

## LOOKING TO THE PAST AND MOVING TO THE FUTURE: A CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL RELIGIOUS CURRICULUM FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

*Mirando al pasado y caminando hacia el futuro:  
un currículo religioso de la escuela secundaria  
católica para el siglo XXI*

Joe STAFFORD

*Queen's University*

Correo-e: [jstafford7@cogeco.ca](mailto:jstafford7@cogeco.ca)

Recepción: 1 de agosto de 2015. Envío a informantes: 15 de agosto de 2015.

Fecha de aceptación definitiva: 2 de octubre de 2015

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the secondary school religious education curriculum in the province of Ontario, Canada. Two questions are addressed: Why are Catholic schools failing to graduate well-informed, active Catholics and what changes are needed in the high school curriculum in order to reverse this trend? These questions are approached from an historical perspective. It is argued here that a new high school religious education curriculum is needed in order to counter the prevailing influence of secularism. It is contended that students are graduating without the knowledge and skills necessary to understand their own faith and to explain it in a logical, convincing manner. It is further argued that this new curriculum must be as academically rigorous as other courses offered in Ontario high schools. William Pinar's theory on subjectivity and development of self provides the theoretical framework for this paper.

**KEY WORDS:** Secularism; religious education; catechetical; subjectivity; Q Source.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo examina el currículum de la asignatura de religión en la educación secundaria en la provincia de Ontario, Canadá. Se abordan dos preguntas de investigación: ¿Por qué las escuelas católicas no logran que su alumnado que se

gradúa esté bien formado en cuestiones religiosas y sean católicos activos? ¿Qué cambios son necesarios en el currículum de la educación secundaria para revertir esta tendencia? Estas preguntas se abordan desde una perspectiva histórica. Se argumenta que es necesario un nuevo currículum de la asignatura de religión con el fin de contrarrestar la actual influencia del laicismo. Se afirma que los estudiantes se gradúan sin el conocimiento y las habilidades necesarias para comprender su propia fe y para explicarla de un modo lógico y convincente. Además, se argumenta que este nuevo currículum ha de ser tan académicamente riguroso como el resto de asignaturas que se ofrecen en las escuelas de educación secundaria de Ontario. La teoría de William Pinar acerca de la subjetividad y el desarrollo del yo proporciona el marco teórico de este *paper*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Secularismo; educación religiosa; catequético; subjetividad; Fuente Q.

## i. Introduction

THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE RELIGIOUS CURRICULUM in Ontario Catholic high schools. Catholics in Ontario have a completely publicly funded school system since 1985 after a long struggle first to defend their educational rights and then to expand their school system in a province noted for its anti-Catholicism<sup>1</sup>. Despite this success new challenges have emerged that have undermined the fundamental purpose of Catholic education: to graduate well informed Catholics committed to their faith and to their Church. Thus, this paper focuses on two key questions: Why are Catholic schools failing to graduate well-informed, active Catholics and what changes are needed in the high school curriculum in order to reverse this trend? It is contended here that a new high school religious curriculum is needed in order to counter the prevailing influence of secular culture and the resulting ignorance among Catholics concerning their faith. This ignorance is both pervasive and profound. Many individuals question even the historical reality of Jesus. What is needed is a curriculum that focuses on the historical person of Jesus, and which provides the students with the knowledge that they must possess in order to be well-informed Catholics committed to their faith and their Church. Educators must recognize the extent to which Catholic youth are ignorant of their own religion.

This paper further contends that the fundamental content and teaching methodology of religious instruction must also change at the high school level. The Ontario Catholic Secondary Curriculum Policy Document for Religious Education will be analysed. It is argued here that this policy document is fundamentally flawed, revealing considerable confusion concerning how religion should be taught. The document is catechetical in nature, emphasizing that the catechetical

<sup>1</sup> This struggle has been well-documented. For an excellent summary, see BRENNAN, Terri-Lynn Kay: «Roman Catholic Schooling in Ontario: Past Struggles, Present Challenges, Future Direction?», *Canadian Journal of Education*, 34, 4 (2011), pp. 22-33.

process cannot be evaluated since it involves a personal spiritual journey, yet at the same time insisting that religion be as academically serious and rigorous as other disciplines, which by definition include sophisticated evaluation procedures. This is a major contradiction, reflecting an international debate concerning the difference between catechism and religious education. With the catechetical approach the underlying assumption is that the students already possess the knowledge and understanding needed to be catechized whereas with religious education, it is assumed that the students do not. Most students are not on a personal, spiritual journey. Advocates for religious education call for an academically rigorous curriculum which focuses on the knowledge and understanding that students need to begin such a journey. This paper supports this contention, arguing that a catechetical approach is no longer effective. Instead, it is imperative to recognize the powerful influence of the secular culture and that it is no longer sufficient simply to provide the students with information about their religion. The students need to know why they would be active Catholics – why they would even bother.

