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Change to Quebec religion course: More crass political marketing by the CAQ

by [Toula Drimonis](#)

Teachers resent being used as tools in the government's pre-election wave of patriotic fanfare.

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Let me clarify something right off the bat: those concerned by the replacement of Quebec's Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) course are less disturbed by necessary updates to the syllabus than they are by the overtly politicized tone of the announcement and the motives behind the announced changes.

It's dishonest to paint those questioning the changes as people unwilling to teach kids to think critically or unable to share civic pride, as if most of us were just walking around aimlessly, ashamed of who we are and how we live in Quebec, until the CAQ reminded us to reaffirm ourselves. The criticism revolves mainly around the fear that this course will be used for ideological and political indoctrination and the propagation of ideas from a purely nationalistic slant, which an increasingly pluralistic and diverse Quebec simply cannot afford to do if social cohesion is indeed the goal.

I watched Sunday's star-studded press conference, announcing some of the details of the new course, as well as the promotional video featuring every CAQ minister the videographer appeared to be able to find at short notice. If you're surprised that there were no teachers featured in the video or even present at the announcement, don't be. The presser was less about education and much more about political marketing. The CAQ is clearly getting a head start on its re-election campaign, reminding Quebecers that they're the only ones defending those elusive and forever-impossible-to-define Quebec values they so like to tout.

Replacing one dogma with another

My discomfort with those calling for the elimination of the ERC course from the curriculum in Quebec isn't new. It goes all the way back to 2008 when the course was first introduced. At the time, a Drummondville couple argued in court that their child should not have to take the mandatory course because the devoutly Catholic parents weren't interested in competing with other religions for their children's attention in class. They argued that it interfered with their ability to pass on their faith and promote one religion over all others. Canada's highest court ruled against them, concluding that teaching students about world religions did not infringe on the rights of Catholic parents who wanted to raise their children in their faith. It emphasized that the ERC course required schools to teach religions from a secular, cultural and morally neutral perspective, aimed at "fostering an understanding of several religious traditions whose influence has been felt, with an emphasis placed on the religious heritage of Quebec."

Fast forward to 2021 and the CAQ government, now replacing it with Culture and Citizenship of Quebec, is operating pretty much under the same premise as that religious couple. It doesn't want any competition from any other competing ideologies or points of view. Only the dogma of religion has now been replaced with the dogma of nationalism and "Quebec pride" which according to former PQ MNA and Bloc MP Maka Kotto will lead to a collective identity and **"Quebec's salvation."** That's a hell of a lot to have riding on an (underfunded and routinely neglected, according to teachers) class that's only taught one hour every week or, very often, every two weeks!

Recognizing the 'other' isn't indoctrination

The ERC course was originally introduced to replace confessional teaching in schools, abolished in the late 1990s, and a major step in removing and de-prioritizing religion from school life in Quebec, which was a good thing. Like most Quebecers, I'm against public education being used as a vehicle for religious

socialization and indoctrination. But we should be equally opposed to education being used as a tool for political and ideological indoctrination, where *one* view, *one* history, *one* version of secularism, *one* concept of Quebec identity, *one* set of Quebec values is taught, ignoring the diverse and pluralistic society that makes up our daily lives.

Recognizing this reality means understanding that, regardless of whether most Quebecers (myself included) identify as atheist, many Quebecers (and people outside of Quebec) do not. Social cohesion requires the tools to understand the *other*. Learning about other religious cultures isn't religious indoctrination, it's education!

“Secularism or not, every time you have people of varying cultures practising various religions, there needs to be some form of educational outreach,” explains Anthony Cooperwood, an ERC teacher at Rosemount High. “Knowledge breeds understanding, understanding breeds tolerance; tolerance breeds harmony; and harmony breeds peace.”

Gilles D’Astous, a French high-school teacher at Cité Étudiante Polyno La Sarre in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, has been teaching the ERC course for the past 11 years. He, too, has concerns about whether there will be room for diversity.

Living and teaching in an area that's 95% francophone and white, he cites the importance of understanding and recognizing that social prejudices exist, the need to demystify them and to see the *other*, as important tools for social harmony.

Chauvinism versus openness

Public Security Minister Geneviève Guilbault's comment about teaching the course with a healthy dose of chauvinism (the word literally means aggressive, exclusionary nationalism) has created much **unease** among teachers and parents.

"We don't know the course details yet, it all depends on what they ask us to teach," says D'Astous, "but I have an issue with the kind of excessive patriotism that limits the definition of what a 'good Quebecer' is supposed to be. I'm proud of our history, our language and our culture, there are many great things about who we are that are worth sharing, as well as the many difficulties we have experienced as a people, but I'm uncomfortable with this kind of patriotism, like the kind we often see in the U.S. What is this social cohesion they're talking about, is it 'them' versus 'us,' and what is the definition of Quebec culture they want to promote? To me, Quebec culture is about Gilles Vigneault, but it's also Leonard Cohen. I have a lot of questions."

