

I believe a paradigm shift is taking place Catholic education is being questioned in a new way.

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Ontario's Electoral Paradigm Shift & Catholic Education

Reflections on the Paradigm Shift Affecting

Catholic Education in Ontario

A Work in Progress

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Introduction

The usual reflex for the Ontario Catholic education community is to remain low-key, to do anything but draw attention to ourselves. But in the October 2007 provincial election campaign, there was just no place to hide or to duck under the radar and avoid public scrutiny. Because of the focus on funding for faith-based schools in the campaign from September 4 to October 9, and in the aftermath – the weeks following the election – the public financing of Catholic schools was caught dead-centre in the headlights of the secular media, the civil liberties groups and the always active lobby for the extermination of public Catholic education.

It is now February 2008, four months after the election. The media articles critical of Catholic funding and the vitriolic letters to the editor protesting the Catholic privilege are now few and far between. Some might think that we are comfortably back under the radar screen of Ontario public opinion. But is this really the case? I don't believe so, and I think that it would be foolhardy and a reckless playing with the enduring gift for the Catholic education community not to do some serious reflection given what transpired around the education question last October 10.

I believe that this unprecedented attack on education done in faith communities during this fall's provincial election has also altered the situation for public Catholic schools in Ontario. The John Tory position from the outset had been: *What is fair for Catholics should be fair for other faith communities*. It is a matter of justice. Tory's attempt (either genuinely altruistic or politically cynical) at "fairness" for other faith communities has raised a fundamental question about the future of Catholic education in the province.

The mantra of some faith communities is: *If we can't have public financing for our schools then the Catholics should not have funding for their schools.* The mantra for the secular media and the lobby groups that so controlled the media during the election campaign is: *All publicly financed education must be secular; faith and religious education belong in the home or church, synagogue and mosque, not in a public institution such as a publicly funded school.*

I believe that a *paradigm shift* is taking place in the social circumstances that provide the context for public Catholic schools in Ontario. Too many people who make up the giant sleeping lion we know as the Ontario public are being awakened; Catholic education in Ontario is being questioned in a new way. *We have less religiosity in public discourse and in policy, the only major anomaly being the funding to Catholic schools. That, too, is now up for debate – no longer a sacred cow, thanks to John Tory.* (Haroon Siddiqui – *Toronto Star*, October 4, 2007, AA2). *Give the Catholic system in Ontario maybe another 10 years. It's likely not too early for the church to start thinking now about the future.* (Michael Valpy – *The Globe and Mail*, October 11, 2007, A11).

A crisis, generally, has the potential for different responses or courses of action. For the Catholic education community in Ontario, this present moment after the October 2007 provincial election provides at least three courses of action: it could be a time to catch our breath and relax, thinking: “Well, we got through that one unscathed! We’ll be okay! Let’s return to business as usual.” Or, it could be a time of fear, confusion and discouragement concerning what is happening or what is to happen next. Or finally, it could be an opportunity, a privileged moment for renewal and change. What follows is intended to kick-start some serious thinking about our future; it is an attempt at understanding more clearly the paradigm shift taking place, the new social circumstances in which we find ourselves as the Ontario Catholic education community. The hope is that this analysis leads into the discussion that must take place, sooner rather than later, of where to go now or how to respond to this new paradigm shift.

Methodological Note: The analysis here is my own. The points I develop under **What remains the same** and under **What has changed** represent my own thinking. All of this comes under the rubric: **A Work In Progress.**

Part One: What Remains the Same?

