



The English Speaking Catholic Council

Le conseil catholique d'expression anglaise

Loyola High School: How to defend Religious Freedom

With the tabling of Bill 60 now before the National Assembly, it is time to revisit how Quebec arrived at the point where discrimination against religious individuals became possible. Part of the answer is that the province has already seen fit to prohibit the free exercise of religion in institutions, even if only for a few hours a week. Five years ago, the Ministry of Education - under the previous government - imposed its Ethics and Religious Culture ("ERC") curriculum on Quebec schools on the presupposition that it was "contributing to harmonious social relations in Québec society today." But, it also tried to impose its program on independent schools, including Loyola High School. Now, mindful of the rightful independence of English language institutions in Quebec, the English Speaking Catholic Council supports the defense of religious freedom. Yes, Bill 60 threatens that freedom. But, just as seriously, so does the Ministry of Education's stance toward Loyola.

Loyola has taken the courageous step of challenging the Ministry's affront to its Catholic identity. Regardless of our religious affiliation or none, Quebecers should all be thankful that Loyola has chosen this course of action. In a few months, its case will be heard by the Supreme Court of Canada. For the sake of freedom of religion and freedom of expression, as well as the freedom of association, all of which are constitutionally guaranteed, we have to hope that Loyola will prevail at the Supreme Court.

Our openly secular society is the historic product of a consensus that the state should not impose or privilege one religion over another. In the U.S., the "separation of church and state" was codified into its constitution. In Canada, a more fluid toleration and appreciation of diverse religious traditions emerged. Some religious bodies have engaged in activities like health care and education – some of which have been subsidized by the state so long as the benefits to all are obvious. In both countries, a secular society was never meant to imply a public square gutted of religious voices. A society comprised of religious people of different persuasions as well as agnostics and atheists will be influenced by this variety of beliefs. This is what a free society means. So, we protect free speech and association constitutionally to show that we are serious about freedom.

A free society also implies freedom for institutions such as churches, community organizations and professional societies. The freedom of religious schools (or non-religious schools for that matter) to foster the education of young people in accord with a particular tradition is simply a logical extension of a free, secular society. A secular society is not a blank slate: religious claims are not special kinds of exceptions that require marginalization. A secular society is a transitory pastiche of religious, quasi-religious and non-religious claims that intermingle freely in ever-changing dynamics.

The Ministry of Education's demand that Loyola set aside its Catholic character during the time allotted to the Ethics and Religious Culture program is intolerant. In Loyola's own course on world religions, which it has taught for years, tolerance and understanding have been key. Loyola can't be singled out for doing anything other than fostering respect for the world's religious traditions. It is utterly ironic that the Ministry of Education should take issue with Loyola: the provincial program does not recognize the pluralistic fact of Quebec society, since it forces religious schools to deny their identity in the guise of a state defined "neutrality". This is a neutrality that is not neutral at all.

The Quebec Ministry of Education demands that Loyola deny its perspective of Christian faith in the classroom. But, Loyola cannot do this. The reason is that for a Christian, faith impacts one's entire life. One example: Pope Francis has recently written about the destructive effects of the attachment many people have toward money. It would be perfectly fitting for a school like Loyola to engage in a critical discussion of the choice Jesus proposes between God and 'mammon' – perhaps in its Secondary-Five economics course, its religion course, or both. Why not? Faith is bound to raise the question of where one really places one's trust. A Catholic school is bound to provide a forum for asking: how does a love of money crush one's faith in God?

What message would the setting aside of one's chosen religious identity send to the children of parents who have asked a Catholic school to educate them? The targeting of religious schools is bad for the schools, bad for freedom and bad for our society, which was founded to be free of institutionalized prejudice. Freedom of religion is a fundamental right for individuals, and also for schools, temples, churches and all manner of associations that possess a religious character.

Dr. Paul Allen, Associate Professor, Department of Theological Studies, Concordia University for
The Board of Directors, English Speaking Catholic Council

Article printed in the Montreal Gazette on January 16, 2014