

The Imperative of our Time: To Build a Compassionate Society

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**Bishop's University / Champlain College
Refugee-Student Sponsorship Committee**

Group/organization submitting the brief:

Bishop's University / Champlain College-Lennoxville Refugee-Student Sponsorship Committee is a private sponsorship group under the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) Refugee Sponsorship Program

Our interest in the consultation topic:

As a group that has been involved in sponsorship of young refugees here in Quebec for the last fifteen years, we have had many occasions to observe and reflect on the challenges faced by refugee youth as well as other newcomers in the process of adaptation to Quebec society. It is our hope that our experience may yield useful insights regarding the themes of concern to the Commission.

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It is our belief that the notion of accommodation is inadequate to describe the approach to intercultural relations that must be taken in a changing world, and that only an individual and collective movement in the direction of an ethos of care will support the process of transformation we envision for the province of Quebec. This text explores our proposition beginning with our understanding of the context and a presentation of our thesis. The thesis is then developed through a presentation of insights from the experience of refugee students, a description of the role of education, and finally, an exploration of why our society must evolve beyond a *rights model*.

Context

The context for this consideration of the issue of “reasonable accommodation” in Quebec is multifold and includes recognition of a number of undeniable realities that provide a backdrop for discussion of immigration in Quebec. First, it must be recognized that in our era of globalization, the world grows increasingly smaller and the peoples and cultures in it more closely connected to each other. Human migration is a dominant feature of this world; thus more and more people straddle or float between two (or potentially more) cultures.

Second, extraordinary cruelty is commonplace throughout the world. Although it is far more extreme in some places than in others, ultimately, it does not respect national

boundaries and everywhere has a devastating effect on the human personality and potential as well as on the potential future of humankind. People everywhere seek escape from cruelty and under the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* are entitled to a social order that will insure protection from it.

Finally, in the context of the above, Quebec needs and wants immigrants. Demographic evidence suggests that its future development depends on immigration. In addition, the Quebec government has embraced the international obligation to protect refugees through resettlement. However, in recent years, more immigrants and refugees have come to Quebec from non-Western parts of the world and many Quebecers seem ambivalent about whether they need or want these people.

Broad Thesis

The fundamental moral imperative of our time is that all humans care for one another. When one regards the extraordinary cruelty noted above, it becomes clear that the future of humankind demands that each person challenge cruelty by reaching out to other human beings with openness, empathy and loving kindness. Likewise, every society must take responsibility for developing a moral ethos founded on this imperative, one that we choose here to call an *ethos of care*. It is by the way we choose to care for each other in our own society that we demonstrate who and what we are and at the same time help the world move from cruelty to compassion thus creating the future that all humans want. Just as it should guide our behaviour toward each other, this ethos must then guide our efforts to embrace those who come newly to our shores. With them as with each other, we need to speak not of

accommodation but of openness, empathy and loving kindness. Doing so, we will find answers to the questions about cultural practices that trouble us.

This imperative of our time calls on us, as Quebecers, to overcome our fears of difference and to rethink our most basic values. It also calls on us to remember that our [European] ancestors came to North America as interlopers with no claim to this land and subdued its first peoples through the force of their collective will, religion and weapons. Even today, these first peoples in our land remain, to a great extent, outsiders to our society. The reality is that as a society we have not always been “accommodating” of perceived “outsiders”, and never have we been guided by an ethos of care. Nonetheless, now, in the 21st century, new challenges call on us, as on all humanity, to find a new way of being in the world. What are we to do?

Our Experience and our Vision

The experience of fifteen years of sponsorship of refugee youth has provided the Bishop's/Champlain Refugee-Student Sponsorship Committee an opportunity to glean some lessons regarding the obstacles and paths to development of a society founded on a moral ethos of care. First, our experience indicates that a degree of integration into Quebec society happens at a superficial level as immigrants grow to understand and learn to accommodate themselves to local norms. Deeper, genuine integration [that is, development of an identity as a Quebecer] does not happen so readily. The young people we sponsor tend to form friendships with each other rather than with native born Quebecers. What are the barriers to deeper integration? One is simply the huge gulf in life experience that separates refugee

youth from native born peers. All of the refugee youth have experienced great suffering in their lives and had to struggle to survive, to cope with loss and grief and to keep their dignity. Most know more about religion and take religious faith far more seriously than their Canadian peers. In addition and perhaps related to their life experience, most refugee students we sponsor generally have conservative values with regard to social behaviour and may be reluctant to embrace a society with very liberal values. Most resist the free sexual behaviour characteristic of many Canadian youth. Like native born Quebecers, they fear loss of their values. Most do not expect to be understood by their peers. Hence they smile a lot but keep their own counsel.

