THE REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION DEBATE: MANIFESTATION
OF THE SHIFTING NARRATIVE OF QUÉBÉCOIS CULTURAL
IDENTITY

By

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Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate that the reasonable accommodation debate, which reached its height in Quebec from 2006 to 2008, can be seen as a manifestation of the shifting narrative of Québécois cultural identity. It will be argued that this debate triggered an intense period of deliberate examination of the cultural narrative with subsequent changes to official discourse in response. Theories and methods used in Cultural Studies scholarship will be emphasized. The discussion will examine the historical foundations of Québécois identity, as well as the more recent political context and in particular the government-mandated commission (The Bouchard-Taylor Commission) which was created to study the issue and make recommendations. Three key provincial newspapers are analysed for their coverage of questions related to cultural identity within the context of the Commission. I will establish that the stage was set for the debate by the heightened climate of threat created by media coverage of the September 11, 2001 bombings in the United States and other events relating to Islamic terrorism. Orientalist discourse was widespread and visibly non-Christian groups, in particular Sikhs and Hassidic Jews, became articulated or connected to the fear of the Islamic “other”. I conclude that although power remains firmly in the hands of the Catholic, francophone majority, the hegemony of the current narrative of cultural identity has been destabilized and is in the process of shifting slightly to accommodate the concerns and interests of the province’s subordinate groups.
Section 1 - Introduction

The definition of the concept of culture is an elusive one but has been said to be concerned with shared meanings (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 3). Stuart Hall states that:

To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and `making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways. (as cited in Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 3)

Similarly, cultural identity can be described as a continually shifting description of ourselves (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 30). Barker argues that the plasticity of identity is manifested as the ability to talk about ourselves in a variety of ways and leads us to a form of cultural politics centred on the re-description of persons and social situations (p. 28). However, although identities are unstable, they are temporarily stabilized by social practice and regular predictable behaviour (p. 31).
The collective identity of francophones in Quebec has undergone significant shifting in the past, from being that of colonizer, to that of a people colonized first by the British and then by their descendents, the English-speaking Canadian elite. During the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, French Canadians rejected the authority of the Catholic church and the English ruling class and fashioned for themselves a proud, francophone Québécois\(^1\) identity, to replace the French Canadian identity of the past. The French language was the key terrain of this battle. Strong legal measures were taken to protect and promote it, and hundreds of thousands of people, mostly unilingual anglophones, fled the province (Schmidt, 2002).

More recently, during the 1990s, the narrative of a unified Québécois identity began slowly to become unsettled due to challenges posed to its hegemony by both recent immigrants and long-established residents of non-Christian religious backgrounds. The first significant event took place in 1994 on the subject of the Islamic headscarf. In a case that attracted media and public attention, a student was expelled from a Montreal public school for wearing the headscarf, which was considered in violation of the school’s dress code (Berger, 1994). The Quebec Human Rights Commission was asked for its opinion and thus published, in 1995, *Religious Pluralism in Québec: a social and ethical challenge* (Bosset, Cloutier, Garon, Lortie, & Rochon). It concluded that

\(^1\) In general, Québécois will be used to refer to old stock francophones, while Quebecer will be used to refer to all residents of Quebec.
prohibiting the Islamic headscarf would not be compatible with the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (p. 30). This ruling did not resolve the nervousness felt in certain quarters with respect to the headscarf as it was associated with women’s inequality and Islamic fundamentalism. A more general debate over the place of religion in the public sphere was thus launched.

Subsequently, a number of highly mediatised cases of requests for accommodation by members of non-Christian minorities served to anger and trouble the francophone majority. The publication in 2007 of an inflammatory code of conduct entitled “The Standards” (Standards) by the small town of Hérouxville was the catalyst which prompted Jean Charest’s Liberal government to establish the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences led by sociologist Gérard Bouchard and philosopher Charles Taylor (hereafter referred to as the Bouchard-Taylor Commission). Although the name of the commission made reference to cultural differences, in reality religious differences were the contested site of this struggle as members of non-Christian religious groups, often immigrants and visible minorities, sought to see themselves reflected in Quebec’s narrative of cultural identity.

