Chapter 14
Religious Education in Quebec's Ethics and Religious Culture Curriculum: A Cultural Approach

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Abstract The presence of diverse religions in Western pluralistic societies raises the following question: how can religion be taught while respecting the different religions and cultures represented in the school environment and in society? Since 2008, the province of Quebec has addressed this issue by suggesting a new type of non-denominational religious teaching: a cultural approach to religion in the "Ethics and Religious Culture" (ERC) program (Mels 2008. *Éthique et culture religieuse* [Online]. Québec: Ministère de l'éducation du loisir et du sport). In this article, we will explore the basic components of this cultural approach to religion and thereby grasp its uniqueness. This analysis will offer a new and contextualized perspective of the issue of non-denominational religious teaching in the Western world. In order to understand the issues of this specific educational context, we will first take a brief look at the history of the ERC program, showing how the secularization of the Quebec education system gradually gave birth to a non-denominational cultural religious curriculum for the entire academic path of Quebec students. Next, we will analyze the cultural challenges of the program; its place in the Quebec education program, the student's vision, the teacher's role and the concept of being cultural mediators, and the professional stance of impartiality, as well as program goals and skills. We will focus particularly on the skill described as "demonstrate an understanding of religion," since it is at the heart of cultural religious teaching in the program. Therefore, we will examine in detail the program components, its concepts of religion and religious expression, its themes, the time dedicated to studying religious heritage, and the time allotted for each religion.

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14.1   Introduction

The presence of diverse religions in Western pluralistic societies raises the following question: how can religion be taught while respecting the different religions and cultures represented in the school environment and in society? Certain Western countries address this issue by suggesting a non-denominational program of religious education. Several teaching approaches have been developed for this type of curriculum, based on the context.

In Holland, Wim Wardekker suggests a post-modern approach to the teaching of religion "that emphasize[s] the life-world related questions of young people rather than the abstract 'grand narratives' of religious systems" (Jackson 2004: 58). American Diane Moore analyzes the idea of a religious cultural vacuum, suggesting the teaching approach known as "situated knowledge": students are taught only objective and factual universal knowledge, which is available by virtue of the cultural studies approach or the scientific method used by social sciences (Moore 1995). Robert Jackson of England has developed the interpretative approach (Jackson 2012) "that takes account of the diversity that exists within religions and allows for the interaction of religion and culture, for change over time and for different views as to what a religion is. It can begin with examples from religious traditions, or it can begin with students' questions and concerns."[1] In France, religious content is integrated into other subjects covered over the course of a student's academic journey. In such a context, Mireille Estivalezes advocates a scientific approach that guarantees objectivity in religious teaching (Estivalezes 2005). Dominique Borne, Jean-Paul Willaime and Céline Béraud support this "scientific" approach in which teachers must only present reasonable religious facts backed up by scientific explanations, so as not to fall into the trap of subjectivity based on religious beliefs (Borne et al. 2007).

As for Quebec, the province has opted for non-denominational cultural religious education with its "Ethics and Religious Culture" (ERC) program (Québec (Province). Ministère de l'éducation du loisir et du sport 2008). Since 2008, the curriculum has been compulsory in all elementary[2] and secondary[3] schools in Quebec, and it offers a new type of non-denominational religious teaching—a cultural approach to religion. What exactly does religious culture mean? And what is the cultural approach to religious education in the ERC program? In this article, we will explore the basic components of this cultural approach to religion and thereby grasp its uniqueness. This analysis will offer a new and contextualized perspective of the issue of non-denominational religious teaching in the Western world.

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[1] Excerpt from Robert Jackson's summary of his interpretative approach at the following website. Retrieved from: http://www.theewc.org/uploads/content/The%20Interpretive%20Approach%20%20in%20Brief%20EWC%20library%20May%202011-1.pdf [accessed 4 February 2014].

[2] Elementary schools teach students from age 6 to 12.

[3] Secondary schools teach students from age 12 to 16.

In order to understand the issues of this specific educational context, we will first take a brief look at the history of the ERC program, showing how the secularization of the Quebec education system gradually gave birth to a non-denominational cultural religious curriculum for the entire academic path of Quebec students. Next, we will analyze the cultural challenges of the program: its place in the Quebec education program, the student's vision, the teacher's role and the concept of being cultural mediators, and the professional stance of impartiality, as well as program goals and skills. We will focus particularly on the skill described as "demonstrate an understanding of religion," since it is at the heart of cultural religious teaching in the program. Therefore, we will examine in detail the program components, its concepts of religion and religious expression, its themes, the time dedicated to studying religious heritage, and the time allotted for each religion. In order to contextualize our analysis of this cultural approach to religion, we will start with a brief look at the program's history.

