

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: A STUDY OF THE STAKES FOR WOMEN

Like many western societies, Quebec is pluralistic. People of different origins, cultures and religions with a wide range of values and ideas live here. Unarguably, this diversity is one of Quebec's greatest resources. It is an opening to the world beyond Quebec's borders and a source of cultural exchange and dynamism. It also allows Quebecers fresh perspectives on our ways of doing things. At the same time, diversity brings disagreement, competing claims, tensions and conflicts which can be a challenge for any society seeking to call itself democratic. Given all the differences that characterize modern societies, what sort of compromises must be made? How can diversity be respected and allowed to flourish without simultaneously encouraging society's fragmentation into a plethora of groups and separate communities? How can we recognize difference without renouncing a collective, unifying plan capable of uniting people for a common cause? In a context in which socio-economic exclusion is on the rise, and in which conditions for the true participation of every member of society are far from solid, the challenge is even greater.

In pluralistic Quebec society urgent questions must be addressed. How can we reconcile the notion of universal human rights (whereby everyone is treated the same way, regardless of their differences) with demands made by certain groups that their specific needs be recognized? Should we limit our accommodation of expressions of difference? And what are the fundamental principles of our society which will admit no compromise?

From a feminist point of view, pluralism involves certain stakes. Progress for women in the area of equal rights is recent and fragile, and Quebec women must fight to conserve and strengthen their gains. The needs of Quebec women, whether born here or elsewhere, are similar and many feminist demands are relevant for everyone. On the other hand, feminists from the cultural mainstream have been accused, rightly or wrongly, of overlooking the ideas, values, problems, solutions and experiences of cultural and religious minorities and, more specifically, of their female members. How can we take their particular experiences into consideration while promoting and protecting the evolution of all women in Quebec?

What feminist principles should guide the decisions we make in a pluralistic society like Quebec? This query is all the more urgent because almost no research has been done on the stakes for women in a pluralistic society despite the fact that many of the claims for accommodation by cultural or religious minorities have women as their focus.

I- Diversity: Assets & Liabilities

Too often we forget that religious and cultural diversity are among Quebec's greatest assets. Immigrants (the main agents of diversity) help the national economy, even in difficult economic times like the ones we are currently experiencing. According to the Ministère des Relations avec les citoyens et de l'Immigration, immigration also increases the population of Quebec, although it has not completely offset the current demographic decline. It is thanks to immigration that Montreal is able to keep a stable population despite the exodus of many Montrealers to the suburbs. Also of note are the number of young immigrants which offsets the effects of aging in the population. These are the measurable advantages of immigration, but the cultural and religious diversity that naturally accompanies immigration also opens us to the world. It brings us into contact with philosophical traditions such as Buddhism, and with different approaches to the body and illness such as Chinese medicine. It teaches us new methods of cooperation, such as African tontines or Latino collective kitchens. Whether diversity originates here or elsewhere, it offers a rich variety of solutions to the problems confronting us. The perspectives of others force us to learn about ourselves and to question certain practices which, without a point of comparison, seem "natural." For example, other societies pay much more attention to their elderly members, and show more respect and care for them than we commonly do here. Diversity is also a challenge which permits us to deepen our sense of solidarity by showing us our similarities and common humanity above and beyond the differences. The tensions provoked by diversity can also be called an asset. Tensions are a part of life and provide opportunities for personal growth.

Nevertheless, the tensions resulting from human differences can be difficult. Different cultures have distinctive world views which are, to a certain extent, grids through which their members analyse and make sense of life. Founded on different values, these world views serve as filters and can make intercultural communication difficult. Sometimes, they result in culture shock.

Differences in family structure (sex roles, modes of communication and social control, moral attitudes) can also lead to culture shock and value clashes between newly arrived individuals and Quebec society, and between women immigrants and feminists born on Quebec soil. Differences between population groups often revolve around the status of women and children in the family, and norms of sexual conduct.