The goal of this new curriculum will therefore be to inspire Catholic students, to capture their interest, indeed their imagination, and to demonstrate that their religion is founded on an integral relationship between faith and reason. It must be an inquiry-based, academically rigorous curriculum wherein the students «discover» the essential truths of Jesus through an analysis of the Gospels as historical documents, as a «window» into the mystery that is Jesus. It is not enough to tell students what to believe, but to convince them with logical argument. In this paper the miracles of Jesus will be used as an example of this new curriculum. Furthermore, the classroom must establish the needed «environment» in which such a curriculum can be delivered successfully. Here William Pinar's curriculum theory of subjectivity and the development of self provide the theoretical framework. It is argued here that the classroom environment must allow the students to engage in a process of self-awareness and thus an awareness of self-formation within society. This is an essential process if the students are to understand secularism and if the objective is to graduate well-informed and active Catholics who understand their faith and are capable of living it and defending it in a secular world.

## 2. The Process of Secularization

The process of secularization in the western world has been well-documented, yet the term «secular» remains contentious. According to James Arthur, it is «wisely contested because it is a socially and historically constructed word». In this paper, secularization is defined as a process that «has weakened traditional religious faith, affiliations and practices along with insisting upon a stronger distinction/separation between religion and education»<sup>2</sup>. Secularism emerged as

<sup>2</sup> ARTHUR, James: «The de-Catholicising of the curriculum in English Catholic Schools», *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 5, 1 (2013), pp. 83-98. doi:10.1111/milt.12000.

one of the major features of western culture after a complex configuration of various factors led to the dramatic cultural changes of the late 1950s and 1960s. One key factor was the dramatic increase in the number of children. Society became child centred as never before. Young people were also conditioned to be wary of authoritarianism in all its forms<sup>3</sup>. A «crisis of authority» marked the 1960s. Young people questioned the «received wisdom» of the adult world, of the «Establishment»<sup>4</sup>, resulting in a proliferation of protest movements, youth radicalism, and the sexual revolution as the dominant social conservative mores and the institution of marriage itself were challenged.

The Catholic Church was one of the «authorities» that was challenged. Its «received wisdom» was openly questioned. For Catholics in the 1960s, the cultural changes had generated considerable confusion and indecision in terms of moral values. Within the Church itself a vigorous debate ensued between conservative and progressive forces over the degree to which the Church should adapt to secularization. It is in this historical context that the Church began the renewal process with the Vatican II Council, resulting in considerable controversy over what the reforms actually meant<sup>5</sup>. Indeed the Church was experiencing a crisis that was universal in scope as organized religion was under siege throughout the world. Many religious began to question their vocation, resulting in a large exodus of priests and nuns from a fundamentally conservative Church<sup>6</sup>.

The increasing secularization of society, including the religious crisis of the 1960s, could not but affect the Catholic public in general, especially since this secularization process continued unabated after the late 1960s. Regular attendance at Sunday Mass reflected this process. In the United States, for example, in 1965 55% of Catholics attended Mass at least once a week; in 2014, only 24% did. In 2009, only 28.5% of Canadian attended Mass on a weekly basis<sup>7</sup>. These percentages also reflected a world-wide trend. Such a trend is worrisome for it threatens the very foundation of Catholicism. According to Yves Congar in *The Meaning of Tradition*, it is «the Christian parents, much more than priests and preachers, who really transmit the faith. They do it, above all, in the intimate and vital way. The daily example given right up to death... the way in which topics are discussed and events judged; the prayer and humble, familiar gestures of the liturgy»<sup>8</sup>. The Catholic bishops of Ontario are also well aware that Catholics live in a secularized

<sup>3</sup> OWRAM, Doug: *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation*, Toronto, University of Toronto, 1997, pp. 126-27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> CUPLINSKAS, I.: «Reporting the Revolution: The Western Catholic Reporter and Post-Vatican II Reform», in ATTRIDGE, M.; CLIFFORD, C. E. and ROUTHIER, G. (eds.): *Vatican II: Canadian Experiences*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa, 2011, pp. 18-38, 18-19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), [cara.georgetown.edu/index.html](http://cara.georgetown.edu/index.html). Statistics for earlier decades are unavailable. This crisis is examined in depth in: McLEOD, Hugh: *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008. See also: BROWN, Callum: «What was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?», *Journal of Religious History*, 34, 4 (2010), pp. 468-479.

<sup>8</sup> CONGAR, Yves: *The Meaning of Tradition*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2004, p. 73.

society in which only a minority of them practice their faith. For example, the *Ontario Catholic Secondary Curriculum Policy Document for Religious Education*, published in 2006 and sponsored by the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, begins with the following statement: «The reality in Ontario is that most of our students come from families whose attachment and commitment to the Church is relatively fragile. They do not attend Sunday Mass on a regular basis. Their knowledge of Scripture... remains partial. Their understanding of the moral teaching of the Church is often fragmentary... They belong to a world that is secularized»<sup>9</sup>. The faith cannot be transmitted in a meaningful way when the majority of Catholic parents are not practising Catholics and whose understanding of Catholicism is minimal at best.

