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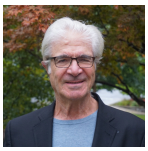
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Quebec's Bill 21 is about fear of difference, not being secular



by Karl Nerenberg May 10, 2019October 5, 2021

When the majority of visible religious symbols in Quebec were Christian, nobody complained. But now that Islamic symbols have become more visible, it has suddenly become a matter of grave concern.

There are currently hearings at the Quebec national assembly on the latest effort to protect the "secular" character of the Quebec state. The Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government's Bill 21 would forbid teachers, judges, prosecutors, nurses and other public servants from wearing visible religious symbols, such as the Jewish yarmulke or Muslim hijab.

Among those who have testified are self-appointed spokespeople for atheists and agnostics, who argue that organized religion has been, on the whole, a divisive and oppressive force. They heartily support Bill 21 and only wish it went much further.

These secular fundamentalists say that to free ourselves from the yoke of religious obscurantism we must deny basic rights to members of religious and cultural minority groups. It is a line of argument this writer finds to be particularly odious.

Here's why.

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I grew up in a Quebec that could in no way be described as secular.

For the first 14 years of my life, the now defunct Union Nationale ruled the province. Its leader, until his death in 1959, was the formidable strongman, Maurice Duplessis. The Union Nationale believed in a close alliance between the Roman Catholic Church and the state. Schools, many hospitals and social services were, for the most part, run by the church or other religious entities.

My family was secular, left-wing and Jewish. Religion did not play a big role in our life, although a cultural and historic sense of being Jewish did.

The Second World War was not far behind during my formative years, and we were painfully aware of the Nazis' efforts to exterminate the Jews, long before the Holocaust became a fashionable subject. (It was the beginning of the Cold War. The mainstream view was that we should not dwell on the crimes of the Nazis, now that the West Germans were our allies in the global contest with the Soviet bloc.)

My parents wanted me to go to school in French, to learn the language of the Quebec majority. But schools were organized on the basis of religion back then. The French-language schools of Quebec were also Catholic schools. They were exclusively for Roman Catholics, and had no place for heterogeneous elements.

We Jews were all directed to the Protestant, English-language school system. There, we learned New Testament Bible stories and sang "Onward Christian Soldiers" with gusto.

I mastered the French language nonetheless, and later in life worked almost exclusively in French for a number of years.

Law 101, but still religiously based schools

My three kids came of school age in the post French Language Charter (Law 101) days, which deemed that French-language education was to be the default choice for the vast majority of Quebecers.

French-language schools became obligatory for almost everyone, including many who had previously opted for, or been directed to, the English system. The only exceptions were children of parents who were educated in Quebec, in English. They could attend English schools, if they wished.

My own children fell into that exception category, but we chose the French system. That meant sending them to Catholic schools. Unlike me, they were welcomed without reservation.

Still, as non-Catholics, we had to sign a form requesting an exemption for our kids from formal, Roman Catholic religious instruction. Each week, when the time came for the obligatory catechism class, our kids were singled out and sent, with the handful of others from non-Catholic or avowedly non-believing families, to classes in "morale," a non-sectarian course in ethical

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The first Parti Québécois (PQ) government, led by René Levesque, passed Law 101 in 1977, but it was not until 1997 that a later PQ government got around to eliminating religious-based public schools and school boards — too late for my kids.

Even after they eliminated public schools with religious identity, the Quebec government allowed a sort of escape route for those who still wanted denominational education. It continued to provide generous subsidies to private schools. And so, Quebec middle class families maintained their access to private, and very often religiously-based, education.

Francophone — and Muslim — immigrants

Around the same time as it brought in Law 101, Quebec struck a deal with the federal government for a significant measure of control over immigration. In the ensuing years, the province admitted tens of thousands of immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries. Quebec wanted to favour French-speaking immigrants and, as it happened, a great many of those came from Muslim countries.

Today, practising Muslims from Morocco, Tunisia, Guinea, Mali, Chad and many other countries form a significant part of the larger francophone community, both in Quebec and in the rest of Canada. They hold jobs in all occupations and professions, including teaching, nursing and the law.

Our grandchild goes to a French public school in Ottawa where the student body is, in the majority, Muslim, from both North and sub-Saharan Africa. There could be a phenomenon of white flight at play here. Ontario still has a separate Catholic school system, and it appears that in Ottawa old-stock, white, French-speaking families have overwhelmingly chosen that system over the public one.