14.2 History of the ERC Program

While denominational education had been the responsibility of the Catholic Church since the founding of New France (1608), in 1963–1964 the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Teaching[4] (known as the "Commission Parent") resulted in the clergy losing its role as manager of the educational system. Despite this significant action, the denominational educational system and curriculum remained in effect in Quebec. However, huge changes took place in Quebec's educational system when freedom of conscience and religion as constitutional social values came into effect with the Quebec and Canadian Charters of Rights and Freedoms in 1975[5] and in 1982[6]. It is important to note that these two charters state that discrimination occurs when a distinction, exclusion or preference for religious reasons destroys or compromises the right to religious freedom. In order to respect the charters and yet protect the historic rights and privileges of Protestants and Catholics in Quebec, the National Assembly voted on an exemption clause (1984: a way to legally avoid a law). This provided for curriculum options; until that time the only possibility was an exemption from denominational teaching. Parents could now choose from a Protestant religious education program (MEQ 1999), a Catholic religious education program (MEQ 1994) or a moral education program (MEQ 1986). Over and above these specific teachings, the three programs offered common mandatory training in

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[4] This gave birth to the Ministry of Education of Quebec (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec) and the Higher Council of Education (Conseil supérieur de l'éducation http://www.cse.gouv.qc.ca/), compulsory education until the age of 16, the CEGEP system, intensive training of teachers, easier access to university education for all social classes and the creation of 64 regional school boards in Quebec, of which 55 were Catholic and 9 were Protestant.

[5] Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, L.R.Q. c. C-12, art. 10.

[6] Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, art. 15.1 (Canada Act 1982, Schedule B).

moral development with a goal of developing cultural points of reference that were open to diversity. Whereas denominational programs taught faith from a Protestant or Catholic religious viewpoint (Lucier 2008a), non-denominational moral teaching did not favor any particular religious belief, and presented religion as an object of cultural knowledge. It was through this moral education program that the first cultural religious curriculum in Quebec began to take shape.

Secondly, the recommendations of the Proulx report (Québec (Province). Groupe de travail sur la place de la religion à l'école and Proulx 1999)[7] inspired the adoption of Bill 118 (2000),[8] which abolished the Ministry of Education's denominational system, while maintaining the exemption clause and therefore the optional curriculum. In 2005, the National Assembly terminated this exemption clause by passing Bill 95[9] which repealed the Education Act. By updating one of the recommendations from the Proulx report (1999), this bill made cultural religious education

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[7] Recommandations 2, 3, 5 and 8: 230.

Among other things, the task force recommended that the government establish a secular public school system at the preschool, elementary and secondary levels; revoke the status of denominational public schools; require the elementary and secondary educational systems to replace Catholic and Protestant religious teaching with a compulsory cultural religious education program; and amend the Education Act to authorize every school to provide a religious and spiritual guidance program for students from various denominations—all publicly funded.

[8] Loi 118 (Loi modifiant diverses dispositions législatives dans le secteur de l'éducation concernant la confessionnalité, 2000) Loi sur l'instruction publique, c. I-13.3, 1988. This bill includes the following elements: creation of the Secretariat on Religious Affairs, prohibition of denominational public schools; replacement of Christian education advisors with advisors on spiritual, religious and moral education; replacement of pastoral guidance programs with spiritual life and community involvement program. This law redefines the relationship between schools and school boards, and especially between various educational agents: primarily between students, parents, teachers and principals. It clarifies the rights of regular students, adult students, and students with disabilities. Finally, it defines the rights and duties of the student, the teacher, the role of school management and the school council, the role and powers of the school board and the duties and powers of the Minister. The changes to the new legal provisions of the Education Act can be found at the following internet address: http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/lancement/LIP/index.htm [accessed 21 Jan 2014].

[9] Bill 95 (Loi modifiant diverses dispositions législatives de nature confessionnelle dans le domaine de l'éducation, 2005) Lois modifiées par la loi 95: charte des droits et libertés de la personne (L.R.Q., chapitre C-12); loi sur l'enseignement privé (L.R.Q., chapitre E-9.1); loi sur l'instruction publique (L.R.Q., chapitre I-13.3); loi sur l'instruction publique pour les autochtones cris, inuit et naskapis (L.R.Q., chapitre I-14).

The educational regulations are available on the following websites: http://www.mels.gouv. qc.ca/ministere/legislation/index.asp?page=reglements1 or http://www2.publicationsduquebec. gouv.qc.ca/dynamicSearch/telecharge.php?type=2&file=//I_13_3/I13_3R8.htm [accessed 21 Jan 2014].