1.1. Objective

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that the reasonable accommodation debate can be seen as a manifestation of the shifting narrative of Québécois cultural identity. While changes to the narrative of cultural identity are often subtle and take place slowly over
time, it will be argued that the reasonable accommodation debate triggered an intense period of deliberate examination of the cultural narrative with subsequent changes to official discourse in response. I will establish that the stage was set for the debate by the heightened climate of threat created by media coverage of the September 11, 2001 bombings and other events relating to Islamic terrorism. Orientalist discourse was widespread and visibly non-Christian groups, in particular Sikhs and Hassidic Jews, became articulated or connected to the fear of the Islamic “other”.

1.2 - Methodological Approach

In order to give adequate treatment to this subject, it will be necessary to historically contextualize the reasonable accommodation crisis in Quebec, beginning with a discussion of the foundations of Québécois identity. Media coverage of recent provincial, national and international events that have fuelled the debate will also be examined. In addition, articles published in several Quebec media sources during the time of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission will be studied at the macro level using approaches from critical discourse analysis and grounded theory in order to reveal recurring themes (Barker & Galisinski, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Furthermore, the discourse of the political elite and government discourse will be analysed in an attempt to expose the interests at play and the effect of the debate on government policy.
1.3 - Theoretical framework

A number of theories will inform this discussion, with an emphasis on those used in Cultural Studies scholarship. Barker and Galasinski’s conception of cultural identity as a continually shifting narrative will be of central importance. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, which holds that “cultural domination is the product of complex negotiations and alignments of interests” (Turner, 2003, p. 54), and an “unstable balance” (Morley & Chen, 1996, p. 422) where leadership is obtained by the winning of consent, by making concessions and compromises with respect to the interests of the subordinate groups (p. 424) will also be of particular value as an explanatory framework. Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism which holds that the East has signified danger and threat since the 1950s (1979, p. 26) will be helpful in explaining the strong public reaction to the requests for accommodation. In addition, psychological theories of threat, group conflict and identity (Esses, Dovidio, & Hodson, 2002) overlap with Said’s Orientalist theory to explain the backlash against visibly non-Christian groups in particular. Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation, which considers that a connection can make a unity of two different elements under specific conditions (Barker & Galasinski, 2001, p. 51), is helpful to understand how heightened fear of the threat that some considered Islam posed to Québécois identity at this historical juncture, became generalized as a fear of many non-Christian signs of religious difference, particularly those exhibited by orthodox Sikhism and orthodox Judaism.
1.4 - Limitations

The analysis will be limited by several factors. It will be based on the researcher’s knowledgeable but outsider (i.e. anglophone) perspective on Quebec culture. While I am fluent in Quebec French, it is possible that some subtleties in the literature reviewed may be overlooked. Due to time and resource constraints, the research was based solely on documentary sources. The Eureka.cc database was used to gain access to Canadian French-language media. Although media sources were selected in order to be as representative as possible, no small regional newspaper was available through this database. A small regional newspaper may have shed greater light on the views of Quebecers outside of the major urban areas. However, three sources were reviewed: Le Devoir (daily broadsheet distributed nationally and aimed at an intellectual readership), La Presse (daily Montreal broadsheet aimed at a middle class readership), and Le Soleil (Quebec tabloid daily). In addition, due to the thousands of items available on the reasonable accommodation debate, the data set was reduced by refining the search terms to: “accommodements raisonnables et Bouchard et Taylor et identité et cultur*”. Therefore, the media review is focused specifically on items that dealt with issues of cultural identity and reasonable accommodation within the context of the Bouchard-Taylor commission. Finally, it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in an analysis of the potential impacts of the Canadian federal system of government on the cultural policy of Quebec and the identity of Quebecers.
Section 2 – Historical Context

