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# "Catholicism as Identity Factor among the French Canadian Minority"

Un document produit en version numérique par Jean-Marie Tremblay, bénévole, professeur de sociologie au Cégep de Chicoutimi

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## **Abstract**

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The main objective of this article is to illustrate the unceasing relevance of the link between Catholic conservatism and French Canadian identity, especially in the cases of the French minorities in the provinces of New-Brunswick and Manitoba, and, more surprisingly, in the province of Quebec. The ongoing value of this link is illustrated by a comparative study of the reactions of these three French communities to immigration and to the secular state's legal obligation to provide *reasonable accommodation* towards a number of religious demands. More generally, these case studies will show the importance of religion, not only as an identity factor, but also as an identity marker.

## Religion as Identity Factor

Throughout the history of humanity, religion has not only been an important factor in the formation of national identities, but it has also been important in the protection and the maintenance of identities in minority contexts. Even if the political role of religion in Western societies has greatly diminished over the last century, there is currently a great surge of religion as an identity factor on the international stage. At the beginning of the twentieth century, evidence that religion played a central role in the formation of ethnic and cultural identities was discussed at length by Émile Durkheim (1991) and Max Weber (1996), notwith-

standing the fact that most thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century thought that religion would be completely eradicated by modernity. For Weber, the rationality of modernity was to usher a 'disenchantment of the world' and the complete secularization of society. This historic association between secularization and modernity is now highly contested by the continued existence and the diversification of religious groups and religious sentiments in many countries around the globe, including Canada (Bibby 2002). Today, religious identity is defined very differently from the way it was defined at the beginning of the twentieth century. A fundamental shift has occurred in the relation between religious traditions and contemporary society. Religious identity is no longer imposed and it has, instead, become one option among a spectrum of choices. Religion is now largely communal, rather than national. Religion also integrates itself into global community networks, where identity plays a central role (Robertson 1992).

The objective of this article is to attempt to measure how a religious environment can facilitate or impede the integration of the religious subject in a secular, multinational and polyethnic civil society like Canada (Kymlicka 2001). This will be undertaken by studying three particular cases of Catholic conservatism within the French communities of the provinces of Manitoba, New-Brunswick and Quebec. The present study will attempt to ascertain whether Catholicism is still an important factor in stabilizing and maintaining the identity of national French minority groups in Canada. Many researchers have tackled issues related to ethnic religious minority groups, but most often their focus has remained on the juridical status of religious minority groups in the host country. An American study by Yang and Ebaugh (2001) has shown that the religion of the majority in the immigrant's country of origin remains an important part of their life in the host country. Not surprisingly, religion frequently remains very important for the formation of an ethnically diverse community in the host country. This is similarly the case for national minorities in Canada, as is the case for French Manitobans, Acadians from New-Brunswick and, to a lesser degree, Quebecers. One can ask the following question: Would changes in their religious identity also transform their cultural and national identity?

There is currently much debate about the place of certain religious groups and their religious practices in the public sphere in Western democracies. Many schol-

ars and public officials would like the public sphere to remain secular. For them, religion must remain a private matter. Contrary to what some claim (Milot 2002), Canadian laws that oversee the separation of Church and State cannot be easily compared to the regime of 'laïcité', or secularism, which has historically prevailed in France. Hence, the secularization of civil society does not automatically lead to a situation similar to the one created by French republican ideals. In Canada, there is no such centralized and unified 'laïcité' principle like in France, where religion is publicly ordered by the State to remain in the private sphere and where the State tries to ignore most new religious minorities. In Canada, and in many other Commonwealth countries, the more overt presence of the religious factor reflects the global tendency observed with the increase of diversification of religious sub-cultures that contest religious monoculturalism and question the subordination of the private sphere to the public sphere. In addition, religion increasingly acts like a whistleblower to identify social problems like racism, refusal to integrate immigrants and prejudice against some stigmatized groups. Khosrokhavar (2000) writes that this new form of emerging religiosity is implicitly political, precisely because it makes demands on society and the State that challenge the universalistic credo of a neutral and secular public space. In Western democracies like ours, the public sphere is generally highly secular. Believers, however, increasingly demand public recognition, not as individuals, but as members of a religious community. Casanova (1994) has documented the continuous de-privatization of religion in the United States since the beginning of the 1990s. Conservative Protestants and Catholics have rebelled against the liberal and secular consensus and have successfully helped religion to regain a greater role in the American public sphere. Until recently in Canada, religion asserting itself in the public and political sphere had been perceived as being mostly a matter of importance for the Western provinces, but with the election of Stephen Harper's conservative party to the Parliament in Ottawa in January 2006, religion came back with a vengeance on the country's agenda. A number of debates are taking place, concerning many Western societies' capacity to accept the increased diversity of religious beliefs and practices and to restrict the activities of closed and nondemocratic religious formations that challenge the regulating power of the State in the public sphere. Quebec's Bouchard-Taylor Commission is a telling example of these ongoing debates, which will be addressed later in this article.

