

Faith as a Factor in Integration

Why Faith Still Matters for the Integration of Immigrants

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About the Author



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About Cardus Spirited Citizenship

Cardus Spirited Citizenship studies the ways in which Canadians work together to strengthen our shared social fabric. In particular we study charitable giving in Canada, city structures and networks, and creative ways to measure in dollar terms what faith communities contribute to their surrounding neighbourhoods.

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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, thank you for coming together to consider a question that is both old and urgent: Does faith still matter to integration in Quebec?

Being a good Canadian, I must begin with an apology. It is presumptuous for an outsider, *une tête carrée* [a squarehead] from Alberta, to speak about some of the most fraught issues in Quebec society.

So why am I here? First, I have deep respect for the work of Cardus, Canada's only think tank that understands that "man does not live by bread alone." Cardus is almost unique in Canadian public policy discourse in recognizing that the human person is more than *homo economicus* and that the common good cannot be achieved without acknowledging that we possess an inviolable dignity, created in the image and likeness of God. At a time when we see an increasingly aggressive and intolerant secularism, and growing attacks on human dignity—such as the banalization of killing the elderly and the vulnerable through Medical Assistance in Dying—the questions asked and perspectives offered by Cardus are more needed than ever in Quebec and in Canada. That is why I am delighted that, with this conference, Cardus is launching a much-needed presence in Quebec and is doing so in collaboration with respected organizations such as the Quebec Interreligious Consultation Table.

Second, while I am an Albertan, I am first and foremost a Canadian. A Canadian who has always understood that French Canada, Quebec, is the cradle of Canada, the font of our history, identity, founding language, and, for centuries, a shared Christian faith. Indeed, in my own province of Alberta one encounters everywhere the vast role of French Canadians in establishing the first European communities, hospitals, schools, churches, and institutions. For example:

- Fort Vermillion, founded by the voyageurs of Montreal's North West Company in 1788, forging early commercial relationships with Indigenous peoples of the region.
- Our first hospital, founded by Quebec's Grey Nuns in Edmonton in the 1890s.
- The essential role of Father Albert Lacombe, known to the Blackfoot people as Man with a Good Heart, for his work as a peacemaker between the Blackfoot and the Cree, and between Indigenous peoples and the Crown.

The vibrant cultural, religious, and commercial energy that poured out of Quebec in earlier centuries helped shape much of Canada, including the Prairie West, and for that I am grateful. That is part of why, the night I was elected Premier of Alberta, I spoke to a rally of conservative activists in French for several minutes, calling for a renewal of the historical relationship between Quebec and Alberta as defenders of the 1867 Constitution and the powers and prerogatives of strong provinces within the federation.

Finally, I believe I have some insight to offer on questions of faith and integration in Quebec, in part because I served as Canada's Minister of Multiculturalism for nearly a decade and was the longest-serving Canadian Minister of Immigration in history. That put me in close, sustained contact with Quebec's cultural, ethnic, and religious communities and had me work closely with the Government of Quebec, including a Péquiste government, given our joint responsibility for the immigration system and the integration of newcomers.

Let me begin with words I shared while representing the Government of Canada at the opening ceremony of the International Eucharistic Congress during the four-hundredth anniversary of the founding of Quebec:

> We must recognize that, in many ways, Canadian history was moulded for centuries by the Church. Courageous and selfless women and men, motivated by their love of Christ and their neighbours, built Canada's first schools, hospitals, orphanages, welfare programs, colleges, and more, as the sinew of civil society. And indeed, in many ways the Church is better positioned than any other part of civil society to help shape our future, as there is no institution that more fully incorporates the ethnic and racial diversity of contemporary Canada than the Church.

Here is a concrete example that connects the past with our diverse present and future. As Premier, I regularly attended Mass in French at a beautiful parish across from Alberta's Legislature, named Saint Joachim. The oldest continuing Catholic parish in Alberta, it was founded by Quebec Oblates. Today, nearly the entire Francophone congregation is made up of new Canadians from Africa, who are renewing the faith that was central to the lives of French Canadians there for well over a century.

