

Brief on Bill 21, An Act respecting the laicity of the State

Submitted by

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I am a public high school teacher. I teach math, science, and Ethics and Religious Culture in a wonderful and diverse public high school in the English Montreal School Board. In our school and in my class everyone is treated equally and respectfully, regardless of their religion, skin colour, or sexual orientation.

I am also a married Orthodox Jewish woman. I wear a head scarf in public, at all times. Contrary to what some Bill 21 proponents like to claim, the Jewish religion is not just about how you feel in your heart. In fact, we have a set of 613 commandments. We are expected to perform them to the best of our abilities. One of these commandments is to walk with modesty. For Orthodox Jews, this means a man must wear a Kipah and a married woman must cover her hair.

If Bill 21 becomes law, and the government asks me to remove my kerchief for work, it is not simply asking me to leave my identity at the door. It would be asking me to change the way I practice my religion. To break a requirement of my faith.

Some say Bill 21 will unite Quebecers. It will help people to better integrate into Quebec society. In my view, it will have the exact opposite effect. If I were about to become a teacher and was refused employment at a public school because of my kerchief, I would end up teaching at a private Jewish school. I would have less opportunity to meet others outside my community, less opportunity to break out of my little bubble. I was fortunate that I had the choice to work in a mixed environment. The new generation of teachers in my position will be deprived of that choice.

I also feel that I have something to contribute to, and to gain from, the larger society by interacting with people who are not exactly like me. If men and women wearing religious

articles are barred from entering their chosen professions, Quebec will become less integrated, not more.

Some have said that my kerchief will make my students want to convert to my religion. But to speak frankly, that would be absurd. Actually, Jewish religious tradition strictly prohibits proselytizing.

I personally believe in and support the neutrality of the state and the public education system. What I would like however, is for students to say "This teacher is proud of who she is, and she is not afraid to show it. I should also be proud of who I am, be proud my identity. I can walk with my head held high, and not be ashamed, even if I am different from others."

While I am deeply troubled by the impact of Bill 21 on teachers, present and future, what bothers me most about Bill 21 is the message we will be forced to give to our current and future students. My school runs an annual career exploration program for all grade 9 students. Students are encouraged to interview people who have jobs that interest them, to spend a day with their parents at work, and other activities directed at encouraging them to think about the type of careers they may be interested in pursuing. If Bill 21 is enacted, the person teaching that class next year will have to say, "All of you have a bright future ahead of you, follow your dreams, the sky's the limit. But before you follow those dreams, read the fine print in Bill 21. Because you over there wearing the cross, you in the hijab, you wearing the Kipah, you with the turban, you may have to re-think your career aspirations. Or consider leaving the province." Is this the message we really want to be giving our students? Let's hope that when Quebecers take the time to think about what Bill 21 means, they will say "no way."

Carolyn Gehr, teacher