



# The English Speaking Catholic Council

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## Le conseil catholique d'expression anglaise

### **REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN QUEBEC**

Recommended for an op-ed

English-speaking Catholics are more than 385,000 strong in Quebec (42% of all English Quebecers) and are an active presence in this society. We are an ethnically diverse group with roots deep in Quebec history. Along with aboriginal English-speaking Catholics, we are also descendents of numerous migrant families who fled from poverty or persecution to make their home in Quebec. Over the generations, a lively tradition of intermarriage fostered innumerable bonds of kinship between English and French Catholics.

From its origins, the English Catholic community lived and developed in communion with Quebec's French Catholic Church. Notwithstanding our minority status, our diverse ethnic cultures, schools, hospitals, social services, and religious associations were allowed to grow and flourish.

The existence and vitality of Quebec's English Catholic community is rarely noted by the wider public. Yet our members have made significant contributions to the social, professional, intellectual, and political life of Quebec and Canada. Since the English Catholic experience cuts across the normal Quebec partitions of faith, culture, and language, it can offer a distinctive perspective on current debates about diversity and accommodation.

Our community welcomed the evolution of modern Quebec society away from a society excessively governed by one religious tradition. But we do not share the hopes of some for a society dominated by "radical or integral secularism." Neither extreme is acceptable nor warranted in Quebec as a liberal democracy.

We are particularly concerned about threats to religious freedom. In recent years, prominent public critics have denounced religion as a source of conflict and bigotry. They argue for the need to deflate and demote religious freedom claiming that it is a stumbling block to the advancement of more basic human rights. This form of secularism would suppress religious freedom in order to enforce conformity to the politically correct values of the day. We believe that the imposition of a heavy-handed secularism would provoke needless social tensions and costly conflicts rather than social tolerance and peace.

Respect for religious diversity is a foundation for the development of a truly pluralistic liberal society. The “fundamental right” of religious freedom is enshrined in our constitutional charters of human rights and freedoms, and has been hailed as the cornerstone of the liberal human rights tradition.

Proposals to suppress religious freedom pose a real threat to the healthy development of liberal democracy. We believe that Quebecers need to renew and reaffirm our commitment to this foundational human right. Religious freedom liberates us from the long history of the persecution of minority religious groups. It celebrates the deep diversity of human life and protects the vibrant co-existence of very different conceptions of human flourishing within society. It defends voices of resistance to authoritarian claims on the part of secular or political elites. Religious freedom protects vulnerable faith communities from coercive state intervention and control.

We recognize that there are justifiable limits of religious freedom, but we reject attempts to establish a trump right over religious freedom. On the question of gender equality and religion, we note that strong statements affirming the fundamental equality of women and men can be found in all of the major religions of the world today. However, most religions also wed the affirmation of gender equality to a recognition of the critical significance of sex difference in the social ecology of human life. Herein lies the real disagreement. For some, any affirmation of the significance of sex difference betrays a flawed and discriminatory view of gender. They wish to enshrine a particular ideology of gender equality into our constitutional charters.

Finally, the detractors of religion paint a negative picture of religious belief and practice. We invite them to come and visit Quebec’s diverse religious communities. Sober scientific research links religious commitment to many positive indicators of personal and social wellbeing. Religious affiliation and involvement are correlated with higher rates of civic involvement, higher rates of charitable giving, reduced rates of delinquency and substance abuse, reduced rates of marital conflict, higher levels of parental investment, and reduced risk of depression and suicide. Religious communities are usually on the front lines in the reception and integration of immigrant communities and they provide important support networks for sectors of the society that are at risk due to marginalization, poverty, age, or ethnicity.

Detractors of religion argue for the suppression and marginalization of religion by playing on fears of religious extremism. Such fears are misplaced. We believe that a more constructive approach to Quebec's future requires a balanced assessment of the substantial contributions of Quebec's diverse religious communities to social wellbeing and more innovative forms of collaboration with these vital sectors of Quebec's civil society.

Clifford Lincoln, President

And other members of the Board of Directors  
The English Speaking Catholic Council  
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