While the link between religion and ethnicity has been thoroughly investigated, especially in the United States, the role of religion as a specific factor in the formation and persistence of social identity in national minority groups in Western societies has rarely been studied from a sociological point of view. The question of religion and identity is usually studied from a psychological angle, but this type of research is generally confined to the cognitive dimensions of religious identity (Maclean, Walker and Matsuba 2004). The main objective of this article is to establish that a national minority religion, depending on the social, cultural and political contexts in which it is immersed, can be a factor of withdrawal from or of integration into society's public space. This research aims to understand the socio-cultural and sociopolitical elements that influence the withdrawal or the integration of religious minority groups in Western societies. Civic integration largely depends on the social criteria each society puts in place to ensure that public space is accessible and that each citizen has the opportunity to participate fully in civic life. But those criteria are rarely fixed and often subject to a myriad of diverse interpretations, such that social tensions can result from the constant debates and even contestation of the civic integration criteria.

In Canada, the integration of religious minority groups is part of an official policy of multiculturalism that promotes religious diversity as an important part of cultural diversity. In the debates concerning the place of religious minority groups in the public sphere, religion is often viewed as an important part of immigrant culture. But the role religion can still play for a national minority, like the French Canadians, is rarely, if ever, considered. Even if a growing number of Canadians are joining or are part of religious minority groups (Bibby 2002), a large majority of Canadians are still, depending on their language, either Protestants or Catholics. Since the beginning of the 1990s, conservative groups have criticized multiculturalism discourses and claimed that multiculturalism destroys social cohesion and community sentiment. Reacting to those criticisms, the Canadian government shifted its policy of tolerance and preservation of religious cultures to a policy of religious diversity and social inclusiveness. This 'intercultural' policy promotes the integration of immigrants and minority cultures into a larger community policy that combines reciprocal efforts at conciliation. In exchange for the individual right to display their religion in the public space, new immigrants must promise to adhere to 'Canadian values'. Those values include the following: Canada as a country of communication networks, bilingualism, the principle of collegiality, free and universal health care, multiculturalism, and Canada as a new postmodern nation and not a state established on old European models of domination (Hébert 2003).

In the political Canadian context, multiculturalism has now been institutionalized for over forty years. The 1982 Canadian Charter of Rights guarantees equality for all Canadian citizens; and this equality prevents discrimination based on religion, gender, race or disability. For lawyer Pierre Bosset (2007), the obligation of reasonable accommodation remains a legal construction at the service of equality that applies to situations where discrimination disadvantages an individual with the application of a universal norm or practice and thus provides legal grounds for preferential treatments, as long as those demands are reasonable. Even if this legal obligation of reasonable accommodation is not unique to Canada, it has, since its first appearances in the Canadian legal system in the mid-1980s, extended beyond its strictly legal context to become part of a wider social debate about the place of religion in Canadian society. In what follows, the various reactions of three French Canadian national minorities to the increasing demands for reasonable accommodation is presented and discussed.