It helps at first to identify what has not changed since the October 2007 provincial election. What has not changed are the following:

1. The anti-Catholic education lobby remains, but they have new energy and more of a soapbox now.
2. The Canadian Civil Liberties Association lobby continues to be the watchdog for secular ideology.
3. There is still a segment of the population that might be called anti-Catholic.
4. We are in a situation in Ontario of declining enrolment. <!--[endif]-->This can tempt competing boards to be increasingly aggressive vis à vis recruitment.
5. There are some Public and Catholic school boards and Public and Catholic school teachers' unions that legitimately fear the negative impact of declining enrolment and loss of jobs.
6. There are some Catholic boards that for the sake of grants intentionally woo students who would be attending public schools.
7. Many in the Catholic community and other faith communities believe that it is the fundamental right of parents to decide the type of education that is best for their children and believe that government has the responsibility to provide such education.
8. The Constitutional right for Catholic education is very clear.
9. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has ruled that the Ontario government is out of line, funding one faith's schools but denying funding to other faith communities.
10. Both Quebec and Newfoundland gave up their Constitutional right to public Catholic schools.
11. With the demise of public Catholic education in Newfoundland and Labrador, it continues to be an enormous challenge (financial and qualified personnel) for the church to provide a religious education to Catholic children in that province.
12. Other provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba) have public funding -partial or complete-for faith-based schools.
13. The Bishops of Ontario support the faith-based schools in their efforts for funding.
14. OECTA is opposed to public funding for faith-based schools.
15. The toil, hardship and suffering that went into the establishment and maintenance of Catholic education in Ontario on the part of generations of laity and religious and clergy remain a matter of historical record.

16. There is still a significant minority making up the Catholic education community – teachers, administrators, trustees and parents – who really do see their work as living out their baptismal vocation and engaging in furthering the mission of the church.
17. There is that unfortunate lack of awareness of (maybe even a lack of valuing of) the Catholic education story on the part of too many parents and too many Catholic educators (including teachers, trustees and administrators.)
18. On the part of some priests, there is a certain reticence to promote Catholic education and Catholic schools. This lack of support and enthusiasm at the parish level is a psychological obstacle to the work that committed Catholic educators try to do in their schools.
19. There is a dearth of qualified religious educators and theologians now connected with Catholic education in Ontario. Theology is the resource for vision and board direction and for chaplains and religious educators. There are too few theological resource persons in Ontario’s Catholic education system.
20. Catholic education continues to be an anomaly: It made sense for the Catholic minority in 1867; it made sense to “compromise” (i.e., the Protestant minority in Quebec and the Catholic minority in Ontario), but it makes no sense today – 2008 – for one faith to have publicly funded schools but deny this same privilege to other faiths.

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Part Two: What Has Changed?

Now to identify different elements of our new reality, elements that constitute the new playing field - the paradigm shift - in which the drama of Catholic education in Ontario will be played out.

1. Background #1 –The “Faith and Religion vs Secular Ideology” Battleground.

1.1 The Global Background:

The extended debate around faith-based education during the 2007 provincial election makes it clear that Ontario is now experiencing the same phenomenon experienced in many different jurisdictions in the West and in the developing world. Faith meets the modern world! Faith must work at some sort of accommodation with modernity and the modern (postmodern world) world must deal with the reality of faith and religion, a reality that, in spite of modernity’s secular theories and presumptions, will just not die out

or go away. For instance, in many countries where Islam is the dominant faith, there are problems surrounding the modern innovations and life-style options from the West. And on the other hand, in a very secular state such as France, for example, there were problems because of the “burqa” – hijab – and because different religious minorities do not give in easily or accommodate to the ways of a secular state. Since the French Revolution, France has been fiercely proud and protective of its *laïcité* – secular-ness. With heavy immigration from Islamic countries, many in France feel that their secular option is under attack.

Clearly, in Ontario, something similar is taking place. In the faith-based education debate, we have the faith/religion vs the secular ideology battleground. On the one hand, there are those who believe faith/religion should be lived out in every aspect of life. An important dimension of this mindset is to do education in a faith environment and in a faith community. On the other hand, there are the secularists who feel that religion is a completely private option that should have no privilege when it comes to public funds.