Women, Modernity and Tradition

It is an over-generalization to state that immigrants represent tradition and Quebec, modernity, but it is nonetheless true that the culture shock experienced when new arrivals meet

Quebecers for the first time often reflects the confrontation of tradition and modernity. This is definitely true for immigrants coming from societies organized around community loyalties who suddenly find themselves in a society centred on the individual. The effects of modernity such as nuclearization of the family, challenges to paternal authority by women and children, and the lack of formality in relations between young and old increase culture shock.

Modernity has three aspects: 1) the technical and economic aspect, wherein nature is no longer viewed as a divine creation; 2) the juridical and political aspect, which separates public from private life; and 3) the philosophical aspect, according to which people replace religion with individual conscience.

While modernity is often associated with improved standards of living, and tradition with outmoded, constraining beliefs, the disappearance of traditional

allegiances that characterizes modernity is a source of confusion as well as freedom. The loss of traditional reference points and bases for belonging can stir up identity crises that sometimes provoke the creation of new communities.

The values of sexual equality and autonomy for women are well anchored in modernity. When these feminist values confront more traditional conceptions of women's roles, tensions result. Women in all cultures have sought, and continue to seek, emancipation from the narrow roles that define them. By immigrating,

many women hope to find a new life and to integrate into modern society. It benefits women immigrants to appropriate certain modern values and to integrate the modern value of equality between the sexes into their traditions. Economic necessity forces many immigrant women to get jobs, and once they have them, they often appreciate their new independence. Financial independence can, however, become a source of tension in their home life.

Furthermore, in certain cultures, girls are watched over very carefully by their parents. Serious conflicts can

occur between children educated in a more permissive society like Quebec and their parents, resulting in a radical challenge to tradition. Girls seem to find the adoption of modern values particularly advantageous.

Nevertheless, if immigration encourages girls and women to challenge certain patriarchal traditions, researchers have shown that immigrant women refuse to see themselves simply as victims of their communities' antiquated views. While certain feminists might describe them as dominated by their spouses, they describe themselves as closely attached to their families. Women immigrants often come from countries in which systems of social protection are weak or absent. The family and community are the only resources on which they can rely in situations of need. Furthermore, the family plays a crucial support role during the rupture caused by migration. Also, women are viewed as guardians of culture, essential to the ethnic survival.

The main areas of culture shock involve:

- distinctive perceptions of time and space;
- types of socializing: gifts, exchanges and rules of etiquette;
- types of requests for assistance addressed to institutions in the adoptive society;
- death rites and beliefs;
- manifestations of cultural change;
- differences in family structure (sex roles, modes of communication, modes of social control, attitudes towards education).

Source: Cohen-Emerique, in "Femmes, migration, interventions: une rencontre interculturelle," a research report by Gisèle Legault, Myriam Lafrenière, Université de Montreal, 1992.

We must stop seeing women immigrants simply as victims of an oppressive tradition. We must also recognize the positive impact of certain of their so-called "traditional" values. Among these are community spirit, sharing, tolerance, a sense of family unity and respect for and care of the elderly. Some of these values are said to be traditionally "feminine." They are defended by feminists who advocate their rehabilitation in a society dominated by individualism and competition.

We believe that autonomy and equal rights are essential to all human beings. Nevertheless, women and society as a whole would likely benefit from increased recognition of certain "traditional" values provided they are practised by men as well as women.

II- Religious Diversity

Over the last few years, the religious diversity of contemporary Quebec has become increasingly evident. It is worth remembering, however, that even in the golden age of the Catholic Church, minority religions such as Protestants, Jews (who have lived in Quebec since the 19th century) and Jehovah's Witnesses (who have been here for several decades) existed. The most recent waves of immigration have accentuated Quebec's religious diversity. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and other religions from abroad have now become part of the religious landscape of Québec. There are also many new religions or sects.

Quebec's religious diversity is not attributable solely to newly arrived citizens; it is also the result of a modern transformation of beliefs. This changing religious landscape brings with it special stakes for women.

