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Charter of Quebec Values – The Quebec Government Has It All Wrong

The Quebec government under Premier Pauline Marois has announced that it plans to implement a new "Charter of Quebec Values". But even for the many of us like the idea of secular governments, and the "separation of church and state", Quebec's proposal is all wrong.

The Charter would ban all government employees -- teachers, nurses, professors, all other civil servants (except, notably, the politicians themselves)-- from wearing anything of any size that shows what religion the person follows. Sikh turbans, Jewish kippas, "large" crosses, Muslim hijab (including head scarves that still expose the full face, not just full burqas or the eye-slit-only niqab) won't be allowed. Small rings or earrings with, for example, a cross, the Star of David or the Muslim crescent would be acceptable, as long as they are not "ostentatious".

But there is an important distinction: the Christian religions -- those practised by the French and English who "came first", who initially colonized what is now Quebec -- do not require as part of their practice the wearing of a cross (of any size). However, the wearing of a head scarf, a turban or a kippa are seen as fundamental parts of their respective religions -- notably those practised by many newer immigrants. "Offering" the idea of small rings or earrings is a red herring, as this simply isn't common practice. This Charter would force many of the newer immigrants to choose between personal religious beliefs and their livelihood.

As such, there are legitimate cries of discrimination. And of hypocrisy - the Quebec government is insisting that it will keep the huge cross with a crucified

Jesus Christ that oversees the legislative chamber – a far greater symbol of the TIES BETWEEN church and state than any government employee's clothing.

There are concerns about security and personal identification with face-hiding burqas and niqabs that I sympathize with. More importantly, I'm a feminist, and those of us who want full equality and independence for women struggle with the sight of women wearing them. Many say that they do so of their own volition, but it arises out of a culture that treats women differently, often very unequally, and that suggests that men's sexual urges are the fault of the women who 'expose' themselves, not the fault of the men's inability to control those urges. I object to any situation where women must do things or behave in ways that prevent them access to full equality and independence. But I have no issue with whatever religion anyone wants to practise or even profess.

But this is NOT the thrust of the Charter of Quebec Values – if the problem were women covering themselves, based on views of equality for women, or for reasons of identification and security, then Quebec could suggest a much more limited ban on full face coverings in public places, or even more limited, for those wishing to use public services. France, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and even countries with large Muslim populations such as Turkey, Tunisia and Syria have done so, to greater or lesser extents. In most cases these are NOT bans on all religious symbols (French public schools being an exception), but rather focussed on women's rights and issues of security (identification).

The aim of the Charter of Quebec Values is, ostensibly, to create a secular public environment, to reinforce the separation of church and state – or more precisely, the separation of state from church, synagogue, mosque, etc. Separating the operations of government from religion is a good thing. Government should be run by and for people regardless of their personal religious beliefs. It doesn't mean that politicians and government workers can't HAVE personal religious beliefs – it means that the operation of government and

the laws that are developed and applied to society as a whole must not be religiously-based.

This is where Ms. Marois and her government have it backwards. The people working in government – teachers, civil servants, professors, nurses, for example – are not “the state”. They are there to implement the state’s mandates. As long as the state’s mandates, the laws that it creates, and the services that it offers are themselves free of religious discrimination or religious intimidation, the individuals who implement them should not have to hide their personal beliefs.

If you have any questions or comments on this, or any other issue, please write to me at info@marthahallfindlay.ca, or to PO Box 69522, 5845 Yonge St., Willowdale, ON, M2M 4K3.

All best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MHF', with a small dot at the end.

Martha Hall Findlay