



Centre for Cultural Renewal
Centre pour un Renouveau Culturel



**Answers to the Specific Questions Regarding
“Secularism” set out in the Consultation Document of the Taylor/Bouchard
Commission in Quebec:**

General Comment: first, to ask, as the first question below does: “what kind of secularism should Quebec adopt?” is like asking “what sort of botulism would you like to eat?” One would much rather not have *any* botulism. The question fails to analyze the validity of the category of “secularism” in the first place. It would have been, and is better going forwards, to ask “what sort of relationship between beliefs and the public sphere do you think is appropriate?” Or, similarly, “do you accept that theocracy (the blending or over-intermingling of the church and state) was wrong in Quebec?” *Those* approaches accurately set out the question to address without using an ideologically loaded (and historically suspect) term such as secularism/laicism. The term needs to be de-constructed and, in fact, jettisoned in order for the Commission’s work to be recognized as the important contribution it can be. Continued use of the category of “secularism” in any form will, with great respect, diminish the value of the Commission’s analysis immediately, and over time.

a) In your opinion, what kind of secularism should Québec adopt? In other words, how can we define the relation that should prevail between the State (or public institutions) and religion?

None. For Quebec to adopt “secularism” in any form would be a serious mistake. It would not solve the problem of a balanced response to errors of “theocracy” (if those are perceived to have been a problem in Quebec) but would be viewed as a pendulum swing that goes wrong in the other direction by attacking religion with the intent to reduce its valid (and perhaps necessary) public dimensions. The kind of relationship between religions and the public realm (if that is what the question really is) should be co-operative with no liability attached to religious believers and their communities as compared to atheistic or agnostic believers and theirs.

b) Is it desirable to exclude any trace of religious life from all public institutions or even in all public spaces? In other words, should we apply the integral secularism* model?

It is not consistent with a free and democratic society to act in this manner. The use of the term “integral secularism” further confuses the terminology already confused by any reference to “secularism.”¹ The forces (legal, police, military and social) marshalled to exclude “any trace of

¹ The terms in the “glossary” to the Consultation Document of the Commission fail to examine in any way, the actual meaning of the term “secularism” as coined by its founder George Jacob Holyoake. Secularism is not another way of saying “separation of church and state” (as the glossary suggests) and, in any case, that concept is also badly confused and confusing. It seems that some of the base terminology chosen in this document, will, *unless corrected*, just perpetuate the very confusions that the Commission seems pledged to overcome. Other (better) conceptual handles are available.

religious life from all public institutions” would be unjust, illiberal and, as has been seen elsewhere, unsustainable. They would also be unconstitutional in any democratic constitution worthy of the name.

c) Which kind of secularism do you think best embodies equality and pluralism as ideals aimed at avoiding discrimination and encouraging mutual respect?

There is no form of “secularism” that does this. There are forms of democratic pluralism that do. A model that embodies allowance for and development of principles within “co-operation of religions and the state” are the most conducive both to social well-being and civil peace; radical exclusionism (an aspect of all “secularisms”) is not conducive to either.

d) More generally speaking, what value should we ascribe to religious life aside from its doctrinal content, in terms of our cultural heritage? Do you perceive in it a source of humanism and values that can be useful to a society?

Religious life, has been recognized as of great importance in other places facing greater challenges to social cohesion than Canada or Quebec. The Constitutional Court of South Africa, for example, has said this about religion:

For many believers, their relationship with God or creation is central to all their activities. It concerns their capacity to relate in an intensely meaningful fashion to their sense of themselves, their community and their universe. For millions in all walks of life, religion provides support and nurture and a framework for individual and social stability and growth. Religious belief has the capacity to awaken concepts of self-worth and human dignity which form the cornerstone of human rights. It affects the believer’s view of society and founds the distinction between right and wrong.²

