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## Contextualising the Quebec Charter of Values: how the Muslim ‘Other’ is conceptualised in Quebec

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At varying points in Quebec’s recent history, political parties have gained prominence through employing identity politics, framing Muslims as a threatening ‘Other’. This occurred during the Reasonable Accommodation debates from 2006 to 2008 and more recently in discussions over Bill 60, a proposed law that would have prohibited government employees or employees of state-funded institutions from wearing conspicuous forms of religious attire. This article attempts to contextualise the anti-Muslim fallout which resulted from Bill 60, arguing that it was symptomatic of pre-existing fears of a threatening ‘Other’. Through examining how Quebec identity was transformed in the 1960s, this article will demonstrate how the values proceeding from this era influenced state policies to preserve the white francophone majoritarian culture. In the post-9/11 context, this has resulted in Islamophobic rhetoric and anti-Muslim bias permeating political and media discourses in Quebec on the grounds of asserting gender equality and secularist ideals.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia; critical race theory; Quebec Charter of Values; identity politics; reasonable accommodation

### Introduction

Recent polls have indicated that 69% of Quebecois(es) have biases towards Islam, while 54% of Canadians, as a whole, have a negative opinion of the faith (Reid 2013). In the Quebec context, a number of discriminatory policies have been proposed by political parties, which have targeted minority populations, particularly Muslim Quebecers (Bilge 2012; Mahrouse 2010; Mookerjee 2009). The Parti Quebecois (PQ), which held a minority government between 2012 and 2014, have maintained a sovereigntist platform since their inception in 1968. As such, it is a political party that relies on identity politics to garner support for sovereignty from the rest of Canada. Identity politics is an approach to politics that seeks to secure political freedom of a marginalised group within a larger political body. Quebec identity politics, as I will use the term throughout the article, entails political processes aimed at mobilising the white French Quebecois majority to seek greater political autonomy and having

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the rest of Canada acknowledge their minority status and the uniqueness of their cultural heritage.

The hallmark of the PQ's stint in power was the creation and endorsement of Bill 60, which was proposed in May 2013. The formal name given to this Bill was the Charter Affirming the Values of State Secularism and Religious Neutrality, but was commonly referred to as the Quebec Charter of Values. The Charter garnered a strong public reaction as some polls suggested that up to 66% of Quebecers were supportive of the proposed legislation (CTV News 2013). The guidelines of this Charter of secularism and religious neutrality proposed that no state employee or employee of a state-funded institution be permitted to wear conspicuous religious symbols. This would prevent teachers, day care workers, hospital staff and government employees from wearing a *hijab*, Sikh turban, Jewish skull cap or a large cross. Ironically, the large cross which hangs from the National Assembly would have been excluded from this ban, as the PQ Government claimed that some religious symbols have become purely secular in nature and reflect Quebec's culture and not a religion (Brean 2013).

Public hearings discussing Quebecer's views on Bill 60 took place in January 2014 in Quebec City and were heard by PQ Minister of Democratic Institutions, Bernard Drainville. At the hearings, a number of white French Quebecois voiced their anxieties and fears of the 'Other', attempting to reify positions of privilege and subordination. Perhaps the most virulent of these came from Claude Pineault and Genevieve Caron, a couple from a small town northeast of Quebec City. During the hearings, the couple described how they were traumatised on their vacation to Morocco when they were asked to take off their shoes when entering a mosque and saw Muslims on all fours praying. Claude Pineault, went as far as implying Muslim dress could be a security threat as he claimed veiled Muslims tried to steal his wallet while he was on vacation. He lamented that wearing such 'disguises' were unthinkable in Quebec society (Blatchford 2014). Although the testimonies of Claude Pineault and Genevieve Caron were not representative of all of the voices supporting the Charter, they did resonate with the type of exclusionary discourses employed by political parties in Quebec who have argued that the 'Other' is irrational and aberrant and therefore not belonging within the nationalist space (Bilge 2012; Wong 2009).

This article will attempt to contextualise the anti-Muslim fervour that erupted as a result of the Quebec Charter of Values, which included anti-Muslim rhetoric in media and political discourses and a documented rise in hate crimes against Muslim women in Quebec (Garber 2014). This will be accomplished by demonstrating how the proposed Bill was symptomatic of pre-existing fears and concerns over an evolving culturally diverse Quebec population. Much of these sentiments can be traced back to a period in Quebec history called the Quiet Revolution. This article will discuss how the values which came to define Quebecois identity in the aftermath of the Quiet

Revolution have framed Muslims as a threatening ‘Other’ in the post-9/11 context. These values undergird the state policies of secularism and interculturalism, brought about the Reasonable Accommodation (RA) debates, which took place between 2006 and 2008, and have also manifested in rhetoric surrounding Quebec’s ‘core values’ relating gender equality (Bilge 2012). Exploring these issues will contextualise and provide a deeper more nuanced understanding of how Bill 60, a legislation which would have violated fundamental rights by policing racialised minorities’ dress, was able to be put forward and gain widespread support in Quebec.

