UNSCIENTIFIC REFLECTIONS ON *L'INTERCULTUREL*

Gregory Baum, professor emeritus at the faculty of religious studies of McGill University holds a doctorate in theology and has done graduate studies in sociology. His main field of research is the interaction of religion and society. His recent books include *Nationalism, Religion and Ethics* (French translation *Le nationalisme: perspectives éthiques et religieuses*) and *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan* (French translation *Islam et modernité : La pensée de Tariq Ramadan*).

ABSTRACT

This article looks at l'interculturel as a symbol and as a message. As a symbol, l'interculturel reminds people that Québec, occupying an objectively different position than the other Canadian provinces, must defend its language and its culture. As a message, l'interculturel informs the immigrants that Québec is eager for their integration into Québec society. So far Québec has not done a great deal to translate interculturalism into action.

The National Assembly of Québec has rejected the Canadian federal policy of multiculturalism and adopted interculturalism as an alternative policy. Québecers are strongly opposed to multiculturalism, even if it is not clear whether the interculturalism they prefer makes a difference in practical terms. I wish to argue that, for Québecers, defending *l'interculturel* has meaning both as a symbol and as a message.

A SYMBOL

The principal reason for rejecting multiculturalism is the awareness that the culture of Québec, a small Francophone space unique in North America,, is in need of protection – protection by law and by a certain discipline of its citizens. Québecers realize that the pressure exerted on them by the English language is not due to the bad will or lack of generosity on the part of English-speaking Canadians. It is due, rather, to an objective factor: the cultural weight of the English language. The cultural weight of a language is determined by the power of the institutions that mediate it within a given society. Because in North America industry, commerce, technology, administration, scientific research and entertainment all operate almost exclusively in English, this language puts pressure on the small Francophone society. Moreover, it constitutes a threat especially in the big city, for it is there that these institutions are located given the concentration of population.

As a result of these institutional dynamics, 19th century Prague, located in a Czech-speaking region, became a city that spoke German. Similarly, Brussels, located in a Flemish-speaking region, became city that principally speaks French. After World War II, the Germans were expelled from the Czech Republic and Prague became primarily a Czech-speaking city once more, but Brussels remains largely Francophone, a fact that makes Flemish nationalists reluctant to aspire to independence. The same institutional dynamics can be found in Montreal, a trend against which the Francophone majority resists. It is not surprising that many immigrants settling in Montreal prefer to integrate into the English-speaking minority: they sense that English has greater social and economic power.

The same institutional dynamics has been operative in the colonies of empires. The dominant language spreads first in the capital city where the administrative, educational and commercial institutions are located. Colonized people often speak two languages badly: their own language used in the family and the village, and the language of the colonizer used at work and in public life. For the Native peoples of Canada the loss of their languages has been a tragic event as it has played a role in destroying their socio-cultural self-confidence. Today some of them try to repossess their mother tongue.

Since I was born in Germany and spent my boyhood there, I am more conscious than many Canadians of the political meaning of linguistic conflicts. Not only do languages differ in the power they exercise, they also differ in social standing. In my time, the languages west of Germany, French and English, were honoured – Germans willingly learned them in school – while the languages east

of Germany were looked down upon, and few Germans studied them. In the city of Danzig, where the middle-class were German and the working-class were Polish, the Germans never learned Polish, the idea to do so having never occurred to them.

Languages differ in status. I have Francophone Québecois friends who moved to Toronto and found that their children did not want to speak French; in the classroom, French has a low status. Middle-class Cubans who moved to New York City found that their children did not want to speak Spanish on the streets as they were concerned they'd be mistakenfor Puerto Ricans.

