THE CHARTER OF QUÉBEC VALUES: PUBLIC DISCOURSES AROUND COMPETING GENDER IDENTITIES AND NOTIONS OF PUBLIC SPACE

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This article focuses on examining the online public discourses around the Charter of Québec Values and the ways in which it shaped the competing narratives around secularism and religion, particularly in relation to Canadian Muslims.

The Charter of Québec Values has sparked an endless controversy in Québec and the rest of Canada over the rights of religious minorities in a secular society. An intense debate over the proposed Bill has continued in various forums ever since Bill 60 was proposed by the Parti Québecois (PQ) in 2013. "*Affirming the values of state secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men*," this Bill proposed to bar personnel members of public bodies, "*including everyone from civil servants to teachers, provincial court judges, daycare workers, police, health-care personnel, municipal employees and university staff*" from wearing overt religious symbols, including "hijab, turban, kippa, large visible crucifix or other 'ostentatious' religious symbols while on the job" ("Bill 60", 2013; CBC News, 2013). The Charter of Québec Values - which will be referred to as "the Charter" from here on - stirred up a plethora of issues around secularism and freedom of religious expression in the public sphere. While the Charter seems redundant in view of the recent election results in Québec, the debate unleashed by the Charter has had a detrimental impact on Muslims in Canada which continues to pose challenges to their integration within Canadian society.

This article focuses on the debate surrounding the Charter and its impact on Canadian Muslims. Specifically, it centers on the contentious discourses around religious, secular, and gender identities in relation to Canadian Muslims. The Canadian immigration policy has resulted in a vast diversification of the Canadian society. Muslims, who comprised 3.2% of the total Canadian population in 2011, constitute an important part of this increasingly diverse landscape. Nonetheless, they are facing particular challenges in becoming a part of Canadian society (Statistics Canada, 2013). According to a recent survey on perceptions of Canadians about various religions, 54% of Canadians and 69% of Quebecers had an unfavourable view of Islam (Angus Reid Global, 2013). Furthermore, there is a sense of heightened tension around religious sensitivity in Québec in light of the Charter and the ways in which it has impacted the relations between different communities. A recent poll in Québec found that 48% of Quebecers sup-

ported the ban on wearing religious symbols while working in government jobs. Approximately 50% of the respondents said there has been *"an increase in stereotyping against religious minorities."* While the PQ government believed that the Charter would enhance social cohesion, over 50% of survey respondents felt that:

> *"relations between communities have already deteriorated since the debate over the charter of values began"* (Curran, 2014).

Like other diasporic communities, Muslims have brought their unique religious and cultural values to Canada. Living in a culture with incongruent secular values, expression of religious identity becomes important to the development of a personal identity (Rossi, Pierre & Dizboni, Ali, 2008; Yang, 1999). Scholars draw attention to this relational aspect of identity development particularly in diasporic contexts. Identity construction is a complex, dialectical, dynamic process of connection with, and separation from, other members of one's immediate and broader communities. As such, identity formulation occurs through an iterative process of observation and reflection where the individual evaluates himself in light of how others judge him (Josselson, 1992; Vincent, 2003; Hanoch & Harriet, 1995; Jacobson, 1998; Nielsen, 1992). The relational identity framework is useful in explicating the rifts between secular and religious values of Québec. In particular, it serves as a useful lens to examine how Muslims see themselves through the eyes of others in the society, and how they position themselves in relation to the narrative around the Charter. At the same time, it helps to explore how the proponents and opponents of the Charter articulate their stances to assert their identities, and the ways in which they de-legitimize the other.

METHODS

We examined ongoing public discourses around the Charter to see how these "group identities" were constructed to defend or challenge the dominant narrative around secularism (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). Specifically articles, blogposts, and videos discussing the Charter and its implications from diverse viewpoints in mainstream and social media were identified to look at the discussions that they generated among commentators on the Charter and its implications for Canadian Muslims. The articles and videos were selected from various mainstream sources including CBC, Global News, Montreal Gazette, National Post and other sources (see Appendix A).