D'Astous told me that ERC topics he's discussed with his students, just this past year alone, range from racial segregation in the U.S., to the significance of Orange Shirt Day and residential schools, the formation of various religions and how the presumption of innocence works in the legal system. He finds it strange to hear Premier Legault talking about how a new course will "help form young Quebecers" because, as an ethics teacher, he feels he and his colleagues are already doing that.

Same, same, but different

After Sunday's press conference where Education Minister Jean-François Roberge, flanked by a bunch of Quebec celebrities and former politicians, presented some of the course details, most teachers reacted with surprise at how little the course differs from the one already being taught for years. I sat down with trepidation to listen to Roberge speak of the changes, only to marvel at how good the CAQ is at playing identity politics. All that fanfare, the guest appearances, and the

promotional video paid by our money, to present changes that, once people pay attention to the curriculum, are quite minor. It's the tone that's different, not so much the content.

After the details were unveiled, D'Astous tweeted, "The name of the course might be changing, but for the moment it looks like I'll just be an ERC 2.0 teacher. Why? Most of the elements planned in this course are already taught in my class."

Jonathan St-Pierre, a high-school teacher in D'Iberville de Rouyn-Noranda, better known as Jonathan Le Prof on social media, tweeted: "Have the columnists praising the new Quebec citizenship program not noticed that 75% of it is the old ERC program? We just removed the 25% of religious 'vivre-ensemble' and replaced it with Quebec nationalism."



I suppose that change alone might be enough for some to rejoice, but this media campaign aimed at convincing Quebecers that a new day of national pride has come is, at best, exaggerated, and at the very least, good political chess.

The CAQ's popularity can often be traced to one thing: Legault's party is good at governing by focus group. They zoom in on key issues that cause existential angst among Quebecers (often created and amplified by populist pundits) and with grandiose statements or symbolic gestures they pretend to make key decisions that will alter this inevitable-to-many demise of Quebec's French culture and language and will help protect us from the onslaught of multiculturalism and erasure.

It's a strategy that works well. And the more riled up and concerned the rest of us become — over valid concerns that exclusionary nationalism will exacerbate social tensions and increase intolerance of the different — the more CAQ partisans think we're complaining because we're "anti-Quebec" (whatever that means when it's used against actual Quebecers) and Legault is doing something monumental in the right direction.

Faith in Quebec teachers and students

I'm not inherently against updates to any courses. Why would I be? As the world evolves, so should the information meant to educate our kids. It's interesting however that most of the people touting these changes as a "breath of fresh air" are the same ones who were up in arms against the removal of the n-word and racist images from our curriculum in the name of academic freedom.

There are some needed and welcome subjects Roberge introduced on Sunday. But the devil is in the details and it remains to be seen what exactly this course will be teaching and, most importantly, how. But whether I trust the CAQ to deliver an inclusive and neutral curriculum is almost irrelevant, because, ultimately, I trust Quebec teachers and young Quebecers. Regressive, reactionary nationalism feels to me often like a person frantically trying to sweep away the ocean tide with a broom.

Quebec is changing and evolving and that isn't good news to some people, who want it to remain insular and drawn within itself, convinced there's only one way to remain true to our majority culture and language.

And if there's one thing I know about teachers, they take their role as educators seriously and are not enjoying having their vocation and their course content used as a crass political tool. Already, teachers are coming forward complaining of being **instrumentalized**, revealing that resignations recently took place among the course-content committee members, and angry that they were not consulted about said changes.

"I'm not here to teach a particular ideology," says D'Astous, "but I believe in the importance of opening my students up to the world. This class is a window to the world, and I have no intention of closing it. In 2021, it's important to understand that we're living in a global village. In my experience, Quebec youth are less and less interested in this kind of isolated nationalism and excessive patriotism and much more concerned by planetary and global issues. My 17-year-old son is very proud of his Quebec origins, but he's preoccupied by much bigger things." ■

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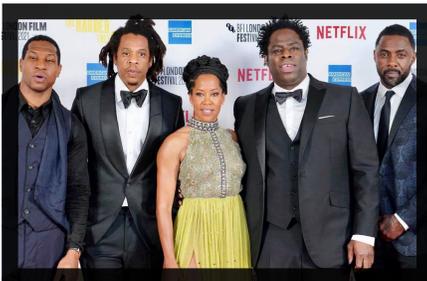


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