2.1. Early European Settlement

Turning first to the historical context, i.e. where the foundation was laid for Quebec cultural identity, the evidence indicates a fairly homogeneous French population that evolved in relative isolation from contact with other Europeans. In 1534-35, Jacques Cartier landed at Gaspé and took possession of the area, which was inhabited by several thousand First Nations and Inuit, for France. Permanent settlement began in 1608, when Samuel de Champlain established a community at the present-day site of Quebec City. Fifty years later, the settlement had a modest population of approximately 3,200 people (Quebec, 2009, Early history to 1860 section). With respect to the indigenous population, France adopted a policy of assimilation to the French language and culture in order to strengthen the colony. This policy attests to a surprising level of confidence in the French culture given that the Native population dominated the French overwhelmingly in number (Belmessous, 2005, p. 323-325).

By the time of the British conquest (1759-1760) the population of New France was about 65,000. Although immigration from France ended at this time, the conquest did not spark a wave of British immigration. This was not encouraged by the colonial administrators for fear of complicating the situation in the newly conquered French, Roman Catholic territory (Troper, 2007, para. 3). Nonetheless, the very high birth rate among French Canadian and Acadian Catholics resulted in significant gains in the francophone population, which increased from seventy thousand in 1763 to one million in 1860 to four
million in 1961 – despite the outmigration of one million French Canadians to the New England states between 1840 and 1930 (Quebec, 2009, Population composition section). A high birth rate was strongly encouraged by the values propagated by the Roman Catholic Church, which disapproved of abortion and contraception, and widely preached that procreation was the first aim, and duty, of Catholic marriages (Bélanger, 2000a, para. 6). Of the total population of Quebec today, nearly half are descendants of the 10,000 original French settlers (Quebec, 2009, Population composition section), thus partaking in a long, shared history.

2.2. The Quiet Revolution

In the western world, the 1960s represented a period of questioning and change of the previously established social order. Quebec was no exception to this phenomenon. The term “Quiet Revolution” refers roughly to the period from 1960-1966, during which the newly elected Liberal government of Jean Lesage embarked on a number of important initiatives which were considered revolutionary by some (Belanger, 1999, Quiet Revolution). Until that time, three principal elements were considered necessary to the survival of French Canadian cultural identity: maintenance of the Roman Catholic faith, preservation of the French language, and the safeguard of distinctive institutions such as the French Common Law system (Belanger, 2000b). The Quiet Revolution would see the diminishment of the Church’s importance.
The Quiet Revolution also brought about significant changes in the narrative of cultural identity. Of foremost importance, cultural identity became firmly associated with a geographical territory, delimited by the boundaries of the province of Quebec. Thus, the narrative shifted from a reference group called French Canadians, to the creation of two categories of francophones: *les Québécois* and *les francophones hors Québec* (the francophones outside of Quebec). Being resident in Quebec did not make one Québécois. “Les anglais” were identified as the dominant “other” while concern over immigrants and ‘ethnics’ began to be felt. Being Québécois also became linked to the political project of sovereignty (Juteau, 2002, p.443).

Without doubt another significant element of the French Canadian narrative of identity was their status as a conquered and colonized people, a minority within Canada and North America fighting for survival against the English-speaking ruling class. The status of French Canadians as colonizers of the Native peoples has largely been ignored in the narrative (Juteau, 2002, p.454). The claims of Native peoples to territory within the boundaries of Quebec have also been essentially ignored in the sovereignty project.

### 2.3. The Roman Catholic Church

As regards the Roman Catholic church, the historical ubiquitousness of the Catholic clergy and bureaucracy ensured a strong imprint of Catholic values on the population. For example, in the 1950s the clergy represented one out of every 60 Québécois (Belanger, 2000b). The education system, an important transmitter of culture, was organized along
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Protestant and Catholic denominational lines. This effectively segregated the Catholic francophones from the Protestant anglophone ruling class, thereby helping to maintain the relative homogeneity of the francophone Catholic schools, which in turn allowed for the development of a fairly uniform cultural identity among the francophone majority (Anctil, 2007, p. 189).

