

Quick Study

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Summary

- Many people oppose faith-based schools on the grounds that they will be divisive.
- The Netherlands began to fund faith-based schools in 1917.
- Funding faith-based schools reduced fanaticism and religious hatred in that country.
- Emphasizing religious differences actually reduces their social impact.

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Faith-Based Schools: A force for good or for evil?

by Malkin Dare

Former *Toronto Star* reporter Lois Sweet was once doubtful about public funding for private religious schools.

In her 1995 book, *God in the Classroom*, Sweet wrote, “I wanted to understand what motivates hundreds of thousands of parents to reject public education in favour of schools that ghettoize their children on the basis of religion....To me, public education carries both a promise and a hope – promise of an academically sound education that’s open and accessible to all. A hope of fostering in future citizens the skills and attitudes necessary for sustaining relationships of trust and solidarity and equality. I was wary of a movement that seemed to have the potential to undermine both.”

But in the process of researching that book Sweet changed her mind.

After journeying across Canada and Europe and visiting educators and parents, she wrote “I never dreamed that two years later I’d not only still be immersed in this subject, but my own views would have undergone such a transformation.”

What Sweet discovered was that in places like the Netherlands, public funding of private religious schools was working and had been working for a long time. In 1917 the Dutch enacted legislation to allow parents – religious or non-religious – who wanted their own school to open it and to operate a publicly funded school.

Although the opponents to this policy warned that “fanaticism would be injected into the receptive hearts of children, and the gentle nation would become a prey to the most horrible of evils: religious hatred”, this did not happen.

Instead, the decision to fund religious schools resulted in the stable and tolerant society the Dutch enjoy to this day. Despite its large multicultural population, Holland has no more than a handful of 'fundamentalist' schools: perhaps a few Islamic schools and one or two orthodox Protestant schools.

Unlike the Netherlands, however, Ontario is pursuing a policy of religious segregation, with one set of rules for Catholics and a different set of rules for citizens of other faiths.

Clearly, favouring Catholics over people of other faiths is discriminatory and unfair. Thus, the question before Ontarians is whether Ontario should withdraw funding from the province's Catholic schools or extend funding to the rest of the religions.

If Ontario chooses to stop funding Catholic schools, the province would be signaling its commitment to the assimilation of its multicultural population. In this scenario, public schools would be forced to provide a sort of lowest-common-denominator education which would bend over backwards to avoid offending any faith or ethnicity, and which would de-emphasize children's cultural differences.

If, on the other hand, Ontario chooses to fund schools of all religions, it would be signaling its commitment to the integration of its multicultural population.

Indeed, denying parents the right to send their children to religious schools causes them to cling more tightly to their beliefs, whereas the availability of religious schools renders religion less essential to people's identities and discourages fundamentalism.

Religious schools, in short, allow people to preserve their roots and at the same time feel a welcome part of the larger society. This is what has happened in the five Canadian provinces that already fund religious schools.

Dalton McGuinty, Sr., the father of Ontario's premier, sent all his children to Catholic schools, saying they "foster in their students tolerance and understanding for people of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds". His son Dalton McGuinty, Jr., also sent his own children to Catholic schools, and Mr. McGuinty's wife continues to teach in a Catholic school.

Yet Dalton McGuinty, Jr. is opposed to public funding for religions other than his own religion. It's difficult to understand his position except in the context of his desire to be re-elected.

Funding for religious schools is an emotional issue and it is easy for cynical politicians to manipulate people's passions on this topic. However, Ontarians who want a tolerant, socially-integrated society would be wise to remember Lois Sweet's intellectual journey.

In her words, "I can't help but be struck by a paradox: by emphasizing religious differences, we may actually minimize their social impact."