Religion and Modernity

In Quebec, modernity has engendered secularism, among other things. Quebecers have challenged religion's hold on society and the power of the Catholic Church has declined. As in other western societies, religion is no longer a central organizing principle. Modernity has not, however, entirely dispensed with religion. We are now witnessing a religious revival and diversification. This religious revival can be interpreted as a search for meaning in a modern world governed by technological rationality and centred on individualism and consumption. Certain scholars believe that both the new religions and fundamentalism are distinctively

modern phenomena because they integrate values like individualism and faith in technological progress.

The New Religions

Just what does the term "new religion" mean? Often, groups falling under this rubric do not claim to be religions but rather spiritual movements that share certain characteristics, including an optimistic vision of the world, an insistence on rituals and techniques of liberation, a lack of interest in metaphysical, philosophical and rational questions, a concern to integrate conscious and unconscious aspects of mind and a search for well-being. These religions are new in Quebec, but in certain cases, have existed for many years. They respond more to social needs than to a need to find life's meaning. Numerous studies have shown that the attraction to new religions stems, in large part, from their ability to create a primary group of belonging much like an extended family.

From time to time, there is a report in the media on some horrific experience of members of these groups. Approximately 1000 new religions exist in Quebec today, and it is unfair to judge them all on the basis of the extreme behaviour of a small minority. Their number seems impressive, but it is important to remember that most of these new religions have only a few dozen disciples. In all, members of new religions account for only two per cent of the Quebec population, and the two largest groups are the Jehovah's Witnesses (with approximately 33 000 disciples) and the Baptists and the Pentecostals (with approximately 20000 disciples).

Women in the New Religions

Some people attribute the attraction many women feel for these new religions to the rigid, clearly defined roles the groups set out for their disciples. They tend to emphasize one role and reject others. The conversion of women to the new religions could be a response to the modern absence of defined roles, or to the complexity or multiplicity of roles in modern society. It might be comforting for some to be told by a leader or guru how to behave in encounters with members of the opposite sex. By redefining sexual roles, the new religions offer a variety of solutions to the crisis in family values and in relations between men and women. The groups also allow for personal redefinition.

A very important aspect of the new religions is diversity, and this can be seen as much in the beliefs

and rituals as in the place and status granted to women participants. Studies show great variability in the status of female disciples. And the automatic stereotyping of women sect members as oppressed and exploited must be abandoned. Indeed, in certain cases, women seem to be infatuated with the new religions because, unlike the Catholic Church, these groups give women the chance to exercise administrative and spiritual leadership.

Religious Fundamentalism

In addition to new religions, fundamentalism is a facet of contemporary religion which our society must address. There are two major differences between the new religions and fundamentalism. First, new religions differ in their treatment of women. Some of them treat women as social inferiors, but others advocate equality or female superiority. In contrast, fundamentalist groups, whether they be Catholic, Protestant, Moslem or Jewish, unanimously reject sexual equality. Secondly, new religions claim to live on society's fringe, while fundamentalist groups seek instead to influence society, even going so far as wanting to subordinate politics to religion. These two differences make fundamentalist groups an important threat, not only to the rights of women who adopt their world views, but to the rights of all women.

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But what exactly does the term "fundamentalist" mean? It has been applied to Catholics, Protestants and Muslims, and is also used synonymously (and erroneously) with "Islamist." It is used to refer to certain Jews, Hindus and Sikhs. The term is sometimes used to denote ultra-conservative practitioners, and other times to denote armed extremists who resort to force in their attempts to exert power. They may plant bombs in abortion clinics, plan and carry out political assassinations, systematically terrorize people or commit extortion against intellectuals or women.

As one author writes, fundamentalism can be defined as a religious attitude "characterized by the canonization of a text from the past, the attachment to its literal meaning and the conviction that a small group, acting alone, will save the world by its faithfulness to the original idea." Note, however, that while Protestant and Muslim fundamentalists focus on the sacred texts of the Bible and the Koran, Catholic and Jewish

fundamentalists do things slightly differently. In the first instance, fundamentalists bypass the Bible for the Thirty Councils (anti-Protestant) and Vatican I (anti-modernist). And Jewish fundamentalists do not rely on truths found in the Torah. Segregation from the world is their primary defining characteristic.

