

during a debate on divorce that such an action is “antichristian and antinational” and that “death alone can dissolve marriage,” Geoffrion wondered how it could be that, if a Catholic legislator is “in conscience bound” to vote against divorce, that same legislator can “vote for a resolution purporting to vest in the Federal Legislature the power of legislating on the subject.”¹⁷

No less troubling was the possibility that federal control over marriage would empower the central government to require civil ceremonies for Catholics planning to marry and that failure to conform would render their offspring illegitimate in the eyes of the law.¹⁸ This argument was pressed with sufficient vigor as to result in the final version of the BNA Act including a new provision, not found in the Quebec resolutions, which reserved to the provinces the sole power over the “solemnization of marriage.”

Today, the hot-button issue for the minority in Quebec focuses on the language rights of anglophones, but, in 1865, the religious rights of the Protestant minority took center stage. To be sure, then as now, the school issue was salient; but, at a more fundamental level, the divisive question of religious freedom itself arose, with Protestants accusing Catholics of being intolerant zealots bent upon destroying all religions but their own and Catholics responding in kind that their accusers were narrow-minded mendacious bigots. It was not a pretty scene. Christian charity was the big loser.¹⁹

The Catholic cause was acutely embarrassed by the untimely appearance just the previous year of Pope Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors.²⁰ His Holiness took a dim view of the dominant liberal sentiments of the day, much to the delight of those willing to see threats to Protestant freedom in Catholic Quebec.²¹ The efforts of Catholics to recall the liberal, tolerant attitudes of the Quebec bishops were met with the counterargument that the papal Syllabus signaled a dramatic new departure for Catholicism throughout the world and that henceforth “honorable gentlemen of the Roman Catholic persuasion” would have to say “either that they have no confidence in what the head of their Church says, or that they have confidence in it, and will act accordingly.”²² Refusing to be pinioned on the