However, in the 1960s, supported by an emerging new middle class of well-educated Québécois, the Lesage government took control of all social, health, and educational institutions, many of which had been run by the Catholic church (Quebec, 2009, The Quiet Revolution to the present section). During this period there was a significant decline in religious practice and a rapid erosion of the church's social and cultural authority (Gauvreau, 2003, para. 1). This downward trend in religious attendance has continued to the present as Quebecers, along with residents of British Columbia, have the lowest record of monthly church attendance of all Canadians at 25% of the population over the age of 15 (Clark, 2003, p.3). In fact, the immigrant population of Montreal causes a significant increase in this figure as non-Canadian born Quebecers report a much higher rate of attendance at 40% as opposed to 17% of Canadian-born Quebecers (p.5).

2.4. Immigration and Preservation of the French language

Members of the francophone community began to fear that due to immigration, anglophones might become the majority in Montreal. Until the 1960s, the Quebec provincial government had not involved itself in the decisions taken by the Canadian
federal government on the subject of immigration policy. The fact that the majority of allophone immigrants (people whose first language is neither English nor French) were opting for English-language schools was not of great concern up until that time because the numbers were small.

However, the increasing number of immigrants arriving in Quebec after WWII coincided with a dramatic fall in the birth rate of francophone Quebecers after the Quiet Revolution. Between 1959 and 1971, Quebec moved from the position of having the highest birth rate in Canada to the lowest at 1.4 per thousand (Belanger, 2000a, para. 7). In addition, a worrying trend was emerging for francophones to send their children to English-language schools, which further increased the threat of a weakened French majority culture. The risk of assimilation appeared very real when demographic analyses were carried out (Anctil, 2007, p. 189-190).

In order to deal with the language crisis, the governments of the day passed a number of laws between 1969 and 1974. However, it was not until the Parti Québécois developed the Charter of the French Language in 1977 (commonly known as Bill 101), which encompassed all language laws passed previously, and made French the single official language of the province as well as the language of education (except for a few exceptions), that progress was made toward the protection and promotion of the French language in Quebec (Anctil, 2007, p. 193).
As illustrated above, a great deal of energy has been focussed over the past 50 years on protecting the French language in Quebec. Government documents indicate that efforts have paid off and the future of the French language in Quebec is viewed with confidence (Gouv. du Québec, Min. de l’Immigration, 1990, *Au Quebec pour batir ensemble*, p. 12). It can now be said with a fair degree of certainty that Bill 101 has achieved its overt aim: earlier enrolment trends have been reversed and minority students are increasingly enrolled in French language, rather than English language schools. At the present time, seventy percent of the allophone student population, and more than 90% of the children of newly arrived immigrants attend French schools, as compared to 11% at the beginning of the 1970s (McAndrew & Lamarre, 1996, Section 1, para. 2). According to 2001 Statistics Canada census data, of the 7.2 M Quebecers surveyed, almost 4M Quebecers speak French; almost 3 M consider themselves bilingual (English/French); 300,000 speak English only; and approximately 60,000 speak neither English or French (Gouv. du Québec, Min. de l’Immigration, 2006, *Population selon la connaissance de l’anglais et du français*).

Section 3 – The Current Context

3.1. Recognition of a new “other”

However, if the anglophone threat appears to have been successfully neutralized at present, the reasonable accommodation debate illustrates that the public has become aware of a new “other” in its midst, which is perceived to threaten the cultural identity of the francophone majority. That “other” is represented by the non-Christian residents of
Quebec, some recent immigrants, others not. In recent years, Quebecers have come under pressure to re-write the narrative of cultural identity in order to make room for those of non-Christian faith to be recognized and find their place within it. The reasonable accommodation debate is evidence of a hegemonic struggle that is occurring between the majority and subordinate groups.