When claiming that society should tolerate their practices, fundamentalists often invoke the principle of religious freedom. Nevertheless, fundamentalists are often the first to display radical intolerance when they meet up with diversity. The death sentences decreed by Muslim fundamentalists for people opposing their views are an extreme example of intolerance. But sanctions imposed by the pope on several progressive theologians also reveal a fundamentalist approach.

The few Catholic fundamentalists in Quebec are highly preoccupied with celibacy and priestly attire. They are also fixated on the

use of Latin in church and reject the validity of other religions. Their activities focus on issues like the family and sexuality. Since Jean Paul II, right-wing Catholics have gained influence all over the world, but even so, very few Catholic fundamentalists live here in Quebec. Protestant and Muslim fundamentalists are slightly more prevalent in Quebec, but their numbers are also limited.

Women and Religious Fundamentalism: A Battle to Wage

What can be done about religious groups whose teachings and practices oppose the equality of women and men? While certain new sects preach discrimination, all of the great religions have patriarchal underpinnings which oppress women. They also have feminists within their ranks who are trying to transform the foundations from the inside. They advocate adapting traditions to fit the lives of contemporary women. Some feminists base their demands on excerpts of sacred texts demonstrating that God made men and women equal. They claim that misogynist interpretations of the scriptures by men are responsible for the inferior status of women. In all of the great religions, fundamentalist tendencies result in a fresh impulse to impose patriarchal values on relations between the sexes. The place of women in society is of central concern to fundamentalists.

For several years (more specifically, since the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc countries), Islamic fundamentalism has been the West's new enemy, taking over from communism. The fundamentalist threat is all too real in certain Muslim countries, and the fate of women in Algeria, Afghanistan or Iran, to name only a few trouble spots, is abhorrent. As women, we must show solidarity with those Muslim women who refuse to wear the veil. We must support those who will not accept diminished rights to education and work, diminished family rights, limits to their freedom of movement and other measures which seek to imprison women in domesticity and subordinate them to men. It is important, however, not to vilify Islam or indulge in sensationalist fearmongering which might lead us to confound the renewal of religious fervour in Quebec Muslims with the terrorist violence of Islamic fundamentalists. Muslims are a tiny minority in Quebec, and most are moderate in their views. Even if many Quebec Muslims are deeply attached to their religion, they value democracy and integration into Quebec society.

III- Cultural Diversity and Beliefs about Integration

Although it has become stronger and more visible over the last decades, Quebec's cultural diversity is not new. In the 19th century, successive waves of English, Irish and Scottish immigrants landed here. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, immigrants from Eastern Europe arrived, along with smaller contingents of Italians and Greeks and a few hundred Chinese, Syrians and Lebanese. Immigration decreased dramatically during the Great Depression, but rose again after the Second World War, notably with the arrival of the Portuguese. Since the end of the 1980s, the majority of immigrants no longer come from Europe, but rather from Third-World countries. At first glance, integration seems more of a problem for these new waves of immigrants. The cultural gulf between Quebec society and immigrants from Asia or Africa seems greater than that which existed with European immigrants. Adaptation on both sides seems to take more effort. In truth, there is no factual basis for the claim that integration of these new immigrants is more problematic.

Language and Politics: A Back-drop for Integration Policies

The issues of language and of federal-provincial relations provide a back-drop for the development of

Quebec policy on the integration of newcomers. During the 1960s and 1970s, newly arrived immigrants preferred learning English rather than French. The Quebec Language Charter, adopted in 1977, obliges the children of immigrants to attend French schools. By the 1993\94 school year, 77 % of allophone students were enrolled in French schools. The percentage rises to 91.5% for allophone children born outside of Quebec. The Quebec Language Charter introduced a profound change in perception regarding the place of newcomers in Quebec society. From 1977 on, French Canadian ancestry ceased to be the main criterion of Quebec's collective identity; a shared language and the respect for cultural heritage and political institutions replaced it.

