"YOU SAY 'MULTI', I SAY 'INTER'; BUT DON'T CALL THE WHOLE THING OFF!"

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ABSTRACT

The narratives embodied in, and generated by, 'multiculturalism' and 'interculturalism' are often conceived as in conflict. This paper focuses on the February 2012 Supreme Court of Canada decision in *S.L. and D.J. v. Commission Scolaire des Chênes* to suggest that conflict between 'multi' and 'inter' need not be sustained or resolved. Nicely illustrated by the judgment, the two may instead be destined to co-existence as indicators of 'multi'plicity and shapers of 'inter'actions.

In a classic recording, Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong sing, "Let's call the whole thing off!" The suggestion follows their playful take on conflicting pronunciations of common words like "tomato" and "potato". As the song concludes, the proposed resolution to the conflict changes: "Let's call the calling off, off!" After all, everyone knows what a tomato is, regardless of the accent with which it is named.

When we turn to the root word, 'culturalism', and then articulate it by adding different prefixes – 'multi' or 'inter' – it's sometimes hard to tell whether we're engaged in simple varied pronunciation or caught in complex irreconcilable conflict. While they clearly share a root, the contrast between 'multiculturalism' and 'interculturalism' is never presented in the form of light-hearted duet. Instead, it is played out in ongoing arguments over models and approaches, over words and melody. The disagreement is rarely over the reality or fact of social diversity on the ground in Canadian society; rather it is inscribed in the policies and politics that shape acknowledgement of, and response to, that diversity.

In order to explore the implications of a "You say 'multi', I say 'inter'" encounter, we might ask whether any concrete consequences flow from the choice of prefix. Accordingly, we might examine diversity-responsive practices in a range of contexts – classrooms and courtrooms, healthcare and childcare, hiring and firing – governed within 'multiculturalist' and 'interculturalist' frameworks, in order to identify principal similarities and differences, convergence and divergence.

As an alternative approach, and the one taken in this short essay, we might focus on the narratives embodied in, and generated by, 'multiculturalism' and 'interculturalism'. Concrete consequences for the way in which individuals live their lives, and in which communities exist and evolve, may not depend on the preference of prefix. But self-understanding and sustenance, on the part of both individuals and communities, may be tied to the perceptions and assumptions built into that choice.

Here, the particular context of religious diversity and the specific example of the Supreme Court of Canada decision in *S.L. and D.J. v. Commission Scolaire des Chênes,* 2012 SCC 7, handed down in February of 2012, will act as backdrop for considering the variations on a shared theme that the terms 'multiculturalism' and 'interculturalism' constitute. Through a brief reading of the judgment and its reliance on stories told by religious parents and school officials, I ask whether the conflict between 'multi' and 'inter' needs to be sustained or resolved. Perhaps the two are destined to co-existence, not so much as prefixes to 'culturalism', but as indicators of 'multi'plicity and shapers of 'inter'actions.

In the recent judgment, parents known only as S.L. and D.J. asked that their children be exempt from the Ethics, Religion and Culture (ECR) course offered as a mandatory part of the curriculum in Québec schools as of 2008. Further, they claimed that the obligatory nature of the ECR program violated their freedom of religion and conscience guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Québec Charter of Human

Rights and Freedoms. More specifically, the parents argued that their right to pass on their Catholic beliefs and faith to their children was compromised by a course in which those children would be exposed to a range of religious traditions and ways of understanding and expressing spirituality. What the parents characterized as the inherent relativism of the ECR course would interfere, they insisted, with the way in which their children were growing up within Catholicism.

The Court's answer was very clear. No infringement of parental freedom of religion was entailed in the exposure of children to the Ethics, Culture and Religion course ensconced in the education program of Québec schools. No exemption on that basis could be granted. In other words, the Supreme Court refused to excuse children of one faith from learning about others.

Justice Deschamps, writing for seven of the nine judges, briefly reviewed the history of education in Québec, highlighting the abolishment of denominational public school boards by the late 1990's and the adoption at the time of a new approach to religious education of children, leading to the introduction of ECR roughly ten years later. As acknowledged in the judgment, the mandatory ECR course aims to provide students with an understanding of ethical questions and of a range of influential religious traditions, without accompanying students on a 'spiritual quest' nor promoting a 'new common religious doctrine'. Regardless of the sincere faith of the Catholic parents who requested an exemption for their children, it was not possible for the Court to conclude that exposure to a comprehensive presentation of religious traditions constituted a violation of religious freedom. In particular, the parents' objective of passing on their faith to their children was not found subject to interference.

In a concurring judgment, Justice LeBel, writing for himself and Justice Fish, emphasized the need to respect religious upbringing of children as part of meaningful religious freedom on the part of parents. With respect to the ECR course – a course for which, at the time the claim was filed, teaching methods, content and spirit were 'sketchy' – there was simply no way to assess the alleged interference with religious upbringing by these parents within their Catholic faith. Justice LeBel notes that it might be possible to establish such interference in another case where there was a clearer picture of the substantive content and the pedagogical approach associated with ECR in a particular classroom.

