

Why Public Funding For Faith Based Schools Is A Really Bad Idea

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I am a strong believer in the separation of church and state.

When people ask me how I identify myself spiritually I tell them that I am an Ex-Jehovah's Witness, baptized Catholic, who became a Star Trek Humanist, that now dabbles in Paganism, while hanging out with Unitarians.

When people ask me how I identify myself politically I tell them that at some point in my life I have voted for all four of the major political parties, been a member of two, and that a few years ago I unsuccessfully tried to win an NDP Provincial candidate nomination.

To deny that my spiritual life informs my political life or that my political views affect my spiritual views would be dishonest. Everything about my life experience is interconnected, so how do I keep two such fundamental and all-encompassing parts of my human experience separate?

Faith-based education has been a part of my life since childhood, but I never had any expectation that my government should help fund, support or supervise this education. Do I really want my government to regulate the education that takes place in my Church, Temple, Mosque or Kingdom Hall?

The Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario states the following in a news release:

"There are approximately 650,000 children currently attending publicly-funded Catholic schools while 53,000 students of other religious backgrounds are being taught in other independently funded faith-based schools. These other schools are not required to teach the provincial curriculum or meet the same teacher accreditation or inspection criteria as the public system. Tory indicated that a PC government would invite these schools into an expanded public system to ensure equality in education for Ontarians of all religious backgrounds."

If John Tory were elected as the Premier of Ontario the funding he would give to faith-based schools would come with an exceptionally high price tag. Not only would he want to know what every faith group is teaching, ultimately he would

be able to change the curriculum of faith-based schools if he felt it wasn't abiding to a set of standards set out by his government.

The disconnect between public funding and faith based schools becomes painfully apparent when we look at the ongoing discord within Ontario Catholic school boards regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (GLBTQ) issues. Most Canadians probably remember the 2002 court case of Marc Hall vs. the Durham Catholic School Board. Hall, a young gay man, wanted to bring his boyfriend to the prom and the principal of his school refused to grant them entrance into the event. Hall's lawyers argued that the Catholic board could not discriminate against Hall due to his sexual orientation because they were funded by public dollars. Their argument being if you are a publicly funded institution you must answer to the same laws and standards as other publicly funded institutions. Ultimately Hall was granted an injunction, which allowed him and his boyfriend to attend the prom. The bigger questions that came out of Hall's case remained unresolved because Hall decided to end his legal battles with the Catholic board after gaining admittance to his prom.

Justice Robert MacKinnon who granted the injunction had this to say in his ruling:

"It is not the task of a civil court to direct the Principal, the Board, the Roman Catholic Church or its members, or indeed any member of the public as to what his or her religious beliefs ought to be. The separation of church and state is a fundamental principle of our Canadian democracy and our constitutional law. Debates as to what the Catholic faith should require on the issue of homosexuality ought generally to be resolved within the Roman Catholic Church and not in a court of law. But I find that Mr. Hall is entitled in this court to question the correctness of the statement in the defendant's materials that Catholic teachings and Board policy in fact proscribe "homosexual behaviour" and a "homosexual lifestyle" so as to justify prohibiting Mr. Hall from attending his Prom with [his boyfriend]. If individuals in Canada were permitted to simply assert that their religious beliefs require them to discriminate against homosexuals without objective scrutiny, there would be no protection at all from discrimination for gays and lesbians in Canada because everyone who wished to discriminate against them could make that assertion."

The Hall case dramatically demonstrates how murky the waters get when state and church institutions mix together. Which institution's laws have higher authority? If John Tory's Conservatives believe they should be able to approve a faith-based school's curriculum what's next? What parts of a faith-based school's

curriculum would Tory's government approve or disapprove of? It all gets rather sticky, as Tory's use of the loaded word Creationism revealed, and that's why I feel that public dollars shouldn't fund any faith-based education.

The Liberals and the NDP continue to defend the status quo, which is plagued with a myriad of flaws, mostly out of necessity. Why would either party want to stir up this hornet's nest? It's not going to gain either of them any ground. The Conservatives, in some ill-conceived publicity stunt, thought invoking some US-style Bush-speak regarding faith-based schools was going to get them some ink. Ink they got, but they also landed in quicksand and they keep trying to dig themselves out of. The Greens are advocating for the Catholic and Public school boards to amalgamate into one publicly funded school system, removing faith from the equation completely. Too bad Canadian broadcasters have once again decided not to invite the Greens to the televised leaders debate so we can hear a different view on this issue.

What the Green Party is proposing isn't all that radical within the broader context of Canadian politics. The provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland do not fund any faith-based schools. The Ontario Government's funding of a public and only one faith group's education system was declared discriminatory by the United Nations in 1999. The solution to this quagmire isn't funding even more faith-based schools, but to draw a line in the sand that says that the Province will only give funding to public schools. Any other schools should be designated private schools and if parents want their children to attend them they can pay the extra costs associated with attending any kind of private school.

The cries of unfairness from some groups regarding this possible solution are in themselves unfair. If you want to segregate your children from a public system that you feel doesn't address your children's spiritual or religious needs, it is not the role of the government to provide these resources to you. I don't want my government in my religion's business any more than I want my religion in the government's business.

Throughout my childhood I identified as a Jehovah's Witness. I used to openly practice my faith while attending a public school. I would refuse to partake in singing O Canada, reciting the Lord's Prayer or celebrating most religious and secular holidays while attending public school because it conflicted with my religious beliefs. The irony of having a government support my right to practice my religion even though my former faith group commands its followers to refrain

from voting in elections has never been lost on me. It's the twisted beauty of a secular democratic society in action.

I now am an openly queer woman. I am painfully aware that numerous religions in Canada discriminate against me both because I am queer and because I am a woman. Several faiths do not allow me to preach from the pulpit, because I am a woman. Several faiths do not acknowledge my same-sex relationships, as they are considered abominations. Yet another irony, the one setting where discrimination is still legally allowed in this country is within the confines of religion.

I enjoy the fact that Canada is a modern day secular democratic society. I don't live in a theocratic nation or a fascist state that is defined by one religion or belief system. There is a maple leaf on our flag not a cross, or a Star of David, or a star and crescent, or a hammer and sickle. I enjoy the fact that my Federal, Provincial and Municipal politicians don't end all of their speeches and addresses with a ubiquitous "God Bless Canada". I enjoy the fact that Atheists, Christians, Pagans, Muslims, Agnostics, Hindus, Jews, and Humanists can all live, work, and learn together in our society in relative peace, harmony and respect.

Religion and politics both coexist and affect the policies and decisions that are made by both group's leaders, but they shouldn't be in bed with each other. Everyday, we Canadians struggle with the paradox of trying to balance fundamental freedoms and equality rights. To preserve the democratic ideals we hold so dear Church and State must be distinct and separate entities. That is why I believe the Ontario government should only fund one public school system for all and not fund any faith-based schools no matter what religion they are associated with.