1.2 Recent headlines: These headlines indicate that a new story is being told.

- Time for a radical rethink of faith-based funding ...
- With religious schools debate, secularism hits a war footing ...
- Faith leaders fear that anti-Semitism, Islamophobia might eventually cost Catholics their schools ...
- Fairer to eliminate Catholic funding ...
- Myths of Catholic education ...
- Catholic education is no longer a sacred cow ...
- Social inclusion is better than fragmentation ...
- Newfoundland offers lessons on religious schooling ...
- As the future unfolds, as the Catholic system becomes more “public” ...
- Catholic schools feel fallout of Tory’s idea ...
- Civil liberties group calls for end to Catholic funding ...
- Funding debate far from over ...
- Catholic schools’ days should be numbered ...
- Public schools embracing faith-based lessons ...

1.3 Recent polls: September 2007 – Confirming the paradigm shift.

- Harris / Decima – 50% of Canadians oppose giving any public money to faith-based education; in Ontario – 54% were opposed ... 34% in favour.
- Environics – 47% of Ontarians agree with Green Party – eliminate Catholic school boards.
- Strategic Counsel – 71% of Ontarians oppose extending religious school funding.

2. Background # 2 — There is now a more forceful and coherent articulation that what was acceptable at the time of Confederation is no longer good for the Province in 2008.

2.1 The Evolving Canadian Background: A Constitutional right in 1867 is now seen to be an obstacle and a stumbling block to unity. In this argument, “social cohesion” becomes the great urgency for the body politic of Ontario and it is “public education” that is the last standing agent to affect social cohesion, given that so many social institutions are now fragmented or greatly diminished (family, church and religion). It is ironic that the secularists and their ideology, who have inflicted such great damage on our founding social institutions – marriage, family, a culture of respect and deference, etc. – now realize that public education is their final hope for socializing our young Ontarians into citizenship and civic responsibility.

2.2 There is much more diversity in the Ontario of 2007 than there was in 1867. And the diversity is not just more Christian churches; the diversity is now made up of Hebrews, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs etc. as well as articulate secularists.

2.3 For commentators in the Muslim tradition, there is a sense that the public is very uneasy with Muslims and Islam. These commentators identify the suspicion of Islam they sense today with the bigotry the Irish Catholics faced at the time of the Constitution.

2.4 Due to the strong anti-Catholic education and anti-faith-based education lobbies, more and more folks are now aware that Newfoundland and Quebec gave up their constitutional rights re: Catholic education.

2.5 *In Our Catholic Schools 2006-2007 (ICE)*, the great challenge for Catholic education is to demonstrate to the Ontario public that Catholic education makes a difference; that the common project of Ontario society would be diminished without our Catholic schools.

2.6 The public must be educated as to the particular reasons for Newfoundland giving up its constitutional right to Catholic schools and why Quebec chose to give up its right to Catholic schools. The media present misleading oversimplifications that must be challenged. The conditions in Ontario are very different from the contexts in Quebec and Newfoundland.

2.7 Some “intellectuals” (e.g., Michael Fullan of OISE) feel that eventually Catholic education will be phased out. The editors of the *Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* would like to see this happen, sooner rather than later. Their view: The Catholic system exists, but it would be better if it did not exist; that it did not receive public funds. Basically their position is this: Publicly funded Catholic education makes no sense at all in a modern, (postmodern) secular society.

2.8 There is a recognition that Catholic education is different than “faith-based” education. Some admit that there is diversity in Catholic schools of because the admission of non-Catholics. Some now define Catholic education as Catholic, but “small c catholic”! *A Catholic school is catholic in the broader sense – it is multi-ethnic, multi-racial, culturally and economically diverse. Faith-based, yes, but large enough and broadly enough constituted that in every other way it mirrors the culturally diverse Ontario community.* – (Roger Hyman Toronto Star, September 13, 2007, AA8)

3. Background # 3 – The ecclesial issue:

3.1 Big “C” vs. little “c” Catholic education: The new tension in the Catholic education question is this: on one side there is the urgency and the need to emphasize Catholic identity in order to be faithful to our original purpose and founding mission. So, *traditio fidei* or the handing down of our faith / evangelization / knowing the Catholic Christian story / understanding and promoting our tradition / our vision for Catholic education: All of this is deemed essential to maintaining the integrity of Catholic education and to effectively continue our mission. This is capital C Catholic education!

