

*Sunday September 22, 2013*

## **Secularism, Quebec's the new religion**

By Jim Taylor

Under Canadian law, you can't persecute any one religious group. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, embedded in the Constitution Act of 1982, guarantees religious freedom.

But apparently you can target religions as a whole.

That seems to be the reasoning behind the Parti Quebecois' proposed Charter of Values. The draft legislation would outlaw the wearing of any specifically religious clothing and/or religious symbols by public service workers.

That means medical personnel in hospitals. Road workers. Clerks in government offices. Bus drivers. Librarians. Tax assessors. Police. The list goes on and on.

Sikhs fought long and hard through federal courts for the right to wear turbans in the RCMP. Quebec's law would invalidate that victory. Jews could not wear yarmulkas. Christians, even nuns and priests, could not wear obtrusive crosses or clerical collars in secular jobs. Hindus would be denied the bindi – that red dot on the forehead.

And, of course, Muslim women would have to give up their burkas and hijabs.

Just to clarify, the hijab is a scarf that covers a woman's hair and chest. The burka, or burqa, is the mobile tent that conceals everything but a woman's eyes.

### **The shotgun approach**

I suspect that Muslim women were the Charter's original target. After all, if a Muslim woman is allowed to keep her face covered in public, shouldn't a bank robber have the same right to wear a balaclava? Or a rioter, to hide his face behind a bandanna?

But because any laws specifically aimed at Islam and at women – both politically touchy subjects – would be quickly struck down in the courts, Pauline Marois's PQ government chose to restrict all religions, without exceptions.

In some ways, that makes sense. When we make use of a public service, we expect the person serving us to be impartial. So Saskatchewan requires marriage commissioners to perform same-sex marriages even if it offends their religious convictions; Alberta doctors must be willing to perform abortions regardless of their church's teachings.

As a general principle, public servants may not use their privileged position to impose their convictions on clients or patients. Social workers should not pressure distraught people into having, or not having, an abortion. Bus drivers should not be allowed reject riders they think of as infidels.

And Calgary's Muslim mayor should not expect to apply Sharia standards to City Council meetings.

But the proposed legislation makes an assumption – mistaken, I believe – that religious symbols are worn to promote a person's particular faith. Wrong! A Sikh does not wear a turban, nor a Jew a yarmulke, as a form of evangelism. Certainly, few Muslim woman would expect her hijab or burka to prove an irresistible attraction to western women.

No, these clothes, this symbol, that ritual, serve to identify who they are – sometimes at significant personal sacrifice.

## Identifying oneself

My friend Ralph Milton described a friend who travelled widely to international meetings and conferences. But when those events spilled over into a weekend, he spent Saturday alone in his hotel room. Because as a Jew, he honoured the command to keep the Sabbath.

“I’m almost envious,” Ralph admitted. “I have nothing that identifies who I am.”

Nor do I. I don’t wear a cross. I don’t flaunt a Jesus bumper sticker. I often do work on Sundays. I don’t hand out tracts on street corners.

Some might say that my absence of overt symbols matches the absence of valid Christian beliefs. I disagree. I firmly believe that my relationship with God shapes every moment of every day. But how would anyone know that?

## Belief in secularism

Does a secular appearance connote secularism?

If it does, the Parti Quebecois Charter of Values, far from being neutral, is in fact an attempt to impose its own set of beliefs on everyone in Quebec’s public services. It asserts, in effect, that there is only one acceptable belief – the belief that no religion has any validity.

According to the latest census (not totally reliable because the prime minister imposed his subjective beliefs about personal privacy on the objective science of gathering statistics) the fastest growing religious group in Canada is the “nones” – those who profess no religious affiliation at all. Since 1971, the first year the national census offered that option, the “nones” have grown from 4 per cent to nearly 25 per cent. One in four Canadians – almost eight million people – claim to belong to no religion.

Naturally, then, they have no common symbols, no identifiable clothing.

By their proposed Charter of Values, Pauline Marois and her Parti Quebecois government are pushing every public employee into that camp.

Lucie Martineau, president of the union that represents 42,000 provincial civil servants, put the PQ presumption well: “People can practice their religion outside working hours. The state is secular.”

In public, it seems, public servants do not have freedom of religion after all. They must look and act like secularists.

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## YOUR TURN

Lots of interesting letters about last week’s column, on legalizing, or at least decriminalizing, marijuana use.