Given the evident disinterest in formal religious institutions or practice, the strong public reaction to requests for accommodation of religious minorities could be perceived as incongruous. The concept of Quebec as a secular state has emerged, although Quebecers have yet to agree upon the definition of “secular” in the Quebec context. One must infer that although francophone Quebecers have massively rejected the Roman Catholic church as an institution that gives meaning to their lives, they maintain a profound attachment to the Christian church as a symbol of the civilized Western world and its values, in opposition to the uncivilized East.

3.2. Changing Immigration Patterns

Contributing to the crisis is the changing pattern of immigration to Quebec. Although Quebec remains an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic and Christian province, with Roman Catholics accounting for 83% of Quebec’s population and other Christian denominations bringing the figure to over 90% in 2001 (Statistics Canada, Analysis Series, 2003), the number of immigrants from Europe has steadily declined. In 1986,
56.6% of immigrants to Quebec were from European countries, while that figure dropped to 43.3% in 1996 (Piche, 2002, Birthplace section).

At the same time, a relatively rapid increase in the number of Quebecers belonging to non-Christian religious groups has been occurring since the early 1990s for a variety of reasons. Although government incentives to encourage Quebecers to produce more children with family-friendly policies such as subsidized daycare (introduced in 1997) and the $8,000 bonus for the third child (eliminated in 1997), were deemed to have had some impact, it would appear that, on their own, these measures have been insufficient to compensate for the declining population (Gauthier, 2001, p. 8-9). In 2003, the birthrate had increased to 1.5 (Statistics Canada, 2005, *The Daily, Births*), a slight gain, but insufficient to maintain Quebec’s demographic weight within Canada and secure its economic prosperity.

The provincial government recognizes that immigration, and even an increased number of immigrants, will be necessary to sustain Quebec’s standard of living and its weight within the Canadian confederation. Its 2008 triennial plan calls for between 46,700 and 49,000 immigrants in 2008, rising to 55,000 in 2010. Its goal is to give priority to immigrants who already speak French, as well as those in the investor category. In 2008, the Quebec government anticipates that 27% of immigrants will come from Africa, 21% from the Americas, 26% from Asia, and 26% from Europe (Gouv. du Québec, 2007, *Communiqué 3217*).
The provincial government has encouraged immigration from the French-speaking North Africa, ‘le Maghreb’, (Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia) since, although by-and-large of Muslim faith, these immigrants are French-speaking. From 2004 until 2008, immigrants from these three countries represented 21.9% of all immigrants to Quebec (Gouvernement du Québec, 2009, *Tableaux sur l’immigration permanente au Québec: 2004-2008*, p. 24). There has been substantial growth among the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh populations, the vast majority of whom live in the metropolitan area of Montreal. Islam is the third largest faith in the province (Statistics Canada, 2003b, *Roman Catholics*). In addition, of these, many are visible minorities, which compounds the challenge of integration.

With respect to the integration of immigrants, government discourse now defines Quebec as a “resolutely” francophone, democratic and pluralist society (Gouv. du Québec, 1990, *Au Québec: pour bâtir ensemble*, p.ii). It acknowledges that Quebecers used to look upon immigrants with distrust (p.5), and encourages them to be less fearful.

Québec’s openness expresses a wish to go beyond exclusive reference to cultural origin and simple coexistence of diverse peoples. Québec has adopted a wider vision, one of civic relations. The individual successively or simultaneously integrates various identities, i.e. occupational, familial, ethnic and so on. Québec encourages its people to express their diversity in a context where, citizens share the same feeling of belonging to Québec.
society and express this feeling through a respect for common laws and institutions. (Gouv. du Québec, 2007, *Portraits régionaux*)

Thus it is apparent that the government wishes to address both economic and demographic issues through its immigration policy. Maintaining the weight of Quebec within the Canadian federation is an important goal in terms of preserving the province’s bargaining power with Ottawa. In addition, the preceding paragraph illustrates that current government discourse encourages Quebecers to go beyond mere tolerance. It recognizes the necessity of broadening the concept of Québécois identity beyond cultural origin in order to avoid the racial tensions experienced in recent years in many Western European countries. The definition of the ‘in-group’ must evolve and the critical challenge for the government is to find a middle ground that will be acceptable to both old-stock Québécois and new Quebecers (or ‘néo-Québécois’ in government literature).

