

M. R. LUPUL

*University of Alberta*

## Religion and Education in Canada: A Call for an End to Hypocrisy

In a subject as controversial as this, it is well to define one's terms and to admit one's biases at the outset. The term "education" is used synonymously with schooling, even though strictly speaking it is a much broader concept. The term "religion" is understood in the traditional sense of belief in a Supreme Being, a belief which in my agnosticism I do not share. Hypocrisy is the act of pretending to be what one is not.

The main thrust of this paper is that religion is entirely a private affair. It is a matter of conscience; it is no one else's business whether one does or does not believe in God, the Holy Scriptures, the 39 Articles, or the Dogma of Papal Infallibility. Least of all is it the business of the state. I doubt whether there are many educated men who would seriously disagree with this position. Nor are public authorities today anxious to violate one's religious conscience — at least in theory. Thus in the Soviet Union (visited by the writer in April, 1968) the official position is that stated by Lenin in 1905: "We insist that religion be a private concern with respect to the state . . ." Yet in the same breath one is told by the same Lenin that ". . . on no account can we regard religion as a private matter with respect to our own party." As a result, no believer in God can be a member of the Communist Party, which for all practical purposes is the state in the Soviet Union. Moreover, even though Article 124 of the USSR Constitution explicitly declares that "Freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda is recognized for all citizens," it is also quite clear that the full weight of state influence is behind the anti-religious propaganda, not the religious worship. Witness the following discussion of the subject in *USSR Questions and Answers*, a publication proudly provided by the state tourist agency in Lvov:

A journal, *Science and Religion*, published in Moscow, contains materials proving the harm of religious prejudices, the bankruptcy of religious philosophy and its moral danger to the people. The Znaniye ("Knowledge") Society (a nation-wide organization run on a voluntary basis) also devotes considerable attention to atheist propaganda. It sponsors public lectures of an anti-

religious nature, with believers and clergymen having the opportunity to come out at these lectures with their arguments.

The impact has been as might be expected:

It should be pointed out that the overwhelming majority of Soviet people are atheists. The materialist world outlook prevails in Soviet society.

And, of course, one is also told that no one is hurt by this official alliance of the state and atheism:

Anti-religious propaganda is conducted without insulting the feelings of those who cherish their faith.<sup>1</sup>

As if those whose feelings have been insulted could speak out in a society where the machinery of the state is stacked against them!

But is the question of state partisanship in religious matters confined to the Soviet Union? The Canadian Bill of Rights, passed in 1960, recognized and declared that the right of freedom of religion (which one supposes would also include the right of freedom *from* religion) has existed and would continue to exist in Canada. This is reassuring, but in its preamble the same Bill placed the state squarely on the side of all religious theists in the following passage:

The Parliament of Canada, affirming that the Canadian Nation is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God . . . <sup>2</sup>

Even if one leaves aside such very difficult questions as 'What Canadian nation?' 'What principles?' one is still faced with the important question raised in connection with the Soviet Union, namely, whether religious freedom (including freedom from religion) is really possible in a state which officially recognizes the supremacy of God. What the Bill of Rights is really saying is that all should enjoy religious freedom except that handful of Canadians (currently about 8 per cent<sup>3</sup>) who admit to being atheists or are uncommitted on the subject of God, to whom religious freedom consists of being free from just such state acts or pronouncements as the Bill of Rights' *official* acceptance of Canada as a theistic nation.

But, it has been argued by some clergy<sup>4</sup> that such people as atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists do not really count for much. They are very few and everyone knows, of course, that Canada is a Christian country — at which point the Jews, the Moslems, and the Unitarians also become dropouts from the wonderful religious unanimity of Canadian society. And all because, in both church and state, men of devotion

<sup>1</sup>V. Komolov (ed.-in-chief), *USSR Questions and Answers* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House n. d.), pp. 71-75.

<sup>2</sup>D. A. Schmeiser, *Civil Liberties in Canada* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), Appendix 1, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>"The Gallup Report," *The Edmonton Journal*, Jan. 16, 1969.

<sup>4</sup>P. B. Smith, "The Bible in Canadian Schools," *The Argus* (Published by the Ontario Public School Trustees' Association), June, 1961, pp. 232-38.

according to a particular fashion (however much in the majority) wish to make their fashion the style for all. Like the Soviet Union, only in an opposite direction, an official relationship between religion and the state is established and the conscience of men and women who are otherwise proud to be Canadians is violated every time sessions of the Legislative Assembly are opened with prayer, religious oaths are sworn in courts of law and in the inauguration of public officials, chaplains are officially provided in the armed forces, and church income and property are officially exempted from public taxation. In each instance the state shows itself to be partisan, rather than neutral, in religious matters.