At our grandchild's French public school, many of the parents and some of the teachers wear the hijab. That's just the way it is.

Nobody engages in any sort of religious proselytization based on the way they dress. Nobody is trying to recreate an Islamic theocracy on the lines of Duplessis' church-dominated Quebec. They just want to be part of the larger society, while maintaining their own identity.

I survived learning Christian hymns as a child. Our grandchild will more than survive having visibly Muslim classmates and teachers. She will be enriched by the experience.

As long as the vast majority of visible religious symbols in Quebec were Christian, nobody complained about the undue influence of religion. But now that an Islamic presence has become more visible, more a fabric of everyday life, religious symbols have suddenly become a matter of grave concern.

Frankly, Bill 21 is not really about religion; it is about difference, and a society's capacity to accept it as a normal and unexceptional reality.

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maybe even more.

But if such folks were genuinely worried about the negative impact of religion, they would have long ago removed the huge cross from atop Mount Royal and renamed every street and place name in Quebec that starts with “Saint” with something appropriately secular.

That is a ridiculous suggestion, of course.

So is telling a person who wears a turban or a yarmulke or a hijab they may not teach or guard prisons or plead in court or tend to the sick.

Karl Nerenberg has been a journalist and filmmaker for more than 25 years. He is rabble’s politics reporter.

*Photo: **ibourgeault_tasse/Flickr***

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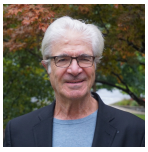
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Karl Nerenberg joined rabble in 2011 to cover Canadian politics. He has worked as a journalist and filmmaker for many decades, including two and a half decades at CBC/Radio-Canada. Among his career highlights... More by Karl Nerenberg

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ComfyPowell
7 years ago edited

"They just want to be part of the larger society, while maintaining their own identity."

Exactly. There's no larger conspiracy at work here. This is the same irrational fear that interned Japanese-Canadians during WWII. Banning religious symbols - and let's be honest here, this is about Muslim symbols - is oppression. It reinforces the view that we must be wary of all Muslims because...well...you know...there were those bad Muslims that one time...

5 0

r **Thea Pierrot** → ComfyPowell
7 years ago

Part of the Quiet Revolution, a large part, was against the church. It took a long time to get rid of religious education. The Cross on Mont Royal and the Saint names are historical artifacts. I am against bill 21 but Quebec has been striving for secularism for decades. It does have different meaning in Quebec and France.

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Karl Nerenberg → Thea Pierrot
7 years ago edited

My argument is about conflating a legitimate aim to separate Church and State, with a conflicted attitude -- which, at its worst, borders on xenophobia -- toward francophones from Muslim countries whom Quebec actively recruited, in large measure for legitimate demographic reasons, because the 'Québecois-de-souche' have an extremely low birth rate. Secularism is not a legitimate excuse for making this sort of xenophobia State policy and denying basic rights to individual members of exogenous communities.

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r **Thea Pierrot** → Karl Nerenberg
7 years ago edited

As I stated, I am against the law. One can condemn the law while recognizing that Quebec is more sensitive to religious symbols worn by people in authority, like nun's habits because the church controlled so much in Quebec prior to the Quiet Revolution. I can still remember teachers wearing wimples and they did have added religious authority. When your teacher is a nun, the teacher can do no wrong. Nuns no longer wear wimples in public schools. a hijab is very similar to a wimple. Those who don't want hijabs worn also don't want wimples worn either.

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7 years ago

Well, we agree on the law, at any rate, Thea Pierrot. I grew up in the Quebec of wimples and much else overtly religious, but I do not accept the analysis some offer to the effect that the reason many Quebeckers want to deny basic human rights to hijab-wearers is because of the oppression they endured under during the wimple-era. My own view is that Bill 21 is based on nothing more than old-fashioned xenophobia; it has nothing whatsoever to do with 'secularism'. Charles Taylor, Québec Solidaire and now the CSN all agree with me, it seems.

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r **Thea Pierrot** → Karl Nerenberg

7 years ago

And yet when polled the same people have mixed feelings about enforcement. I'm big on civil rights not religious rights. There is no proof of a deity existing in real life so I don't see why believing in one should confer special rights not afforded others.

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r **Pierre Therrien** → Karl Nerenberg

7 years ago

Small point, Karl: Charles Taylor never was a "secularist"; he was always a defender of religion, viz the Templeton Prize ("Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion"). I know it firsthand: he taught me.