An effort was also made to obtain articles and videos from alternative sources such as Huffington Post, Press TV (Irani English language channel), Rawal TV (Canadian Pakistani channel), a video statement on the Charter prepared by the Islami-Centre in Ontario, as well as video-blogs posted directly on YouTube. Even when videos from mainstream sources were selected, they were accessed using You Tube rather than mainstream media sites, in an effort to identify discussions generated around these videos in a relatively un-moderated environment. Many of the selected articles/videos/blogposts were generally highly viewed, and recommended, tweeted, shared, and liked by readers and commenters. Some articles and videos had generated extensive discussion. Therefore, we selected a smaller set of responses that were most favoured or liked by other commentators. For instance, a Huffington Post video entitled "Muslim Woman In Hijab Harassed On Montreal Bus; Québec Values Charter Cited In Rant" had generated 1,155 comments. Out of these comments, only the most favoured comments were analyzed. Conversely, some of the articles/videos selected for analysis had reasonable viewership but they generated many fewer comments. However these sources were also included in our analysis to broaden the range of sources being analyzed. For example, a statement made on the Charter by the Islami-Centre in Ontario did not instigate much commentary, but it was a very relevant source of information, presenting a much needed alternative view concerning the Charter by a community directly impacted by it. In addition, discussion on the challenges posed by the Charter for Muslim women at a public seminar held at McGill University in January 2014 was also included in this analysis. The exchanges among the audience and speakers were transcribed and analyzed subsequently to identify the themes that emerged from this discussion.

Overall, the analysis included coding over 750 exchanges for central concepts. First, open-coding was done by carefully reading the responses to identify recurring concepts from contributors' interpretations of the Charter and the issues highlighted by them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Related codes were clustered and placed into broader categories (e.g., gender identity, women oppression, religious extremism, secular spaces, etc.). About 15% of the excerpts were coded independently by 2 researchers. As a strategy for analyzing the exchanges, we identified the core constructs that had repeatedly emerged during the analysis. The codes were subsequently discussed to develop a set of common categories for further analysis. Visual displays and matrices helped in identifying and comparing prominent trends that surfaced from the data through this inductive analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The majority of these exchanges either supported or denounced the Charter. Through a deeper analysis of the arguments that were for or against the Charter, a set of overarching themes were created to capture the oppositional stances reflected in these arguments as discussed below. Nearly 400 comments out of the total 750 comments were selected for further analysis to categorize into the two selected themes being analyzed in this article, i.e., public space and perceptions of gender. Around 320 comments pertained to the thematic binary around public space and over 70 comments were categorized into the gender related themes.

Although we do not know the individual identity characteristics of those who were engaged in these dialogues on different online forums, their utterances revealed several substantial issues concerning the Charter. The online environment afforded a safe platform where they could share their critical thoughts and reactions honestly without having the fear of being judged by other people. There were however some important limitations to this inquiry, which need to be pointed out at this stage. Our online search for public exchanges focused on English-language media in Canada, due to which the views of French-speaking communities expressed in French-language media are not included in this analysis. Further, in a brief article like this, it is not possible to provide an in-depth analysis and discussion of a wide variety of themes that surfaced in online as well as seminar interactions. For example, other significant themes emerging from the online and seminar discussions on the Charter included the politics of language, political history of Québec, and relations between the Francophone and Anglophone communities. These complex issues merit further examination, and while they are beyond the scope of this article, they need to be examined in future studies on discourses around the Charter. Moreover, a number of comments consisted of extreme hate speech directed against Muslims; some were also against other communities in Québec, including politicians affiliated with the PQ, for instance. Comments or parts of responses inciting hate speech and violence were excluded from this analysis. Moreover, given that the comments were not stringently moderated on most of the online sources, some of the responses were unclear and their relevance was difficult to categorize, and hence these responses were also excluded from the analysis being undertaken in the article.

SALIENT FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

SECULAR VERSUS PLURAL PUBLIC SPACE

The notion of public space emerged as an important element of the arguments that supported or denounced the Charter. In looking at the contentious discourse around this issue we noticed a sharp division in these conversations in relation to the characteristics of the public space. The argument in support of the Charter was mainly in favour of creating a secular space by maintaining a strict demarcation between religion and public service. According to this view, overt religious affiliations should be avoided in the public sphere. A number of utterances highlighted the importance of constructing an equal space for everyone by removing religion from public institutions. Several responses suggested that creating a neutral space is important to maintaining Québec's secular identity and culture. Religion should have a role only in the private sphere. In addition, a few suggested that wearing religious symbols might mean "proselytizing" others. Some even argued that "*immigrants should follow Québec's cultural values to integrate into the society.*" A few maintained that "*Québec belongs to the Québec people... and immigrants have no place telling them how to run their business*." Several commentators also noted that although they did not have any issues with the hijab, a head covering worn by Muslim women, they felt that hijabs should not be worn while performing public duties. A number of responses pointed out that the niqab (veil or face covering) should be banned as it poses a security threat to the society. The Charter was also being supported for not only representing and preserving the cultural values of the majority of Canadians, but also due to it being a legislative attempt which merited consideration in the spirit of preserving democratic values considered an integral part of the Canadian socio-political fabric. Arguments were also made for the Charter meriting replication in the rest of Canada in order to ensure neutrality of public space[1].

