

Factual – Measured - Critical

The Rise of Ideological Secularism: Quebec's Proposed Charter of Values **Momin Rahman, Trent University**

Controversies about religion, secularism and multiculturalism beset all western societies. The 'face' of these controversies is often the various forms of veiling practised by some Muslim women. In 2011, France widened its ban on face coverings in schools to include the whole public realm, joining Belgium's legal prohibition. Jeremy Browne, UK Liberal Democrat MP and Home Office minister, has recently argued for a debate about doing the same (1). Many local jurisdictions across Europe have also introduced restrictions on either the full face veil or the headscarf both within educational settings and in 'public'. These interventions are uniformly underpinned by a frame that pits western secularism as a bulwark against the threat of multiculturalism embodied by immigrant religions.

Recently, the separatist Parti Quebecois (PQ) government of the French Canadian province of Quebec proposed a secular 'Charter of Values'. Its five proposals focus on restricting visible signs of religious affiliation in all public servants who work for the provincial government (2). The 'need' for this legislation is not very clear although polling indicated that a majority of rural and suburban Quebecers favour the Charter (3), though a more recent poll showed an even split for and against (4). There have been some hints that Islamophobia lies behind the PQ's agenda because of Premier Marois's comments about the Muslim practice of veiling being oppressive to women. The Charter, however, proposes to restrict all religious people's visual presentation, including Jews, Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians who wear 'highly visible' crosses.

What then, are the likely consequences of this Charter? First, there seems to be an assumption that people who adopt religious dress will be more prone to discriminate against others and less likely to operationalize human rights principles in the execution of their duties. This implication is in the third and fourth proposals, which seek to establish a duty of 'neutrality' for state personnel, primarily by limiting visible religious symbols. You cannot, apparently, act without prejudice if you wear religious garb or, cannot be *perceived* to be able to do so.

The major religions affected are overwhelmingly mapped onto ethnic immigrant groups and so such approaches will return us to the worst colonial-era assumptions of mental inferiority in non-white citizens. Internal colonization, in the name of a civilizing secularism, will therefore legitimize racism.

The fourth proposal in the Charter seeks to ensure that the face is uncovered when delivering or receiving state services. This will obviously affect Muslim women most directly. Many have argued that gender equality in western countries is a fundamental value that cannot be given up in the pursuit of multiculturalist tolerance and Islam has been centre-stage in these tensions. As a cultural Muslim who is also gay, I am keenly aware of the gender inequalities and homophobia within many different Muslim cultures. I don't agree with the modesty requirements expected of women in Muslim cultures and I think that gender equality (and queer rights where they exist) should take precedence over religious rights in the public realm. What worries me greatly, however, is that state restrictions of patriarchal practices do not move us towards reforms within religious communities, nor do they acknowledge or enhance the agency of Muslim women.

There is evidence that many Muslim women choose to adopt varieties of covering for the purpose of affirmative religious and ethnic identification, but also as part of the tactical negotiation of their agency within patriarchal cultures (5). I am not sure that banning such practices does anything to create a dialogue which prioritizes women's voices. Rather it is likely to produce a defensive

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retrenchment in Muslim cultures. Making spaces for self-defined Muslim women's agency is more productive than legislation that will affect women disproportionately within Muslim groups.

Similarly, the (admittedly less consistent) use of the denial of gay rights as a marker of Muslim traditionalism has done nothing to generate a debate about sexual diversity within Muslim communities. Instead it has too often provoked a defensive reaffirmation of Muslim homophobia and rendered queer Muslims more invisible (6). Patriarchal and homophobic practices in religions *do* need to be challenged, but many of us working in these areas have cautioned against the constant public reiterations of Islam versus gender equality and sexual diversity because it does nothing to enhance the possibilities of developing progressive voices within Muslim communities.

The state must be secular in its treatment of citizens, not least to protect religious freedoms. But this cannot be an ideological requirement of civil society. Secularism is not an identity that citizens should, or must, adopt; it is simply a technique of governance. Secularism has developed in a variety of ways within specific national cultures, none of them strictly ideological. The closest would seem to be the French approach, which provides for the statist incorporation of organized religion and then seeks to privatize religion in civil society (7). There is some public commentary which suggests that Quebec politicians look more and more towards France as a model for their nationalism but if the Charter is indeed inspired by France, it is also, therefore, a move towards ideological secularism.

The assumption behind this Charter and much of the related debate in western societies seems to be that either religion runs rampant or culture is secular, but this dialectic is a fundamental mischaracterization of the social realm. While the state must be secular, civil society and individual identities need not be. Indeed, secularism is always symbiotically engaged with religious identity through the need to identify the relevant spheres of influence of both religion and the state. Secularism is not the antithesis of religion but rather a technique in managing religious diversity and multiculturalism. Thankfully, many Quebecois secularist politicians such as Justin Trudeau seem to recognise this point and have provided strong resistance to this Charter.

Even if this particular Charter disappears through political opposition, the key issues of multiculturalism, secularism, racism, Islamophobia and gendered and sexual (in)equality will remain for Quebec, for Anglophone Canada and for other western societies. We should resist a model that moves us towards ideological secularism because its consequences will inevitably be racist. Moreover, engaging patriarchal religions in a reformist dialogue is something I support and work towards professionally but institutionalizing racism through an ideological secularism will, however unintentionally, only make that task more difficult.

It is here that I think that past debates in Quebec have a useful lesson for us all. The earlier thoughtful and complex report from the Bouchard Taylor Commission was itself produced as the result of a public consultation on cultural differences within Quebec. It argues for an 'open', rather than an ideological, secularism as one of many threads that need to exist for a successful integrated and multicultural society:

“The second thread is that of open secularism accompanied, once again, by a delicate balance to be maintained between four key constituent principles, i.e. freedom of conscience, the equality of citizens, the reciprocal autonomy between churches and the State, and State neutrality. For compelling reasons that result both from respect for ethnocultural diversity and the protection of basic rights, this equilibrium demands that religious affiliations and practices not be concealed in the private sphere. The most sensible,

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effective way to become accustomed to cultural differences, including religious affiliations, is not to hide them but to display them. This is also the condition that enables us to promote them and to benefit from them” (8)
(Bouchard and Taylor, 2008: 241).

We urgently need a civil society in which differences are engaged and not suppressed.

References

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