This law presents school legislation regarding the nature and objectives of educational services; preschool, elementary and secondary educational services; supplementary and special services; the general organizational framework of educational services; admission and school attendance; levels of education; school calendar and time requirements; information or documents to be provided to the parents of students; curriculum material; subject distribution; learning evaluation; graduation requirements; language quality; transitional and final measures; arrangements for disabled students and students living in low-income areas.

mandatory for all Quebec students: the "Ethics and Religious Culture" program (MELS 2008).[10]

Since 2008, the non-denominational Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum has been compulsory in all private and public Quebec elementary and secondary schools, non-denominational and denominational alike, whether regular or special education. The curriculum is therefore present throughout the entire academic pathway of the Quebec education program. We should note that in spite of this, the Private Education Act still allows private schools to offer denominational educational teaching in addition to including the Ethics and Religious Culture program in their curriculum.

This program targets two main objectives which are interdependent: recognition of others and pursuit of the common good. These goals are the driving force behind the three skills this program is designed to help students acquire. In order for students to *reflect on ethical questions*, the teacher must develop their capacity to think independently, critically and creatively. So, teachers must introduce the diverse values, morals and standards that make up our pluralistic society, without favoring one over another. Furthermore, for students to *demonstrate an understanding of religion*, the teacher must convey the theoretical and cultural knowledge required to understand the various religions represented in Quebec, in order to promote togetherness. Finally, while developing the first two skills mentioned, the teacher must allow students to *engage in dialogue*, in other words to reflect on information, interact with others, and present and support their own point of view. For each of these skills, the program establishes themes from which the teacher can develop learning and evaluation activities appropriate to the age of the students. The following section contains an analysis of the cultural approach to religion in this non-denominational program.

14.3   ERC Program and Religious Culture

In order to understand the cultural approach to religion of the Ethics and Religious Culture program, we will first examine the meaning of the expression "religious culture." The program defines it as follows:

It is considered cultural because it is aimed at the ability to grasp the field of religion by means of its various forms of expression in time and space. It allows for understanding the signs in which the religious experiences of individuals and groups are conveyed that contribute to shaping society. Moreover, it does not espouse any particular set of beliefs or moral references (MELS 2008).[11]

The program therefore requires teachers to promote an understanding of religion in its social dimension and cultural expressions. This approach is indicated clearly in the program: "The goal is neither to accompany students on a spiritual quest, nor

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[10] The program was signed by the Minister of Education, Ms. Courchesne, in July 2007.

[11] See the "Preamble" section.

to present the history of doctrines and religions, nor to promote some new common religious doctrine aimed at replacing specific beliefs … it is aimed at fostering an understanding of several religious traditions whose influence has been felt and is still felt in our society today" (MELS 2008).[12] Therefore, the ERC program does not allow teachers to promote their personal experiences or respond to the students' search for meaning or values. As certain authors advocate, the teacher must present only "situated knowledge" and objectives in order to remain impartial and non-denominational (Moore 2006; Estivalezes 2005). This requirement reinforces the cultural dimension of non-denominational religious teaching.

In addition, unlike denominational religious teaching programs, teachers must not see students as individuals searching for meaning (MEQ 1994). In Ethics and Religious Culture, students need to understand their society and their cultural and religious heritage, as well as develop attitudes of tolerance, respect and openness in order to live and act in a pluralist democratic society (MELS 2008).[13] The teacher is therefore conveying cultural and religious information to future citizens, to help them understand the world around them. This concept is in line with Robert Jackson's observation that most non-denominational educational approaches in Western countries could be described as civic education. According to him, this perspective allows better integration of cultural and ethnic diversity in varied pluralist social settings (Jackson 2004). The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation maintains that citizenship education is one of the responsibilities of the Quebec educational system. This type of education must not encourage political indoctrination, but rather allow a feeling of belonging to the ideals of Quebec society while respecting its multi-ethnicity and renewal. This report, which preceded the Proulx report (1999), established the foundation and position that led to the Ethics and Religious Culture program (Québec (Province). Conseil supérieur de l'éducation et al. 1998).

This aspect must be qualified. Just like the Physical Education and Health program, the ERC program belongs to the subject area known as "Personal Development."[14] The goals of this subject area are the "students" construction of identity and the development of their worldview as well as the ability to "reflect and raise questions about themselves and their relationships with others and the environment through action and interaction" (Québec (Province). Ministère de l'éducation 2003).[15] On the one hand, teachers must encourage not the students' search for meaning or values, but rather their social and cultural understanding of religious expressions. On the other hand, they must encourage personal growth, or the "understanding and enrichment of their value system, the development of personal attitudes, and solving problems pertaining to their personal and social lives" (MELS 2008).[16] These two instructions may seem contradictory. While teachers must

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[12] Idem.

