The Sacred Public Sphere:

Praying for Secularism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the place of religion in public institutions as well as some of the key players in resolving the issues surrounding the accommodation of religious and visible minorities. It explores discrimination in attaining employment in the public sector and also explores what Canadian society can do to maintain social cohesiveness and further mutual understanding within our communities.

The debate surrounding reasonable accommodations in Quebec and Canada as a whole has pushed Canadians to ask many questions regarding the future of our society and has demanded deeper and deeper levels of introspection. We now, as a nation, must channel those reflections into solutions that will increase social cohesion, and address the ills that challenge our society.

Among many of the questions les Québécois, and by extension, Canadians are being asked to ponder is the place of religion in public life or public institutions. It is therefore important to define the nature of such institutions. The Latin root of "public" is *publicus*, which literally translates into "pertaining to the people", and means "open to all in the community".[1] Public institutions and public places should, in theory, be accessible to all citizens, regardless of colour, gender, creed and so on. Not only should everyone have access to the services provided, but also the opportunity to provide those services to others by working for such public institutions.

On this last point however, there appears to be much discussion. Should people who publicly display their faith be permitted to work for a public institution? If we were to speak in purely theoretical terms, a public institution pertains to outwardly religious people, and they certainly are a part of the community. Therefore, simply by implication, they should have the opportunity to serve and be served. We do not, however, live in a purely theoretical world, do we?

So can a man wearing a turban objectively take your driver's licence photo? Some will argue that no, he cannot, as he is clearly affiliated with a religion, and the state is not. So how can this be reconciled?

These critics will say that because the state is secular, then its representatives should not display any affiliations, so as to remain objective in rendering services. This argument is based on the assumption that the state is actually secular. We first must understand the parameters within which we are asked to work. While Quebec, for example, is a secular province, Canada, strictly speaking, is not a secular country.[2] It is worth noting that, for all intents and purposes, Canada operates as though it were a secular country despite the presence of religious references. For example, the preamble to our *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* recognizes "the supremacy of God". So while the references to religion are present, they tend to be more ceremonial in nature.

And even if Canada did strictly identify itself as a secular country, for the state to be defined as secular, it must not espouse any one religion. That is to say that the state, in and of itself, does not give precedence to any religion over others and has no affiliation with a particular religion. The term "secular" is defined as "not pertaining to or connected with religion".[3] In no way does the definition indicate something that is anti-religion; it simply is not affiliated with religion. The state may be secular; the people that reside within it need not be.

Secularism was instituted in many countries. It was instituted in France, for example, to restore equality between men and women, believer and non-believer, and to make all citizens equal before the law. Bearing this in mind, a secular state will not favour a religion over another, and more broadly speaking, favour one individual over another for the purposes of employment, except on the basis of merit. Simply put, secularism, by virtue of its definition, means that we should all have equal access to opportunity, regardless of race, creed, gender and so on. Secularism cannot be used to justify discrimination.

Yet still, some will argue that a representative of a secular state should appear outwardly to be completely objective and neutral, so anyone that displays public religious observance does not qualify. If that were the case however, then where would we draw the line? We would be headed down what lawyers call the slippery slope. If a religious person is feared not to be objective enough to serve the population, for fear that he or she might favour people with the same observance and deny services to others, then would people of colour be objective enough? Would homosexuals? Feminists? What about women versus men? Which gender would be more objective in that case? If we begin to discriminate to find the perfectly objective person, we will be searching endlessly, as they do not exist.

If at the end of the day, our goal is to further mutual respect and social cohesion, this will only happen through daily interactions between people of different faiths (or non-faiths for that matter) and cultures, and what better place for this kind of exchange to occur than the workplace? It may sound like grandma psychology, but we as humans naturally fear what is unknown to us. The more we learn about something or someone, the less we fear and we begin to draw our understanding from practical experience, rather than programmed prejudice.

A survey conducted by the Council on American-Islamic Relations in the United States reported that the more contact non-Muslim Americans had with their Muslims compatriots, the less likely they were to have a negative opinion of Muslims in general.[4]

These results can likely be extrapolated for any religious group, or even more generally to visible minorities.

So while the debate about reasonable accommodation rages on, and we as a society discuss the various cases that are presented to us by the media, it seems that we have missed the forest for the trees in many instances.