For the purposes of this paper, the judgment can be read both through a 'multicultural' and an 'intercultural' lens. If we look for signs of 'multiculturalism', we find them most explicitly in the introductory paragraph of Justice Deschamp's majority decision: "The societal changes that Canada has undergone since the middle of the last century have brought with them a new social philosophy that favours the recognition of minority rights." Throughout the judgment, there is acute awareness and repeated acknowledgement of the diversity of Québec and Canadian society. The Ethics, Religion and Culture component of the curriculum in Québec schools appears both to stem from, and sustain, a multicultural reality.

If we look for what might be labelled evidence of 'interculturalism', we could start by contrasting the opening paragraph of Justice LeBel's concurring judgment: "The implementation of this program re-emphasizes the continuing problem of establishing an appropriate relationship between the religious neutrality of a modern democratic state and the deeply held religious beliefs of members of Québec society who are often in a minority situation." Here, the on-going dialogue between the state and particular communities (via their members) shape the answer given to the claim of these religious parents that they are unable to accept public policy in the form of the ECR course.

The 'multicultural' reading of the judgment offers obvious support for a government project that aims to teach a diverse group of children about a diverse group of religious traditions. The ECR course offers a roof under which individuals and identities comingle, and together appear to realize the promise of multicultural theory. But the very recognition of the multiplicity of ethical and religious perspectives and practices, embodied in the education program, is the problem identified by the parents who insist on securing their children's way on a particular path. For them, the risk is in too much recognition, in losing one's direction by being pulled in too many others, in substituting individual identity formation with comprehensive exposure to a collective tangle. Put in these words, the concern precisely mirrors the very critique sometimes aimed at 'multiculturalism' itself.

In the 'intercultural' reading of the judgment, by contrast, we are invited to focus on the on-going conversation, the incessant back-and-forth, between religious individuals and families and communities on one hand, and the state - in the form of a mandatory education program – on the other. If 'interculturalism' signals a principal preoccupation with shaping the interaction between two parties or partners, it is reflected in the acknowledgement by the Court, through Justice LeBel's judgment, that questions will continue to be asked of the ECR program as well as of religious parents. The approaches and commitments of both schools and religious families throughout Québec and Canada will continue to evolve, always influencing each other at the same time that they work to sustain their particular identities and vocations.

While multiculturalism and interculturalism are often imagined in conflict, their coexistence in the Supreme Court of Canada judgment denies the need to choose between them. The two judgments are in agreement, but they use different words and emphasize different features of the story in order to get there. It is no coincidence that the three Québec justices on the Supreme Court are front and centre – Justice Deschamps for the majority, and Justice LeBel for himself and Justice Fish. Through their judgments, supported by the entire Supreme Court of Canada, these judges offer leadership and guidance for Québec as an increasingly diverse society within Canada. They do so in a way that illustrates the mixed presence of models and insights drawn from 'multi'- and 'inter'-cultural thinking.

Neither is it surprising that the parents in the case are Catholic parents, members of the majority faith community in a province that used to provide institutional support to the religious upbringing of Catholic children. The conversation captured by 'interculturalism', usually thought to be a dialogue between 'us' and 'them', or 'we' and 'you', is explicitly transformed here into an 'us'-'us' or 'we'-'we' moment. Who are 'we', in today's Québec? What does it mean to fashion our state institutions around 'us' as a collective community? The focus becomes the texture of the 'us', the conditions and contexts in which 'we' can flourish and move forward together. A 'multicultural' view might suggest that this is always the case, no matter which community is involved in an 'intercultural' dialogue with broader society. The answer given to any identity-based claim is always an invitation to learn something more about who 'we' are as members of that society.

At the end of a Supreme Court of Canada judgment, one party 'wins' the appeal. In this case, that party represents a public policy according to which children of all backgrounds and in all schools learn about sources of ethical teachings and world faiths. The finality of the judgment feels like a message of "Let's call the whole thing off!" – satisfying for the victor, and deeply frustrating for the vanquished. Those who contrast 'multiculturalism' and 'interculturalism' in order to force a choice between two approaches to cultural diversity, might wish for a similar dramatic resolution to what sometimes feels like an endless back and forth.

And yet, as the *Commission scolaire des Chênes* judgment itself reminds us, the precise contours of the policy and the Ethics, Culture and Religion course it has generated will change and evolve. The voices of teachers, administrators, parents and children – including individual members of religious communities – contribute to the on-going shaping of the substance and significance of the institutions, including ECR, that form the fabric of our collective experience.

Coexistence, rather than conflict, thus captures the relationship between 'multi' and 'inter' sensibilities – not only in a court but also in classrooms, congregations, and corridors. The prefix might change depending on context or purpose; it might signal a particular register, or simply offer a variation of accent. Separated from their usual 'culturalism' root, and spliced onto other words that describe our always-unfolding reality, 'multi' and 'inter' combine respect for 'multiplicity' with recognition of 'interaction'. Rather than "calling the whole thing off", the melody and the words keep going, and everyone's invited to join in the song.