One of the congregants at Saint Joachim is my friend Dicky Dicamba. Dicky immigrated to Canada, via France, in 2008. He immediately observed poverty and exclusion among many fellow newcomers. Rather than passing the buck to the state, he founded l'Association des Volontaires unis dans l'action au Canada, a charity that has delivered thousands of food hampers to struggling families, operated a mobile community kitchen, helped connect the underhoused to affordable housing, provided mentorship to help newcomers with credential recognition and finding jobs, and much more. Dicky and his team of energetic volunteers are driven by the same faith, love, and charity that drove the Grey Nuns, the Ursulines, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Louis, the Oblates, and so many others to a life of service, throughout the history of Quebec and Canada.

Historically, we know the great work that churches and faith communities have done in integrating immigrant communities, supporting refugees, and teaching French and English to newcomers. In the twenty-first century, in a society in which fewer people attend religious services or have a religious affiliation, and where the official policy of the state is oriented to *laïcité* [secularism], is there still a role for faith communities in integration? My answer is not nostalgic. It is pragmatic, historical, and forward-looking: Faith communities remain among Quebec's most effective partners for integrating newcomers, if public policy gives them room to serve, and if those communities lean in to both hospitality and French-language civic formation.

That is Quebec's story at its best. It is also a Canadian story about constitutional imagination and human dignity lived locally.

Government has responsibilities to help integrate immigrants into Canadian society, yet faith communities are among its most essential partners. Mosques and parishes, synagogues and gurdwaras do what government cannot do alone: They welcome in relationship. They build trust, teach language around kitchen tables, mentor newcomers, and mobilize volunteers, faster than any grant cycle. They are not competitors to the state, they are civil society complements that turn policy goals into concrete outcomes: learning French, finding jobs, overcoming loneliness, and practicing civic habits.

This is not an argument to abandon a secular state, nor to confuse neutrality with cultural amnesia. It is a call to remember that institutions of meaning, religious or otherwise, are schools of citizenship. They teach the duties that make rights sustainable: love of neighbour, gratitude, reciprocity, service. Alexis de Tocqueville saw this clearly: "It is despotism that can do without faith, not liberty." Authoritarian regimes can rely on coercion to force behaviour, including cultural assimilation. In free and democratic societies, we depend on voluntary institutions and common beliefs to build the values we need for social functioning, and faith communities are among the most important of those. In other words, democracies rely on reservoirs of moral energy that the state cannot manufacture. Quebec, more than most places, knows how to harness those energies without sacrificing a common civic frame. Quebec's distinctive path since 1774 demonstrates a durable truth: Confidence in who we are and what we believe is the condition for generosity toward those who arrive.

Today, I want to show how faith has been a factor of integration in Quebec's past, how it can be again in the present, and how, with thoughtful policy, it should be in our future. My thesis is this: When the secular state is neutral and confident, and when faith communities are hospitable and aligned with Québécois and Canadian values, newcomers do not hover at the edges of society; they become participants in the common good. This is not a dream. It is a memory of what has worked, and a map for what can work again.

Deep Roots of Diversity in Quebec's History

Long before "diversity" became a fashionable idea, the British Parliament adopted the *Quebec Act* of 1774. This was a deliberate choice to protect the French language, civil law, and the free exercise of the Catholic faith within an empire that was English, based on common law, and Protestant. It was not sentimental, it was statecraft, a prudent accommodation aimed at loyalty and peace in a fragile province. The *Act* stipulates that "The inhabitants of Quebec may profess the Roman religion, under the supremacy of the King." Under this *Act*, institutions of identity, parishes, schools, and charities were recognized rather than erased. It said that the path to civic unity ran through respect for deep loyalties, not their forced assimilation. It marked Quebec out from both the later French model of anti-clericalism and strict *laïcité*, and the rougher assimilationist instincts that periodically surfaced in other parts of Canada and the United States. The *Act* wagered that you build allegiance with the grain of a people's convictions.

For many other North Americans, the Crown's accommodation of the French language and Catholic faith of its Quebec subjects was a bridge too far. The *Quebec Act* was one of the "intolerable acts" that the American revolutionaries rose against, and Quebeckers helped the British resist the American invasion of 1775.This wager prefigured a recurring Canadian pattern: accommodation as a means of integration. It is not weakness; it is prudence grounded in human nature. When a people's cultural identity is threatened, they become defensive; they cooperate when what they cherish is granted a legitimate place in a shared home. The *Act*'s recognition of Catholic institutions ensured continuity of social services, education, and charitable life, networks that would later become pathways for newcomers long before government programs and settlement agencies existed. This approach, refined across centuries, offers a lesson. Where the state frames a common civic language and protects core liberties, faith communities do not threaten unity, they thicken it. In that sense, the best parts of Quebec's 1774 legacy are not museum pieces. They are a template for integrating difference into a shared polity, one we can adapt to today's plural realities.