### 4. The Role of the Media

#### 4.1. Omnipresence of the US perspective

As is the case with most people around the world, Quebecers do not live in a vacuum, impervious to national and international events. The average francophone Quebecer spent 23.8 hours per week watching television in 2004 (Statistics Canada, 2006, *Summary Tables: Television viewing*). Although francophones in general prefer home-grown television (Statistics Canada, 2006, *Television viewing*) likely due to a preference for
French-language television which reflects their cultural reality, the proximity of the United States and the omnipresence of American cable television is inescapable. In addition, English-language programming is accessible to the over 40% of individuals in the province who are bilingual (Statistics Canada, 2002, *Profile of languages in Canada*).

Although the reasonable accommodation debate took place in Quebec, it occurred within a particular context at a particular historical juncture (Johnson, 1987). The portrayal of numerous acts of violence linked to “Islam” in recent years, and in particular since 9/11, likely contributed to a heightened feeling that certain religious minorities posed a threat to the West. It is a fact that a small number of large American news corporations have more reporters overseas than most others, and their reports provide the basis for what many other media distribute (Said, 1997, p. 54). These corporations work in a political context and have an interest in promoting certain views of reality rather than others (p. 48). According to Edward W. Said, Americans continue to believe that the most important thing about “Islam” is whether it is pro or anti American (p. 102). At the same time, there is a strong ideological commitment to a monolithic and unchanging Islam (p. 100).

**4.2. Legitimization of Orientalist beliefs**

In *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*, Said convincingly argues that:
There seems to have been a strange revival of canonical, though previously discredited, Orientalist ideas about Muslim, generally non-white people – ideas which have achieved a startling prominence at a time when racial or religious misrepresentations of every other cultural group are no longer circulated with such impunity. Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians. (1997, p. xii)

From the beginning of the 19th c. to the end of WWII, France and Britain dominated the Orient; since WWII the United States has dominated the Orient and approaches it as France and Britain once did. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of varying degrees of a “complex hegemony” (Said, 1979, p.4). Said describes the general basis of Orientalist thought as a drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts: the Orient and the Occident. The Orient is the larger of the two and considered an inferior part of the world with greater potential for destructive power than the West (Said, 1997, p. 4). He asserts that only Islam seems never to have submitted completely to the West and that this is perceived as threatening (p. 5).
Although it is undeniable that Muslims and Islamic countries have been responsible for a number of atrocities in recent years, it is of great consequence that other atrocities committed around the world have generally not been described in religious terms. Said cites the examples of the massacre of Muslims in Bosnia (1997, p. 33), and the mass suicide at Jonestown in 1978 (p. 9) which were not ascribed to Christianity nor identified with Western or American culture at large. Since the end of the Cold War, there appears to be a determination to characterize the Muslim world in monolithic terms, to set up “Islam” as the new enemy “other”. The media associates Islam with “fundamentalism”, although every religion has its fundamentalist components (p. xvi).

4.3. The 9/11 Watershed

The bombing of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, must be seen as a watershed event since it was the first time since WWII and Pearl Harbour that Americans had been the victims of a serious terrorist attack on their own territory. In the days that followed, U.S. President George W. Bush declared a “War on Terrorism”. According to the President, the United States had been attacked for its goodness, its freedoms, and its prosperity; in other words, for who it was, rather than what it did. There was no self-questioning regarding the role that US foreign policy may have played in motivating the
attack. No changes in its fundamental foreign policies, including those in the Middle East, were deemed warranted. Representations of the global Islamic threat fell into a predictable pattern; Islam was consistently linked to violence (Baker, 2003) and the media coverage was both unrelenting and reductive.