### Overview of contemporary Quebec history

Quebec society has traditionally been very influenced by Catholicism and the Catholic Church (Gauvreau 2005; Wong 2011), whose presence dates back to the first arrival of the French in the Americas. Catholicism continued to be instrumental in Quebec society until the 1960s. According to Rymarz (2012), Catholic Mass attendance in Quebec just prior to the 1960s exceeded 80% in major parts of the province on any given Sunday. This slowly began to change in the 1960s, as religion was perceived as impeding social progress. In the place of religion ‘there evolved a robust secular mentality characterized by, among other things, a marginalization of religion to the periphery of personal and public life’ (Rymarz 2012, 297). The erosion of the Church’s influence in Quebec is usually referred to as the Quiet Revolution. The Quiet Revolution took place in the 1960s; however, its roots can be traced to the *Grande noirceur* or the ‘great darkness’ a few decades earlier. The *Grande noirceur* was a period in which there was a rise in conservative ideology and clerical power. It was a period when Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis presented French Canadians as ‘a docile Catholic population that was reliable as an unaggressive labour force and ... respectful of hierarchy’ (Dickinson and Young 2008, 271). Consequently, francophones in Quebec were economically marginalised and relegated to working-class positions. This was a challenging time in Quebec society as it was being confronted with numerous changes. After the Second World War, there was a substantial entry of immigrants to Canada, including Quebec. Consequently, linguistic and ethnic tensions were beginning to fester as a rising awareness of class and ethnic identity subtly emerged. These changes helped bring about a revival of Quebec nationalism that formed the basis for the Quiet Revolution.

During the Quiet Revolution between 1960 and 1966, Quebec Liberal Premier Jean Lesage introduced a number of political reforms, transferring several key responsibilities from the Catholic Church to the government, including education (Wong 2011). These reforms were celebrated by Quebec society as a release from the Church and economic oppression (Turgeon 2004). The Lesage reforms brought about a reinvigoration of Quebecois identity that was ‘closely linked with the culture and language of the majority’ (Karmis 2004, 85). This

neo-nationalist ideology asserted that immigrant populations should be assimilated, adopting the language and culture of the francophone majority (Karmis 2004). Fed up with Quebec's traditional value system and social structure, francophone intellectuals began advocating 'a radical separation of church and state and a new concept of social cohesion based on language and culture' (Gauvreau 2005, 248). Upon being elected Premier, Lesage rallied the French Quebecois population under the mantra of *Maîtres chez nous* (masters of our own house), seeking greater political autonomy for Quebec's distinct culture and identity from the rest of Canada. During this period, francophone identity was redefined and centred on the preservation of French language and nationalism, '[d]efence of the French language become the centrepiece of nationalism, replacing the Church and legal institutions ... for the survival of francophone society' (Dickinson and Young 2008, 305). These transformations were especially directed towards the traditional education system in Quebec, which was under the administration of the Catholic Church. Inspired by notions of economic progress, the Quiet Revolutionaries brought about 'a series of new educational structures that displaced Roman Catholicism from what had been a near-monopoly of clerical influence' (Gauvreau 2005, 247). These dramatic shifts, which displaced Catholicism with secularism and defined Quebecois identity along the lines of French language nationalism, inevitably resulted in a growing desire to seek greater political autonomy under a sovereign Quebec.

Sentiments over Quebec nationalism have often resulted in tensions between Quebec and the rest of Canada which have included two referenda geared towards Quebec sovereignty in 1980 and 1995. Through employing identity politics, which asserted the distinctiveness of Quebec society, as a means of political protection from being marginalised within Canada, Quebec engaged in 'Us-talk'. 'Us-talk' is a racially coded way of speaking aimed at preserving power and privilege (Bilge 2013). In the Quebec context, it has manifested through emphasising the distinctiveness of Quebecois culture and identity in contrast to the 'Other'. However, this exclusionary 'Us-talk' lost some of its political currency after Jacques Parizeau, the former Quebec Premier, made his infamous speech on the eve of the sovereigntist defeat in the 1995 referendum. In this speech, Parizeau openly blamed the referendum results on ethnic minorities voting against separation (Bilge 2013). However, recent events in Quebec have seen a rehabilitation of the exclusionary 'Us-talk' reminiscent of Quebec's past. The RA debates, as well as discussions over the proposed Quebec Charter of Values, were clear examples of how divisiveness and alienation of ethnic and religious minorities from Quebec society have come to occupy political discourses. These discourses were emblematic of the sensitivities surrounding the preservation of Quebecois culture through French secularism in the aftermath of the Quiet Revolution.