After the 1837–38 rebellions, Lord Durham arrived with a surgeon's knife. He famously wrote, "I expected to find a contest between a government and a people: I found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state." His remedy tilted toward assimilation, under a legislative union between French-speaking Lower Canada and English-speaking Upper Canada. Canadians did not follow Durham's prescription for assimilation. The political tradition that followed, from Baldwin and La Fontaine's grand ministry of 1848 to the Macdonald–Cartier partnership decades later, worked a different logic. Canada's leaders chose balance within shared institutions rather than cultural erasure. Responsible government took hold. Reforms in education, law, and administration were pursued by coalitions bridging Canada East and Canada West.

Accommodation continued. In Lower Canada, where the school system had been organized on English Protestant and French Catholic lines, bilingual and English-speaking Catholic schools were established to accommodate the children of Irish immigrants. Measures for the relief of Irish emigrants fleeing the potato famine were among the first legislation of the Baldwin–La Fontaine ministry. Baldwin and La Fontaine did not demand uniformity before cooperation, they organized cooperation despite difference, and in doing so proved that you can have a sturdy common life without burning down your cultural house. That lesson scales. A nation is not a clone factory. It is a negotiated civility backed by fair laws and practiced virtues.

Macdonald and Cartier pushed the same insight further as co-premiers. The way to govern a divided polity is to institutionalize partnership. That requires clarity about fundamentals, today the primacy of French in the public realm, and also a generosity that invites minorities to see themselves inside the story. The message for our present is simple: Vigorous identity and open accommodation are not enemies. They are the dials we must tune together if we want newcomers to become protagonists rather than permanent guests.

Durham's line remains a caution and an encouragement. It warns us what happens when we misdiagnose pluralism as pathology, and it encourages us to keep practicing the art that

saved Canada from sterile assimilationism: institution-building that respects language and law while welcoming the institutions of meaning that help people belong.

Postwar Pluralism

Jump forward a century. After 1945, Quebec welcomed tens of thousands of immigrants from war-torn Europe: from Italy and Portugal, from Poland and Eastern Europe. These waves of immigrants were later joined by newcomers from Vietnam, Latin America, and beyond. Many of these immigrant communities were historically Catholic, and parish life supplied on-ramps: mutual aid, catechesis and community, sports leagues and sewing circles, help finding rooms and jobs. The Montreal Catholic School Commission (CECM) offered children stability, however imperfectly, in a time of rapid change. The moral vocabulary of Catholic schools and parishes—service, gratitude, duty—echoed the values of many home countries and helped families translate private virtues into public participation.

For decades, however, the Commission channelled Catholic newcomers into the Anglophone Catholic network, and ethnic parishes were created in the English Catholic sector. This was intended to promote faith and cohesion, but it also slowed entry into the Francophone mainstream. "Until the 1950s, the CMEC encouraged the integration of Catholic immigrants into English Catholic schools [...] which had the effect of delaying their integration into the French-speaking majority." With the Quiet Revolution came a greater effort to bring new immigrant communities into the Francophone mainstream. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Montreal and provincial educators developed *classes d'accueil* [welcome classes], intensive language-and-civics on-ramps for newcomer students that would later be generalized after Bill 101. This pivot reshaped the educational landscape from a parallelism of Catholic sub-systems to a Francophone civic integration model in which faith-based networks increasingly aligned their ministries, tutoring, childcare, and job-search help, with the *fait français* [French fact].

The practical lesson is clear. Faith communities adapt when the state sets a clear, fair civic horizon. Parish halls and community centres turned into after-school programs. Hospitality committees became mentorship pipelines to employers. Clergy served as cultural interpreters for principals and municipal officers. When aligned with provincial priorities, religious networks generate both bonding capital, by creating care and trust within communities, and bridging capital, by helping immigrants reach out with language skills and job referrals. This twofold capital is what makes language and culture stick, not just as lessons in the classroom but in everyday life.