4.4. The Canadian Media

The mainstream Canadian media did not distinguish itself by more nuanced reporting than its American counterparts in the wake of September 11, 2001. According to Ismael and Measor (2002), Islam and events in Arab states are generally only portrayed or examined in mainstream Canadian media when they affect Canadians, or when there are stories examining shocking acts of violence which then receive sensationalist coverage. “Public discourse within Canada equates Islam with terrorism, Palestinians with gunmen, and the profession of the Islamic faith with fundamentalism” (p. 108). In August 2002, according to an IPSOS-Reid survey, 45 percent of Quebecers, 37 percent of Albertans, 33 percent of Ontarians, and 22 percent of British Columbia residents agreed with the statement: "The September 11 attacks made me more mistrustful of Arabs or Muslims coming from the Middle-East" (Helly, 2004, para. 46).

In their study of French-Canadian press coverage of the events of September 11, 2001, Belkhodja and Richard (2006) observe that political scientist Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations was widely referred to in the
press. However, the authors note that although the word ‘sécurité’ and its derivatives appeared frequently in their corpus, they state that French Canadian journalists did not begin with a crusade against Muslims. In the authors’ opinion this is due to the fact that immigrants from French-speaking North Africa have successfully integrated into Quebec society since the 1960s and therefore that Quebecers are familiar with the North African reality. This statement appears to belie the survey results cited above. However, overall, the authors conclude that there was no significant difference in the manner in which the events were covered in the French-Canadian press than in other Western media. If this is the case, we can surmise that the media coverage did indeed contribute to a more negative perception of Muslims in particular.

Furthermore, the media treatment of the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Madrid and London bombings, the hunt for Osama Bin Laden and other members of Al Qaeda, as well as the pursuit of Saddam Hussein served to heighten distrust of and negative attitudes toward people of Middle Eastern heritage. According to Ismael and Measor, “The merging of the fear of the ‘other’ and of terrorism, provided media consumers in Canada with a clear path to the conclusion that Islam was a faith in which acts of unspeakable violence were acceptable and that terrorism was endemic to Muslim and Arab culture. Arab and Muslim societies and individuals were framed as somehow fundamentally different from the average Canadian” (2002, p.124).
4.5. Media contribution to feelings of threat

It is my contention that in Quebec, the intensified climate of fear and distrust toward Arabs and Muslims created by constant exposure to sensational media reporting became conflated with a heightened feeling of threat towards people exhibiting any visible signs of non-Christian religious affiliation. According to Esses, Dovidio and Hodson (2002), when there is a perceived threat, national identity and attachment are likely to be strengthened among members of the host population, with tighter and more clearly defined in-group boundaries evident. They cite a number of psychological theories that assert that perceptions and feelings of threat to one’s group typically strengthen the sense of one’s collective identity, which is reflected “not only in terms of the exhibition of shared symbols of solidarity within the group, but also in enhanced motivations to see the in-group in more favourable terms than the out-group” (p. 74). Under conditions of threat, people are more likely to see the out-group in more homogeneous and in negative stereotypical ways. It stands to reason that in this type of climate, the willingness to accommodate those who are perceived as threatening and different would be reduced.

Section 5 – The Reasonable Accommodation Debate

5.1. - Antecedents

According to Pierre Bosset (2005), the duty to accommodate first appeared on the Quebec and Canadian legal landscapes in the mid-1980s. In a key judgment, the Supreme
Court of Canada recognized that an apparently neutral rule (a work schedule) could have a discriminatory impact on an employee because it was incompatible with her religious observance. In this case, the Court made a distinction between direct and indirect discrimination (Bernatchez & Bourgeault, 1999). While it did not reject the rule established by the employer, the Court concluded that in order to give meaning to the standard of equal treatment, the employee’s right required ‘reasonable steps toward an accommodation’ by the employer that involved changing her work schedule. Thus, today, the duty of reasonable accommodation (short of undue hardship) is an integral part of the right to equality (Bosset, 2005, p. 2).