### Understanding French secularism in Quebec

French secularism, or *laïcité*, has traditionally been rooted in separating Catholicism from the state. In more contemporary times, it has been geared towards dichotomising Muslims as ‘Other’ in the French society. As Selby (2011) notes, ‘If during the first half of the twentieth century the separation of church and state was intended to displace Catholicism, in recent decades Islam has been increasingly depicted as the new challenge for French secularism’ (442). Within France, this dates back to the post-war era when there was a large increase of Muslim immigrants arriving from North Africa as unskilled labourers in the 1940–1960s (Selby 2011). The consistent growth of Muslim migrants over the decades have brought about tensions, as state discourses have framed Muslims as threatening to the French culture and society. This was apparent in the Stasi Commission Report published by the French Government in 2003, which examined the application of secularist principles in France. The report emphasised *laïcité* as a fundamental pillar of the French society and essential for national unity and cohesion (Stasi Commission Report 2003). However, the Stasi Commission Report positioned ‘Islam as overly “political” and “patriarchal” and describe[d] Muslim women as “oppressed” by their religious tradition’ (Selby 2011, 445). Additionally, the report associated Islam with polygamy, genital mutilation and forced marriages (Stasi Commission Report 2003). This report led to the French Government passing a law banning conspicuous religious symbols in public schools in 2004. The majority of cases in which the law was applied involved Muslim women wearing the headscarf (Al-Saji 2010). Hence, Muslims have become the direct targets of French secularism in contemporary times through discourses of ‘liberating’ Muslim women from their oppressive religious beliefs and practices. Drawing from the work of Fanon, Al-Saji (2010) argues that perceptions of Islamic symbols like the headscarf being threatening to the French society dates back to the colonial era.

In his critical work ‘A Dying Colonialism’, Fanon (1965) discusses the French colonisers’ project of removing the Muslim headscarf from Algeria in the 1930s. According to him, the colonisers perceived the headscarf as a cultural identifier and they believed that by eliminating the headscarf, they would be taking steps towards destroying Algerian culture in the colony. Dismantling Algerian culture was essential, as the colonisers viewed themselves in stark contrast to the colonised. According to Al-Saji (2010), ‘[t]he representational apparatus of colonialism not only constitutes the image of the “native” but posits this image in opposition to a certain self-perception of colonial society and against an implicit normalization of gender within that society’ (883). It is through this dichotomising gaze that a civilised self emerged in contrast to a barbaric ‘Other’. This perception of the ‘Other’ constructed the Muslim head veil as a deviation from the French society and was therefore deemed unacceptable. Similar instances of perceiving the *hijab* as ‘Other’ have occurred in

Quebec and have resulted in exclusionary discourses, as noted by Al-Saji (2010). She notes that, ‘in diverse contexts from France to Quebec, images of the veil have as their counterpart policies that enact the exclusion of veiled women’ (877). Hence, the Muslim head veil has come to symbolise opposition to the French culture and society. Notions of French secularism have combined with discourses surrounding gender equality to frame Muslims as a threatening ‘Other’ in the Quebec context (Al-Saji 2010; Bilge 2012). French secularism has greatly impacted Quebec’s integration model of interculturalism, which bears some similarities to Canada’s model of multiculturalism.

### **Multiculturalism, interculturalism and managing diversity**

To put interculturalism in context, we should recall that multiculturalism was instituted in Canada by Prime Minister Pierre Eliot Trudeau through the *Multiculturalism Policy* in 1971. This policy ensured that:

all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging. Acceptance gives Canadians a feeling of security and self-confidence, making them more open to, and accepting of, diverse cultures. The Canadian experience has shown that multiculturalism encourages racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding. (Government of Canada 1971)

According to Haque (2012), the *Multiculturalism Policy* as well as the *Official Languages Act* were enacted to engender a sense of belonging and to counter tensions building in Canada resulting from changes in immigration policy, Indigenous Peoples’ critical responses to the Federal government’s attempts to abolish the *Indian Act* and the growth of French language nationalism and sovereignty movements in Quebec in the 1960s and 1970s (Haque 2012). The changes in Canada’s immigration policies dramatically increased immigration. Hence, the *Multiculturalism Policy* was a means to manage the changing make-up of the Canadian society.