Firstly, reasonable accommodations are made everyday in Canada, without the flashbulbs of cameras, and the myriad of microphones surrounding them to show Canadians how it can be done. Yielding your seat to an elderly person on the bus is a reasonable accommodation. So is offering to carry a heavy box for a pregnant woman. We do these things all the time. Though this debate has been heavily reported in the media as of late, and has even become an election issue during the 2007 Quebec elections, Canadians have been accommodating for a long time now, and overall, we get along quite well in our society.

To "reasonably accommodate" someone simply means to re-adjust circumstances to help an individual remain included in the mainstream group, in this case, Canadian society. The individual in the wheelchair does not have to make the painful decision to stay home from school because there is no ramp or elevator to allow her into the building. No harm is presented to walking individuals if a ramp is put in the place of stairs, and this small gesture makes a world of difference to the individuals that must use a wheelchair. Their needs have been considered and addressed and they feel like they belong to their school's community.

Now the example of pregnancy or of physically challenged people is rather benign, as we will seldom hear any objections to those kinds of accommodations. Religion, however, is just slightly more controversial in today's world, isn't it? Now any accommodation made public is contested, to the point that people making the accommodations will deny that they have done any such thing to avoid the plethora of emails, voice mails and interviews that will undoubtedly come their way.

The example of the International Tae Kwon Doe Federation allowing Muslim women to wear their head-scarves beneath their helmets at a tournament this past summer in Quebec City comes to mind. When the spokesperson was asked if he had made "a reasonable accommodation", he replied "Oh no! This is not a reasonable accommodation, no no!...". It is quite ironic that reasonable accommodation was designed to promote inclusion and unity and is now perceived as exclusionary and divisive.

Secondly, reasonable accommodations are rights, not privileges, that are accessible not only to religious minorities, but to all people living in Canada. It is after all, the principle of reasonable accommodation that allows women to take maternity leave from their jobs, and to be able to return to the same position when that leave expires. This applies to many women in Canada, nowadays. Keeping these points in the foreground, we must highlight that not all reasonable accommodations apply exclusively to religious or minority groups, but are rather quite mainstream.

Lastly, while religious accommodations are usually well received in the public and private sectors, the greatest "accommodation" that can be offered to religious and visible minorities is a stable job. Access to employment remains the biggest challenge faced by minorities, religious or otherwise. This is a problem that we as a nation must tackle, with the various levels of government leading the way.

Maria Barrados, president of the Public Service Commission ("PSC") reported that in 2004, the PSC asked 18 departments and agencies to prepare and submit their executive staffing plans. Eleven of the 18 organizations complied. These plans included over 280 potential vacancies, of which only eight were targeted to members of visible minorities.[5] In 2006, Barrados reports 18 departments made a total of 254 appointments. Only six of those went to visible minorities. And in 2007, the hiring of visible minorities fell again, despite that fact that overall hiring increased by 9.5%. The number of visible minorities hired decreased from 9.8% to 8.7%.[6]

A great many articles were also published in Canada's francophone newspapers, such as *La Presse*, investigating hiring individuals with French-Canadian names versus others with Arab or Muslim names.[7] The results were often disappointing. Other articles explored the hiring practices of the Municipality of Quebec City. Journalists did not have to explore deeply to discover that women wearing hijab, and particularly women wearing niqab, were not welcome to even apply to Quebec's City Hall according to the late mayor Andree Boucher.[8]

Our political leaders and governments have a duty to set examples for the greater public, as well as other institutions, and are expected to show leadership in treating visible and religious minorities as full-class citizens. Otherwise the social fabric that is our society will be very easily ripped apart, as there is little to hold the seams together. This unravelling has already begun in countries like France, and has led to disastrous consequences. To avoid similar consequences in Canada, we must tackle the issues of accessibility to employment swiftly and thereafter the other issues that pertain to accommodations of various sorts.

To act swiftly, there are many lessons to be learned from the reasonable accommodation debate in Quebec. Three of the lessons will be highlighted below.