Nowhere does this partisanship hurt the non-Christian more than in the matter of his children's education. There are two main reasons for this. First, it is the common understanding that the schools are public, not Protestant, schools, which to him means that they admit all people's children, and that whatever the political and economic faiths taught, questions of religious faith are no more material than are the children's color or social class. A child's religious faith, the non-Christian assumes, is outside the concern of the public schools because that faith is far too important, too privileged, and too private to have any state-supported institution tamper with it. Secondly, the non-Christian is hurt because he knows that children, particularly in the elementary grades, are simply too innocent, too trusting, and too imitative to withstand such practices as prayers and Bible readings, religious instruction classes, and Christmas and Easter celebrations complete with God, Christ, and angels. He knows that the usual option of withdrawing children from such exercises is not a satisfactory solution. No matter how tired some people may be of hearing it, it is still true that young children dislike being non-conformists and become emotionally upset when they are obliged to leave a class simply because they have the great misfortune of being born to parents who ignore the 'Good News' of the Christian churches and persist in remaining Jews, Moslems, Unitarians, or secular humanists. But annoying as the more formal religious practices in so-called public schools may be to non-Christian parents, from periodic complaints made to the writer (particularly by Jewish parents) nothing about the 'public' schools is more infuriating than the carol singing and the general evangelizing in what passes for Christianity at Christmas time.

In Canada, then, there are no public schools in the sense of religiously neutral schools, a term to be explained later. All Canadian schools exist to produce theists (hopefully Christian theists) and a public school official of any influence who categorically denied this would be hard-pressed to retain his position. Nowhere would this be more true than in the Province of Quebec, which has always regarded its denominational school system as a model for the rest of Canada to follow instead

of the dysfunctional relic which even some clergy of late have declared it to be — without, of course, attacking its underlying Christian theism.<sup>5</sup>

However, the purpose of this paper is not to open up old wounds by throwing bricks at Christians or their clergy or even at denominational education. Its purpose is to show how religion would relate to education in a neutral public school, a type of school for which there has been in recent years some agitation even in Quebec (or at least in Montreal) by a group named "Le Mouvement Laïc de Langue Française."<sup>6</sup> There is, in the writer's opinion, a real need for a third type of school not only to end the disgraceful practice of having Jewish children (to mention no others) attend Protestant denominational schools in Quebec, but to provide a real opportunity for parents in all parts of Canada to choose their children's schooling. *Canadian parents in every province should be completely free to send their children either to a Catholic, a Protestant, or a religiously neutral school.* This should meet with the approval of Roman Catholic educational theorists, for whom parental choice has always been a fundamental consideration. Note, for example, Pope Paul's most recent remarks to Vatican II (October, 1965):

Parents, who have the first and the inalienable duty and right to educate their children, should enjoy true freedom in their choice of school. Consequently, public authority which has the obligation to oversee and defend the liberties of citizens, ought to see to it, out of a concern for distributive justice, that public subsidies are allocated in such a way that, when selecting schools for their children, parents are genuinely free to follow their consciences.<sup>7</sup>

The writer takes the above to mean that Catholic parents everywhere in Canada should be free to choose their children's schooling, putting an end to that equally disgraceful practice currently followed in provinces like Alberta and Saskatchewan, where Catholics who, for any number of reasons, might prefer to have their children attend a non-Catholic school must either suffer double taxation or deny their religion before their names can be transferred from Catholic to non-Catholic tax rolls. The same is, of course, also unfortunately true for Protestants disenchanting with the so-called public school.

Among the Protestants, where there is probably no single position on any issue, the proposal for a tripartite school system would likely receive a mixed reaction. The Anglicans, least identified historically with the public school system, a heritage no doubt of the Methodists' close association with its development through the work of Reverend

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<sup>5</sup>J. P. Desbiens, *The Impertinences of Brother Anonymous (Frère Untel)* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1962); also by the same author, *For Pity's Sake: The Return of Brother Anonymous* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1965).

<sup>6</sup>M. Chapin, "Quebec's Revolt Against the Catholic Schools," *Harper's Magazine*, July 1961, pp. 53-57.