This transmission of the faith has become even more difficult given the various, rather dubious, interpretations concerning Jesus and the early Church that are now prevalent. Many of these interpretations have permeated popular culture. For example, M. C. Scott, in his murder mystery, *Rome: The Emperor's Spy*, bases his story on the theory that Jesus was taken off the cross before he died, and that his Resurrection was faked<sup>10</sup>. Saint Paul was not the great Christian missionary but a Roman spy. Scott refers to Christianity as the «Christian myth». In the «Author's Note», Scott indicates that the works of Robert Eisenmann and Hyam Maccoby support his viewpoint<sup>11</sup>. According to another author, Joseph Atwill in *Caesar's Messiah* (2005), the Gospels were not composed by early Christians, but by the Romans Titus and Vespasian who saw the «continuing value» of the work of their spy, Saint Paul, and created a religion acceptable to Rome and anti-Semitic<sup>12</sup>. Scott even refers to Christianity as the «Christian myth», arguing that there is not any «concrete proof of that Jesus and Saint Paul even existed»<sup>13</sup>. Many other authors have proposed theories that criticize traditional Christian belief, but based on rather dubious «historical» evidence. The Australian writer, Barbara Thiering supports her viewpoint that Jesus did not die but came down from the cross on scraps of un-interpretable papyrus discovered in Cave 7 at the Dead Sea<sup>14</sup>. At different times Jesus has been portrayed as a peasant revolutionary, a sage, and a magician<sup>15</sup>. Most of these theories have received widespread attention through mass media. Such views have received considerable attention despite the fact that most scholars have dismissed them as historically inaccurate<sup>16</sup>. Even Pope Benedict, who has serious reservations about the historical-critical method

<sup>9</sup> *Ontario Catholic Curriculum Policy Document for Religious Education*, Toronto, Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> SCOTT, M. C.: *Rome: The Emperor's Spy*, Toronto, Bantam Press, 2010, pp. 16-19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 488-489.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 490-491.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 487-488.

<sup>14</sup> CAHILL, Thomas: *The World Before and After Jesus: Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, New York, Random House, 1999, p. 74.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 74, 209-210.

<sup>16</sup> The internet provides substantial information on these views. For example, see [www.caesarsmessiah.com](http://www.caesarsmessiah.com).

and emphasizes the limitations of this method in terms of understanding Jesus and Christian belief, nonetheless recognizes the danger that these inaccurate portrayals of Jesus pose:

All these attempts (i.e. inaccurate portrayals) have produced a common result: the impression that we have very little certain knowledge of Jesus ... this impression has by now penetrated deeply into the minds of the Christian people at large. This is a dramatic situation for faith, because its point of reference is being placed in doubt: Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air<sup>17</sup>.

Catholics and members of other Christian churches in the Western world are therefore in a precarious position. Western society is now fundamentally secular in nature. The majority of Christians no longer practice their religion with any regularity, and thus Christian parents no longer fulfil the critical role of transmitting the faith to the next generation. In this secular society, even the existence of the historical Jesus is doubted.

### 3. Secularism and Catholic Education in Ontario

The increasingly secular nature of society also affected Catholic schools. The school boards became more secular as the society became more secular. According to James Arthur, the dominant secular culture permeated Catholic schools, culminating in a «secularisation of consciousness» whereby Catholic teachers and students unconsciously adopted secular values<sup>18</sup>. This internal secularisation has also occurred in American Catholic schools, according to Christian Smith in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*<sup>19</sup>. No such study has been completed for Ontario Catholic schools, but given the international nature of secularism, it stands to reason that a similar process occurred in Ontario. Ontario Catholic leaders were certainly aware of the prevailing influence of secularism even before the 1960s. Reverend Gerald B. Phelan of St. Michael's College, on 20 April 1954, in his address to Catholic teachers at the eleventh annual Catholic Conference, emphasized the powerful influence of secularism which he believed threatened the «heritage of Christian culture» more than ever before<sup>20</sup>. In their *Brief on Education* of 1962 submitted to the provincial

<sup>17</sup> RATZINGER, Joseph: *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol. 1, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2007, p. xii.

<sup>18</sup> In this context, secular values are understood as being different from Catholic values, which are based on a world view centred on God and Christian belief. ARTHUR, James: «Secularisation, secularism and Catholic Education: The challenges», *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 1, 2 (2009), pp. 228-239. doi: 10.1080/19422530138226.

<sup>19</sup> SMITH, Christian: *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 214-216.

<sup>20</sup> PHELAN, Gerald B.: *Education and Culture*, Toronto, The English Catholic Education Association of Ontario, 1954, p. 4 (Queen's University, Special Collections).

government, the Ontario bishops recognized the influence of secularism and emphasized that the lay Catholic teachers graduating from the provincial teachers' colleges were not «thoroughly prepared to take up position in one of our Catholic schools» because of the lack of religious education. These graduates did not understand «Catholic philosophy of life» and were not prepared to pass on «this wisdom to future generations»<sup>21</sup>. This was a critical problem since by the late 1960s the laity represented the majority of teachers in the Catholic system. As well, Church authorities were becoming less involved in Catholic education<sup>22</sup>. By the mid-1960s the school boards were the undisputed leaders of Catholic education and the vast majority of school administrators were lay Catholics<sup>23</sup>. These lay Catholics, although influenced by the Vatican II reforms and therefore opposed to the traditional methods of Catholic education that bordered on indoctrination, had nonetheless received little religious education themselves<sup>24</sup>. Thus, by the late 1960s the Catholic school system was controlled by lay Catholics inadequately prepared and exposed to the «secularisation of consciousness».

