CHAPTER 3

Religion and Education in Ontario Public Education: Contested Borders and Uneasy Truces

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Introduction

The role of religion in public education has never been an easy or straightforward matter in jurisdictions around the world (Temperman 2010; Jackson 2004; Bader 2007; Jödicke 2013). Ontario is no exception, religion having played an ambiguous and even contradictory role, providing the language for civic values, social cohesion and personal morality, while, at the same time, being the source of attitudes and practices considered undesirable or even dangerous to social order and achievement of the fully realized human being (Corbett 1997; White 2003; MacLellan 2008). Ontario follows the pattern of other Western, liberal and democratic jurisdictions in considering protection of religious freedoms and equality a mark of secular, modern states (Hurd 2008) while at the same time regulating religion and religious practice on the basis of distinctions between tolerable and intolerable forms of religion (Beckford 1985; Brown 2006; Banchoff 2007; Hurd 2014). In Ontario, as in other states, the public school system is a key state instrument in the regulation of religion and religious diversity (Lawr and Gidney 1973; Glenn 2000, 2011; Jödicke 2013).

The attempt to establish a common form of religion that respects religious freedom and diversity while, at the same time, establishing the language of common values and togetherness has been a project in Ontario public education since the nineteenth century when the common school system was established as a state instrument to inculcate a common ethos (Lawr and Gidney 1973; Titley and Miller 1982; Michel 2003; MacLellan 2012). Two themes in the project of establishing and inculcating a common ethos as the basis for social cohesion in Ontario have persisted from the nineteenth into the twenty-first centuries. The first of these is that the state is the central player in the formulation and delivery of the common ethos through the common school system and the second is that non-standard religions or forms of religion that deviate from the common ethos are matters of state interest, scrutiny and regulation. The wrong kind of religion is an important state matter in Ontario.
In this chapter, I examine the phrase ‘education about religion’ as a strategy in the ongoing project in Ontario public education to establish ways of thinking about religion which will allow freedom of religious expression without harm to social order and harmony. Education about religion is represented as a public way of teaching about religion which respects religious diversity and the freedom of religious expression on the one hand, while at the same time, establishing a common ethos transcending religious particularities. Education about religion is represented as a religiously neutral formulation designed to create safe space for all religious voices and as an educational strategy to inculcate attitudes, skills and civic values about religion appropriate in a modern, diverse society.

However, its representation as such depends on education about religion being placed in binary opposition to the Christian religious instruction it replaced in 1990 but also more generally to all education emerging out of any religious imagination. Education about religion is seen as evidence of a new era of religious freedom and inclusive equality which, as a form of critical thought, is positioned in a binary opposition to the religious indoctrination, coercion and exclusion that are the imagined characteristics of an earlier period in Ontario public education. The dominant narrative in Ontario public education suggests that education about religion is the long sought after resolution to the seemingly intractable problem of balancing the interests of religious diversity and religious freedom with the achievement of social harmony by providing a religiously neutral and critical voice about religion that transcends religion and religious sectarianism.

However, I argue that education about religion as it is interpreted in Ontario has its own epistemological assumptions, biases and blind spots which create its own exclusionary impulses. I argue, through the lens of a social constructionist theoretical perspective (Beckford 2003), that education about religion is a socially constructed response to historical and political circumstances and that Ontario's construction of education about religion is shaped and limited by the unique history and political context of Ontario public education. I also critically examine the claim that education about religion, as a form of critical thought, can be delivered only in liberal secular public schools.

While education about religion is represented as an educational issue and a resolution of a problem in the delivery of public education, Ontario's interpretation and implementation of education about religion cannot be understood without taking into account the role it plays as both a political remedy and as a political project. Having been adopted by the Ontario Court of Appeal in *Elgin County 1990*, education about religion served as a political remedy to the complaints of religious minorities that their religious freedom