It is quite understandable that newcomers in a society gravitate more toward each other than to native inhabitants. They have a shared experience of having left part of their lives behind, sometimes of having similar cultural backgrounds and of being outsiders. Logically, they may find companionship and comfort in each other. In addition, in this shrinking world with its huge migration flows, many people will indeed simply float between cultures, embracing elements of more than one, thus challenging the very definition of “membership”. Whatever the explanations, with respect to Quebec, this reality may condition the way native Quebecers and newcomers experience each other and make understanding of and care for each other more difficult.

To a great extent the problem appears to be one of communication, no easy task for people whose life experience is so different. Efforts by newcomers to reach out are sometimes met with [probably unintended] negative signals. The problem, as a member of our sponsorship group put it, is to overcome those misconceptions by “finding a connection”,

an avenue for communication that allows genuine relationship to develop. The catalyst for its development, in our experience, is usually shared activities that diminish the cultural distance between newcomers and natives. By preparing a dinner, playing on a soccer team or struggling to complete an assignment for a course together, they *begin* to develop the level of comfort and confidence [on both sides] that permits deeper communication and eventually, for newcomers, the feeling of belonging in their new society. Still, unless these activities are guided by the moral ethos set forth at the beginning of this paper, the ultimate objective simply will not be achieved. Real communication is possible only where openness and empathy exist.

As members of an academic community, our experience has also taught us that education can play a crucial role in fostering this moral ethos of care. Among students on our campus and people in our community, ignorance [not ill will] remains the greatest single reason for lack of comprehension of the difficulties related to being a newly arrived refugee in Canada. Most people simply have no knowledge or even awareness of the situations from which these people come. There are many misconceptions regarding what a refugee is and why refugees have come to Canada as well as about their life experience and cultural/religious background and beliefs. Because of the misconceptions, there is sometimes little empathy for refugee youth. Most of our sponsored students have had experiences of racist attitudes in the course of daily life in Quebec. However, our experience tells us that when native born Quebecers have real knowledge of the situations from which our students come, they become more empathic and caring.

It is therefore our belief that there is a need for education at all levels so that Quebecers have better knowledge of human rights, world geography, religions and cultures and political issues. We have remarked that few students coming to CEGEP have studied the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the cornerstone of the Canadian constitution and conception of human rights, as well as the *Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms*. Few understand their importance in our law and society; thus they are unable to take an informed position regarding how to balance the rights contained in these documents. While there is no single answer as to how rights should be balanced (a view that will be developed further later in this paper), appraisals based on knowledge and on an ethical framework will definitely be more comprehensible to newcomers as well as more defensible morally. In this way, newcomers are less likely to be subjected to judgments that are irrational and insensitive and will be more likely to appreciate the character of the society they are joining.

In addition, as a group that is associated with a university that trains future teachers, we are aware that the Government of Quebec *has already gone through an elaborate process* of defining the role of education in a changing world. The education policy that resulted from the reforms initiated in the 1990s defines the current role of education as that of preparing students to deal with the reality of the 21st century. This includes explicit reference to understanding globalization and its impact on relations, economies and cultures. Through the educational reforms, tools exist to allow educators in the public and private system at the Elementary and Secondary levels to assist youth and young adults to be better informed and able to understand the ethical dimensions of questions of human rights. For example, components of the new provincial curriculum call on educators to increase students' knowledge of the world, including territorial issues and social phenomena, to understand the

spirit of the laws and charters, to develop students' critical thinking abilities, and to focus on themes such as *tolerance* and *the future of humanity*. Among its other aims, the new curriculum is intended to enable teachers to lead students to “develop an attitude of openness to the world and respect for diversity”¹ Unfortunately, the policies, charters and curriculum programs – in and of themselves – will not guarantee that students will become better able to take informed positions regarding globalization, human migration, the many situations of cruelty of humans toward each other and the changes in Quebec society, all of which provide the context for understanding the need for an ethos of care. If education, therefore, is the means through which our society is to move beyond expressions of ignorance, misinformation and fear, then the Government must train educators to take the required leadership. Only an effectively prepared, engaged and committed educational community can insure that education policy, programs and associated documents are used for the ends we have described.