But on the other side of the coin is Catholic education described as small c catholic! Here comes everyone: an increasing number of non-Catholic Christians in our schools, an increasing number of non-Christians and secularists who choose our schools for different reasons such as proximity, sports, academics, test scores, discipline, the possibility of talking about God and prayer etc. Several intellectuals have made this small c catholic argument. As the future unfolds, as the Catholic system becomes more public ... For

them, Catholic education is offensive, but less offensive than faith-based education. In Ontario's Catholic schools, there is diversity and inclusiveness that you will not find in faith-based schools. In a back-handed sort of way, this is their defence of Catholic schools, even though they would sooner have them discontinued. They see Catholic schools well along the path of "secularization" – as the Catholic system becomes more public – which means that soon they will be so secularized that there will be very little difference between the Catholic school and a public school.

It is also important to recognize that the large C Catholic Vs small c catholic tension we experience in Ontario is experienced as well in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Indeed, in an increasing secular culture, maintaining "Catholic identity" is the central question for every Catholic institution.

3.2 Future Church: It is worth noting that the children and adolescents we have in our classrooms in 2008 are those who will constitute the adult church in 2018 and 2028. Though many are under-catechized (more the fault of the home than the school, I believe), they still receive some fundamental elements of the Catholic imagination, the imagination which will continue to compel many of them to associate (even vaguely) with the church and to identify themselves as Catholic; the imagination that will furnish some meaning and purpose for them in their spiritual pilgrimages.

3.3 Some characteristics of the increasing secularization of Catholic education:

- There has been a dramatic marginalization of religion and the institutional church in Ontario society;
- The human person – man and woman – has become the centre of the universe; God and a sense of the transcendent have been banished to the sidelines;
- The Catholic school population represents great numbers of unchurched or under-catechized students and parents; they seem to be more secularized than Christianized;
- An indicator of secularization: A conversation with a couple looking to baptize their child: *But Father, none of our friends really practice their faith. It is so hard to find Catholics serious about their faith to be Godparents or Confirmation sponsors!*
- The increasing numbers of non-Catholics and non-Christians in our schools;

- There are more and more teachers in our schools who are not really comfortable in sharing faith; who have but a superficial understanding of our Catholic story;
- To often there is the relegation of religion and religion teaching to the periphery of Catholic school life;
- Some teachers are assigned to teach religion who are not willing and even less prepared to teach religion;
- At the level of Catholic educator, (teachers, administrators and trustees) regular practice of the faith, that is, Sunday Eucharist, is no longer seen by some as normative for the Catholic Christian; it is just one option among a number of options for Sunday morning.
- At the level of Catholic educator, secular values and attitudes are more manifest than gospel values and attitudes; (by osmosis, we are all secularized; we are children of our culture.)
- The struggle going on in our schools can be framed this way: Christianizing our school communities, making them unambiguously Catholic vs allowing secularization to dull or diminish the Catholicity of our education vision and methods. Which movement is winning?
- There are some leadership practices that are rooted more in the corporate model of the *Report on Business* or *Financial Post* than on the gospel model of service. Catholic leadership is often impervious to a gospel critique of practice. Perhaps this is the most serious indication of the secularization (or making our Catholic schools, Public schools) of Catholic education. Some examples: Look seriously at how some go about managing human resource; the readiness to outsource; the unwillingness to practice collegial rather than autocratic decision-making; the salaries of administrators over and against the lowest salary on a board's payroll; the criteria for hiring; the privileging or the lack of privileging of the "Catholic difference"; the openness to having the social teaching of the church critique practice, etc.
- The same question can be asked of the teachers' union: how ready and open is OECTA to having its strategies and operating practices critiqued by Catholic Social Teaching?
- Are Catholic School Councils more taken with bake sales to fund a field trip than with the ongoing question of what makes the school Catholic and how to conserve the Catholic difference;

Part Three: Confronting a paradigm shift: the urgency to ensure a future!