With the *Charter of the French Language* (1977), Quebec spoke with institutional clarity, as the Bill's preamble states: ". . .the National Assembly recognizes that French is the only common language of the Québec nation and . . .[wants] to make French the language of integration." That sentence is not a slogan, it is strategy. A shared public language is the condition for a confident pluralism. Faith-based actors adjusted accordingly. Diocesan services and congregational charities added francisation, conversation circles, and job-readiness workshops. Community

associations hosted CV clinics in French. Youth ministries became tutoring clubs. The goal was not to create parallel societies, it was to equip families to thrive in French, at school, at work, and at city hall. The state sets the compass; civil society walks with families along the path. This pivot to francisation deepened after subsequent reforms that reinforced French as the official and common language and reaffirmed the goal of integration. Where religious networks align to that horizon, the results are practical: parents who can talk to teachers, apprentices who can talk to supervisors, newcomers who can serve in French on municipal committees or in local non-profits. That is not cultural coercion. It is civic empowerment.

There is a wider civic lesson. Integrating newcomers is rarely a single "course." It is a culture of welcome that extends from the classroom to the lunchroom, from the parish kitchen to the start-up incubator. In those spaces, French is not only taught, it is used to plan a fundraiser, to solve a neighbour's problem, to run a small business. That is how language becomes habit. The more we structure public policy to tap those civil-society energies, including faith communities, the more we make French an everyday instrument of belonging rather than a barrier to overcome. That is what Quebec's language policy, at its best, invites us to do.

While earlier waves of immigrants were mostly Christian, Quebec's demography has diversified. On the 2021 Census, 5.1 percent of Quebec's population identified as Muslim, concentrated in urban centres. This is an ordinary fact of being a global city and province open to the world, and it can be an opportunity for civic renewal, not division. In practice, mosques and Muslim associations have invested in newcomer orientation, youth activities, language help, and open-house outreach, echoing the parish model of practical integration of an earlier generation. The Centre culturel islamique de Québec expresses this in its mission, proactively offering services that respond to Muslim identity and that favour integration into Quebec society. Other Muslim institutions describe similar aims, bringing together Muslims in the region, fostering social-cultural life, and promoting good relations with other institutions.

We must also describe challenges honestly. Serious research has demonstrated the hiring barriers faced by Quebeckers of Maghrebi origin. A 2017 study in the Quebec City area, in which 404 CVs were sent to 202 postings, half with French-sounding names and half with North African–sounding names, found a 49 percent net discrimination rate against equally qualified applicants for the same administrative roles. Related studies point to a lack of foreign credential recognition, language expectations, and name-based screening as factors that block entry before talent can be recognized.

Why raise this in a speech about faith? Because integration is relational. When doors to work remain shut, trust erodes and communities become defensive shelters rather than launchpads. Many Quebeckers have expressed concern about the possibility of ghettoization or isolation of religious minorities, which can in turn encourage religious extremism. We can see this vicious cycle in parts of Europe, where social exclusion and failure to integrate in certain communities has led to radicalization, backlash, and deep social tensions. Those risks exist here. The response to discrimination cannot be sermonizing alone. It must be design. Transparent hiring practices. Anonymized CVs in key agencies. Practical mentorships. Clear credential pathways. Partnerships in which mosques, parishes, and employers co-create pipelines into the labour market, *en français*. In short, faith communities can offer the hospitality, but the wider society has a

responsibility to ensure that jobs and opportunities are open to all, just as newcomers have a duty to integrate, which means moving beyond ethnic or religious silos.

We need to keep both sides of that partnership alive: a culture of welcome and belonging, and fair opportunity for those who come. Only then will we see newcomers who are not merely resident, but neighbours and citizens who renew our civic life, start businesses, volunteer at schools, join city committees, and make French not just a language they learn but a language they lead in.

Interculturalism, Bouchard–Taylor, and Bill 21: The Debate Over Identity

Quebec has articulated a distinctive model of integration rooted in French as the common public language and in dialogue among cultures, often called "interculturalism" as opposed to the Canadian and wider Anglosphere notion of multiculturalism. Interculturalism is not a formal statute but it has informed programs and debates for decades. It seeks mutual recognition, fairness, and shared civic commitment.