<sup>7</sup>W. M. Abbott, S. J. (gen. ed.), *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: American Press, 1966), p. 644.

Egerton Ryerson,<sup>8</sup> would probably welcome the emergence of a genuine Protestant school system. The United Church, on the other hand, in keeping with its popular image as Canada's national church,<sup>9</sup> would undoubtedly be most opposed to the division of the 'public' school system into two school systems. And most smaller sects (however fundamentalist) would probably join it in the realization that small groups usually carry more weight in the existing school system than they would in a distinctly Protestant system dominated by the larger church groups. Even so, the Protestants must face facts. They cannot, on the one hand, insist that public schools officially acknowledge the power and goodness of God in their work (with all that that implies) and remain, on the other hand, passionate defenders of the right of every individual to determine his own religious position. For if the latter means anything, it means that teaching for commitment to theism has no more place than teaching for commitment to atheism in a real public school system. However difficult, Protestants will just have to get used to the idea of three school systems.

With three school systems the gain for such values as honesty and sincerity will be tremendous. First of all, the change will enable Canadians to get around the fiction that this is a Christian country and that every babe born in Canada is either a little Catholic or a little Protestant. The gain for tolerance will also be significant and in fact unparalleled in the history of education. It will also test the sincerity of groups like the Catholics who have long stressed the primacy of parental rights in education. The tripartite plan will have other advantages as well. It will provide the first sustained test for what is undoubtedly the most famous hypothesis of the traditional advocates of religious education, namely, that there can be no moral education outside a religious (i.e., Christian) context. It will also give the Protestants a chance to demonstrate their skill in developing the kind of "common core" program of religious education which they have frequently maintained all Christians of good will, Catholics included, could come up with if given the opportunity.

What type of school would the neutral public school be and, in particular, what would be its approach to religious education? First and foremost, it would recognize with Harvey Cox that ours is a secular era and that for most men *The Secular City*<sup>10</sup> is the way of life of the future. This is not to say that the neutral school would glorify secularism; but neither would it try to stem its tide. It would accept secularism for the reality that it is and then concentrate on isolating and studying the many issues and problems raised by it — issues and problems

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<sup>8</sup>H. Adams, *The Education of Canadians, 1800-1867; The Roots of Separatism* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1968).

<sup>9</sup>H. H. Walsh, *The Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1956), p. 304.

<sup>10</sup>H. Cox, *The Secular City* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1966).

which are either ignored in today's public school curriculum, or if taken up are first filtered through the screen of Christian idealism in accordance with quaint Protestant notions of what is safe, proper, and decent. As a result, school children merely experience the secular world; they do not understand it for it is seldom openly discussed with them. The result is alienation accompanied by cynicism or, worse still, simplistic solutions to very complex problems as currently exemplified in the student power movement at one level and the John Birch Society at another.

The frank acceptance, then, of secularism — the very phenomenon which is largely responsible for making irrelevant so much of today's public school curriculum (suffused as it is with Christian uplift and bounce, i.e., Rev. Norman Vincent Peale's 'positive thinking') — would open up the whole question of what it means to live in a secular society. In particular it would lead to an exploration of life's "big questions" in a secular context: questions related to freedom and security, the origins of right and wrong, the nature of the good life, and the possibility of human beings being able to lead the good life in our time.<sup>11</sup> In short, a concentrated study over several years of what, if anything, is the meaning of life in the God-is-dead age? Important also would be attention to the authorities people invoke in their definitions of, and recommendations for, the good life — authorities such as disciplined reason, the Church, the Bible (both ultimately backed by God), the ancient classics, the scientific method, naked and unaided reason, the state, history, etc.

As is obvious the authority of religion could hardly be overlooked in such a study. Its nature would have to be discussed, along with the reasons for its uncertain influence in today's world. The neutral school therefore would not ignore religion, nor would it be hostile to it; it would merely study religion like any other subject. It would operate on the premise that to do more is to indoctrinate; to do less is to perpetuate ignorance. It naturally follows that it could not teach Christianity or any other religion as a faith or that belief in God is necessary for good living. But religion as a social phenomenon would be explored, its varieties would be studied, and its influence (good and bad) in human history noted. And, of course, the code of ethics and related concepts of 'good living' associated with the world's religions would be contrasted and compared with an eye to universal elements.