The opponents of the Charter, on the other hand, argued for a diverse and plural public space. Freedom of religious expression, equal human rights, tolerance and respect for diversity, and plurality of views and dress codes in the public space emerged as salient concepts in a substantial number of responses against the Charter. Some comments pointed out that the public and private spheres "cannot be divided" as they did not see a separation between the two spaces in terms of their right to express their cultural and religious identity. Others argued that public spaces are not neutral in any case, given the pervasiveness of "Christian symbols" within public arenas, including government institutions. A few respondents also clarified that *"wearing religious symbols doesn't mean proselytizing or indoctrinating others about religion*."

Several responses hinted at a deep suspicion of the intentions of the government for imposing the Charter on religious minorities. Many seemed to believe that the government was using divisive policies as a political strategy to secure support from certain constituencies for their next election. While critiquing the dominant secular view of public space, some also asked, whose culture and values should dominate the public sphere? Connected to this question was the notion, in some exchanges, that Canadian society is constituted of immigrants who came at various points in time, except the First Nations.Although this debate exposed numerous rifts in social relations, it also brought together various communities to protect the diverse character of the Canadian society. As one person suggested,

> *"I believe it is vital... to make serious efforts to reconcile with Muslim groups and those affected, and to educate the population to raise awareness of the damage divisive actions can have on the fabric of society."*

MUSLIM WOMEN'S OPPRESSION VERSUS EMPOWERMENT

Since the Charter aimed to prohibit the wearing of a hijab in public institutions, a number of exchanges focused on its impact on Muslim women in terms of the Charter providing a potential opportunity to liberate Muslim women, on the one hand, or the fear that it undermines their basic right to choose how to express their identity. In most cases, however, perceptions about women were tied to or embedded in the discussion on religion in the public/private space, perceptions of Islam, gender equality and religious expression. The Charter supporters felt that this ban would liberate the "oppressed" Muslim women in Canada. A few conversations explicitly indicated that Muslim women are forced to wear a hijab by Muslim men or their families. The construction of Muslim women as subjugated and the hijab as a sign of oppression further served to legitimize their secular claim over public space. According to one commenter,

> *"the veil has been used as an instrument of oppression by religious and political authorities... reject oppression — reject the veil that would be a protest with a point."*

The counter argument shared by the Charter opponents mainly focused on Muslim women's right to self-expression, religious freedom, and respect for religious and cultural identity. In some cases, the hijab was also described as a symbol of women's empowerment. Likewise, some comments rejected the stereotypical construction of Muslim women as "subservient" or "subdued." As one comment, suggested:

> *"I've seen some uninformed commenters offer the opinion that Muslim women are subservient, subdued... Muslim women are exactly like all other women: usually far, far stronger than the clueless give them credit for being."*

Another comment lamented the "*clothing tyranny*," which prevented a "*debate of real issues*" such as employment and health.

The Charter marked a significant moment in the history of Québec as the intense public debate on the proposed bill exposed the competing discourses around secularism and religious freedom within Canadian society. The tensions resulting from these contested identity narratives suggest a "*moment of identity crisis*" as these competing value systems seem to have created considerable societal confusion and anxiety (Marcia, 1966, 2002; Schwartz, 2001). Developing a common and cohesive vision of the role and place of religious minorities in this society would require a critical, and candid, dialogue at various levels among the people of Québec to define a common understanding of secularization in ociety (Baubérot, 2012; Talyor cited in Abbey, 2000). In particular, they will need to decide collectively if they want to neutralize the public space of all religious expression or if they wish to develop a consensus over secularization that recognizes pluralism of religious and spiritual beliefs.

NOTE

1 In this short article, it is not possible to present illustrative examples to show the entire range of comments on this topic, but the sources are cited in the attached Appendix so that readers can view them online.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF ONLINE SOURCES CONSULTED

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES & BLOGS

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