Education in Ontario

The Religion and Society Debate

8 — October 5, 2007

Where do schools belong in the social structure and functions of a nation? Who should bear responsibility for educating children and on what terms? How should government shape its education policy to do justice to all citizens?

These questions lie at the root of a contentious election campaign for premier of the province of Ontario. Election Day is October 10. The incumbent premier and Liberal Party leader, Dalton McGuinty, wants to maintain the status quo, which means continuing to fund two school systems in the province, one called public, which in its origin served the Protestant majority, and the other that serves the minority Roman Catholic population. This arrangement represents the early historical accommodation between Ontario and Quebec to share a single, pluralistic Canada.

The Conservative Party candidate for premier, John Tory, is promising something quite different. If elected, he says he will bring Ontario’s education policy up to date with reality—the fact of even greater religious and cultural diversity today. If the government is committed to funding a Catholic school system, he argues, it should also support a variety of other faith-based schools in order to be fair.

Those are the two options facing voters. But there are important critics who reject both options. One such critic is John Stackhouse, who wrote on September 28 (http://stackblog.worldpress.com) that both positions are out of date and wrong. The fact is that Ontario’s public schools have long since shed their Protestant character and are now secular. The secular public schools are all that Ontario needs today, says Stackhouse. Ontario should no longer fund Catholic or any other religious schools. If parents want to inculcate religious values in their children, they can do so at home and in their churches, synagogues, and temples. A single public school system should reflect commonly held public values and only those values. To deal with the growing religious diversity of the population, Stackhouse advocates teaching “about religions” in the public school system so that everyone can learn about all of their neighbors. Religion should be a “teachable subject,” says Stackhouse, just like English or science.

The problem with Stackhouse and McGuinty, however, is that they continue to take for granted that public education is entirely government’s responsibility and that a single school system with a common curriculum squares with the “secular values” that everyone supposedly shares. Stackhouse is, in essence, arguing that Ontario ought to
become more like a state in the United States where the once-Protestant public schools have become secular and anything religious (including religious schooling) is treated as an entirely private matter.

McGuinty and Stackhouse are both out of date in assessing Ontario’s history and in dealing with the current reality of public life. In the 19th century, Protestant and Catholic faiths were not merely private matters, isolable as “teachable subjects.” Nor are the many faiths currently alive in Ontario merely private affairs that all mesh comfortably with “secular values” supposedly shared by everyone. Stackhouse is naively unconscious of the fact that not everyone in Ontario shares his faith and worldview.

In this respect, John Tory, the conservative, is acting as a real progressive even if he has not yet worked out a comprehensive pluralistic philosophy of public life to support his instincts. Most of Ontario’s non-government schools are teaching children about public life, including science, math, music, and literature, and not only about private beliefs, and they are doing so from encompassing points of view that are different from Stackhouse’s all-encompassing worldview that divides the secular and the religious. In other words, religiously deep worldviews cannot be privatized and there is not a secular consensus that somehow grounds the full diversity of private faiths.

The real question for government, therefore, is how to do justice to that real diversity of worldviews and approaches to life that exist among the people of Ontario. Stackhouse and McGuinty uncritically follow in the steps of their elders: let government impose the wishes and views of the majority on everyone through a single public school system and let those who don’t agree fend for themselves in educating their children privately. Tory is proposing something better. Minorities ought to receive the same public benefits the majority receives. If 80 percent of Ontario’s population wants secular public schools, let them have 80 percent of the public funding for education. And if the other 20 percent want schools of a Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, or some other ethos and worldview, then let them have proportionate funding for their schools. All schools are educating Ontario’s children for public life.

Tory, moreover, seems to understand that government does not possess sole responsibility for education, and schools should not be treated as mere departments of state. Families are responsible for the education of their children. A variety of schools do the educating. Many churches sponsor schools, as do various other organizations. Government has every right to make sure that all schools teach certain subject matter and help to prepare maturing citizens. But education can never be a neutral, secular affair. Thus, to be just, government should establish equitable pluralism rather than monopolistic majoritarianism with respect to education and give public support to a diversity of schooling options for Ontario’s families. If Tory wins the election and implements such a system, he will help build a more solid public consensus in Ontario where its citizens can share a single commons where justice is done to its true diversity.

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