Ignoring such insights and moving expressly or by default to minimize the public influence of religion shows extraordinary anti-religious hubris. Consider this as well. It is known in Canada that, for example, 20% of Canadians do approximately 80% of charitable giving and volunteering. When these “top 20%” are compared with the “bottom 20%” who do nothing or very little in this area, three indicators stand out as statistically significant. On examination it then turns out that two of the three most important indicators of “socially embedded” conduct (those that “join”, “donate” or “volunteer”) are “spiritual” or religious. That is to say, 1) regular attendance at a place of worship (church, synagogue, temple, mosque etc.); and 2) a high rating as to “religiosity” question (“how important is spirituality to your life?”); and 3) University education.³ This alone shows that religious belief should be encouraged for the good of society not thwarted because of anti-religious animus or the difficulties of harmonization.

e) Has Québec gone too far too fast as regards the establishment of a non-confessional, secular education system? Should we, to the contrary, further pursue this course by excluding any trace of religious life in educational institutions?

Excluding “any trace of religious life” in educational institutions is also inconsistent with the fair sharing of public spaces called for in this Brief. It exemplifies the approach advocated by the man who first coined the term “secularism” (England in 1851) when he set out deliberately to minimize the importance of religion particularly in public education. To adopt this approach would be to advance that agenda and to work against the principles of fairness, equity, openness and inclusivity that a properly free and democratic society should seek to embody.

² *Christian Education South Africa v. Minister of Education* 2000 (4) SA 757 (CC) para. 36. See, generally, for the Scope of Freedom of Religion in South Africa (much of which has been based upon Canadian decisions) Iain Currie and Johan de Waal, *The Bill of Rights Handbook* (Cape Town: Juta, 2005) 5th ed. 336 – 357.

³ Personal communication, 2006, with Dr. Paul Reed, Senior Social Scientist at Statistics Canada, Ottawa.

f) Do you think it is legitimate in Québec to grant special status to Catholicism, given its place in the society's history? Do you think that society overall would accept it?

All religions should be treated equally in a pluralistic society. What must not occur is to use the historic rights and entitlements of one group as a means of "levelling down" the whole society. What one wants to do is "invite others to the party" not cancel it for everyone except the non-religious. The recent debates in Ontario regarding denominational education and much of the discussion in Quebec about religious access and entitlements, show "levelling down" not the encouragement of others into inclusion. Knocking out "special status" (and why was this term chosen rather than the more neutral "historic recognition"?) for some seems to make sense until we recognize that what is left is nothing but the agenda of one set of voices. Better to invite other groups (religious or non) to be involved according to their beliefs while leaving the public rights of Catholics in place for the benefit of all.

g) What might this special status for Catholicism entail? Give concrete examples.

Funding of denominational health care and education are two areas where religious ethos offers particularly distinctive benefits and advantages (as anyone who has been involved in hospice or palliative care knows in relation to health care). It would make good sense to use principles of "co-operation", set out above, to continue to fund, and to extend funding, to catholic, and other, religions (see the previous question) in areas such as education and health care. The removal of historic denominational rights in education was a "levelling down" and there needs to be improvement in education and health care going forwards. What is not being discussed but needs to be is "what are the core aspects of civic virtue" for all citizens and how do we deliver it within schools of all types? Removing funding doesn't mean all citizens will use provincial schools (and neither should it). The question then is how are we going to teach the citizens of tomorrow that we must live together despite our cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious differences? Keeping some governmental (monetary) oversight makes good sense from this point of view. When a course curriculum is designed for "civics" so that it may be taught across all types of schooling in a province, it must be one that is not inconsistent with the core requirements of citizenship, diversity and accommodation yet capable of indicating the shared commitments for civic membership.

h) How far might we go in this direction?

You might recognize that encouraging diverse belief frameworks assists a culture to thrive. Forcing them into a "one-size fits all conception" in which the beliefs that are stripped out are religious and those "left in" are atheistic or agnostic dominated is not encouraging and will produce the effect a child's water-colour paint box has when all the colours are mixed together into one mass. A homogenized greyness is hardly the effect that any culture, especially one as potentially vibrant as Quebec, wants to be known for.