This laicization of the Catholic school system posed a critical problem for religious education. Vatican II may have advocated a larger, more important role for the Catholic laity within the Church, but what was envisioned was an educated, well-informed laity. This was especially true of Catholic teachers now responsible for religious education. Yet in an increasingly secular society, wherein most Catholic parents are no longer transmitting Catholic tradition to their children, the formation of an educated laity is a significant challenge. Critical here is the religious formation of the Catholic teacher. In their 1962 brief to the provincial government, the bishops criticized the religious education that potential Catholic teachers were receiving. Only one course was offered – not even the «bare minimum» as far as the bishops were concerned. In 1962, the bishops raised the possibility of establishing a Catholic teachers' college, indicating that they were interested in discussing the issue with the government in the near future. In 2015, potential Catholic teachers still only have to complete one religious education course and no Catholic teachers' college exists. Furthermore, the qualifications to teach religion are not rigorous – a strong academic, university religious education is not required. Overall, then, religion teachers are still not prepared adequately to teach religion, raising serious doubts that the school system is graduating the «educated and well-informed» Catholics that are needed in the modern, secular world.

<sup>21</sup> Ontario Bishops' *Brief on Education*, 1962 (Queen's University, Special Collections).

<sup>22</sup> WALKER, Franklin A.: *Catholic Education and Politics in Ontario*, vol. III, Toronto, Catholic Education Foundation of Ontario, 1986, pp. 137-138.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 141. The church hierarchy supported this change in the power structure since Vatican II emphasized the important role that the laity needed to assume in the Church.

<sup>24</sup> Many Catholic educators were opposed to traditional teaching methods that relied on rote memory, and instead emphasized inquiry. For example, as early as 1957 Professor Lawrence Lynch, president of the English Catholic Education Association of Ontario, criticized Catholic schools for their «moralistic interpretation of the truth» and appealed to teachers to arouse «a restless of intellectual curiosity». WALKER: *Catholic Education*, 1986, p. 205.

#### 4. The Need for Academic Rigour

Secularism, in particular the «secularization of the conscious», therefore poses a serious problem for Catholic schools. One possible solution to this problem is the development of a new religious curriculum at the high school level which emphasizes academic rigour. This does not mean a return to the past. Traditionally, Catholic schools only emphasized academic excellence in the technical sense<sup>25</sup>. This curriculum was largely delivered by rote memory. Little critical analysis was demanded of the students, especially with regards to religious education. For example, a series of textbooks, *Our Quest For Happiness*, used throughout North America, offered an unquestioning approach to doctrine and to the historical accuracy of the New Testament. The Gospels are understood as «biographies» of Jesus whose authors were secretaries of the Apostles: «St. Mark was St. Peter's secretary and simply wrote down what St. Peter preached. This is Peter's Gospel»<sup>26</sup>. It would be a major mistake to return to this type of curriculum. By the early 1960s, this traditional Catholic pedagogy was no longer tenable.

The educational reforms of the 1960s, however, caused a major problem that has serious implications for religious education. Academic rigour became less important in the eyes of educators. The needs of the students, their self-esteem in particular, became more important than technical academic excellence<sup>27</sup>. For example, in Ontario, a broader curriculum was adopted that offered the students more choice in terms of courses and no longer relied on standardized tests<sup>28</sup>. Province-wide standardized exams, called departmentals, were abandoned<sup>29</sup>. As a publicly funded system, Catholic schools were also reformed. Although it is difficult to measure the «quality» of education, it does appear that one of the consequences of these reforms was a decline in the quality of education that the students received in terms of academic excellence in the technical sense; that is, the mastery of specific skills and the understanding of significant content. At the time most educators agreed that standardized provincial exams should be eliminated since they «circumscribed» teaching and thereby encouraged «the cramming of factual information» according to the provincial committee on supervision and evaluation. This committee, however, emphasized that before the exams

<sup>25</sup> In this context, academic excellence is understood as technical excellence, the mastery of specific skills and content measured by standardized tests, and the rational, the «socializing students into forms of language and thought in relation to practices and standards» of a particular intellectual or scholarly discipline. BRUNO-JOFRE, ROSA and HILLS, George (Skip): «Changing Visions of Excellence in Ontario School Policy: The Cases of Living and Learning and For the Love of Learning», *Educational Theory*, 61, 3 (2011), pp. 335-349, 338. doi: 10.1111/j.1741-5446.2011.00407.x.

<sup>26</sup> ELWELL, Clarence: *Our Quest for Happiness*, Chicago, Mentzer, Bush, & Company, 1951, p. 492.

<sup>27</sup> These changes are fully explained in the provincial report, *Living and Learning: The Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*.

<sup>28</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the entirety of the educational reforms of the 1960s.