There have been a number of critiques of multiculturalism, which contend that it gives rise to the false notion that Western nations are living in a ‘post-race’ era. This implies that notable racial progress has been made and that we have now entered a phase in our societal development in which racism is a concern of the past (Barnes, Chemerinsky, and Jones 2010). Consequently, some critics charge that the notion of multiculturalism ultimately masks the racist past of these nations while simultaneously cloaking the existing inequities, alienation and prejudices that continue to impact racialised members of society (Hage 2000; Razack 2008; Thobani 2007). Additionally, embedded within multiculturalism discourses is the notion of benevolence and tolerance, both of which are problematic. The notion of tolerance suggests that some are in a position to tolerate, while others are tolerated – that there is a power relation between some who get to judge who should be ‘accepted’ into Canada,

on what terms, and others who do not (Hage 2000). The notion of benevolence in multiculturalism fails to acknowledge immigrant contributions to society. As Mookerjea (2009) explains, multiculturalism was instituted to:

obscure our significant and now growing dependence on the import of migrant labor without access to citizenship rights and to impede the formation of public class solidarities between social groups. But the neoliberal reforms of the last two decades have made it difficult to contain the contradictions. (188)

In other words, Mookerjea argues that multiculturalism is not an expression of beneficence, but rather it is a way of masking Canada's dependence on its immigrant populations for economic growth and prosperity.

Interculturalism is Quebec's integration model for managing racial diversity. It came about in response to Canada's implementation of its multiculturalism policies and has been promoted and in operation officially in Quebec since the 1970s (Waddington et al. 2012). According to Leroux (2010), the 1990 policy document *Au Québec pour bâtir ensemble: Énoncé de politique en matière d'immigration et d'intégration* best articulates the policy implications of interculturalism which has three main principles: 'French as the language of public life; a democratic society, where everyone is expected and encouraged to participate and contribute; and an open, pluralist society that respects democratic values and intercommunitarian exchange' (Gouvernement du Québec 1990, 16). One of the key differences between interculturalism and multiculturalism is the notion of a moral contract between newcomers and Quebec society, which suggests that Quebec's common public culture is at the forefront (Leroux 2012). The adoption of interculturalism as Quebec's official stance towards racial diversity as opposed to multiculturalism is rooted in the notion of self-preservation. As Waddington et al. (2012) state: 'Québec's opposition to multiculturalism is grounded in the belief that the Canadian Government's policy of multiculturalism is a betrayal of Québec's historical status within the Canadian federation and undermines Québec's grounds for seeking greater political autonomy' (314). As there have been ongoing tensions over safeguarding language and identity in Quebec, this approach ensured their preservation as a unique minority in Canada while it also offered 'a means of partial or limited integration within Canada, releasing the Québécois from the fear of loss of their linguistic culture while providing a sustainable means of remaining within Canada' (DesRoches 2013, 7). Thus, interculturalism takes a more assimilationist approach to integration of racial minorities in order to safeguard traditional Quebecois culture (Talbani 1993).

Some have argued that the differences between multiculturalism and interculturalism are political in nature and that ultimately whether one is dealing with multiculturalism or interculturalism, both are 'politicized tools for constructing national subjects' (Leroux 2012, 68). In this vein, Quebec, like Canada as a whole, engages in exaltation (Thobani 2007), the process of

attributing inherent qualities which characterise belongingness to the national imaginary, while excluding those who do not possess these qualities. This is evident as interculturalism promotes the notion of a ‘common culture’, the French white Quebecois culture being accepted as the norm and given prominence. It is a culture which does not evolve or change. It remains constant and stagnant, fixed in a particular construct of the French culture and identity excluding those who do not fit its mould. It is a culture that does not accept deviations and is therefore a culture of exclusion. As DesRoches (2013) observes,

[t]he terms set out by the intercultural policy ... offer only an exclusive inclusivity; explicitly, the model boosts diversity as central to the progress of Québec, however, diversity is only really acknowledged and promoted when it does not risk disrupting established power dynamics. (6)

Hence, interculturalism has been central to discourses of preservation in Quebec. As will be seen in the following section, the RA debates were a clear example of a resurgence of Quebec nationalist identity politics in contemporary Quebec society.