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Karl Nerenberg → Pierre Therrien

7 years ago

True. But notwithstanding his own religious convictions, Taylor would agree, I think, that Bill 21 is not based on some sort of rational and reasonable notion of the neutrality of the State with regard to religion. It is, rather, an appeal to a fearful distrust of difference that always exists in segments of the community. Before there was a significant and visible Islamic presence in Quebec nobody talked about "laïcité" in a way that related to the personal dress choices some Quebeckers might make.

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rick randall → Karl Nerenberg

7 years ago edited

Is it legitimate for Quebec to deliberately recruit French speakers and exclude immigrants who speak a different language?

Is the right of a community to exclude certain language speakers different from the right of a community to exclude certain religions, and if so, on what basis?

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7 years ago

No. Having selection criteria is normal. Often those are based on education & skills that make a prospective immgrant employable. In that context, Canada has always considered & given points to linguistic ability in English and/or French. Quebec merely gives extra weight to one of the two official languages. That is not xenophobia, any more than favouring English speakers would be.

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rick randall → Karl Nerenberg

7 years ago

Now there's a can of worms! Education, skills and especially English language ability are highly correlated with class.
Why would it be fair to discriminate based on class?
If you say it's fair to discriminate in favour of immigrants who will supposedly fit in with our economic needs, why wouldn't it also be fair to discriminate in favour of immigrants who would supposedly fit in with our culture?
Are you saying economic needs have a privileged position over culture? If so, why?
Defending this position certainly benefits higher income Canadians, who in general appropriate more benefits from higher immigration levels than lower income Canadians.

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Karl Nerenberg → rick randall

7 years ago

All I am saying is that Quebec's linguistic requirements are not different than Canada's.

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rick randall → Karl Nerenberg

7 years ago edited

Yet the points system is not attacked for xenophobia or class exclusion, and is therefore considered normal.
Once again, why should economic considerations which benefit mostly the already wealthy remain unexamined, and cultural considerations be discouraged from examination by deeming them xenophobic?

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Maria Gatti → rick randall

7 years ago

Do you really think that governments have no right to choose immigrants based, at least in part, on their skills?

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Absolument, Karl.

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Okanagan Tim
7 years ago

Good article that brings some clarity between the separation of church and state and prejudice.

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rick randall
7 years ago edited

Too bad Quebec missed out on the French revolution and was saddled with a powerful established religion for another two centuries. Activists have been trying to make up for it since the 1950s.

In general, religions are bad because they teach uncritical dependence on ideology and leaders, live, dead, or fictional.

That said, if one absolutely needs an ideology and leader to follow, sometimes religion is not the worst choice, especially if it promotes calmness and a charitable sense of community.

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Ken Burch → rick randall
7 years ago

I always have wondered why Quebec would keep the fleur-de-lis, the flag of the corrupt and ultimately overthrown French monarchy, as their banner. Why define the place by a symbol of bigotry and conquest?

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Pierre Therrien → Ken Burch
7 years ago

The French Revolution was always regarded with ambivalence in Quebec. The church here never accepted "laïcité".

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Ken Burch → Pierre Therrien
7 years ago

Which is why nothing even vaguely resembling the values of the French Revolution reached Quebec until after the death of Duplessis.

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rick randall → Ken Burch
7 years ago

Using an old symbol makes the point that the French were here before the Anglos.

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It would be nice if they updated it to combine the French fact with the First Nations/Metis/Inua fact. The indigenous were there before the French, after all, and it's not as though francophones can possibly claim to have it worse than the indigenous on any level at all.

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Make Anarchy Great Again

Slumberjack

7 years ago

They do indeed seem to be self-appointed to the role of spokespeople for atheists.

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Make Anarchy Great Again

Slumberjack

7 years ago

As if a political party beating the drum of identity politics isn't odious enough, there's a receptive audience as well.

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Gordon Doctorow

7 years ago

Excellent explanation and insightful commentary, Karl. BTW, those people on the left who think they are rescuing Moslem women from male oppression are exhibiting a form of unasked for paternalism. There are hijab-wearing women who dress the way they do as an act of defiance.

We should also consider the ban would affect Sikhs who wear turbans. Imagine if Jagmeet Singh were to become Prime Minister. Would he be affected if he were to come to Quebec?

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Maria Gatti

7 years ago

I agree, with one quibble. Remember le Refus global? There have been a lot of anti-religious

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