<sup>29</sup> GIDNEY, R. D.: *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario Schools*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991, p. 68.



are eliminated, «proper safeguards» must be adopted that would ensure academic rigour<sup>30</sup>. No such safeguards were developed, and the evidence indicates that there was a significant decline in academic technical excellence almost immediately thereafter. For instance, after the elimination of provincial exams in 1967, school boards were responsible for supervision and development of curriculum. Exams were set by individual departments. One result of this reform was an increased student success. When Ontario students wrote provincial exams, the success rate was a consistent 80% for more than two generations. In 1968, 92% of students passed the locally developed exams<sup>31</sup>. Furthermore, in 1965 5% of the graduating students were Ontario scholars, achieving an average of 80%. By 1968, the percentage was 11% and in 1973, 17%. Known as «grade inflation», the percentage of Ontario scholars continued to rise. In the 1980s, 40% of graduates were Ontario scholars. This grade inflation continued until in 2015, 60% of grade 12 graduates were Ontario scholars<sup>32</sup>. It is of course notoriously difficult to measure «student success», even in the technical sense without a common form of measure such as a provincial exam. Nonetheless such dramatic increases raise serious questions about academic rigour. It is highly unlikely that improvement in both the quality of the teaching and the students' academic efforts account for such increases in academic achievement<sup>33</sup>.

The lack of academic rigour was even more pronounced in religion courses. The government did not consider religion courses as sufficiently academic courses. When Ontario adopted the credit system in the early 1970s, religion courses were not eligible, meaning that religion courses did not count towards the number of credits needed to graduate. Only after considerable protest from Catholic educators were religion courses accredited<sup>34</sup>. Even then religion courses were not considered as academically rigorous. Presently, for example, at the grade 9 and 10 level religion courses are offered at the open level, meaning that they are open to all students with no academic differentiation. In other words, a student in the workplace level and a student at the university-preparation level are in the same course and complete the same assessments. Such a course by definition cannot be academically rigorous. At the senior level, religion courses are offered at the open and at the «M» level, a designation for courses that may be used to qualify students for either college or university. These courses are not as academically challenging as university-preparation courses. In Ontario, university admittance is based on the student's six best grade 12 marks and most universities therefore

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> STAMP, Robert M.: *The Schools of Ontario, 1876-1976*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982, p. 245.

<sup>32</sup> DARE, Malkin: «How to Stop Grade Inflation», *The Globe in Mail*, 15 April 2014.

<sup>33</sup> Educational researchers have emphasized the importance of maintaining academic rigour. Academic rigour was identified as one of the major reasons for student success in STRONG, Richard W.; SILVER, Harvey F. and PERINI, Matthew J.: *Teaching What Matters Most. Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement*, Alexandria, VA, ASCD, 2001, pp. 5-30.

<sup>34</sup> This issue is discussed in WALKER: *Catholic Education*, 1986.

only permit students to include two M courses in their best six. It would be difficult indeed to argue that high school religion courses are academically rigorous, especially given the minimal qualifications to be a religion teacher.

The quality of religion courses and the lack of academic rigour therefore pose a major problem if the goal is to graduate well-informed and active Catholics. Indeed, Catholic educators are well aware of this problem. In the *Ontario Catholic Secondary Curriculum Policy Document for Religious Education*, the following quotation appears from the General Directory for Catechesis (the Congregation for the Clergy, 1997): «It is necessary therefore, that religious instruction in schools appears as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines. It must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge»<sup>35</sup>. What is not quoted in the policy document, which perhaps should have been, is the comment that preceded the above statement in the General Directory:

In the cultural universe, which is assimilated by students and which is defined by knowledge and values offered by other scholastic disciplines, religious instruction in schools sows the dynamic seed of the Gospel and seeks to «keep in touch with the other elements of the student's knowledge and education; thus the Gospel will impregnate the mentality of the students in the field of their learning, and the harmonization of their culture will be achieved in the light of faith»<sup>36</sup>.

This statement implicitly acknowledges the powerful influence of secularism in the «cultural universe» that has «assimilated» Catholic students. Thus, the Church recognizes the need for religious education courses to possess the same degree of the academic excellence and rigour of other academic disciplines, especially given the secularized nature of both the society and the school. Such a secondary religious curriculum does not exist in Ontario Catholic schools.

## 5. Academic Rigour, Inquiry, and a New Religious Curriculum

What is needed therefore is a new religious curriculum at the high school level. It is argued here that the curriculum should not be catechetical in nature, but focus on religious education. This is a critical distinction. The catechetical approach assumes that the students possess some core knowledge of their faith, which, in this secular world, is no longer a valid assumption. Religious education is not based on this assumption. Religion is treated like any other academic subject in that the students are not expected to have a considerable amount of

<sup>35</sup> General Directory, 1997, article 73.