# Catholic Conservatism among French Manitobans

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In their seminal article on the French Manitoban community, Hébert and Vaillancourt show that a small rebellion of French Manitoban youth against the Catholic clergy-based elites occurred in the sixties, but that this rebellion was somewhat thwarted by the end that decade. For them, French Manitoba was still, at the beginning of the 70s, mainly a Catholic traditionalist society:

...a deeply-rooted ideology of survivance, based upon a near-paranoid concern for conservation of certain traditional values, has virtually paralysed the society's capacity for self-renewal. Alternative ideologies, such as have arisen in Quebec since 1945, have yet to take hold on French Manitoba. Thus, while Quebec has proven to be a dynamic society in the years since 1945, and especially since 1960, French-Canadian society in Manitoba has barely begun the process of changing its basic social and institutional structures (Hébert and Vaillancourt 1971: 176).

When we observe the French minority in Manitoba today, this assessment seems harsh in light of all the progress and accomplishments made by French Manitobans in the last thirty years to modernize their institutions. In this particular case, however, progress was much slower and went in a somewhat different direction than the fast-paced changes that have occurred in Quebec since the 1960s. At the time, the influential Catholic Church in Quebec was replaced with a strong provincial government, the new major institutional representative of French Canadians in Quebec—who have since become 'Quebecers'. Or course, no such thing happened among the French minority in Manitoba. It was not until 1993, when the secular French school board, the Franco-Manitoban School Division (Division scolaire francomanitobaine) was created, that French Manitobans had their first important representative institution, other than the Catholic Church. Still, what would be considered as Catholic conservatism today in Quebec seems to be more mainstream in Manitoba's French community, especially in rural areas. Traditional family values, for instance, are still very popular with French Manitoban youth. In spite of the fact that the Franco-Manitoban School Division is supposed to be a secular school board, children still pray in class and the Catholic tradition is still being taught in most schools.

The French Manitoban community also benefits from a state-subsidized university, the Saint-Boniface University College (Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface). In 1969, the Saint-Boniface University College was transferred from the French-speaking Jesuits to the secular community for the symbolic amount of one Canadian dollar, in exchange for two seats for the Church on the university's Board of Governors. Even if the university is now officially secular, the influence of the Catholic Church's local hierarchy is still very strong. For example, Sister Norma, a Catholic nun appointed to the Saint-Boniface University College, has organized weekly activities promoting Catholic values and dogma within the university. She has access to the institution's electronic mailing list and can thus forcedly spread Catholic views to distraught professors, many of whom are convinced atheists who remain silent in fear of reprisals from the Catholic community. In 2005, a majority of students voted to have condom distributing machines installed in the university's public washrooms. A counter-action was quickly organized by an obscure Catholic activist group which managed to put posters near the condom machines with the following message (author's translation):

Condoms are not 100% reliable Do you really want to protect yourself? Protect your future and your health by making the right choice. Ask yourself the following questions: Do I know the sexual habits, past or present, of my partner? Do I accept all the risks associated with this sexual relation? To prevent sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies ABSTINENCE is the only 100% reliable means of prevention. Be truthful to your values and your beliefs. Protect your body and your heart!

For many months, these posters were at the heart of a major controversy for many students, and especially for teachers, who felt its message was going against their better judgment as educators. For the institution, it was indeed a reasonable accommodation for some of the more religious students and professors. To this day, the poster still hangs in the university's washrooms near the condom machines.

The university also has a growing Muslim African student population and some French Mennonites who seem to get along quite well with the Catholic majority, because the university gives them the opportunity—in the name of freedom of religion—to express publicly their beliefs by lending them the university's chapel to organize their own religious celebrations. Paradoxically, only atheism seems to be banned from this secular institution.

The fact that the well-known Catholic fundamentalist Quebec-based group called the Army of Mary has more than 200 members in the French community of Saint-Boniface confirms the existence of thriving Catholic conservatism in small French Manitoban communities. Following the excommunication in November 2007 of parish members who belonged to the Army of Mary, the Archbishop of Saint-Boniface, Mgr Goulet, had to organize an information meeting at the Ca-

thedral to reassure and reunite the parishioners who had wandered into a group now considered a cult or a sect. Some members of the local Army of Mary reintegrated themselves into the Church, but most of them remained with the group. On a much lesser scale, the St-Pius X Fraternity also has a presence within the French community of Winnipeg where it owns a small church in the North of the city.