[13] Idem.

[14] The Quebec Education program is divided into six subject areas: languages; social sciences; arts education; personal development; career development; and mathematics, science and technology.

[15] See the "Introduction, Personal Development" section.

[16] See the "Connections with the Other Subject Areas" section.

encourage social understanding of religion without responding to the students' search for meaning, they must also allow for the development of the students' identity. Because of this possible confusion, clarifications have been made to the program.

In the section "Connections with the Other Subject Areas," the program clarifies that personal development is mainly associated with the ethical aspect of the program; there is no mention of developing connections between religious culture competency and personal development (MELS 2008).[17] Instead, religious competency is associated with arts education,[18] languages[19] and social sciences aiming to "research the historical origins of certain beliefs, values or norms" and to "use different techniques specific to interpreting and establishing a time line or a graph in order to understand a form of religious expression" (MELS 2008).[20]

We interpret these clarifications as an attempt to maintain the program's cultural approach to teaching religion. They are intended to prevent teaching that focuses on developing students' beliefs. Religious teaching must therefore remain solely cultural, even though this program is listed under the "Personal Development" section. Its goal is to inform students of the types of religious expression they are surrounded by, without attempting to respond to their personal questions or conveying values or beliefs. In this regard, it would seem more appropriate to place the ERC program under the "Social Sciences" section, in order to avoid confusion and to underscore the cultural and civic approach of the program.

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[17] "Use the processes involved in adopting a healthy, active lifestyle in order to evaluate possible options and actions concerning an ethical issue" and "apply what they have learned in situations in order to foster reflection on ethical questions related to the need to achieve their potential." See "Connections with the Other Subject Areas: Personal Development (Physical Education and Health" in the "Making connections: ERC and the other dimensions of the Quebec Education Program" ERC program section.

[18] "Apply processes that enable analyzing a work of art and interpreting its meaning in order to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of religion." See "Connections With the Other Subject Areas: Arts" in the "Making connections: ERC and the other dimensions of the Quebec Education Program" ERC program section.

[19] "Draw upon competencies involving writing, reading and appreciating a variety of texts in order to reflect on ethical questions and demonstrate an understanding of the phenomenon of religion." See "Connections With the Other Subject Areas: Languages" in the "Making connections: ERC and the other dimensions of the Quebec Education Program" ERC program section.

[20] See "Connections with the Other Subject Areas: Social sciences" in the "Making connections: ERC and the other dimensions of the Quebec Education Program" ERC program section.

14.4 The Cultural Dimension of the Program Goals, Dialogue and Ethics Skills

Another dimension of the cultural component of the "Ethics and Religious Culture" program is found in its two goals, as well as in the ethics and dialogue skills it aims to develop. First of all, the program goals entitled "recognition of others" and "pursuit of the common good" guide teachers in their choice of teaching practices, attitudes and interventions with students. They point out the spirit in which the program skills must be developed: the promotion of Quebec societal values for better togetherness. Recognition of others is seen as self-knowledge which fosters receptiveness to dialogue, with both an open mind and discernment. In order to recognize the value, dignity and uniqueness of another person, we must know and respect his or her worldview, while rejecting anything that violates human dignity or the common good. Furthermore, by a pursuit of the common good, the program encourages the exploration of common values, supports projects which advance the common good, and promotes principles and democratic ideals particular to Quebec culture.

Since Quebec's pluralistic society requires "dialogue that is imbued with listening and reflection, discernment and the active participation of its members" (MELS 2008), the teacher must allow students to "engage in dialogue" by reflecting on information, interacting with others, and presenting and supporting their own point of view. This skill must be developed in students by way of two interactive dimensions that are essential for dialogue: internal deliberation and interpersonal exchange favoring togetherness and the common good of Quebec. The other skill, "reflect on ethical questions," allows students to analyze an ethical situation and develop a critical position in the face of the diverse values and norms created by Quebec society, from a common base necessary for togetherness. The point of reference for this skill is therefore the values and norms of Quebec society.

In this way, the program goals and these two skills indicate a central axis of the ERC cultural approach: Quebec culture. Unlike Catholic denominational teaching that presents faith as the first point of reference, the ERC program encourages Quebec culture as the common culture for all students (MEQ 1994). Teachers must therefore exemplify and cause the students to adhere to the values of Quebec culture as the point of reference for their teaching. So, if Quebec culture is to influence and guide the entire program, we have a right to ask: what exactly is it? If it is used to ensure the non-denominational nature of the curriculum, then what are its values? MELS clarifies that the Quebec values listed in the Charters of Rights and Freedoms serve as a common reference point in this non-denominational cultural program. In this regard, Pierre Lucier explains that even though the program is officially non-denominational, Quebec culture "confesses" values such as openness, respect and dialogue. In doing this, it does promote a particular worldview (Lucier 2008a, b). In fact, the program was based on a very precise concept of society, values, ethics, dialogue and religion.