### **RA debates and its reverberations**

Some Western nations in recent years have displayed anxieties over the ‘Other’ and the extent to which immigrant populations should be integrated in society and their cultural/religious practices be accommodated (Mahrouse 2010). Quebec society is no different and these concerns and anxieties began to boil over in light of a series of highly publicised, and at times unsubstantiated (Leroux 2013), events regarding accommodating religious minority groups in Quebec in 2006 and 2007. According to Mahrouse (2010), the RA debates were preceded by a string of highly publicised cases including a Sikh boy wanting to wear a *kirpan* to school, an 11-year-old Muslim girl being disallowed by a referee from participating in a soccer match because of her *hijab*, as well as a synagogue requesting an adjacent YMCA to frost their windows so that women wearing tight fitting clothes would not be visible to members of the congregation. A few other incidents exacerbated tensions such as the Quebec Human Rights Commission ruling against a local French university, ETS, forcing them to accommodate Muslim students attending the school with a prayer room, as well as cases of disputes of pregnant Muslim women requesting women doctors in Quebec hospitals (Wong 2011). These incidents received widespread media coverage, despite representing a fraction of the RA cases in Quebec, as the vast majority of religious accommodation requests in the years leading up to the RA debates were from Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses (McAndrew 2010). In relation to this point, Potvin (2010) observes, ‘not only was media coverage disproportionate to the actual number of cases of

accommodation, but many newspapers ... increased the number of incidents “revealed”, thereby setting the stage for one-upmanship and media hype’ (79). Media representations of these overly publicised incidents created anxieties and fuelled fears over Quebec identity being threatened by the ‘Other’. Consequently, in January 2007, a small Quebec town, Hérouxville, adopted a ‘declaration of norms for immigrants’ geared towards its (non-existent) immigrant population. The declaration entailed the following:

- (1) At Christmas, children sing Christmas songs.
- (2) No stoning women.
- (3) No burning women with acid.
- (4) No ceremonial daggers in school even if you’re a Sikh.
- (5) Boys and girls can swim in the same pool whether Muslims like it or not.
- (6) Men can drink alcohol whether Muslims like it or not.
- (7) No walking around with your face hidden except on Halloween.
- (8) Female police can arrest male suspects even if it troubles their egos.
- (9) Women are allowed to dance.
- (10) Women are allowed to drive.
- (11) Women are even allowed to make decisions on their own.

As Mahrouse (2010) has noted, a number of these declarations appear to be banning practices commonly ‘associated with a perception of Muslim barbarism’ (86). The declaration, not so subtly, makes certain assumptions about the backwardness and incivility of Muslim immigrant communities while ironically whitewashing many of the manifestations of gender inequality, which continue to exist in Quebec society (Nieguth and Lacassagne 2009). Despite the distasteful nature of the declaration, which presumed immigrant populations – particularly Muslim immigrants – were barbaric and in opposition to ‘true Quebecois’ values, a number of other municipalities across Quebec adopted similar declarations (Mookerjea 2009). Much of the anti-immigrant fervour from the RA debates focused particularly on Muslim women as Mahrouse (2010) observes,

Although the debate was officially framed as being about secular versus religious values, the major preoccupation of the media reports on the Commission reveal that the overwhelming concern was not secularism per se but Muslim religious practice in Québec, in particular the wearing of the veil, which suggests that the oppression of Muslim women has come to be perceived as the greatest threat to Québec identity. (92)

Mahrouse (2010) further elaborates that the focus around Muslim women in the RA debates was framed around a discourse of secularism versus religions in a general sense. However, in the post-9/11 climate, these debates of secularism versus religion in Western nations have allowed for the policing of some

forms of religious expression and not others (Asad 2003). In other words, secularism was being used as a pretext to attack religions, the brunt of which was borne by Muslims.

