RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

ABSTRACT

In democratic and pluralist societies, the issue of religion in the public sphere gives rise to many serious and complex debates. Such issues require discussions among people from different domains. On the one hand, it requires contributions from researchers working in universities, in various public and parapublic institutions, and in private and community organizations. On the other hand, it requires the points of view of decision makers and religious groups. This paper provides an overview of some of the contributions that will appear in the book *La religion dans la sphère publique*. The issue of diversity is examined from a statistical point of view and in relation to the question of religion's place in the model of Canadian multiculturalism. The book also includes studies of relations between the state and religion in Québec, in the education and health sectors, and in the municipal sphere. Finally, several studies look at the public sphere's secularity and neutrality.

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In democratic and pluralist societies, the issue of religion in the public sphere gives rise to many serious and complex debates. It involves the relations between religions and different spiritual trends, government, and civil society; these three areas obviously cross various aspects of the public and parapublic domains: educational institutions, social and health services, penal and legal institutions, and public policies. On another level, the issue has considerable impact on the workplace, the community, and the family. Consider, for example, the recent debates on gay marriage, contraception, AIDS prevention, managing work schedules, wearing religious symbols in schools, and building new places of worship for non-Christians. Various issues often cause us to reflect on the challenge of living together, of respecting the diversity of beliefs and visions of good, while agreeing to a common way of functioning and certain common values.

Such issues require discussions among people from different domains. On the one hand, it requires contributions from researchers working in universities, in various public and parapublic institutions, and in private and community organizations. On the other hand, it requires the points of view of decision makers and religious groups themselves, including those who identify with a specific system of belief – whether it be religious, spiritual, atheist, or secular, for example.[2] This paper provides an overview of some of the contributions that will appear in the book *La religion dans la sphère publique* [religion in the public sphere].[3] The issue of diversity is examined from a statistical point of view and in relation to the question of religion's place in the model of Canadian multiculturalism. The book also includes studies of relations between the state and religion in Québec, in the education and health sectors, and in the municipal sphere. Several studies look at the public sphere's secularity and neutrality.

Canadian society and religious diversity

Sociologist Peter Beyer provides an analysis of Canadian statistics on the religion of Canadians (1981–2001).[4] He notes that old-stock Canadians have been becoming decreasingly religious, while immigration has been intensifying cultural and religious pluralism since the 1981 census. However, Canada remains a predominantly Christian country (2001: 77%). At the same time, however, the number of people who say that they have no religion is increasing – more so among men than among women – as is the number of non-denominational Christians. Beyer has also observed a trend that suggests a certain de-institutionalization of religion. Newcomers can just as easily adapt to the influence of their host society as they can resist it. Although we cannot predict the underlying attitudes and choices of future generations, we can still, based on current data, anticipate a continuous flux of immigrants from the world's main religious groups – Christians (particularly Catholics), Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, and to a lesser degree, Sikhs, Jews and Jains. Also, the increasing number of non-European Christians will probably change Christianity considerably. Comparing the two large urban centres of Vancouver and Toronto with that of Montréal, we see that Vancouver and Toronto have a much larger diversity of religions than Montréal, which is still a predominantly Christian city – primarily Roman Catholic – with fewer people who are either not religious or who belong to other religions.

John Biles, of the Metropolis Project, has investigated the capacity of Canadian multiculturalism to take religious diversity into account. Based on two case studies, he has investigated the nature of the separation between the state and the Christian church in Canada.[5] The first study addresses the refusal to grant visas to a number of Lutheran Church representatives from Asia and Africa during their worldwide meeting in Winnipeg in 2003. The second examines the issue of Christian sanctuaries where refugees have sought asylum to escape deportation. In both cases, strong criticism from the churches, which was often supported by public opinion, contested the decisions rendered by the immigration department. Biles concludes that Canadian public opinion seems to accept that Christian churches play a critical role. However, many people in the Canadian elite insist on the separation of church and state. Biles notes that the Christian churches undeniably play a key role in that they have an impact on the public sphere, but he suggests that serious consideration be given to the possible contributions of other religious groups. Enhancing the Canadian model of diversity requires both a recognition of the positive critical role that religion can play in certain matters and an end to limiting this possibility to Christianity.