So, in order to comprehend fully the cultural dimension of the program, we must understand the type of religious teaching it offers. For this reason, we will analyze the key elements of religious culture competency.

14.5 Religious Culture Competency: A Cultural Approach to Religion

The first thing that comes to the fore when trying to understand the meaning of religious culture competency is the wording of the skill description: "demonstrate an understanding of the phenomenon of religion" (MELS 2008).[21] Two elements stand out: understanding; and the phenomenon of religion. As was clarified in Sects. 3.1 and 3.2, to develop religious culture competency the teacher must convey the theoretical and cultural knowledge needed to understand the diverse religions present in Quebec society, in order to promote togetherness. This must be done without responding to the students' search for meaning and without favoring one belief over another. So, as was mentioned above, religious culture requires a rational understanding of religions and not a personal commitment to their belief systems.

As for the concept of "the phenomenon of religion," we should point out first of all that the program is not referring to a phenomenological approach to research. Instead, it uses the more general definition of this term, which indicates a fact observed that comes to one's consciousness, that which is perceived by the senses (Garnier et al. 2003). This is the meaning that applies to the idea of phenomenon. In fact, the program uses the term to refer to what can be observed in Quebec society from various religious expressions:

> Living together in our society requires that we gain an understanding of the phenomenon of religion. In this program, the goal is to encourage students to understand the various forms of religious expression, grasp the complexity of the phenomenon and gain perspective on the various dimensions: experiential, historical, doctrinal, moral, ritual, literary, artistic, social or political. (MELS 2008)[22]

We would also point out that the concept of religious phenomenon is directly connected to the idea of religious expression. So, in order to understand the phenomenon of religion, we need a greater understanding of religious expression as it pertains to this competency. Actually, the first part of this skill that must be developed is to bring a student to the point that he or she "analyzes forms of religious expression"[23]—in other words, is able to put them in context, connect them to religious traditions in the world and describe their meaning and purpose. As well, this competency is intended to ensure that a student "makes connections between forms

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[21] See the "Competency 2: demonstrates an understanding of the phenomenon of religion" section.

[22] See "Competency 2: demonstrates an understanding of the phenomenon of religion" section.

[23] Idem.

of religious expressions and the social and cultural environment"[24] by situating them in space or time and linking them to elements of the social and cultural setting of Quebec and elsewhere. Finally, a result of this skill is that the student "examines various ways of thinking, being and acting"[25] within a certain religious tradition or between several traditions, and also understands their impact on society.

So, the idea of 'religious expression' is integral to every facet of this competency. It is therefore central to understanding the cultural approach. The program defines this concept as follows:

> Relates to one or more dimensions of a religion. Religious expression takes root and develops in a sociocultural universe. The Torah, the Bible, the sweat lodge, the minaret, Puja, Christmas, the icon, the Buddhist temple and certain street names referring to saints are all forms of religious expression. (MELS 2008)

An analysis of the prescribed themes for this competency allows us to better understand the idea of religious expression and the cultural approach (MELS 2008). In fact, it is interesting that most of the prescribed themes relate to the understanding of a religious expression readily apparent in the student environment. These themes deepen the students' understanding of what they see, hear and can touch in their immediate surroundings. Expressions that students must learn about secondhand are found only in the senior secondary cycle.[26] The understanding of religious phenomenon therefore centers on analyzing religious expressions from the student's immediate environment.

In summary, we see that competency in religious culture refers to rational understanding of various religious expressions in society, that is, of the phenomenon of religion observable by diverse cultural expressions: objects, buildings, clothing, rituals, expressions of religious beliefs, etc.

In each of the themes for this competency, teachers must respect the requirements for presenting material about major world religions. These guidelines were developed based on the cultural influence of each religion on Quebec's religious heritage:

> This program takes a special look at Quebec religious heritage. The historical and cultural importance of Catholicism and Protestantism is especially highlighted. However, attention is also given to the influence of Judaism and Native spirituality on this heritage, as well as other religions that today contribute to Quebec culture and inspire different ways of thinking, being and acting. (MELS 2008)[27]

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[24] Idem.

[25] Idem.

[26] In the senior secondary cycle, students of ages 15 and 16 study four themes: "religions down through time," "existential questions," "religious experience" and "religious references in art and culture."