I have not mentioned as yet the recent development that made English the global language. In his *La langue nationale et mondialisation: Enjeux et défis pour le français* (Gouvernement du Québec, Conseil de la langue française, 1995), Ricardo Petrella writes,

> *Lorsqu'en 1886, la ligne de chemin de fer Ivrée-Aoste fut achevée, beaucoup d'observateurs de l'époque estimèrent qu'elle allait être un instrument puissant d'italianisation de la Vallée d'Aoste, ce qui fut effectivement le cas.*
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> *Quel va être l'impact de la création à l'échelle continentale et mondiale des superautoroutes de l'information et de la communication, dont l'on parle beaucoup depuis peu d'années et qui vraisemblablement «parleront» surtout l'anglais, sur des langues comme l'italien, le néerlandais, le polonais, le russe? Seront-elles réduites à des parlers locaux? Et quel sera l'impact sur l'arabe, le français, l'espagnol?*

Scientific publications in France and Germany are published increasingly in English, while some academic conferences have followed suit in using English asthe working language. The disadvantage here is chiefly that participants are generally incapable of fully expressing themselves in their own language, and are thus their participation is limited to the extent of their proficiency in English. For Québecers interculturalism is a symbol reminding them and others that their society is in an objectively different situation than the rest of Canada. It is my impression that the Canadian discourse about the two official languages and the word 'bi-lingual' are, by their very nature somewhat misleading, suggesting that French and English have equal weight. The problem here is the failure to recognize that these languages have, in fact, different cultural power and different social standing within Canada inasmuch as the rest of the world. Québecers will always have to resist the cultural power of the English language, preventing it from entering one sphere of social life after another. Given its geo-political realities, even if Québec became an independent country, it would still have to struggle to keep French as its public language.

A MESSAGE

L'interculturel is not only a symbol but as message as well, addressed to immigrants, telling them that Québec is eager to see them integrate into society, perhaps even more eager than the federal government with its policy of multiculturalism. Qubec upholds the rights and freedoms of immigrants and respects their cultural and religious practices, yet Québecers are eager to have newcomers become active citizens who will assist in building a distinct society. Interculturalism encourages dialogue, interaction and cooperation between the settled population and more recent arrivals. Ideally, recent immigrants and the established population are to come to know one another, overcome their prejudices and discover their common interests and values. Interculturalism has been promoted through several different proposals. Some have emphasized the convergence of cultures, another has stressed the common citizenship, and others have advocated a common public culture. The latter proposals want all citizens, regardless of their cultural background, to recognize the public values essential to Québec society, such as democratic participation, human rights, the importance of the French language and gender equality, among others. A common public culture would allow all citizens to celebrate their individual cultural tradition within their family, their neighbourhood and their ethno-cultural community while promoting a sense of common cause amongst diverse peoples. *L'interculturel* says to the newcomers: we need you, we welcome you, and we want to work with you to make our small society flourish.

It is regrettable that Québec has done very little to translate *l'interculturel* into practice. If interaction among the different communities is desired, initiatives must take place on several levels in order to do so. The first and most important requirement is that immigrants be able to quickly establish themselves by gaining employment. It is by working with others and participating in a common project that exchange and interaction take place. A government committed to interculturalism must see to it that the newcomers find work, that their academic and professional competencies and qualifications are recognized,, and that their rate of unemployment is not higher than that of the provincial average. I am not certain whether the philosophy of the present government permits such interventions in the economic life of the province.

There are other levels in which interculturalism calls for action. At this time, the government hardly involves itself in the integration of immigrants. It does not create centres in urban neighbourhoods for teaching French, nor does it help immigrants to find their way by organizing events to make them feel welcome and to further bring them into contact with established Québecers. To make interculturalism work, all Québecers must go out of their way to include newcomers in their circles and social projects. The philosopher-novelist Naïm Kattan, who arrived in Montreal in 1954, has made an important contribution to Québec's intellectual life. One of his sayings is that the best thing you can do for an immigrant is to ask him or her to participate in a common project. By rendering a service to society, the newcomer learns to feel part of it.

L'interculturel is a great idea, but Québec has done very little to give it concrete meaning. I am associated with the Centre justice et foi de Montréal which promotes *l'interculturel* and *la culture publique commune* in its review *Relations,* as well as the activities of the sector *Vivre ensemble* in support of immigrants and refugees. In Québec many centres and networks try to put interculturalism into practice. What is missing is organized pressure on the government to support the process of integration.