<sup>36</sup> General Directory, 1997, article 72. Here the General Directory is quoting from Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution, The Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965).

prior knowledge<sup>37</sup>. Yet many of the official documents on religious education are catechetical. For example, the majority of the documents from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCC), first produced in the mid-1990s, reflect a «strong catechetical mindset»<sup>38</sup>. In the teachers' manual for the grade 12 course, *In Search of the Good*, one of the major aims of the course is catechetical: «To assist young men and women to understand themselves as moral persons living the way of Christ through an examination of ethical theories, the revelation of sacred scripture, and the experience and teaching of the Catholic Church»<sup>39</sup>. The assumption here is that the students are already living, or at least are willing to live, «the way of Christ» – an incorrect assumption. Furthermore, a major contradiction exists in the policy document concerning the fundamental nature of the curriculum. Despite the insistence on religion courses having «the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines», there is the following reference to the «catechetical process» with regard to assessment and evaluation: «It is the most definitely the most difficult to assess and should probably never be evaluated, for here we are talking about the divine action of God in the life of the person»<sup>40</sup>. No serious, academically rigorous «scholarly discipline» would have such an evaluation policy. The curriculum therefore is essentially catechetical at a time when religious education, and not catechism, is required. In terms of academic rigour and excellence, however, it is not a matter of returning to the traditional academic rationalism. Students, living in a secular society and not conditioned to accept traditional authority, will not develop into informed and active Catholics if they are not allowed to question and to inquiry about their own faith. Moreover, every other high school course emphasizes cognitive skills, in particular inquiry.

The Ontario religious education curriculum document, in a section entitled «Exploration and Explanation», emphasizes memorization, stating that «special mention needs to be made of memorization. Once the sole pedagogical method of religious education, it has been completely abandoned in the past decades». The document then highlights the «short summaries of important teachings» in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that could be used for «memory work»<sup>41</sup>. This approach differs in one significant aspect from the traditional teaching method in that the important teachings need to be explained before

<sup>37</sup> Here the nature of catechesis is defined as «instructional dialogue between believers; sharing faith insights; continued evangelisation of believers» that presumes an «initial awakening or conversion to faith». ROSSITER, Graham: «A Cognitive Basis for Affective Learning in Classroom Religious Education», *British Journal of Religious Education*, 11, 1 (2006), pp. 4-10, 25. doi: 10.1080/0141620880110102.

<sup>38</sup> RYMARZ, Richard: «Comparing religious education in Canadian and Australian Catholic high schools: Identifying some key structural issues», *The British Journal of Religious Education*, 35, 2 (2013), pp. 175-187. doi: 10.1080/01416200.2011.628203.

<sup>39</sup> Teacher Manual for *In Search of the Good*, Ottawa, 2004, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> *The Ontario Catholic Secondary Curriculum Policy Document for Religious Education*, 2006, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

being memorized: «Such formulae, however, should be proposed as synthesis after a process of explanation»<sup>42</sup>. No mention is made of inquiry or analysis. Overall, then, the religious education curriculum is fundamentally catechetical in nature and remains essentially traditional in its teaching methodology.

What is needed is an inquiry-based, academically rigorous curriculum which allows the students to ask questions, to analyse, and thereby «discover» the essential truths of their religion. Recent research in the theory of inquiry supports this contention. According to Johnston, the students «interests and efforts» are key to the inquiry process. The role of the teacher is to provide the necessary intriguing questions that serve to stimulate this interest and therefore effort. This inquiry process «is finished when there is no longer the unsettled situation that gave rise to the inquire process in the first place»<sup>43</sup>. A curriculum that provides a «focused, deliberate framework and program that is in keeping with the point and purpose of inquiry can augment a child's successful understanding of the world»<sup>44</sup>. Within this framework the students must also be taught how to use the historical-critical methods in order to analyse the Gospels as historical documents. In this secular age the students need to be convinced of these truths through logical argument, focusing on the integral relationship between faith and reason. Considerable educational research supports this contention. For example, Graham Rossiter argues convincingly that most teachers have a mistaken belief that the students possess a shared faith and therefore do not allow for «an open, critical inquiring approach to the study of religion»<sup>45</sup>. By adopting this «faith approach», the students' faith is weakened since the students are not given the opportunity for inquiry and discussion. According to Rossiter, the students need «intellectual freedom» and it is «this freedom of inquiry which in turn provides students with the very freedom to move into discussion» of their personal faith<sup>46</sup>.

Within the Church there have been some powerful voices in favour of such a «freedom of inquiry». For example, long before Vatican II the Chilean Jesuit priest, Alberto Hurtado (1901-1952), argued that important aspects of John Dewey's educational, pragmatic philosophy could be reconciled with Catholicism, in particular «reflective thinking, the development of «a spirit inclined to observation», wise scepticism of precipitated conclusions and of «exaggerated dogmatism, freedom in the classroom, and emphasis on internal motivation»<sup>47</sup>. Hurtado agreed with Dewey that the teacher acted as a guide leading the students to «discover the truth»<sup>48</sup>. Critical of the «mediocre education» that many Catholics received, based on «a code of prescriptions, external to them», Hurtado argued that Catholic

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> JOHNSTON, James Scott: *Deweyan Inquiry: From Education Theory to Practice*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> ROSSITER: «A Cognitive Basis for Affective Learning» (2006).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>47</sup> BRUNO-JOFRE and HILLS: «Changing Visions of Excellence» (2011).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*.

education needed to be child-centered and that this education should aim for the students to internalize moral attitude as a «personal light» and the role of the teacher is to «place the child in such an environment that would facilitate the light to become brighter and brighter». It is argued here that this new proposed religious curriculum shares a similar aim. The aim of this new curriculum is for the students to emphasize «internal motivation», to internalize what they learn, and to develop a «personal light», a profound belief in Jesus and His Church through inquiry and analysis. It is the role of the teacher to create the needed «environment» to facilitate this «light to become brighter and brighter».