Ultimately, if education and teachers are to play a crucial role in fostering the moral ethos of care, teachers themselves must first reflect critically on their own values and beliefs. Empathy can be developed in a classroom setting, but only if the teacher models it, reinforces student demonstrations of empathy in the classroom, points out its significance and provides examples of the impact on others when empathy is not evident. Empathy cannot be taught as a concept – disconnected from reality; it must be part of the fabric of classroom life. Teachers, therefore, must be supported through a process of critically examining their beliefs about the purpose of education. In sum, the current discussion of reasonable accommodation

¹ *Quebec Education Program. Secondary Cycle Two*, Chapter 2, pg. 13. Ministère de l'Éducation, Gouvernement du Québec (2007).

clearly demonstrates that a concrete plan for developing empathy through education is essential.

Finally, along with examining the role of education in fostering the moral ethos proposed here, we must consider the role and importance of the culture of human rights and the conception of civic community that Quebec has embraced, at least in theory, over the last half century. We speak often of the importance of human rights in our society. Philosophically, rights are sometimes thought to be ranked, some being thought of as more “basic” or “fundamental” because they are needed in order to claim other rights. However, they are also thought to exist in clusters. Thus, for example, the right to life precedes all other rights but at the same time is supported by a host of other rights.

In a society founded on civic rather than religious, cultural or ethnic identity, those rights that foster participation in the civic community are logically given greater importance than those based on religious, cultural or ethnic claims. *Equality of all citizens to participate fully in building the society* is fundamental to a community founded on civic identity. The right to practice a religion or to preserve a cultural heritage, while important, may be considered less *fundamental* than equality within this context. Although historically strongly influenced by Catholicism, increasingly Quebecers think of Quebec society as a civic community in which membership is based on acceptance of civic more than religious or cultural values. Better understanding of the concept of civic community and the rights and responsibilities pertaining to it can provide guidance to those seeking to balance the claims of all the various groups that make up Quebec society.

However, our vision of society is somewhat different. The concept of civic community, when combined with the ethos of care, requires that we develop beyond the culture of human rights and think in terms of what will create well-being for all. *All*, it must be emphasized, includes *all* – newcomers and “natives” (which includes first peoples as well as descendents of less recent immigrants) of all persuasions. If we Quebecers are sincere in embracing the concept of civic community and identity, our definition of “all” needs to be expansive, inclusive and egalitarian. There is no place in it for “us” and “them”. Furthermore, this vision (for “vision” it is) of Quebec society asks that we speak not simply of concern for the well-being of all but of the need for openness, empathy and loving kindness for all, a lofty goal perhaps but ultimately absolutely essential if one accepts the global context described in our introduction. To go back to the observations of the students in our sponsorship group, the point is that all Quebecers, not only those born here, should feel that they belong in our society.

Realistically, conflicting claims will arise, and given that it is not a relativist conception we are embracing, not all claims will be judged equally valid. Everyone will find it necessary to make concessions at one point or another. However, in the society we envision, the motivation for asking people to forego claiming certain rights will arise not from coercion, fear or the demand for conformity. Instead, decisions around claims will be driven by the desire to build a society in which each member feels the confidence needed to be able to participate fully and to fulfill his or her potential as a human being. In addition, it will be understood that answers to questions about the limits of rights (e.g., about how much freedom to express one’s religious or cultural identity should be permitted), though not relativistic, are truly multidimensional. They will depend on context (situation and

relationships), will not be controlled by any single group within society, will not be absolute or always the same since (sometimes the “well-being of all” demands one conclusion and sometimes it demands another), and in all cases, will consider “the well-being of all” in its long-term as well as immediate sense.

Concluding Comments: A Model that Demands Personal Engagement

The vision of society described here and the moral ethos that underpins it need to be better understood and willingly embraced by all Quebecers. They also need to be better communicated to newcomers. Clearly, the best way to communicate any moral framework is not to prescribe but to model it, that is, to live it. As noted in this paper, both a long process of education and concerted efforts to reach out to fellow human beings are necessary in order to move our society in this direction. However idealistic, we wish to imagine an ongoing transformation of our society, one in which *everyone* can participate, one which all will come to embrace and one that will contribute to creation of a world free of cruelty. Once again, we Quebecers, as individuals and as a society, need to speak not of “accommodation” but of openness, empathy and loving kindness and to look within ourselves for this transformation. Our years of experience working together as a small community to build new lives tell us that it is possible.