As fears of the impending erosion of white francophone Quebecois culture and identity grew, political parties were able to gain ascendancy by politicising the debate over the accommodation of minorities in the March 2007 provincial elections. The Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ), which prior to these elections was merely a fringe third party overshadowed by the Quebec Liberals and the PQ, bolstered its reputation by being the first political party to take a strong and vocal position on the issue of RA, framing it as an issue of *unreasonable* accommodation for the white Quebecois majority. The leader of the ADQ, Mario Dumont, clearly articulated his party's views regarding accommodation of minorities in his *Open letter to the Quebecois*, published by all francophone dailies on 16 January 2007. As Leroux (2010) observes, Dumont engaged in culture talk (Mamdani 2005), depoliticising the nature of the RA debates and created a discourse hinging on the notion that the Quebecois nation's racial origins were at odds with those needing accommodation. Many of the principal points in this letter would later form important tenets of the party's platform, which according to Bilge (2013) was 'among the most anti-immigrant and pro-assimilationist party platform[s] witnessed in post-1960 Canadian politics for a long time' (168). Ultimately, what were initially a few isolated incidences of religious minorities seeking accommodations in order to practice their faith, a right which is protected in Quebec, became an occasion for the media and politicians to acquire gains. As Wong (2011) states, 'the media and the politicians saw an opportunity to draw in more readers and votes, respectively, and, as a consequence, collectively fanned the flames of racism in the public sphere' (147). This was particularly troubling, given that no one spoke out against the number of white Christian requests for accommodation, which far outnumbered the ones that were being sensationalised involving Muslims, of which some were claimed incidents and not proven (Leroux 2013).

In response to this perceived crisis over RA, the Quebec provincial government established a consultative commission in February 2007 headed by sociologist Gérard Bouchard and academic/philosopher Charles Taylor. The mandate of this consultative commission was to:

- a) take stock of accommodation practices in Québec; b) analyse the attendant issues bearing in mind the experience of other societies; c) conduct an extensive consultation on this topic; and d) formulate recommendations to the government to ensure that accommodation practices conform to Québec's values as a pluralistic, democratic, egalitarian society. (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, 17)

The final report was published in April 2008. The synthesis and analysis of the 300-page report concluded that the perception of Quebec identity being under

threat was erroneous and that the collective well-being of Quebec society was not in danger (Bouchard and Taylor 2008). On the one hand, some stated that the report produced a well-documented and thorough analysis of a number of pressing issues relating to RA, as a number of Arab and Muslim groups welcomed the recommendations of the report (CairCan 2008). However, Mahrouse (2010) argues, 'in a number of subtle ways, the Commission paradoxically perpetuated the racialised hierarchies and exclusions that it wanted to overcome' (88). This was most obvious in the consultation process. White French Quebecois would regularly vent their concerns over the loss of Quebec identity, nostalgically recalling the days when Quebec culture was uncontaminated by the 'Other', whereas immigrant groups would try to alleviate the fears of the white Quebecois majority reassuring everyone that they were not threatening and were committed to Quebec values and culture. Minority and immigrant groups:

were always on the defensive, having to justify their presence, and commitment to Quebec values, while French-Canadian Quebecois were in a position of granting validation and approval, in effect, acting as judges of what was tolerable and what was not. (Mahrouse 2010, 89)

Thus, instead of alleviating misguided fears and paranoia of the threatening 'Other', the consultation process served as a platform to reify positions of privilege and dominance by bringing to the surface the fact that certain members of Quebec society were able to define who did and did not belong.

Another way in which the Commission reinforced racial hierarchies was by shifting the debate over RA away from strictly legal issues to being symptomatic of problems related to Quebec's sociocultural integration model of interculturalism (Bouchard and Taylor 2008). The overall consequence of employing this approach led the Commission to give 'greater prominence to a general request for majority generosity and tolerance, rather than a demand that certain minority rights be upheld' (Mahrouse 2010, 90). In other words, existing power relations were reinforced. The white French Quebecois majority were in a position to show benevolence by tolerating practices of the 'Other', despite the fact that freedom of religious expression is a right guaranteed in Quebec and Canada (Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms 1976; Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms 1982). As the statement on the report's cover – 'dialogue making a difference' – suggested, the assumptions embedded in this report were that the debates over RA stemmed from ignorance and miscommunication and that by engaging in dialogue, these differences and problems could be resolved. What was absent from the report was an analysis of the power dynamics which framed the discourse of RA. Muslims have been further alienated from Quebec society through secular and liberal feminist discourses.

### Racism disguised as secular and liberal feminist discourses

A number of Western nations, including Quebec, have increasingly imagined themselves as champions of gender equality and sexual emancipation. This was evident when the Quebec National Assembly adopted a Bill in the aftermath of the RA controversies which gave gender equality precedence over religious freedom through the addition of the sex equality provision in the Quebec Charter of Human Rights, even though sex discrimination was already protected against in this Charter. Hence, gender equality has been given such prominence that it was the only one of Quebec's 'core values' that was 'in need of additional constitutional protection' (Bilge 2012, 309). This situation, as described by Bilge (2012), is a manifestation of sexualism. Sexualism can be understood as:

a contemporary discourse offering a teleological narrative of the secularisation process, believed to lead inevitably to gender and sexual equality. From the sexualist stand, religion is deemed unambiguously oppressive to women and non-heteronormative sexualities – an assumption that heavily relies on hierarchical binaries ... and produces the West as the site of gender equality and sexual emancipation thanks to secularism. (307)