Catholic conservatism is alive and well among the French Manitoban minority, because of the continuing trend in the province of linguistic assimilation of the last forty years which reinforces the closed, conservative and ideological orientations of the French minority. The fact that they are confronted with an everexpanding French-speaking Muslim group that competes with the traditional Catholic elites for representative power has meant the revival of the Catholic faith, as an identity marker, within the French community. The particular social, linguistic and religious contexts of French communities in Manitoba demonstrate, therefore, the importance of the role of religion as an identity factor in this French national minority group.

## French Canadians in New-Brunswick

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Situated on the eastern Atlantic shores of Canada, the province of New-Brunswick is predominantly rural. It possesses the most influential francophone minority in Canada, with roughly one third of its population speaking French. Also known as 'Acadians', they are the descendants of the first French settlers who were brutally deported around the world (including to Louisiana and Australia) by the British Army in 1755. Since that infamous date, Acadians have won many battles on political and cultural fronts and have, in recent years, gained sufficient influence to have the province recognized as officially bilingual.

Labelle (2003) has noted that Acadian culture and Catholicism have historically been closely associated with one another. Even if many popular beliefs have disappeared over time, many of them still persist to this day, for example, the pilgrimage to Saint-Anne-du-Bocage in Caraquet. Saint-Anne is the patron of fishermen and native people. Lamontagne (2003) has shown that, at the end of the nineteenth century, clerical Acadian elites imposed the Mary of Assumption figure as the only protector of the Acadian people, such that the birth of Acadian nationalism became closely associated with the Virgin Mary. To this day, many important symbols of Acadian culture are associated with the figure of Mary. For instance, on the Acadian national flag, the star represents 'Mary the Sea Star'; the national anthem is Ave Maris Stella (Lamontagne 2003: 150); and the Acadians national holiday is on August 15, which is also Mary of Assumption day. All these politicoreligious symbols indicate that Catholicism remains an important component of Acadian cultural and political life.

In 1991, 96.9 per cent of French Canadians in New-Brunswick were Catholics. Johnson and Mckee-Allain (1999: 221) have noted, however, that Acadian society has started to distance itself from religion, but without breaking its bonds with the Catholic tradition. For instance, only recently did the provincial legislature force Catholic education out of public schools, a decision that is still viewed as extremely controversial. In terms of religious diversity, New-Brunswick society is much more monolithic culturally than the very multicultural provinces of Manitoba and Quebec.

# Ambivalent Secularism in French Majority Quebec

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Quebec is the only Canadian province where the French-speaking population enjoys a majority status. In fact, Quebec is the only province where French is recognized as the only official language. Until the 'Quiet Revolution' of the 1960s, French residents of Quebec lived in a conservative Catholic society. Today, the province is probably the most secularized of all Canadian provinces. It was perceived to be predominantly secular, that is, until the recent events that surrounded

the Bouchard-Taylor Commission whose public hearings and consultations were co-presided by Sociologist Gérard Bouchard and philosopher Charles Taylor, two of Quebec's most prominent intellectuals.

Faced with increasing and unceasing demands from immigrant groups, mostly Muslims, Sikhs and Jews, for religious reasonable accommodation, the Quebec Government was pressed to investigate the matter further due to an increasingly incensed public opinion over these demands. The Bouchard– Taylor Commission was established when Quebec's Prime Minister Jean Charest and his Quebec Liberal Party (Parti libéral du Québec, PLQ) were in the middle of an election campaign. Charest set up the Commission in the hope of sweeping this controversial and potentially divisive issue under the rug during the campaign, but the whole issue found its way back into the limelight. Charest was eventually elected, but his party was only able to form a minority government. The winner of the 2007 election was, in fact, the Quebec Democratic Action Party (Action démocratique du Québec, ADQ), a right-wing traditionalist party which gained, for the first time, enough seats to form the official opposition, leaving the separatist *Parti* Québécois (PQ) in good third place. The ADQ's number one priority was the promotion of traditional family values, a clever way to promote the Catholic Church's point of view, without publicly endorsing the institution. Not surprisingly, virtually all votes for the ADQ came from rural Quebec and from smaller cities, like Trois-Rivières and Quebec City.

