



Mark Anderson,
Ph.D.

Luther College High
School

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The Time Has Come:

*Education About Religion(s)
in Public High Schools:*

*A Course for Contemporary
Canadian Citizenship Preparation*

Saskatchewan School Boards Association
Spring Assembly
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Working Together

“When schools flourish,
all flourishes”

(Martin Luther).



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Not four letters, but still a dirty word

“Even where people remain indifferent, education and its intersections with religion will soon generate public controversy and debate” (Marty, 2000, p. 25).



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Terms

1. RE--religious education
1. EAR--education about religion(s)
3. Public or Common Good--“the goals sought by citizens across the personal boundaries of religion, race, philosophy, taste, and commitment” (Marty, 2000, p. 7).
4. The term “religion” will be construed to be an umbrella term which includes closely related terms like “personal belief,” “spirituality” and “faith.” And, the “education about religion(s)” course being proposed will also include considerations of non-religious belief systems.



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Education About Religion(s)

- ✓ Long historical connection between institutionalized Judeo-Christianity and education.
- ✓ Such is archaic and illegal in the public classrooms of our multicultural, secular nation.
- ✓ Perhaps the secular education that has replaced RE may be equally monolithic. Neither monopoly is acceptable in a multicultural and free nation guided by a charter of rights.



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Assumption

Students inherently have questions about religion, faith and spirituality

Margot McKinnon
Doctoral Thesis, University of Oxford

“...students were coming to her desk asking if they were allowed to wonder about spiritual things. ‘It was that “allowed” that got me worried and concerned about our public education system,” said McKinnon. “I also noticed that students were having spiritual experiences”

(Regina Leader-Post, Saturday, A6, December 29, 2012).



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A citizenry conversant in religious and non-religious beliefs, theories, practices and histories is one more aware of its human nature and the totality of that experience, one more able to make discerning choices, one more likely to understand and respect other worldviews and, therefore, one better able to effectively strengthen a free, diverse society.



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Two Criteria For Educational Policy-Making:

1. Is it lawful?

1. Is it pedagogically defensible in a
democratic, multicultural nation?



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Legislation:

1. The *Constitution Act*, 1867;
2. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*;
3. Provincial Statutes.



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Chamberlain, [2002]

- ✓ Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, Beverly McLachlin, stated in the ruling that, “Religion is an integral aspect of people’s lives, and cannot be left at the boardroom door” (para. 19);
- ✓ Much of the debate centered on defining “secular” in light of the *B.C. School Act, 1996*. Secular--at least in terms of public policy-making--should be viewed as “pluralist or inclusive in its widest sense” (para. 33);
- ✓ *Chamberlain* clearly establishes that religion does have a place in educational policy-making and that equality of representation is one of the hallmarks of a multicultural democracy.



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Des Chênes, [2012]

- ✓ Speaking for the majority, Deschamps J. stated, “Parents are free to pass their personal beliefs on to their children if they so wish. However, the early exposure of children to realities that differ from those in their immediate family environment is a fact of life in society” (para. 40).
- ✓ “Exposing children to a comprehensive presentation of various religions without forcing the children to join them does not constitute an indoctrination of students that would infringe the freedom of religion of [the appellants]” (p. 5).
- ✓ “The suggestion that exposing children to a variety of religious facts in itself infringes their religious freedom or that of their parents amounts to a rejection of the multicultural reality of Canadian society...” (para. 40).



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Canadian Civil Liberties (Elgin County), (1990)

...it is conceded that education designed to teach about religion and to foster moral values without indoctrination in a particular faith would not be a breach of the *Charter*. It is indoctrination in a particular religious faith that is alleged to be offensive. (p. 4)



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Canadian Civil Liberties, (1990)

- (a) The school may sponsor the *study* of religion, but may not sponsor the *practise* of religion;
- (b) The school may *expose* students to all religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view;
- (c) The school's approach to religion is one of *instruction*, not one of *indoctrination*;
- (d) The function of the school is to *educate* about all religions, not to *convert* to any one religion;
- (e) The school's approach is *academic*, not *devotional*;
- (f) The school should *study* what all people believe, but should not *teach* a student what to believe;
- (g) The school should strive for student *awareness* of all religions, but should not press for student *acceptance* of any one religion;
- (h) The school should seek to *inform* the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to *conform* him or her to any one belief. (p. 28)



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Legal Overview

- ✓ Foster and Smith (2001) concede that no case “has ruled out the possibility of a *rainbow approach* to religious exercises or instruction, that is non-discriminatory provision of such services to all religious groups” (p. 47).
- ✓ Any attempts to indoctrinate, proselytize or exclude are unequivocally illegal. The core precedent is that education about religion(s) is not unconstitutional: indoctrination is.
- ✓ Chief Justice McLachlin argues, “Exposure to some cognitive dissonance is arguably necessary if children are to be taught what tolerance itself involves” (para. 66).



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Legal Overview

- ✓ The *Chamberlain* ruling clearly established, the religious conscience or voice is just as valid in a multicultural society as any other is.
- ✓ Dubois J. of the Quebec Superior Court and later the Supreme Court itself held that requiring public school students to take the *Ethics and Religious Culture* course (ERC) did not violate their religious freedom.



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The Pedagogical Arguments

1. Humanizing Education
1. Searching For Meaning and Truth
1. Educating the whole person through a truly well rounded curriculum
1. Avoiding a secular humanist monopoly in the public sphere
1. Avoiding pedagogical indoctrination
1. Developing empathetic yet critical thinkers
1. Citizenship preparation



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Pedagogical Conclusion

The EAR classroom seeks to include many viewpoints, not disenfranchise a few; to promote discernment and critical thought, not proselytize; to foster understanding, not indoctrinate; and, to expose students to the rich secular-religious diversity found in Canadian society, not inculcate personal agendas.



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What Does It Look Like?

1. How?

1. Why?

2. What?



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What Does It Look Like?

The course seeks to give schools, students and parents wide latitude in terms of content. A useful place for the teacher to begin is by assessing the students' prior understanding of the nature of belief systems and the context in which they exist. Because students will not share the same lexicon or base knowledge, some groundwork on terminology would also serve as a natural starting point. For that matter, a teacher may not wish to start with any content at all, but rather spend a few days focusing on developing the skills necessary for lively but respectful debate within a classroom. In other words, setting the “ground rules” for how strongly divergent ideas are to be negotiated and other students to be treated.



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What Does It Look Like?

EAR teachers should choose at least **five** units from Column A (listed alphabetically) and at least **two** units from Column B (listed alphabetically). Column C is compulsory.

Column A

Baha'i
Buddhism
Atheism
Christianity
Hinduism
Islam
Janism
Judaism
Sikhism
Taoism

Column B

Agnosticism
Scientology
Secular Humanism
Wicca
Aboriginal Spirituality

Column C

School's Free Choice of a
maximum two units not
found in Columns A or B



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Conclusion

Historically, public schools that have been purely religious or secular in nature have tended to be educationally limiting, rigid, even unimaginative. EAR, by contrast, opens pedagogical space: The organic synthesis of EAR offers a more complete picture of who we all are and what we typically think about. Such a course better situates students to deal with differences in more intelligent, humane and democratic ways, by encouraging discourse about beliefs in a purposeful, accountable and essential place in public education. This should be a primary educational goal in a democratic, multicultural nation.