[27] It is interesting that the program outline specifically states the place of each religion in its vision of religious culture: 'In Religious Culture, your child will progressively: learn about the important place of Catholicism and Protestantism in Quebec's religious heritage; discover the contributions of Judaism and Native spirituality to this religious heritage; learn about elements of other religious traditions more recently found in Quebecsociety." See also the "Introduction" section.

So we see that the program associates the concept of religious heritage with religions that have historically had the most influence on Quebec culture. This mention of historical influence reveals another dimension of the ERC program's cultural approach: the idea of religious heritage.

In fact, based on Quebec's religious heritage, the program institutes a hierarchy of religions according to their influence on Quebec culture, which means that teachers must convey more cultural information about the religions that have been more influential. In spite of having to respect this hierarchy of religions according to their cultural and historical importance, the teaching must remain non-denominational. Therefore, even though students acquire more cultural knowledge about religions that have influenced Quebec heritage, the teaching must not turn into a Christian, Jewish or Native denominational course. This distinction is crucial for understanding the program's cultural approach. For this reason, we present the following analysis of these guidelines (MELS 2008).[28]

The program allows the study of "various expressions of Quebec's religious heritage present in the immediate or distant setting" (MELS 2008)[29]—that is Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism),[30] Native spirituality and Judaism. First of all, Christianity holds a central place in cultural teaching because it is considered the dominant religion of Quebec's religious heritage, having most influenced Quebec's identity and religious legacy. For this reason, the program requires that Protestantism and Catholicism be "covered throughout each year of a cycle" (MELS 2008).[31] Christianity is present in every year of teaching and therefore in each theme covered in Religious Culture. Secondly, the program states that Native spirituality and Judaism have influenced Quebec's religious heritage. So they must be "covered on a number of occasions in each year of a cycle" (MELS 2008).[32] Even though they are not covered in each religious competency theme because of having a lesser historical influence than Christianity, they must still be presented more than once a year during the teaching of the curriculum.

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[28] See the "Program Content, Religious Culture" section: "Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism) is covered throughout each year of a cycle; Judaism and Native spirituality are covered on a number of occasions in each year of a cycle; Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism are covered on a number of occasions over the course of a cycle; religions other than those mentioned above may be covered over the course of a cycle, depending on the reality and the needs of the class; cultural expressions and those derived from representations of the world and of human beings that reflect the meaning and value of human experience outside of religious beliefs and affiliation are addressed during the cycle."

[29] See the "Introduction" section.

[30] We note that Orthodoxy is not considered to be a religion that has influenced Quebec's religious heritage, due to its later arrival in the history of Quebec. For that reason it is not included in "Christian" religious heritage, but rather in the "other religions" that will be discussed later.

[31] See the "Program Content, Religious Culture" section. A teaching cycle includes at least 2 years of study. There are three study cycles at the elementary level and two at the secondary level. For example, the first elementary cycle includes the first and second years of elementary school.

[32] See the "Program Content, Religious Culture" section.

In addition to religions included in Quebec's religious heritage, the program requires students to learn about other religious traditions present in Quebec society (MELS 2008).[33] Therefore, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism must be "covered on a number of occasions over the course of a cycle," meaning they must be addressed several times during at least 1 year of the teaching cycle (MELS 2008).[34] As well, "religions other than those mentioned above may be covered over the course of a cycle, depending on the reality and the needs of the class."[35] These "other religions" could include either new religions or other religious traditions that were not previously addressed. They are covered only if the teacher feels it is appropriate to do so. Finally, "cultural expressions and those derived from representations of the world and of human beings that reflect the meaning and value of human experience outside of religious beliefs and affiliation are addressed during the cycle."[36] By this description, the program includes non-religious worldviews, for example: atheism, humanism or agnosticism. Also, certain non-religious worldviews are included in the list of religions prescribed by the program.

In connection with this issue, philosopher Daniel Weinstock states that the program tries to be fair to all faiths by including in religious culture all belief systems, whether they are religious or not. However, in doing this, it favors one definition of belief systems over the others. According to him, non-religious worldviews are not the same as religious beliefs. So, the program's claim of fairness may cause confusion between the goal of studying religious culture and the goal of studying ethics, namely: what is the difference between a religious and philosophical response to human questions (Weinstock 2006)?

14.6   The Teacher's Role and the ERC Program's Cultural Approach

To ensure that program goals and skills are approached in a non-denominational way, the Ministry of Education has defined the role and professional stance required of teachers of the curriculum. We present here our analysis of these mandatory requirements, which is drawn from two sources of departmental information. The primary source is of course the official "Ethics and Religious Culture" program (MELS 2008). In this, we found a section entitled "Role of the Teacher" which presents the requirements pertaining to the professional stance of teachers. As well, in order to delve deeper into the meaning of these requirements, a second Ministry website[37] was used that provides details and explanations. We can summarize the

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[33] See the "Introduction" section.