Through a sexualist discourse, Muslims are seen negatively not only because of the association with the religion of Islam, but also because a number of Muslim women don the *hijab*, which in Western societies has become synonymous with misogyny and oppression as Mahrouse (2010) observes. She notes: 'The image of the veiled woman has long been captivating to the western imagination because she epitomises the oppressive practices of the Muslim world, thereby enabling westerners to understand themselves as liberated and, perhaps more importantly, as liberators' (Mahrouse 2010, 92). Underlying sexualist discourse is the notion that women have entered into a phase of modernity thanks to secularism. These gains need to be protected at all costs, hence religion, particularly Islam, is seen as an open threat to Quebec society because of perceived symbols of oppression like the *hijab*. This became apparent in the Bouchard-Taylor Commission proceedings over RA in which significant negative images concerning Muslim women wearing the *hijab* were circulated. Hence, these proceedings became a platform where 'the figure of the veiled woman conveniently served, once again, to position non-Muslim Quebecers as the epitome of progress and tolerance' (Mahrouse 2010, 92). What was strikingly absent from these discussions over the oppressive nature of the *hijab* were the voices of the women whom were supposedly oppressed. The irony of these discourses was that they claimed to centre on freedom and the liberation of women, while marginalising the same women who they sought to 'liberate'. This framing of the *hijab* as oppressive, according to Bilge (2010), is typical of liberal/universalist feminist discourses. These discourses surrounding Muslim women fail to address the reasons given by veiled women themselves

as to why they cover – reasons involving morality, modesty, virtue and divinity (Mahmood 2005).

In addition to framing Muslim women as passive and oppressed, liberal feminist discourses also framed Muslim men as dangerous and threatening. This frame was visible in Quebec society over discussions relating to ‘honour-based violence’ during the Shafia murder trial. In January 2012, the Shafia murders received widespread media attention, when Mohammad Shafia, his wife Tooba Yahya and their son Hamed were convicted of killing Shafia’s three teenage daughters and his first wife over their alleged immoral behaviour. Media reports mentioned how the teenage daughters’ rebellious behaviour, which included wanting to have boyfriends, clashed with their father’s more traditional Afghan cultural norms and eventually reached an impasse resulting in their deaths (Humphreys 2012). As opposed to framing this case as an instance of domestic violence, the media, the Crown prosecutors and even the presiding Judge insisted on this particular case being an honour-based crime (Dalton 2012). In the aftermath of this horrible crime, the Quebec Government mandated the Quebec Council for the Status of Women to examine the phenomenon of honour-based crimes. After studying 17 cases of honour-based violence in Canada since 1991, the Council provided the provincial government with seven recommendations to help stop honour-based crimes. These include:

- (1) Develop a policy to fight against honour-based violence in consultation with women’s groups and community organisations.
- (2) Develop an action plan that includes the following measures:
  - (a) Train all workers (including youth protection officials, police, judiciaries, teachers and medical professionals) who deal with people at risk of honour-based violence, including forced marriage and genital mutilation.
  - (b) Develop tools to help workers recognise the signs of honour-based violence and to help them evaluate potential risks.
  - (c) Inform women and minorities affected by honour-based violence about their rights and the resources available to help them.
  - (d) Increase funding for organisations that support women affected by honour-based violence, so that they can offer monitoring, extended accompaniment and adapted housing.
  - (e) Develop a strategy aimed at helping youth, such as a guide on how to prevent honour crimes or a guide on the rights of Canadians.
- (3) Review the strategy to fight against the practice of female genital mutilation.
- (4) Put mechanisms in place to protect immigrant women who have been sponsored by their spouses and inform them of their rights in cases of fraud or violence. Also monitor women sponsored by their spouses

- until they obtain their citizenship in order to ensure their safety and their rights are respected.
- (5) Examine the laws in place to ensure that children and adults who are threatened by forced marriages are protected by our legal system and, if necessary, ask the federal government to modify its legislation to ensure those protections are in place.
  - (6) Review the Youth Protection Act, the criteria for the evaluation and the intervention of the department of youth protection, keeping in mind the particular risks linked to honour-based violence.
  - (7) Co-ordinate the implementation of an outreach strategy to challenge the patriarchal concept of honour at the core of some of the communities in question and actively promote awareness about equality between men and women (CBC News 2013).