We must get on with searching for the soul of Catholic education.

NOW!

Fr. Jim Mulligan

In conclusion, I believe that the evidence for a paradigm shift speaks for itself. It is now almost twenty-five years since full funding. For most of that time, Catholic education expanded in every part of Ontario. With the new-found financial security along with the growth in schools and numbers of students and teachers, a mind-set of entitlement may have developed. We have a right to this system. With such a mind-set, the sacrifice and struggles of the past are easily forgotten and a relevant, working vision for Catholic education owned by Catholic educators is simply taken for granted. Questions about what struggle and sacrifice may be required today remain unasked.

But October 10, 2007 has signaled a new reality, a new situation for publicly funded Catholic education in this province. The mindset of entitlement must give way to some profound soul-searching. In contemporary Ontario culture, there is increasing suspicion of the privilege that any religious group might enjoy when it comes to public funds. In our society today, there is a more coherent understanding of diversity in the province and the exigency to have all students belong to the same school system – one public system – for the purposes of socialization into civic life. And within the Catholic community, the question of “How Catholic is Catholic?” for our Catholic school system begs to be addressed: Can small “c” catholic survive for long on its own without being renewed in large “C” Catholic identity?

For the last quarter century, a number of Catholic education documents and vision statements have been attempts to define ourselves in Catholic education. [The ownership of and commitment to these often articulate, inspiring, challenging documents and vision statements is another question.] The point is that there have been few outside pressures or challenges to the specific “Catholic” nature of our system. But now there are other forces defining who we are: proponents of a secularizing culture who hold that in ten years time there will be little difference between a public system and a small “c” catholic system; a political and civil rights lobby that sees a separate “Catholic” system as an obstacle to the common good of Ontario society; not to mention constituencies both inside and outside the Catholic school community who raise uneasy questions about what the Catholic difference really is and whether it is significant enough to justify two systems.

Since full-funding in 1984, Ontario culture clearly has become more secular; personal and family identity with faith traditions and religious institutions have noticeably diminished. This makes a serious study of the “Catholic identity” question by all the

partners and in every school absolutely crucial to the present and future of publicly funded Catholic education in this province.

For the most part, my analysis in this reflection has been at the macro level. I have described the fundamental shift that has taken place in the situation of Catholic education in Ontario. Let me conclude by moving to the micro level. I do this to illustrate concretely the implications of our new reality. An exercise I would like to propose would, I think, offer a litmus test to determine the health of Catholic education in Ontario. This is the exercise.

Isolate any Catholic school – your own school or the school you most identify with. Think of that school as a free-standing entity unto itself. No Catholic school board. No external faith resources. It is entirely on its own. The school must survive as a Catholic school in a very secular culture on its own. And now the critical questions. Are there a sufficient number of Catholic educators in that school who know the Catholic Christian story? Is there a core group of Catholic educators who see their work as living out their baptismal commitment and are able to tell that story, sharing their faith with students? Will this core group be respected enough and accepted in order to be able to shape the direction and the vision of education of that Catholic school so that their school continues to be and to grow as a Catholic school?

The vocabulary here: “sufficient numbers” and “core group” is telling. This is a tipping point scenario. My great hope would be that the “sufficient numbers” are increasing; that the “core group” is expanding. My fear is that the opposite is taking place. The tipping point for the “isolated” Catholic school is also the tipping point for publicly funded Catholic education in Ontario. We must get on with searching for the soul of Catholic education. Now!