Preserving Differences Within Civic Society

Quebec's new orientation has resulted in a moral contract which entails rights and responsibilities for the immigrant and adoptive society alike. The contract is founded on three principles:

- Quebec is a society in which French is the common language of public life;
- Quebec is a democratic society which expects and encourages the participation and contribution of all citizens;
- Quebec is a pluralistic society open to a variety of contributions as befits its respect for democratic values and need for inter-community exchange.

Equality between the sexes is a fundamental democratic value. Under the Language Charter, immigrants have the right to preserve their own cultural life. Nevertheless, the complete and rigid preservation of different cultures coexisting without any real link must be avoided. It is important for people to develop feelings of belonging to Quebec society stronger than their allegiances from the past.

How far should we go in welcoming contributions from the outside and exactly what are the limits imposed by respect for democratic values?

For several years, Quebec has sought to integrate people by encouraging the development of a common civic identity rather than by encouraging the preservation of cultural communities. It has focused on issues of participation and equality rather than on

culture. This policy shift reflects a change in the concept of integration.

Communitarianism and Universalism: The Stakes for Women

In the past, we compared and contrasted integration and assimilation. The latter concept is no longer used much in Quebec or in Canada because it reflects the unrealistic and totalitarian view that immigrants should abandon their distinctive characteristics. Everyone now advocates integration as a middle ground between assimilation and autonomous co-existence. Two models of integration exist which, although rarely found in their pure form in the real world, do denote different world views. They are the communitarian (ie., collective integration) model, and the universalist (ie., individual integration) model.

The communitarian model is founded on a policy of recognizing differences. It involves a high degree of respect for community differences, and the preservation of cultures of origin via the enforcement of collective rights. The universalist model is founded on individual human rights. It establishes a clear divide between the private sphere, in which religious, cultural and other customs may be practised freely, and the public sphere, in which everyone must adhere to a common set of rules and principles. Both models entail stakes for women.

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The Pitfalls of Communitarianism

Communitarianism has been the object of criticism relevant to feminists. Communitarianism tends to reduce identity to its ethnic or cultural dimension at the expense of other dimensions like sex, social class, religion, nationality or region which might be important in certain contexts. Culture of origin is not the only identity reference, nor is it necessarily the most important one for immigrants. Moreover, the culture of an ethnic group is never perfectly homogeneous; membership in many sub-groups prevents uniformity. And finally, identity is not fixed; it is a process. Even though socialization helps to create it, immigration forces re-socialization during which immigrants preserve parts of their original identities and acquire

aspects of identity associated with their adoptive society. This happens more or less quickly, and in greater or lesser degree according to circumstances, to the society of origin and that to which people immigrate, and to the opportunities of the individual immigrant.

It is important to remember that not all immigrants cherish their culture of origin. Many actively desire civic integration into their adoptive society.

Furthermore, institutionalization of differences creates categories of people and distorts the notion of citizenship. The multiplication of rights complicates social management (eg., which right should take precedence over another?) and creates ethical dilemmas.

In addition to these broad criticisms of communitarianism, there are criticisms of particular interest to women. Taken to its logical extreme, communitarianism translates into a form of relativism which can be very harmful to women. The claim that all cultures must be respected in their entirety overlooks the fact that cultures and religions

often condone practices which oppress women. In collaboration with women from various cultures and religions, we must give ourselves the tools and powers necessary to criticize and transform these practices.

Furthermore, if ethnicity takes precedence over other facets of identity – whether this be because an ethnic group demands it, or because society at large imposes it through discrimination – it imprisons women in a narrow, "traditional" self-definition. It might force them to submit to customs that oppress them. If their primary allegiance is to the community, women will not dare to challenge patriarchal practices. This becomes even more true if the community has experienced discrimination, because any criticism from the inside will then be regarded as treason.

