

Table of Contents

- ***Quebec Catholic school principal fights for right to teach religion course with faith***
 - ***Quebec ponders Turban, Kippa, Hijab restrictions***
 - ***Scholar Andrew Bennett to lead Canada's office of religious freedom***
-

Quebec Catholic school principal fights for right to teach religion course with faith

The National Post (29.10.2013) - Paul Donovan, the principal of a Catholic high school in Montreal, is in the midst of a cross-country road show. He wants to warn Canadians about what is at stake if Quebec's proposed Charter of Values becomes law and bans the wearing of religious symbols in public buildings. The principal of Loyola High School has been battling the provincial government in court for the right to teach a mandated religion and ethics course from a Catholic perspective. The province wants it taught without regard to any religion. In 2010 a Quebec Superior Court said the school had the right to teach a religion course from the perspective of its faith. Two years later an appeals court ruled in favour of Quebec; next year the Supreme Court of Canada will make a final decision. National Post religion reporter Charles Lewis spoke to Mr. Donovan, who began by linking his school's case with what he believes is the intention of the charter.

A: The charter and our case are both a reflection of how the government sees society. [We believe in the notion] that government should practise "open secularism." In that case the government has no preference for any religious view or non-religious view. And the job is to have a society in which all ideas and beliefs can develop and grow. But Quebec is now moving towards "closed secularism," in which the government says not only are we secular but we want society secular as well. And religion moves back into the homes and the churches and stays out of the public square all together.

Q: Some say that because you receive a government subsidy you should do as Quebec asks. How do you respond?

A: The subsidies are a complete non-issue in this case because in Quebec the course has to be taught whether funded or not. But even if you want to view it as Loyola taking "secular" funding it shouldn't matter. We still teach math, English, French, history. So we are doing what Quebec wants all schools to do.

Q: So you have no trouble in promoting pluralism, which is the stated aim of the course?

A: We are in agreement with those goals. We just want to teach it from a Catholic point of view. Quebec wants us to keep any explanation out of why people believe what they believe. You are supposed to say this is what they believe and that's it. The government requires that when you're dealing with other religions that the teacher in the classroom completely disassociates himself from any religious perspective or religious value. So we can never say, 'As Catholics, we see this...'

Q: What if a student raises the questions about Catholic perspective. Are you allowed to answer?

A: No. The government wants statements about religious belief to be absolute. They're not to be argued. They cannot be seen as rational. In Catholicism, St. Thomas Aquinas said reason is the first step to faith. So we are not allowed to be who we are.

Q: Religious literacy is pretty low in Europe and North America. Wouldn't this course, even taught the way Quebec wants, at least give students some basic knowledge they might not get otherwise?

A: I guess they're trying to find a way to let the students in a secular school gain some religious literacy — though I would argue if it's just religious culture it's not really literacy because nothing is really being explained.

Q: Let's broaden this out. Even at a societal level, whether it is in Quebec or elsewhere, religious arguments on policy seem to be ignored or even greeted with hostility. Even so-called secular arguments made by a religious person are met with suspicion of a "hidden agenda." Why do you think that is?

A: I teach philosophy to Grade 11 kids. And one of the first things we do is go over logical fallacies. It's also called 'poisoning the well.' It says, 'I'm going to assume because your view is also religious that this is really a religious argument so none of it's valid.' So a Catholic can't argue anything, even from a secular perspective, because they'll be told, 'As a Catholic, of course you're going to say that.' It doesn't look at the argument and ask whether they are valid arguments. Instead they're automatically dismissed because the person is religious.

Q: So what does this ultimately mean for the place of religion in society?

A: What it's saying is if you have a religious outlook you can't serve the common good. Under the charter someone in the Quebec government would never be able serve the common good if they were religious. So the charter would remove any indication that the person is religious by banning outward symbols. It's the same argument about why we can't do the program the way we want. You have a religious view so therefore you can't serve the common good. You as a Catholic can't possibly inform kids about other religions.

Quebec ponders Turban, Kippa, Hijab restrictions

The Canadian Press (20.08.2013) - Quebec has launched its next debate on minority accommodation — and this one could make the erstwhile soccer-turban ban look like a leisurely stroll down the pitch.

The government is preparing to introduce long-awaited, controversial legislation that would restrict religious symbols in numerous places.

A media report Tuesday with leaked details of the Parti Quebecois government's "Charter of Quebec Values" said the proposed policy will prohibit public employees from donning Sikh, Jewish and Muslim headwear or visible crucifixes in the workplace.