Is the idea of three school systems a realistic one? Is it administratively feasible? The difficulties in the rural areas are obvious and in such areas the single school (usually Catholic or Protestant, seldom neutral) will for the present have to do. However, the pace of urbanization in North America is so rapid that by the end of this century

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<sup>11</sup>C. Brinton, *Ideas and Men* (2nd edition, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 6.

it would appear that most people will be living in cities and towns and all will be in a position to enjoy the benefits of a tripartite school system. The latter's establishment in urban centers will be made easier by the fact that many supporters of the existing public schools are by no means totally committed to them. Some Protestants, particularly those with high church leanings, are so disenchanted that given the opportunity they would, undoubtedly, willingly join the Catholic school system. Among the remainder, two fairly even groups would probably emerge, thus giving both the Protestant and neutral schools a solid basis of support. It is common knowledge that nominal Christians outnumber the truly devout in our secular society. As a result, the neutral school with its emphasis on studying religion rather than celebrating the place of the Christian religion in our society, would have an appeal far beyond the atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, rationalists, Unitarians, Quakers, and liberal-minded Jews and Moslems who would probably make up the hard core of its adherents. One would, of course, have to anticipate some opposition from short-sighted Protestants who would insist that today's 'public schools' are truly public, their Protestant overtones notwithstanding. But this pose, however charming, should deceive no one. As Leo Pfeffer, perhaps the deepest student of the question, has noted, Protestants have accepted Catholic schools "with a naive yet revealing simplicity: 'the Catholics have their parochial schools and the Protestants have the public schools'!"<sup>12</sup> To meet the opposition a strong dose of democratic ideology at the appropriate time should be sufficient to soothe even the most disturbed Protestant, especially at a time when thanks to Black Power, Red Power, Student Power, Quebec Power, and now Tenant Power the rights of minorities are in the ascendant everywhere.

But the difficulties need not be many if the initiative comes from each provincial government in the form of appropriate school legislation, requiring each citizen in centers with a population in excess of, say, twenty-five hundred to indicate his school preference in writing. A provincial commission or board appointed by the government would then designate existing non-Catholic schools as either Protestant or neutral on the basis of a two-thirds majority vote in the area served by the school. Adjacent schools with only simple majorities would be arbitrarily designated as Protestant or neutral in such a way as to ensure that no child, particularly at the elementary school level, was too far removed from its school. Children of neutral parents in districts with a two-thirds Protestant vote would be bussed (if necessary) to the nearest neutral school (and vice versa). The idea of bussing some urban school children is a small price to pay in money and in such inconvenience as may result for the great benefit of an education which would not insult the religious conscience of the child's home. Each of

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<sup>12</sup>L. Pfeffer, *Church, State and Freedom* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1953), p. 290.

the three school boards would have to ensure that all children had adequate access to bussing facilities, even if that meant the provision of bus services by all three boards to meet difficult cases. The problem is by no means insurmountable, and any one who wishes to see the ease with which separate elementary and secondary schools are established for Catholics who constitute but 20 per cent of a very heterogeneous population should visit Edmonton for a few days.

Perhaps a more serious problem might be the establishment of Catholic schools in some provinces, notably in Manitoba where the issue has been smouldering since the famous (or notorious, depending on one's viewpoint) Laurier-Greenway Agreement of 1896, or in that "Christian Democracy," British Columbia, which prides itself in having Canada's most religiously neutral schools, while making the recitation of the Lord's prayer and daily Bible readings obligatory! (Both are permissive in Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, and only daily Bible readings are obligatory in Manitoba and Prince Edward Island.<sup>13</sup>) It is, the writer believes, time that the Protestants took the concept of Christian charity seriously and realized the profound injustice done to Catholics when the latter are denied schools which are in keeping with Catholic, rather than Protestant, educational philosophy.

The writer does not mind admitting that a tripartite school system is not his first preference. He would much rather see a single state-controlled school system in which the approach to religion would be that of the neutral school outlined above. But what is the point of wasting words? Both Catholics and Protestants have amply demonstrated that no compromise on the subject is possible. Catholics must have schools where the entire atmosphere is permeated by their religion and Protestants are just as adamant about Bible-centered schools. Yet the real losers in this historic battle, it should be clear, have been parents unimpressed by either approach to education. Intra-Christian bigotry has made religion a very touchy subject in the schools. As a result, in most non-Catholic schools the concerns of religion and philosophy are seldom touched on — and the tragedy is deep, for the teaching of literature, history, and even physics and biology are also affected. Value questions having to do with sex and marriage, crime and punishment, the fine arts, communism and capitalism are either ignored or handled gingerly because of their connection with religion, which teachers prefer to shun as a sensitive and controversial area. What is needed is a third school system to de-sensitize religion and bring the normative dimension of life out of the back alley of emotional sounding-off in the style of current 'talkback' radio and television programs and onto the stage of rational analysis and discourse.