Sophie Therrien provides an overview of how religious diversity in Québec is addressed in legislation and in politics.[6] Following a brief historical overview, she examines the articles of the charters of rights (Québec, 1975; Canada, 1982) as they relate to religion and the guarantee of the fundamental freedoms of belief and religion. Individual expressions of belief are so important in those articles that strong personal beliefs are enough to qualify as a demand, regardless of conformity to the group. Also, in 1985, the obligation of reasonable accommodation made its appearance in Canadian and Québec law.[7] Therrien specifically defines the concepts of laicity and secularization by situating the recent adoption of the concept of open secularity in Québec, which aims for increased consideration of religious diversity. Therrien suggests that healthy management of religious diversity must be supported by a legal framework and, on a larger scale, by the recognition of the religious dimension of a citizen's identity, which contributes to the richness of community life.

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Educational, municipal and health environments

Christine Cadrin-Pelletier's article describes the significant steps marking the evolution of religious education in schools, in relation to these diversity issues.[8] She identifies a homogeneous Catholic world and a heterogeneous Protestant world prior to 1974. Between 1974 and 1995, several major events significantly changed the education system. In 1977, the adoption of the *Charter of the French Language* further diversified the population attending Francophone Catholic schools, particularly in Montréal. The charters of rights and freedoms (1975, 1982) set out new requirements for the respect of religious freedoms. Catholic programs did not address religious diversity until Secondary V,[9] and it was not until 1991 that openness to religious diversity was considered essential learning at the high school level, and until 1994 at the primary school level.[10] Cadrin-Pelletier seems to regret the creation, "parallel" to scholastic services, of a Direction des services aux communautés culturelles [cultural community services branch], in cooperation with the ministère des Communautés culturelles et de l'Immigration [department of cultural communities and immigration], which in 1996 became the ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration [department of relations with the citizens and immigration]. Then, in 1995, various factors led to the deconfessionalization of the school system and a change in lessons and activities.[11] In 2002 in particular, the National Assembly introduced certain provisions in Québec's *Education Act*, which established an open secular attitude toward religion in public schools. Corporate culture in education, from this point of view, is changing, but controversy exists. Cadrin-Pelletier therefore concludes that the issue of whether to teach religious diversity in public schools remains unresolved.

Myer Siemiatycki (Ryerson University) studied the case of Toronto, which saw its Catholic and non-Christian populations increase very rapidly at the end of the 20th century. He points out that the municipal authorities are on the front lines in terms of determining the styles of belonging and the inclusion of differences, since they decide the rules governing, for example, zoning, recreation, public libraries and schools. In this respect, Toronto promotes many ways of recognizing diversity, but it seems to have an aversion to the word "religion." Among other examples, the city's action plan to eliminate racism and discrimination makes no mention of religion in any of the 20 indicators it suggests. Conflicts between Jews and Muslims have, nonetheless, increased recently in Toronto. Moreover, among the 10 advisory committees and working groups that deal with discrimination issues, none addresses religion. In 2000, the school board, for its part, produced a guide on accommodating religious demands (holidays, prayers, dress codes, etc.). Siemiatycki notes that, to be considered, these issues must be the object of complaints or demands from the individuals concerned. Following the example of other major Canadian and western cities, urban planning in relation to the construction of non-Christian places of worship and their spatial and symbolic dimensions is the subject of debate and tension among residents.

Three articles address the health-care sector. Alex Battaglini recognizes that religion is barely considered a factor among the concerns of the Québec government's public health branch or in research on health in Québec. As a result of the secularization of health-care institutions during the 1960s, biomedical concerns were paramount. Paradoxically, a significant proportion of Québeckers believe that their spiritual values have a positive impact on their health, and this is corroborated in rare studies on the subject.

One study shows that religion and spirituality are a protective factor in relation to health.[12] However, religion can lead to risk factors, particularly in cases where a person's beliefs oppose specific medical treatments.[13] He therefore suggests that popular beliefs can be health determinants, that religious traditions can contribute to a person's health, and that we must be more vigilant as to the coherence between promoted public health values and those held by a diversified population.