William Pinar's curriculum theory of subjectivity and development of self provides the needed theoretical framework for establishing this environment – an environment independent as possible from government control. School systems, reflecting government priorities, control what the students learn by insisting on a detailed curriculum that teachers must follow. Embedded within this curriculum are the values that the government considers essential for the student to internalize. As Pinar states, students possess a sense of self that has been «conditioned, and, perhaps, required to be... the “self” conceived by others»<sup>49</sup>. The «secularization of consciousness» needs to be understood in this context. The students have internalized the values of a secular society. Pinar's theory provides a means by which this secularization process may be overcome. Schools need to connect the students «lived experience with academic knowledge, to foster students' intellectual development and students' capacities for critical thinking»<sup>50</sup>. They must therefore be given sufficient opportunity to use these capacities, to examine their own subjectivity in the context of a secular society. Pinar refers to this as «autobiography approach» to education in which the students «reconstruct themselves through academic knowledge, knowledge self-reflexively studied and dialogically encountered»<sup>51</sup>. Within the classroom the teacher and the students engage in a «complicated conversation»<sup>52</sup> about the content with the ultimate objective of employing «academic knowledge (and popular culture, increasingly via the media and the Internet) to understand their own self-formation within society»<sup>53</sup>. This is an essential process if students are to become well-informed and active Catholics. They must become independent, critical thinkers who are self-aware and therefore aware of how the society has shaped their sense of self. They then are given the opportunity to study their own religion, to ponder, to inquire and to decide for themselves how their faith could be used to shape their sense of self. They are not just told what to believe after receiving a «canon of knowledge». They engage in a complicated conversation with themselves<sup>54</sup>. Such is the environment now needed in the classroom.

<sup>49</sup> PINAR, William: *What is Curriculum Theory?*, Mahwah, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. xiv.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

The study of the Jesus' miracles provides an excellent example of how this type of environment would actually look like in a modern classroom setting. First of all, the students are permitted to analyse the Gospels as primary documents and ask questions. This analysis begins with establishing the historical existence of Jesus by examining the reference to Jesus in Josephus' *The Jewish Antiquities*. In Book 18, in a short passage, Josephus mentions the «Jesus-who-is-called-Messiah». This reference is critical since Josephus, a Jewish historian without any Christian affiliation, offers independent evidence that Jesus existed. According to John P. Meier, given the doubt raised about Jesus' existence, such a significant non-Christian source of evidence needs to be emphasized. Thus, in the first volume of his study on the historical Jesus, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, he spends an entire chapter on establishing the historical authenticity of Josephus' reference to Jesus<sup>55</sup>. Once Jesus' existence has been established, the Gospel miracle stories are examined. These stories need to be told in an engaging fashion for they are great stories that will capture the students' imagination and establishing a narrative is critical for the students' understanding and retention of knowledge<sup>56</sup>. The Gospel stories are then analysed as historical documents. It is no longer enough to have the students memorize the stories that they may not believe as historically authentic. Critical here is the role of the teacher in explaining that the Gospels should not be understood simply as an accurate historical biographies of Jesus whose authors were «secretaries of the Apostles» as was traditionally taught. The Gospels must be explained as being «evangelical» in nature with the purpose of conversion: not all of the content is historically accurate.

The students also need to understand some important historical context before analysing the miracle stories, in particular the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus. This is important since one of the earliest references to Jesus' miracles involves John. Traditionally, John was understood as the unquestioning cousin of Jesus who was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' baptism is thus described: «As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"» (Matthew 3: 17). The students use critical-historical methods to analyse this passage, asking questions about historical authenticity. Here the teacher needs to explain that the early

<sup>55</sup> MEIER, John P.: *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, New York, Double Day, 1991, pp. 56-59. Meier makes an interesting observation about Josephus' passage on Jesus, which reveals the extent to which some commentators seek to question the historical existence of Jesus. *The Jewish Antiquities* contains a longer passage on John the Baptist, yet «practically no one» doubts its historical authenticity (pp. 68-69).

<sup>56</sup> BRUNER, Jerome: «The Narrative Construction of Reality», *Critical Inquiry*, 18, 1 (1991), pp. 1-21. Bruner examines in detail the importance of establishing a narrative in terms of understanding. *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action* also highlights the research supporting the importance of a narrative approach. MARZANO, R. J.: *What Works In Schools. Translating Research Into Action*, Alexandria, VA, ASCD, 2003, p. 113.