The Bouchard–Taylor Commission started its hearings a few months after the election. The main aim of the Commission was to look at the reasonable accommodation practices towards Quebec's religious minority groups. The government was expecting recommendations on how it should deal with those demands, but the agenda was hijacked by both the media and the general public who were able to access freely the Commission's public hearings. Quebecers from all walks of life packed the audience and voiced their concerns about reasonable accommodation practices towards immigrants' religious demands, but ignored the fact that most reasonable accommodation demands were made by Protestants and Catholics, Canada's two major Christian denominations. The public and the media somehow conflated immigrant religions with the reasonable accommodation system, something that incited many Quebecers publicly to reaffirm their French

Catholic heritage in the face of strangers who 'seek to destroy' that Christian heritage.

The report that Mr. Jean Tremblay, the Mayor of Saguenay, presented to the Bouchard-Taylor Commission is a perfect example of this strong affirmation of Quebec's Catholicism as an identity marker. In the voluminous document presented to the Commission on September 27, 2007, the Mayor and the city Councillors presented themselves as Catholics who fervently practice their religion. For them, religious culture has maintained its strong influence over Quebec's society and Catholicism remains, just like the French language, at the root of the identity of Quebecers. This incredible document states that abortion is murder, although abortion has been available since the late 1970s and legal in Canada since the late 1980s. They went as far as to state that it is impossible truly to separate Church and State, because it is impossible for believers like them to put aside their religion when in office. Of course, this document was, at the time, mocked and ridiculed in Quebec by the press and the intellectual elite, but the document clearly indicates that the province of Quebec is still very much a Catholic stronghold, especially outside the Montreal metropolitan area. Geographically and socioculturally, rural Quebec shares much with the northern part of New-Brunswick, its immediate neighbour to the East. Quebec's eastern region and New-Brunswick's northern region share demographic and cultural homogeneity. Both regions still remain mostly French and Catholic. Both are also generally less open to multiculturalism than other regions of Canada that welcome immigrants in greater numbers, like Ontario or western Canada. The controversy surrounding the Bouchard-Taylor Commission thus reveals that even if Quebecers do not practice their religion in great numbers anymore, they still remain, as Quebec's pioneer sociologist Fernand Dumont often remarked, very much 'cultural Catholics'.

## Conclusion

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As we have seen in this article, Catholic conservatism is still a relatively important factor in the building and maintenance of French Canadian minority identities within the French Manitoban and Acadian communities. Even in a much more secularized society like Quebec, we have seen with the example of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission controversy that if a Geoffroy Catholicism as Identity Factor 15 © Equinox Publishing Ltd 2008. minority feels that its national identity is threatened by the demands of other religious groups, it will quickly fall back on its own original religious tradition as an identity marker in order to fight against those threats. A majority of Quebecers no longer go to Church, but they refuse to take away the crucifix from their National Assembly, because religion remains an important part of their history. But it seems that it is easier to make reasonable accommodation toward immigrant religious groups' demands when religion itself is respected and when immigrant numbers almost outweigh those of the national minority, as it is the case in Manitoba. In regions like the province of New-Brunswick, where religion is highly respected, but where the number of immigrants is small, it remains to be seen whether reasonable accommodation demands from immigrant religious groups will be accepted. In the province of Quebec, reasonable accommodation demands are challenged on two distinct fronts: from rural French Quebecers who see these demands as a threat or an attack on their culture and religion, and from a more urban group among Quebec's population who would like to see religion disappear from all public spaces. These three cases seem to indicate that religion remains, for the French national minorities of Canada, a powerful identity marker, especially when the minority feels that its identity is threatened by reasonable accommodation demands made by other religious groups.

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