[34] See also the "Program Content, Religious Culture" section.

[35] Idem.

[36] Idem.

[37] Retrieved   from   https://www7.mels.gouv.qc.ca/DC/ECR/ressources/index.php?page=faq [accessed 3 Oct. 2008].

"Role of the Teacher" section of the Ethics and Religious Culture program in two main points: providing support for students by being cultural mediators, and maintaining a critical distance.

The idea of student support formed part of the Catholic and Protestant denominational curriculum. In fact, in the Catholic religious education program, the teacher was to "accompany the student as a coach or an initiator (MEQ 1994: 21)," meaning as a "seeker of God with students…[to] assist youth to draw on sources of human and Christian wisdom to find answers to their questions" (MEQ 1994: 21). We note that faith was therefore the core support of this denominational program. In order to guarantee the non-denominational nature of its cultural approach to religion, the ERC program redefined this concept.

As was mentioned in Sect. 14.3, the program no longer aims to allow youth to find answers to their personal questions, but rather to help them to develop a common Quebec culture. Therefore, teachers must assist students in developing the three program skills, providing support as they expand their capacities in ethics, religious culture, and dialogue. In order to do this, teachers must continuously improve their skills and ability to provide quality teaching. In addition, they must "play the role of cultural mediator, that is, they build bridges between the past, the present and the future, especially with regard to Quebec culture" (MELS 2008).[38] This concept is crucial in analyzing the cultural approach of the ERC program, because it is foundational to non-denominational religious teaching.

First of all, it is mentioned in the first professional skill required of all Quebec teachers, which is expressed like this: "Act as a professional beneficiary, critic and interpreter of objects of knowledge or culture while carrying out their duties" (Québec (Province). Ministère de l'éducation et al. 2001: 61–67). Teachers are required to situate cultural knowledge in its context while being aware of students' prejudices and preconceptions (Desaulniers and Jutras 2006: 139). More specifically, this competency requires the teacher to maintain a critical distance with respect to the material taught, by placing knowledge in its proper setting in order to be able to exercise judgment about statements made in class. It expects the teacher to transform the class into a cultural space open to the cohabitation of diverse perspectives. This is done by creating a culture of shared and common points of reference, in order to develop an environment that promotes togetherness and the ability to look critically at its own origins, cultural practices and social role (Québec (Province). Ministère de l'éducation et al. 2001: 61–67). So, teachers become cultural mediators by distancing themselves from their personal viewpoints and being able to determine their own cultural roots, in order to recognize their limits and

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The professional stance of the ERC program created some problems for teachers during the implementation of the program. In this website, the MELS presented answers to the teachers' questions. It is a section of the official ERC program website that is reserved for teachers. It is important to note that this information was only available during the first year of implementation of the program, and is no longer accessible. Despite this fact, we chose to integrate the information into our theoretical framework because it contains clarifications that are crucial for our research.

[38] See the "Pedagogical Context, The Role of the Teacher" section.

potential, all with the goal of being sensitive to differences in the class resulting from diversity.

Marie-Paule Desaulniers and France Jutras believe that the basic role of the teacher is to be an intermediary between knowledge and student culture, as well as to open them up to the world through the human culture and heritage that is conveyed in class. They define the role of cultural mediators as heritage speakers, critics and interpreters of knowledge. In fact, as beneficiaries of societal culture, cultural mediators need a general culture in order to situate teaching material in its context and show its evolution. As critics, they must be aware of their own personal prejudices that could color their judgment and distort the knowledge conveyed in class. They must also be aware of student prejudices and reprimand those who express them in class. As interpreters, they draw connections between students' lives and the culture to be conveyed to them. So, the role of cultural mediator is not unique to the teaching of religious culture, but is central to all education in the Quebec context (Desaulniers and Jutras 2006).

Pierre Lebuis maintains that teaching the ERC curriculum requires teachers to cause students to think for themselves, by provoking questions according to the skill being developed. While providing ethical support requires that teachers develop students' independent rational and critical thinking, giving religious cultural support as cultural mediators necessitates avoidance of misunderstandings and respect of students' freedom of conscience. Lebuis associates this idea more with competence in religious culture, in order to ensure the teaching is non-denominational. According to him, the competence requires the presentation of religions as objects of knowledge and culture, without guiding students' conscience, choices or behavior. He connects the concept of cultural mediators to the professional impartial stance and critical distance characteristic of ERC teachers, as it assures the non-denominational nature of the teaching and therefore preserves the cultural approach (Lebuis 2008).