Church was somewhat embarrassed by the well-known fact that John baptized Jesus. Given this information, the students analyse the passage, beginning with the question: Why was the early Church embarrassed? The students will arrive at a logical conclusion without the teacher telling them: Jesus' baptism gives the impression that John was superior to Jesus<sup>57</sup>. Thus, in the story, God makes it quite clear that Jesus is His son. Astute students will quickly question the authenticity of the biblical account of Jesus' baptism. The students then examine the biblical reference to Jesus' miracles that involves John. This analysis focuses on one of the earliest written documents about Jesus, the mysterious, long-lost document known as the Q Source. After providing the necessary historical context, that neither Matthew nor Luke was aware that the other was writing a Gospel, and that both possessed a copy of Mark, the first Gospel to be written, the students examine passages in Matthew and Luke that are almost identical and are not found in Mark. The students, then, determine that another document must have existed, and that this document preceded the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. This document must therefore have been written within thirty years of Jesus' death. Then the key passage from the Q Source is examined after the teacher briefly explains the historical context. In the Gospel, John has sent one of his own disciples to ask Jesus a question: «Are you "He who is to come" or do we look for another?» Given the earlier passage about the Jesus' baptism, this statement would raise questions for the students: Didn't John know that Jesus was the Messiah? Does he doubt Jesus? Were they not relatives? Jesus' answer is even more intriguing: «Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them. Blest is the man who finds no stumbling block in me». The students then analyse the statement for what it reveals about Jesus. First of all, the students would note that his relationship with John is intriguing. Unlike the traditional portrayal of John as the unquestioning cousin of Jesus, he is revealed as a more historically authentic individual who doubted. John's reaction to Jesus' answer is unknown since he was executed soon after, which adds more «intrigue» to the story. Even more fascinating is Jesus' answer. Rather than declare that he was the Messiah<sup>58</sup>, Jesus appears more historically authentic in his answer, implying that it is obvious who he is given what he is doing, and directing John to examine the «evidence», the poor, the cripples, and lepers. Furthermore, the students would realize that written evidence did exist concerning Jesus' miracles. They would then continue to analyse other miracle stories. The students would find this type of analysis more convincing than the

<sup>57</sup> Meier has a fascinating historical criteria for such evidence, evidence by embarrassment, arguing convincingly that anything in the Gospels that embarrassed the early Church such as the baptism of Jesus is most likely historical since otherwise it would not have been included. In this instance, the baptism of Jesus was so well-known among early Christians that evangelists had no choice but to include it.

<sup>58</sup> According to Biblical scholars, Jesus did not overtly declare himself as the Messiah. For evangelical purposes, the authors of the Gospels have Jesus making such utterances.

traditional teaching method in which the students memorized the miracle stories. Recent educational research indicates that students understand and remember significant content, especially when given the opportunity to examine it in depth.

There is of course some «risk» in this type of analytical and inquiry approach. As the students continue to examine the miracle stories, they would realize that some of them are most likely not historical<sup>99</sup>. Yet such «risk» is necessary and even desired. Catholic students need to have a sophisticated understanding, not only of the Gospel miracle stories –this is only one example– but of the Gospels themselves, the history of the early Church, and the moral teachings of Jesus and his Church. They must understand the significant content and possess the analytical and inquiry skills necessary to develop logical and convincing arguments if Catholic schools are to succeed in graduating well-informed and active Catholics. This can only be accomplished if Catholic high schools offer academically rigorous religion courses, and not courses that are primarily catechetical.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper focused on two questions: Why are Catholic schools failing to graduate well-informed, active Catholics and what changes are needed in the high school curriculum in order to reverse this trend? These questions were approached from an historical perspective. The most daunting challenges for Catholic schools are to counter the pervasive influence of secular culture and to overcome the profound ignorance among Catholics concerning their faith. In this secular culture, even the existence of Jesus has been questioned. Within Catholic schools a «secularization of consciousness» has occurred, resulting in Catholic educators unconsciously adopting secular values. What is needed is a religious high school curriculum that is fundamentally «religious education» and not catechetical in nature. It can no longer be assumed that students are practising Catholics who already possess an understanding of their faith before they enter high school. This new curriculum must be as academically rigorous and challenging as other subjects taught at the high school level. Academic excellence in the technical sense is required, but there should be no return to the past when religion was taught by rote memory. Rather, students must be given the opportunity to ask questions, to ponder, and to analyse. They must be allowed to examine the Gospels as historical documents, and to discover the «essential truths» of their faith for themselves. The students must also develop the cognitive skills needed to form a logical and convincing argument to explain and defend their faith. An examination of the Ontario Catholic Secondary Religion Policy document revealed that considerable changes need to be made in order to develop such an inquiry-based, academically rigorous curriculum. In this paper, William Pinar's curriculum theory of

<sup>99</sup> According to P. Meier, the so-called «natural miracles», for example Jesus walking on water, are not historical, but included in the Gospels as a way to communicate a moral teaching or to support a theological position.



subjectivity and the development of self provided the theoretical framework. It was argued that the classroom must provide the appropriate «environment» in which the students are given the opportunity to develop an awareness of how society shapes their sense of self and to develop their capacities to be independent, critical thinkers. The miracles of Jesus were used as an example of this new curriculum. Instead of just telling the students that Jesus performed miracles, they will make their own historical inquiry and discover this truth for themselves. They will, in other words, form a logical argument based on faith and reason that Jesus performed miracles. Jesus' historical miracles would then be connected to modern day miracles, so that the students will understand that Jesus is not just an historical individual, but the Son of God who is still «alive» and with whom they can establish an «intimate friendship». The students will «discover» that the Gospels support this fundamental Christian belief: «And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age» (Matthew 28: 20).