What was troubling about the publishing of these recommendations along with a report was not that action was taken to help prevent honour-based violence against women, as violence against women is a serious social ill and problem that continues to plague society. Rather, what was problematic was that the impetus for these actions resulted from the Shafia murder trials. Honour-based violence is not framed as a generic form of violence against women, but rather as a form of violence that originates in the perpetrator's culture. Honour killings are believed to be 'a foreign and imported phenomenon brought to Canada by immigrants who fail to assimilate to national and "western" ideals of gender equality, the crime is also viewed as an extreme form of violence that must be managed and ultimately expelled' (Olwan 2013, 533). The terms 'honour killings' and 'honour based-violence' are frequently used when Muslims or people who come from predominantly Muslim cultures commit acts of violence against women from their communities (Razack 2008).

Publishing a report specifically for 'honour-based violence' may have the unintended consequence of lessening the impact of violence against women that is not categorised as such. It was apparent from the Shafia murders that domestic violence when categorised as an 'honour killing' received widespread media attention and government involvement. However, do similar forms of gender-based violence enacted by other communities, including the white majority, receive as much attention by the media or the government? It is striking that the Quebec Government would go to the trouble of mandating an organisation to study, collect information and publish a report over 'honour-based violence', which has seen 17 cases in Canada over a span of 20 years (an average of less than one case per year), when in 2009 alone, there were over 18,000 cases of domestic violence in Quebec, 82% of which involved female victims (Sécurité Publique Quebec 2009). The unintended result of these fixations with 'honour-based violence' is a whitewashing of the realities of the violence perpetrated by men from non-Muslim communities, as well as the violence suffered by women belonging to non-Muslim communities. This

is highlighted by Olwan (2013), as she notes the contradictions littering policies revolving around honour killings in Canada, where the state has committed 'over \$2.8 million dollars to community projects targeting honour related violence while simultaneously stripping Native women's associations from funding crucial for their work' (549). Olwan was referring to the federal government's decision in 2010 to defund Sisters of Spirit, an association which worked towards exposing and ending violence against Native women (Olwan 2013). By labelling forms of domestic violence specifically as 'honour-based violence' when committed by men from Muslim communities, it creates a perception that this form of violence exists exclusively within the 'Other'. Pathologising honour-based violence as a uniquely Muslim phenomenon 'fails to address violence against women as a universal phenomenon, requiring shared strategies to confront forces of subordination at work in areas such as gender, "race", ethnicity ... religious discrimination and homophobia, all of which illustrate intersections of discrimination' (McKerl 2007, 187).

The Council, when providing their recommendations, explicitly mentioned that honour-based violence was not exclusive to any particular culture or religion, but their recommendations repeatedly refer to female genital mutilation and forced marriages, tropes often associated with Muslim cultures. They also emphasised the protection of rights of women from immigrant populations. What was clear from these recommendations was that non-immigrant communities were not particularly at risk of honour-based violence, even though honour-based violence and other forms of violence against women have the same basis, namely power, control, female subjugation, male patriarchy and a perceived sense of superiority resulting from gender discrimination (CWF 2012).

## Conclusion

In light of the preservationist agenda of Quebec political parties, the post-9/11 context has ushered in a barrage of incidents which have constructed Muslims as existing outside the nationalist space. This article has argued that the anti-Muslim sentiments, which circulated in the aftermath of the proposed Quebec Charter of Values, were symptomatic of underlying racial tensions towards religious and ethnic minorities, which pre-date Bill 60. The state policies of secularism and interculturalism, debates over RA, as well as secularist and liberal feminist discourses have framed Muslims as a threatening 'Other' to Quebec society.

Though the PQ lost its mandate in the April 2014 provincial election, and with it the ability to pass Bill 60, the fact remains that when the Quebec Charter of Values was proposed, most Quebecers did not oppose it. Polls indicated that the PQ was poised to win a majority government in the upcoming election after unveiling this proposed legislation (Hamilton 2014). Political analysts believe that the PQ's campaign began to unravel when prominent candidates began over-emphasising Quebec sovereignty as a basis of the PQ's

platform in place of the Charter of Values (Brean 2014), which resulted in the Quebec Liberal Party winning a majority government. Hence, the findings of this study indicate that fears over the cultural erosion of the white French Quebecois majority persist in Quebec and have been used by political parties to garner public support for discriminatory proposed legislations. These findings suggest the need to further explore bias experienced by Muslims in Quebec society and whether the imagined threat of the Muslim ‘Other’ has resulted in acts of racism and discrimination.

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