Even though I was the federal Minister responsible for Multiculturalism for a decade, I was sympathetic to the Quebec concept of interculturalism. In fact, I revamped the federal program to replicate much of Quebec's approach, moving beyond a superficial celebration of diversity to emphasize the duty of newcomers to integrate, to develop official-language literacy, and to cultivate civic literacy and primary loyalty to their new country. In both the Multiculturalism and Citizenship programs, we stressed that Canadian pluralism requires unity in diversity. It does not have space for aberrant cultural practices such as honour crimes, the mistreatment of women, or the transmission of ancient hatreds, prejudices, and conflicts.

The Bouchard-Taylor Commission in 2008 offered a roadmap for what I call authentic pluralism, *la laïcité ouverte* [open secularism]. This means state neutrality toward religion, that allows room for citizens' public religious expression. Their report puts it succinctly: with *la laïcité ouverte*, neutrality belongs to the state, not to the faces of citizens. Then came Bill 21 in 2019. Its Article 1 states the principle without ornament: "The Quebec state is secular." The law restricts religious symbols for certain public employees. Whatever one's view of its justification, one effect has been to narrow pathways into teaching and other public-sector roles for visibly observant minorities: for example, hijab-wearing Muslim women, turbaned Sikhs, or Orthodox Jews.

So where does that leave us? Hopefully not in a culture war but seeking a better balance between the public sphere and personal belief. The state can be secular and hospitable. Schools can be neutral and welcoming to difference. A confident French-speaking public sphere does not need to police the conscience of those who serve in it. We can debate where the line should be drawn. Perhaps a judge should not be permitted to wear religious symbols while on duty as a symbol of state authority. Does that mean a hijab-wearing woman cannot work at the Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec? That was the Bouchard-Taylor intuition.

Calibration will not be achieved by slogans. It will be achieved by measurable outcomes, language mastery, civic participation, hiring equity, and proportional rules that keep citizens of faith inside the story of Quebec, not outside the classroom door.

An Agenda for Renewed Integration

So, let's conclude by considering what an agenda for renewed integration could be.

First, re-embrace interculturalism's promise. Quebec should draw on the Bouchard-Taylor synthesis: French first as the common language, a secular state that is neutral toward faith but not hostile, and an open public space for citizens who are religious and citizens who are not.

Second, partner with faith-based groups on francisation and jobs. Build on the *Charter*'s preamble, "to make French the language of integration," by scaling up French-language conversation circles and creating co-op-style employer partnerships with faith communities. Track outcomes in language learning, job placement, worker retention, and wage growth.

Third, tackle discrimination with data and design. Track outcomes and publish dashboards in language learning, job placement, worker retention, and wage growth. Speed up recognition of foreign credentials (something I worked on for years as Minister of Immigration). Expand anonymized CV screening and structured interviews in high-impact agencies. Tie procurement points to verified fair-hiring practices. The evidence of discrimination is strong; design fixes exist that can mitigate it.

Finally, celebrate our deeper history. Teach Quebec's civic arc, from the *Quebec Act*'s prudential accommodation, through Baldwin–La Fontaine and Macdonald–Cartier, to modern interculturalism, as a shared patrimony of generosity under law.

None of this requires us to resurrect older systems of religious dominance or to paper over real disagreements. It asks Quebeckers to be who they are at their best: a French-speaking civic nation with a neutral state, allied to vigorous communities that help strangers become neighbours and neighbours become citizens.

A Challenge to Cardus and Civil Society

If there is a single through-line in Quebec's story, it is this: confidence and charity together. From 1774's accommodation to post-war immigration, from the linguistic debates of the 1960s and 1970s to recent debates over religious symbols and identity, the lesson repeats itself. When we are confident in our language and fair in our law, we can be generous in our welcome.

So here is my invitation to Cardus in Quebec and to every parish, mosque, synagogue, and temple represented in this room. Make your religious communities not simply places of worship but hubs for language learning and for integration into employment and civic participation. As Pope Francis has said many times, our task is "*abattre les murs et construire des ponts*," "to tear down walls and build bridges." This should be our goal as people of faith: to build bonding capital within communities, and not to hide behind the walls of the church or mosque but to build bridges to the wider society.

If faith communities and civic institutions help dismantle real barriers to participation, so that newcomers can learn French, find employment, and participate fully in society, Quebec will not merely manage diversity. It will renew a common life worthy of its history.