Immigrant women of colour often feel torn between feminism and the battle against racism. When faced with discrimination, they seek support from their

community and culture, and they fight for collective rights. But as feminists, they often have to question these collective rights which tend to limit their individual rights to realise their full potential in sexual, economic and social spheres.

The Relationship Between Feminism and Communitarianism and The Dangers of Universalism

If women must challenge communitarianism and its tendency to respect ethnic or cultural identity in their totality, they should also be aware of the ground feminism shares with communitarianism. Both are ideologies of difference. Many people regard feminism as the matrix for communitarian notions. After all, the common citizenship that is so central to the universalist model came very late to women, who were deprived for so many years of the right to vote. Until very recently, universality was the domain of men; to a certain extent, this trend continues today. Women are still fighting for recognition of their particular contribution to society, and for real equality with men despite their differences. They emphasize that giving birth and bringing up children are important tasks that are undervalued in society. They demand recognition of qualities that have traditionally been viewed as "feminine." Many seek to transform from within fields of work dominated by men, and urge acceptance of different ways of being and doing. For these reasons, women cannot fully adhere to the universalist approach.

According to the universalist model, differences may be expressed in the private sphere but in the public sphere everyone shares a common identity. Relegating differences to private life usually means devaluing them. This is true for women, but it is equally true for other groups. Women have fought in the past, and continue to fight, to erase the lines of demarcation between private and public, between the individual and society, between emotion and reason which characterize modernity and threaten their needs.

By supporting a purely civic conception of identity, women could renounce claims of difference or the idea of collective rights. They risk having their specific condition denied in the name of a universalist abstraction which could easily exclude them. If universalism is the prerogative of the dominators, women have good reason to be wary. This reasoning should convince them to treat claims made by other "communities" for social recognition with sensitivity.

The issue of power dynamics between social groups is often overlooked in universalism under the guise of treating each citizen "equally." In reality, however, people do not share the same opportunities in life. Social class, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, the presence or absence of physical handicaps and, it goes almost without saying, sex are factors which erode equality of opportunity. The universalist model risks privileging formal equality over equality of results and failing to address different forms of exclusion. The reign of the universalist citizen with no community attachments risks becoming a screen for the triumph of individualism.

In summary, communitarianism and universalism paradoxically conceal similar traps for women. In the first instance, we risk endorsing the domination of women within cultural groups (most, if not all, cultures and religions are built on solid patriarchal foundations) in the name of each culture's right to self-preservation. In the second instance, in the name of a dubious equality between all citizens, we risk endorsing the domination of men as a group over women, and of the ethno-cultural majority over ethno-cultural minorities.

IV- Feminist Principles and Values for the Here and Now

While different cultures must benefit from a presumption of equality of worth, they cannot hope for equal status in Quebec society. If we cannot argue the necessity for a common culture, we can at least recognize the need for unifying standards and principles. Equality between the sexes must be one of these.

The Conseil du statut de la femme proposes four guiding principles to evaluate the various demands for adjustment that might result from the need to respect cultural and religious diversity without denying fundamental values. This evaluation must be carried out with critical, yet open, minds.

1- NON-NEGOTIABLE STANDARDS

- no departures from standards which decree the **equality of men and women**, specifically in the family, in the workplace and in education;
- **respect for physical integrity**, specifically that every citizen must respect the laws and articles of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms relevant to women.

2- VALUES TO PROMOTE

- **solidarity among women;**
- **autonomy for women** and participation in collective life.

While standards are generally well established in our laws, values present a more difficult challenge because they are less concrete. The value of equality between the sexes has a dimension uncontained in any law, and respect for it presupposes an attitudinal shift. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that our actions do not always reflect the values we preach. Any attempt to regulate the values of immigrants or of any other member of society would be wrong-headed and totalitarian. Female independence, and solidarity between women are also values to be encouraged, but they cannot be imposed.

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