Gilbert Gariépy, chaplain at a Manitoba hospital, adds to this discussion, stating that many people distrust religion, medical science and psychiatry. Spiritual intervention services in the health-care sector are generally limited because it is difficult to evaluate their real impact according to medical science criteria. Among the numerous challenges this intervention – traditionally pastoral, Christian and Jewish in Canada – faces are welcoming religious diversity; providing better support for individuals of Aboriginal faiths, which are also very pluralistic; and reflecting the increasing number of people who do not identify with either a faith community or a religion but who do, however, request "spiritual" service (the concept of the de-institutionalization of religion, observed by Beyer). New types of professionals are also being called upon to build various relations with religion, without any tie with or accountability to a religious group, for example.[14] Provincial laws incorporate spirituality into the definition of health to varying degrees. For example, in Manitoba, it is absent, limiting the definition to physical and psychological factors. This is not the case in Ontario and Québec. Moreover, in 1998, Manitoba enacted *the Personal Health Information Act* (PHIA), which makes access to information difficult for people offering certain services, like spiritual care. Ontario even set up an independent organization, the Multifaith Council of Ontario,[15] to advise the government on matters pertaining to religion and health in order to ensure that patients with different spiritual orientations are respected. To address some of the questions raised by Gariépy, let us turn to the work by anthropologist Marie-Pierre Bousquet (Université de Montréal), who examined the religious system of Amerindians, which is referred to as "Aboriginal spirituality" or pan-Indian, and which is neither dogmatic nor governed by an institutional mechanism. An interesting fact is that, while federal and provincial policies tried to curb traditional Aboriginal faith practices until the 1950s, they are now supporting the use of these practices in correctional, health and social services programs as effective therapeutic tools, and are even integrating them into various civic and political rituals.

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– Chief Justice C.J. McLachlin

What separates the state and religion?

In closing, let us look at the problems raised by Farrow and Brunk on the relations between state and religion. Farrow notes that secularism often reigns in the public sphere, because of the fear of the influence of religion and in order to curb public demonstrations of religion.[16] He focuses on two models of secularism. Liberal secularism, based on the ideas of Locke, recognizes the separation between religion and state, without, however, denying that religion has a certain place in the public sphere. He offers the example of a statement made by the Chief Justice of Canada: "Religion is an integral aspect of people's lives, and cannot be left at the boardroom door. What secularism does rule out, however, is any attempt to use the religious views of one part of the community to exclude from consideration the values of other members of the community."[17] But what religion can influence the public sphere in this way? Farrow examines certain communitarian positions that assume that the life of citizens does not separate the temporal from the spiritual, according to their vision of a good life. To be recognized, this vision must, however, be advanced by established and coherent communities of belief and culture. Farrow endorses a type of secularism in which the public and secular sphere share a common space, fostering collective action, but without trying to answer the higher questions of life. These are advanced by the specific communities themselves. He also offers a certain "Christian secularism" which seeks a substantial consensus between different communities and which is working toward this, without excluding other religious beliefs or different visions of good. This Christian secularism applies to the entire society and supports a functional state that is modest enough not to substitute itself for cultural and religious communities, which alone can provide an ultimate sense of meaning and common good.

Conrad G. Brunk questions what place religious values and beliefs have in the public sphere.[18] In the context of moral debates, such as those over abortion and the use of stem cells, he notes that the dominant vision of a liberal democracy denies a voice to the religious groups that have opinions on these matters, preferring that public policies offer the broadest range of choice possible, which would mean the "neutrality" of the state. However, while legalizing abortion allows a plurality of private options, in the name of the liberal value of autonomous moral conscience, the same is not true for the use of stem cells for research purposes. In this case, research uses public funds in the interest of public health. Brunk maintains that we cannot therefore push religious arguments outside the sphere of discussion or choose them over "rational" arguments. In fact, any position represents a disputable system of beliefs and values – even the so-called modern, liberal and rational position, which has its own philosophical tradition and orthodoxy. The decisions of the state must therefore take into account a debate that allows for these multiple conflicting positions, religious and otherwise.

Prior to these debates on the relations between state and religion are various reflections on interreligious dialogue and the possible contribution of religions to community life: social and ethical criticism, and contributions to peace and to the criticism of ideologies that instrumentalize religion and politics. Likewise, new issues in assessing religion are arising in our societies: in addition to the traditional status of religious experts in various traditions, how can different environments better understand and know different religious and spiritual trends, and how can they better negotiate with them? This is what Patrice Brodeur intends to investigate through the development of a theory of applied critical analysis of religion. He examines the relations between experts in the critical study of religion, religious worshipers, and researchers on believers of religious discourses.[19]

From all of the contributions, we learn that we cannot limit our thinking to one private vision of religion in which religion would be relegated to an individual's private space or to a specific associative or community sphere. We are also reminded that the rational "I" of modern times is not as neutral as it appears. More importantly, distinct discomfort permeates the relations between decision-makers, players on various levels of the public sphere, and religious groups. Significant challenges in knowledge and recognition will therefore arise in Canadian society if it wants to perfect its model for taking diversity into account.

Notes

1 Solange Lefebvre, Chair of Religion, Culture and Society, Faculty of Theology and Religious Sciences, Université de Montréal, Solange.lefebvre@uMontréal.ca, www.cerum.uMontréal.ca.