As we have just established, each of these definitions and analyses mentions the concept of cultural mediators, the professional impartial stance and the concept of critical distance. We will examine these aspects in more detail. In order to respect every student's freedom of conscience and of religion, teachers of the non-denominational cultural religious curriculum must "maintain a critical distance regarding their own worldviews especially with respect to their convictions, values and beliefs" (Québec (Province). Ministère de l'éducation et al. 2001: 61–67). What does "critical distance" mean? First of all, "teachers show professional judgement imbued with objectivity and impartiality in order to foster students' reflection on ethical questions or understanding of the phenomenon of religion" (MELS 2008). MELS states that "regardless of their personal positions, teachers therefore strive to be impartial and objective in their relationship with the students."[39] It goes on to say that to be impartial, the teacher must "address the values, norms, beliefs and

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[39] https://www7.mels.gouv.qc.ca/DC/ECR/ressources/index.php?page=faq. [accessed 3 Oct. 2008].

convictions as objects of study."[40] This issue relates to the requirement to develop only a knowledge of religion (see Sect. 3.1). Secondly, it is stated that "to ensure against influencing students in developing their point of view, teachers abstain from sharing theirs."

Thirdly, it is stated that "when a stated opinion violates someone's dignity or proposed actions undermine the common good, the teacher intervenes by referring to the program goals" (MELS 2008)—that is to say, the recognition of others and the pursuit of the common good. In other words, the teacher should not accept everything that is said in class in the name of respect and openness. If the assertions of the students are in conflict with the goals of the program, the teacher must reinforce the latter and redirect the conversation so that it complies with the program. The teacher is actually seen as a guardian of the program objectives, and must help students to recognize and reject statements or actions that violate human dignity (MELS 2008). Remember that Quebec cultural values are at the heart of the program goals. So, presenting religion from a cultural approach requires teachers to be impartial and to develop a critical distance toward the material conveyed to students. It is interesting to note that out of all the educational curricula in Quebec, the Ethics and Religious Culture program is the only one specifically to define the concept of the teachers' critical distance (Gravel and Lefebvre 2012). Is it therefore unique to non-denominational cultural religious teaching?

14.7 Critical Conclusion: Synthesis and Typology

Our analysis has enabled us to identify the central issues of the cultural approach to religion in the Ethics and Religious Culture program. There are eight main characteristics of the Quebec program's cultural approach:

1. Non-denominational religious program
2. Cultural and social understanding of religion
3. Common Quebec culture
4. Citizenship approach
5. Religious expression and phenomenon
6. Quebec religious heritage and the hierarchy of religions according to their historic and cultural influence
7. Cultural mediators
8. Critical distance and impartiality

MELS developed the cultural approach to teaching religion in order to ensure that the Ethics and Religious Culture program would be non-denominational. It is this approach that distinguishes the program from denominational religious teaching. Teachers must not encourage a search for meaning or values, but rather an intellectual understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of religion. Even though

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[40] Idem.

the program is officially listed under the subject area "Personal Development," its religious component must not promote the development of personal values. It must rather encourage future citizens to resolve problems relating to togetherness, based on an understanding of the phenomenon of religion observable by students by way of social expressions of religion. Since it is also connected to the subject area "Social Sciences," this approach to religion requires teachers to see students as future citizens needing to develop a common culture: Quebec culture. In fact, the program goals and skills must encourage the common good and promote democratic principles and ideals unique to Quebec society. In the context of non-denominational and cultural religious teaching, teachers must use Quebec culture as the reference point for their teaching and must cause students to adhere to social values. So, if faith or religious belief is no longer considered the common base of Quebec society, then not all religions have the same importance. In fact, the program associates the concept of Quebec religious heritage with religions that have historically had the most influence on Quebec culture, which mainly include Christianity, Judaism and Native spirituality. Students will therefore develop a larger amount of cultural and religious knowledge of certain heritage religions, even though the teaching must remain non-denominational and cultural.

Finally, in order to ensure that a cultural approach is used for non-denominational religious teaching, the stance and role of the teacher have been clarified. As with all other subjects in the Quebec education program, teachers are cultural mediators. However, the concept of critical distance in such teaching is clearly stated. In effect, teachers must remain impartial and objective in order to avoid conveying their viewpoints and beliefs; they must only teach cultural knowledge of religion.

In conclusion, we would like to point out that this analysis represents only a starting point in understanding this issue. Further research would be desirable in order to grasp the practical implications for teachers in their professional practice. In order to really understand its educational impact, it is crucial to understand how teachers implement this approach. What difficulties do teachers encounter in class? How do they internalize Quebec societal values? These questions merit further study. Therefore, in our future research, we hope to respond to at least some of them.

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