

# Myths of Catholic education

**With 11 days left until Ontario's election, the faith-based education debate is steaming ahead with advocates of secular public schooling facing off against devotees of religious education.**

The wild card, of course, is the availability of publicly funded Roman Catholic schools.

Since the existence of Catholic schools makes it impossible for secular versus religious to engage in an even debate, each side has developed its own rhetorical ways of dealing with the problem. Competing mythologies have emerged about what Ontario's Catholic schools actually teach.

On one side, those who advocate the bringing of other faiths into the public educational system point to the Catholics as both their role model and the salt in their wound. If only we could have what the Catholics have, all would be well. But let's be clear about the time spent on religion in separate schools. Where other private schools spend roughly half a school day on religious studies, Catholic schools devote less than an hour to religion courses. If you need a working knowledge of classical Arabic, ancient Hebrew or Sanskrit to read your holy texts, 30 minutes a day will barely scratch the surface.

While Catholic schools give less than an hour's worth of doctrine in English, many minority religions tend to convey substantially more cultural, linguistic and historic background as part of their religious educational package. Of course, any religion can be taught in translation and in small digestible doses, but many advocates of faith-based schools likely would opt out of schools based on the separate school board model. Like those families who require a more rigorous brand of Catholicism, they would remain in private institutions.

On the other side, advocates of devoting the province's educational resources to an enhanced and inclusive public system point to the Catholic separate school board as a model of modern diversity. In an op-ed in this newspaper penned by a long list of educators and public figures, the separate schools were described as "small `c' catholic marked by an increase in ethnocultural diversity reflecting the changes to our society." But let's be clear about the religion taught in Ontario's Catholic schools. Course offerings in Grades 1 through 8 include "the Holy Spirit dwells in the followers of Jesus," "the Church believes in the Lord Jesus Christ," and "We believe in One Catholic and apostolic Church."

For Muslims who believe that Jesus is one among many prophets and that Muhammad surpassed him in importance, for Jews who believe that Jesus was no prophet at all, and for Protestants whose very faith is premised on there not being just one Catholic and apostolic Church, none of this is acceptable. For Hindus who believe in a supreme personal God in a world of multiple deities and for anyone who rejects papal authority, these teachings are contrary to their own. The separate school curriculum is not "small `c' catholicism" with only an emphasis on humanism and morals, but rather is the specific dogma of a capital "C" Church not shared by others.

So what does this all mean when it comes to the election?

John Tory's faithful would have us believe that the existing private faith-based schools can easily emulate the Catholic system, while Dalton McGuinty's supporters would have us believe that the existing Catholic system is acceptable in a religiously diverse society.

Voters face a difficult choice when it comes to education policy in Ontario. At the very least, they deserve to engage in rational analysis without being sidetracked by an assortment of myths.

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