2 The position of Chair of Religion, Culture and Society was created with the aim of investigating these questions and bringing together stakeholders from all of these sectors.

3 The book *La religion dans la sphère publique* (ed. Solange Lefebvre), will be published in fall 2005 by the Presses de l'Université de Montréal. It will include other texts that are not relevant here and that address European issues, case studies and interreligious dialogues.

4 The data from 2001 indicate that religious pluralism is increasing, since Statistics Canada identified 114 categories of affiliation. The analysis is based on data collected between 1971 and 2001, under the direction of P. Beyer (University of Ottawa), with the cooperation of John H. Simpson and Leslie Laczko, and the assistance of Kyuhoon Cho, Wendy K. Martin and Rubina Ramji. These data were taken from Statistics Canada, 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001 Census Custom Tabulations. Do0324, CD-ROM, Ottawa, Statistics Canada, Advisory Services Division, 2003.

5 According to Biles, Christianity is tremendously diverse, and that subject will be addressed in *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada* (Bramadat and Seljak ed., forthcoming). That diversity, however, seems less apparent to the Canadian public than the diversity of non-Christian religions.

6 Sophie Therrien is a research officer at the Conseil des relations interculturelles, Government of Québec. Her analysis is based on *Laïcité et diversité religieuse : l'approche*, CRI, March 2004.

7 This concept appeared in Canadian law in a judgment rendered in a case involving a conflict between religious convictions and a work schedule. See M. Drapeau, "L'évolution du droit du travail à la lumière de l'arrêt Meiorin," *Revue du Barreau*, Spring 2001, p. 306; and José Woehrling, "L'accommodement raisonnable et l'adaptation de la société à la diversité religieuse," *Revue de droit de McGill* (1998) 43 R.D. McGill, p. 325.

8 C. Cadrin-Pelletier is head of the Secrétariat aux affaires religieuses [religious affairs secretariat] of the ministère de l'Éducation du Québec [Québec department of education].

9 Ministère de l'Éducation, Direction de l'enseignement catholique, *Le phénomène religieux*. Document d'appoint. Québec, 1990, 260 p.

10 Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, Comité catholique, Notice to the Minister of Education. *L'enseignement moral et religieux catholique au primaire. Pour un enseignement mieux adapté aux jeunes et aux contextes actuels*, Québec, April 1994; Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, Comité catholique, Notice to the Minister of Education. L'*enseignement moral et religieux catholique au secondaire. Pour un enseignement mieux adapté aux jeunes et aux contextes actuels*, Québec, June 1991.

11 Particularly the publication of this report: ministère de l'Éducation, *Laïcité et religions. Perspective nouvelle pour l'école québécoise*, Report by the working group on the place of religion in schools, Québec, 1999, 282 p.; and ministère de l'Éducation, *Dans les écoles publiques du Québec, une réponse à la diversité des attentes morales et religieuses*, Québec, 2002. Note that various options for religious teaching must be offered, and they always include a confessional lesson; and that a spiritual service and non-confessional community commitment has replaced the pastoral confessional service.

12 See M. Clarkson, L. Pica, H. Lacombe, "Spiritualité, religion et santé : une analyse exploratoire," in C. Develuy (ed.) *Enquête sociale et de santé* 1998, Collection la santé et le bien-être, Institut de la statistique du Québec, 2001, p. 603-625.

13 See A. Battaglini, S. Fortin et al., *Bilan des interventions en soutien parental et en stimulation infantile auprès de clientèles pluriethniques*, Direction de la santé publique de Montréal-Centre, 1997, 314 p.

14 This a matter under debate by the Canadian Association for Pastoral Practice and Education (CAPPE); site: www.cappe.org.

15 The collective work to be published, *La religion dans la sphère publique* (ed. Solange Lefebvre) consists of a text on the contributions of this organization, written by its director, Liz Chappel.

16 See Douglas Farrow (McGill University), "Three Meanings of Secular," *First Things* 133 (May 2003), 20-23, for a simple typology of secularisms; and *Recognizing Religion in a Secular Society*, ed. D. Farrow (Montréal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

17 McLachlin C.J., in *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District No. 36* (2002 SCC 86), at §19.

18 Brunk is the Director of the Center for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria. He refers particularly to the work of Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.

19 Patrice Brodeur, of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Sciences at the Université de Montréal, is Canada Research Chair on Islam, Pluralism, and Globalization. This definition of a new sub-discipline of the critical analysis of religion, Brodeur explains, requires that a theory and particular methods be developed to understand how this triangle works in various domains, such as the intersections between religion and politics, education, law, health, the media, the economy, the environment, and inter-identity relations.