The particulars drew swift condemnation from political adversaries and from a well-known philosopher, who likened the plan to the human-rights abuses of Vladimir Putin's Russia.

The Parti Quebecois minority government hopes to cash in at the ballot box by championing a "secularism" plan that polls have suggested has considerable support in the province.

So the fiery debate that erupted over a recent ban on wearing turbans on Quebec soccer fields offered a sneak-peek of what could be in the political pipeline for the national assembly's fall session.

The turban ban was lifted by the Quebec Soccer Federation due to external pressure that included unflattering headlines abroad. Inside Quebec, however, Premier Pauline Marois rushed to the defence of the soccer federation and accused its detractors of Quebec-bashing.

Political opponents quickly cast Tuesday's leak as a PQ "trial balloon."

The newspaper report said the PQ government is set to restrict public-sector workers in places like daycares, schools and hospitals from wearing religious symbols such as turbans, niqabs, kippas, hijabs and highly visible crucifixes. Some institutions, however, will be free to request exemptions from the government, according to the report.

The PQ's approach was roundly condemned Tuesday by civil-rights experts, including an outraged Charles Taylor, the internationally renowned philosopher who co-versed over Quebec's 2007 commission on the accommodation of minorities.

Taylor told The Canadian Press such measures would have a devastating impact on Quebec's reputation in the world and he feared it would keep entire communities out of public-sector jobs because of their religious convictions.

He said to find a comparable level of systemic exclusion, one would have to look to Russia.

"In Russia, if you believe that homosexuals should have the same rights as others you cannot be open about it. It would be considered propaganda, it's a type of crime of conscience," Taylor said.

"If we look at what is proposed here, for sure it does not go as far, but it says that if you have certain convictions you are a second-class citizen because those who have such convictions cannot apply for (a job) in the public sector."

The province, he added, would isolate itself if the PQ government digs in and moves forward with the policy.

"I challenge you to find another country in the hemisphere where we have this kind of exclusion," Taylor said. "There are countries much more diverse than ours, like Brazil, that will find this appalling."

He argued that it's one thing to ban a teacher from wearing a burka, because an impediment to clear face-to-face communication could have an impact on other people — namely, the students.

But he condemned a wall-to-wall, draconian approach.

If the Marois government drives forward with the legislation, it would likely face court challenges under the Charter of Rights, said Montreal human-rights lawyer Julius Grey.

"The type of secularism that is being promoted goes beyond what is acceptable," he said in an interview, expressing hope that the plan would be struck down.

The PQ has already said it wouldn't hesitate to fight the courts on the matter, including using the Constitution's notwithstanding clause to override any verdict.

It has, in fact, stated rather bluntly that it would gladly wage a legal battle up to the Supreme Court over the issue — and would hope to use the clash with Canadian institutions to stir up support for its main cause of independence.

Past opinion polls have suggested such policies enjoy broad public support with voters in Quebec. A majority have told pollsters they supported the turban ban and also viewed hijabs and kippas as a cultural threat.

What's less clear is how the policy will hold up in the long term, in two key arenas: the court system, and the ballot box.

There's no guarantee the minority government could get the policy through the legislature or win an election on it.

In the legislature, the policy would need the support of one major opposition party and both the Liberals and Coalition Avenir Quebec have reacted coolly — especially the Liberals.

There's no evidence yet that the issue is an election-winner, either.

Even if the PQ's approach proves popular, other polls suggest that only a minuscule sliver of Quebec voters actually care about this as an election issue — and that what really drives the Quebec electorate are bread-and-butter issues like health care, education and the economy.

A Leger Marketing poll during last year's election campaign listed immigrant integration as a top electoral priority for a paltry one per cent of respondents — at No. 15 on voters' list of issues.

Other identity issues hardly fared better in that poll. Sovereignty was the 10th most-commonly cited issue, and the protection of French was at No. 12.

Health care, by comparison, was the No. 1 issue, cited by 35 per cent of respondents when asked to choose their top two most-important issues.

Lowering taxes, fighting corruption, school fees, creating jobs, trimming down the civil service and protecting the environment — all were among the issues ranked higher by the 1,648 respondents to the online poll.

The PQ had already campaigned last year on a promise to introduce what was originally dubbed the "Charter of Secularism."

The Marois government has since rebranded the plan as a charter of "Quebec values" — with those values including gender equality and secularism.

Liberal leader Philippe Couillard has dismissed the idea in the past and shrugged it off Tuesday as a "trial balloon."

He called it the PQ's attempt to divert the public's attention away from economic issues.