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<sup>13</sup>Department of Christian Education, *Religious Education in Schools in Canada* (Toronto: Canada Council of Churches [1962]).

This will not happen until religion is studied like any other subject — and a third school system alone can ensure that.

Finally, a word about post-secondary education. Denominational schools, the writer believes, should render denominational colleges and universities unnecessary. There must surely be at least one level of education in our society where the young can mix freely and experience the profound truth that racial, national, and religious differences are all really basically artificial, there being no necessary connection between them and individual behavior. Moreover, one must not lose sight of the fact that what our age increasingly needs is human beings who are not only scientific and democratic in their outlooks, but intercultural, interracial, and international as well. Institutions of higher learning controlled by religious groups are not as prone to encourage such outlooks because they tend to be ethnocentric. It is difficult for them to be otherwise. They are officially Catholic or Lutheran or Baptist and those who run them have a moral obligation to cultivate a belief in the superiority of the ideas and values which underlie the institution. This is understandable but inappropriate at the university level.

Moreover, neutrality too is inappropriate. That is, classes in the hands of committed theists who are so objective on the religious question as to be fatuous have no place at a university. The writer has stated the point elsewhere as follows:

. . . Real education, the kind of education required in our time of ideological warfare, only begins when students (especially at the university level) are challenged in one class by a devout Christian, in another by an atheist, in a third by a slave to antiquity, in a fourth by a utilitarian, in a fifth by a Marxist (even a Communist), in a sixth by a strong conservative (even a follower of Governor Wallace] . . . )<sup>14</sup>

Now, of course, this is difficult to ensure and most state universities unfortunately still fall short of the mark. But if it is difficult for state universities to become centers of liberal learning, it is even more difficult for religious colleges and universities — whether they exist to produce more Christ-like students or to confront them with the Bible — to pursue learning freely, with an unrestricted study of ideas, philosophies, and religions. This is because the founders of religious colleges and universities are mainly concerned to pursue their own private ends. If this is not so, then whose ends do they pursue? Does anyone really believe that the purpose of education at such universities as Laval or Sherbrooke is the same as that at McGill or the University of Toronto. If the former do not have it as their main purpose to produce Christian theists (hopefully Catholic Christian theists), their sponsors might address themselves to the question of what *does* distinguish them from non-denominational colleges and universities. Why

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<sup>14</sup>M. R. Lupul, "Church and State in Alberta's Educational System," *The ATA Magazine*, March, 1965, p. 10.

should religious colleges and universities continue to style themselves as such if their objectives are the same as state colleges and universities?

There is still another reason why religious colleges and universities are inadequate as institutions of higher learning. In our shrinking world we not only require people who are intercultural, interracial, and international in outlook, but those who are not afraid of inter-marriage and do not try to discourage it for group ends. To wish to share one's whole life with another person is the highest compliment one human being can pay another. To discourage inter-marriage on the grounds of race, color, or creed is therefore one of the most undignified activities in which a human being can be engaged. Nothing weakens a society more than the attitude that some groups are *prima facie* unworthy of primary association. In western Canada we have been a long time in coming around to this point of view. Miscegenation is still highly suspect (especially where Negroes and Indians are concerned), but today one can say that inter-marriage between a Pole and a Scot is not nearly the horrible prospect it was just a generation ago — and there is much evidence that the offspring of such unions do not give the special qualms of the ethnic and religious groups a second thought. At the same time, this offspring even mellows the prejudices of the grandparents, for few grandparents can resist their grandchildren — no matter how 'impure' their ethnic or religious background may be. Of course, there are still problems — what marriage is without them? But the problems of inter-marriage are always fewer where the prevailing social attitude favors, rather than discourages, inter-marriage. Denominational colleges and universities by their very nature cannot encourage intermarriage and this exclusive, protective and ethnocentric nature renders them incapable of preparing the type of people our world increasingly requires.