Firstly, there is always someone that has a vested interest in pitting groups against one another. The old "divide and conquer" strategy has worked for as long as there have been people to divide. By stirring up questions of identity threat

in Quebec, and fears about organized religion coming back to take over the province, many players had something to gain. By pouncing on the question of Quebec's identity being threatened, and the need for a separate constitution to clarify to immigrants Quebec values, Mario Dumont, leader of the Action démocratique du Quebec (ADQ), stood to gain about 15-20 seats. And he did gain them. Certain up and coming journalists seized the opportunity to launch their careers on the backs of the most "unreasonable" accommodation they could find. Some journalists even published books about the supposed threat to Quebec's very existence.

And while we in Quebec were having debates about the hypothetical situation of "veiled voting", in ridings where there are virtually no Muslims, we failed to make our infrastructure, environment, and not to mention our ailing healthcare system potent elections issues. All most politicians had to worry about in this last Quebec election was whether little girls should be allowed to play soccer with headscarves on.

The second lesson we can draw from this debate is how important our media has become in shaping our attitudes towards one another. Their coverage can propel us forward in our goals of social cohesion or, conversely, can be completely detrimental. The constant repetition of the similar stories, from very similar angles during this debate inflated the perceived occurrence of conflict between communities. The viewers were bombarded with the same stories over and over again, until the cries of threatened identities began to sound terribly legitimate. Yet for the handful of controversial stories, there were hundreds of others that demonstrated mutual respect and understanding.

While certain media outlets concentrated on sensationalist headlines, and finding the most ridiculous examples of reasonable accommodations, they did not seem to realize that their coverage increased hostilities in the day-to-day life of anyone who was outwardly religious.

Yet there were other outlets that went far more in depth to discover how to solve problems. In certain cases, there were some journalists investigating the claims of their colleagues. In one particular case, a story of so-called reasonable accommodation was exposed as a complete fabrication.

One of the pillars of a healthy democracy is a well informed public. A responsible press gallery is therefore essential to a thriving democracy and social cohesion. Irresponsible media may thwart any advances that we wish to make, unless we participate actively in countering misinformation.

Lastly, and perhaps the most powerful lesson learned in this debate, is that of acceptance. This was not a lesson learned from our politicians, our scholars or journalists. This lesson was a demonstration put on by a small group of 11-year old girls at a tournament in Laval. Asmahan Mansour's soccer team had fully accepted her presence among them, and valued her contribution not only as a talented soccer player, but also as a friend. They had come to know Asmahan and liked and respected her for who she was. They did not simply tolerate her because they had to, but rather accepted her as one of them. Though this wasn't the focus of the media, it remains a very powerful lesson from an often overlooked source.

We have much work to do in the way of mutual understanding and social cohesion. Most people would agree that the best way of overcoming our fear of the unfamiliar is to get to know one another. And it is not only in religious texts that we find this prescription.[9]

> "C'mon people, now
> smile on your brother,
> everybody get together,
> try to love one another right now."
>
> *– Chet Powers, The Youngbloods*

Notes

[1] The Online Etymology Dictionary. (2008). Retrieved from http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=public.

[2] Department of Justice Canada. (2007). *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, 1982. Retrieved from http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/charter/.

[3] The Online Dictionary. (2008). Retrieved from http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/secular.

[4] The Council on American-Islamic Relations. (2006). *American Public Opinion about Islam and Muslims.* Retrieved from http://www.cair.com/Portals/0/pdf/american_public_opinion_on_muslims_islam_2006.pdf.

[5] Maria Barrados. (2006). *Conference on visible minorities in the federal public service.* Public Service Commission Canada. Retrieved from http://www.psc-cfp.gc.ca/spch-disc/2006/2006-02-20-eng.htm.

[6] (2008, January 14). Visible minorities losing ground in public service. *The Montreal Gazette.* Retrieved from http://www.canada.com/montrealgazette/news/story.html?id=3a1de7fd-3366-485d-983c-e825870d4d32.

[7] Handfield, C. (2007, August 10). Quand Rachid devient Richard. *La Presse.* Retrieved from http://www.cyberpresse.ca/article/20070810/CPACTUALITES/708100448/6751/CPOPINIONS05.

[8] Vaillancourt, C. (2007, October 30). Accommodements: pas de femme voilée à l'hôtel de ville. *La Presse.* Retrieved from http://www.cyberpresse.ca/article/20071030/CPSOLEIL/71029231/7113/CPSOLEIL.

[9] Qur'an 49:13.