The province has seen its economic, political and demographic clout plummet within Canada as it bleeds people to other provinces, year after year, and fails to attract and retain immigrants at the same rate as faster-growing provinces.

The fate of the values charter will likely be decided by the Coalition party.

Coalition Leader Francois Legault criticized the Marois government for going too far, saying he would try to propose a middle-ground solution that falls between the approaches of the PQ and Liberals.

Grey, meanwhile, said he doesn't agree with the inevitable conclusion drawn by those who will paint Quebec as an intolerant place.

"In fact, it's one of the most open and tolerant societies," he said.

He does believe, however, that the proposal swerves the PQ away from the party's tradition as a defender of human rights. He recalled the PQ's battles for gay rights in the '70s and '80s under the leadership of Rene Levesque.

"I hope this (policy) doesn't get passed, I hope people realize that that isn't either what Quebec is about, or what the PQ is about."

Scholar Andrew Bennett to lead Canada's office of religious freedom

CTV News (19.02.2013) - The federal government has appointed a Christian college dean to head up Canada's new, controversial Office of Religious Freedom.

Andrew Bennett, the Catholic dean of Augustine College, a Christian liberal arts school in Ottawa, has been tasked with promoting religious freedom around the world and monitoring persecution of religious minorities.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper had promised to establish the office as a branch of the Department of Foreign Affairs during the 2011 federal election campaign.

Harper announced Bennett's appointment at the Ahmadiyya Muslim community centre and mosque in Vaughan, Ont., Tuesday afternoon, where representatives of different faiths had gathered.

The prime minister described 40-year-old Bennett, who has also worked for the Privy Council Office, as a "scholar, a man of principle and deep conviction."

"Most of the countless men and women who are prosecuted for their faith are not known to us by name, but to them we say Canada will not forget you," Harper said. "When you are silenced we will speak out, we will use our freedom to plead for yours."

Bennett told reporters he's looking forward to "taking on this great challenge."

"It says a lot about the government wanting to promote this aspect of human rights," he said.

"It's (about) building awareness about the issue of religious freedom abroad; it's about interacting with the various communities here in Canada who are in the diaspora from these areas where religious freedom is not respected."

But human rights groups and opposition critics have said the Office of Religious Freedom is a misguided attempt to inject religion into foreign policy.

They also questioned what exactly it can accomplish with a modest \$5-million budget.

"The Office of Religious Freedoms, as introduced today, represents both a broken Conservative promise and a missed opportunity," NDP's foreign affairs critic, Paul Dewar, said in a statement.

"Conservatives had repeatedly promised a democratic development agency, but they broke that promise and now they're moving forward on a much more limited and narrow approach."

Interim Liberal Leader Bob Rae agreed that religious freedom is an important value, but questioned how the newly created office will fit into Canada's broader efforts to address human rights issues.

"I'm concerned that we shouldn't see this as an exclusive focus," he told CTV's Power Play. "This has got to be part of an overall approach."

Rae also said the values of certain religious groups may not include "a lot of other values that Canadians in fact hold dear: equality between women and men, sexual orientation as a basic principle and the right to be yourself."

Others expressed concern that the Office of Religious Freedom may focus too much on Christians because the man leading it is a Catholic.

"I think it does raise questions about whether or not this government is biased toward Christian groups," said Amira Elghawaby, the human-rights officer with the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations.

But Harper said he wants to make it "very clear that this is not an office to protect a particular religion."

"This is an office to promote religious diversity and tolerance around the world."

Don Hutchinson of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada said the fact that Canada has opened its doors to immigrants from all kinds of religious backgrounds should quell any concerns about favouritism.

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney, who joined Harper for Tuesday's announcement, along with Minister of International Co-operation Julian Fantino, told Power Play that Bennett can "develop an expertise" on religious persecutions that can better inform Canada's foreign and immigration policies.

Asked what Bennett can do besides publicly condemn specific incidents, such as attacks on Egypt's Coptic Christians or Tibetans in China, Kenney said: "even making statements is nothing to be sneered at."

Kenney said the idea to create a religious freedom office was inspired by Pakistan's minister for minorities, Shabaz Bhatti, who was killed in 2011 shortly after meeting with Harper in Canada. Extremists had accused Bhatti, a Christian, of violating Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

While Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird, who's in the middle of a six-country tour of Latin America, wasn't on hand for Tuesday's announcement, he has been involved in many high-level meetings with religious figures over the last year and a half.

Baird has held consultations in Rome, with the head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Turkey and with the U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom.

The U.S. religious freedom office was put in place under the Clinton administration.
