

## State Secularism

In November 2013, the Canadian province of Quebec's ruling party introduced Bill 60 in the Quebec National Assembly to enshrine secularism as an official value of the Government of Quebec.<sup>1</sup> If adopted, Bill 60 would ban all public-sector employees from wearing "conspicuous" religious symbols such as large crosses for Christians, headscarves for Muslim women, turbans for Sikhs, and any other religious symbol deemed by the government to be conspicuous. This would apply not only to all public sector workers, but also to private workers who had Quebec government contracts. Furthermore, under Chapter III #7 of Bill 60, "Persons must ordinarily have their face uncovered when receiving services from personnel members of public bodies."<sup>2</sup>

Not only may these provisions violate the rules of some religions, detractors counter that the bill would disproportionately affect certain religious groups.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the opt-out provisions that are allowed are targeted at universities and hospitals receiving public funding, which in Quebec are predominantly Catholic. Adding to the controversy, the bill was introduced in the meeting chamber of the Quebec National Assembly, which contained a large Catholic crucifix, justified as a symbol of Quebec's heritage. Although the government has offered to let lawmakers vote on whether or not to keep the crucifix if Quebec adopts the secular charter, its removal was not in the bill itself.<sup>4</sup> Thus, opponents argue that the provisions of the bill essentially separate Quebec citizens along religious lines, giving preferences to the Catholic Quebecois majority.<sup>5</sup>

Proponents of the charter point out that it is meant to promote equality between men and women since some religious customs require women to cover more of their bodies than men. Additionally, advocates say that the charter would protect the rights of all by ensuring government neutrality in religious matters.<sup>6</sup>

### Study questions:

1. Should a government be allowed to require its employees to abide by policies that cause them to violate their religious beliefs?
2. Is it morally permissible for a government to put restrictions on religious freedom? If so, in what circumstances is it permissible? If not, why not?
3. Should the government be able to require citizens to violate their religious beliefs in order to receive government services?

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/quebec-government-tables-controversial-values-charter-1.1531854> <sup>2</sup><http://www.nosvaleurs.gouv.qc.ca/medias/pdf/Charter.pdf>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.montrealgazette.com/life/Highly+qualified+Muslim+immigrants+face+employment+discrimination/9463890/story.html>

<sup>4</sup><http://o.canada.com/news/updated-values-charter-parti-quebecois-considers-removing-crucifix-from-legislature/>

<sup>5</sup><http://o.canada.com/news/philippe-couillard-over-my-dead-body/>

<sup>6</sup><http://www.nosvaleurs.gouv.qc.ca/medias/pdf/Charter.pdf> (Full text of the Charter)