John Shaffer wrote from Washington State, where Jessica Goldstein was headed before she was barred from entering the U.S. for having smoking marijuana. “Yes, Indeed,” he wrote, “marijuana is now legal in the State of Washington and life seems to be just about the same. I hope that there will be some money saved on our prison system, but that lobby is very powerful, so someone else may come under attack to fill the prison beds.

“I join with you in never having smoked marijuana, and I agree that alcohol causes a lot more problems, yet in our wisdom, it is legal. Go figure. Our society pushes for its use and then punishes those who cannot handle it responsibly.

"I remember a drunk politician's wife arguing for the punishment of marijuana users. However, when her son got in trouble driving while drunk, her husband got the policeman fired. We sometimes do not live in a fair world. Who polices those at the top of the food chain?"

"I have never smoked marijuana either," wrote Margaret Carr, "But I certainly inhaled lots of its smoke. It wasn't called Marijuana then; it was Rhazma and my Mother put some of the leaves onto the top of the can and lit it for me to inhale. I am an asthmatic, and from the time I was 3 yrs old Rhazma was used to relieve my attacks. My grandfather and my Mother both used it for asthma and I had no idea what we were using until the RCMP brought some Marijuana to a Home and School meeting to show parents what it smelled like, so we would know if our kids were using it. Although it was many years since I had used it I knew that smell immediately! In those days, Rhazma was legal and could be bought at any drugstore. So do you think I should tell the custom agents when I visit my daughter who lives in the USA? I would hate to have my grandchildren know their 81-yr-old Grandma was a law breaker and could no longer visit them!"

James Russell in Ottawa wrote, "I would add these arguments:

- 1) Operations on the scale of the marijuana industry (in B.C. alone, bigger than the B.C. forestry industry) can only continue with the aid of corrupt police, corrupt judges and corrupt border officials. Continued criminalization is a vote for corrupt government.
- 2) The choice is between open, public and lawful regulation and secret and arbitrary regulation by criminal cartels. Non-regulation of the industry is not a choice.
- 3) Illegal operations mean that no money from the industry benefits society and social services (including health care, addiction treatment and prevention, law enforcement ...). Funds flow instead to murderers, human traffickers and corrupt officials.

"I'm afraid you also understate the case when you say that because so few arrests for possession make it to court, arrest efforts are only "a colossal waste of policing time and effort." Rather, they are worse -- a tool for intimidation and police bullying, and likely racist in nature (given the disproportionate arrest and detention rates for aboriginals and people of colour)."

Charles Hill lives in the U.S. Bible belt: "The most heinous aspect of current marijuana laws is that the active ingredient in pot, THC, is a fantastic non-addictive pain killer. While the more liberal states have legalized pot for pain control, the southern states, including Texas, rigidly enforce marijuana laws and fill our prisons (at huge public expense) with people caught with a joint. Better to suffer for the Lord, I guess, and take highly addictive and increasingly strong pain killers.

"You are dead-on with your article. I would also add that I have heard rumors of politicians making good money by protecting the transport and sale of illegal drugs. They make a bust once in a while to look good to the public."

"Yes -- let's legalize marijuana," Isabel Gibson wrote. "While we're at it, let's have an adult conversation about the hard drugs. Not to promote their use but to ask whether prohibition is really working, even for them? And before we answer just for our neighbourhood, let's look at that neighbourhood just south of the US/Mexico border."

Miriam Bowles is a canvasser for the SensibleBC petition. She wrote, "Thank you for the article in the paper on Sunday. We have collected close to 500 signatures so far... The response has been very positive."

Miriam drew my attention to "Exodus 30, verse 23. That verse mentions 'sweet calamus', which is cannabis."

Steve Roney simply said: "We agree on this one, Jim."

Christa Bedwin said, "I wish they would criminalize tobacco..."

Sam Strauss told me about a one hour program that was aired on CNN “by Dr. Sanjay Gupta (who was once offered the position of Surgeon General in the US). It’s an interesting study in marijuana use. Not particularly scientific, but has interesting information.”

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## OLD BOOKS AVAILABLE

I have a couple of boxes of old books that belonged to my father and grandfather. As near as I can tell, the oldest is a Shorter Catechism from 1863, the newest a 1994 text by John Polkinghorne. If you’re interested in any of them, please let me know and I will send you an Excel spreadsheet with the full list of books – all I ask is that you pay for shipping.

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## TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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## PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don’t think I’m sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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