At the local level, a number of highly mediatised requests for accommodation on religious grounds contributed to the perception that the “other” was beginning to encroach and make unreasonable demands upon Quebec society and Québécois cultural identity. However the reality of the situation may be quite different from public perception. According to Denise Helly, “since September 2001, the situation in Quebec and throughout Canada is characterized not by a higher number of requests, refusals, or acceptances of religious accommodations related to Muslim demands, but rather, by one new trend -- the coverage of these cases by the media” (2004, para. 45).

The report released by former Ontario Attorney General Marion Boyd in 2004, which recommended the use of religious family arbitration with certain
safeguards formed part of the contextual background. This report was subject to a great deal of media attention in both Quebec and Ontario. The focus of the controversy was the fear of encroachment of Islamic Sharia law into the Canadian legal system. In 2005, the Quebec legislative assembly unanimously voted to adopt a motion submitted by Quebec MP Fatima Houda-Pepin to reject Islamic tribunals in Quebec, even though none had been requested (Richer, 2005). Amid national and international outcry, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty backtracked on September 12, 2005 with a surprise announcement that all faith-based arbitration would be eliminated in the province, although some said that the system had been working well since 1992 (Yelaga & Benzie, 2005). In February 2006, the Ontario Government passed Bill 27 which effectively prohibits all forms of binding arbitration in family matters not conducted according to Canadian law.

In addition, several highly mediatised accommodation cases ended up at the Supreme Court of Canada for a ruling. Significantly, these cases did not involve requests for accommodations by Muslim Quebecers, which is an indication of the extent to which minorities other than Muslims had become associated with the atmosphere of threat surrounding Islam. The most highly publicized ruling occurred in May 2006 and became known as the “Affaire du kirpan”.

In this case, the Supreme Court overturned the decisions of a Montreal school board and a Quebec Court of Appeal which forbade an orthodox Sikh student from carrying a ceremonial dagger (kirpan) to school. The rationale of the school board and the Quebec Court of Appeal was that the metal kirpan posed a security risk to students and was to be considered a weapon. The Supreme Court of Canada, based on the provision in Section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which guarantees freedom of religion, ruled that the kirpan, when worn under certain conditions agreed upon by the student, did not pose a security risk significant enough to deny his freedom of religion. It therefore ruled that the school board had a duty to accommodate the student (Supreme Court of Canada, 2006, *Multani v. Commission Scolaire Marguerite Bourgeoys*). This decision caused a public uproar.

In addition to the above, a growing list of requests by religious minorities for differential treatment were given prominence in the media. These reports aggravated an already agitated public. Some examples are: a Montreal YMCA frosting its windows at the request of Hasidic Jews, men asked to leave a Montreal pool deck in order not to indispose Muslim women who were taking a swimming class, the renaming of the Christmas tree at the Montreal City Hall as the “tree of life” (for a complete list see Bouchard & Taylor, 2008b, pp. 48-60).

The small Quebec town of Hérouxville was so alarmed by events that it felt it necessary to publish its own code of conduct, in February 2007, in order to inform potential
immigrants what was and was not acceptable in their town. This code of conduct received international media attention due to its sensational and derogatory language, and stereotypical portrayal of immigrant groups, targeting Muslims in particular (Standards, 2007). The commotion surrounding the Hérouxville “Standards” and the issue of reasonable accommodation in general threatened to take over the impending provincial election campaign. Premier Jean Charest therefore announced the creation of the Consultation Commission on the Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences as a forum for public expression.

5.2 – The Bouchard-Taylor Commission

In the words of co-chairs Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, the commission was established “in response to public discontent concerning reasonable accommodation” (2008b, p. 17). Given the importance of the topic and the need for a non-partisan review of the issue, the commission would study and consult the population over a one-year period with a report due in March 2008. This effectively removed the topic from the election campaign and calmed the debate for a period of time.

It should be noted that the Commissioners excluded the sticky issues of Quebec’s Aboriginal peoples and anglophone minority from their study. Aside from these two points, they decided to interpret their mandate broadly:
The second approach to the Commission's mandate would be to perceive the
debate on reasonable accommodation as the symptom of a more basic
problem concerning the sociocultural integration model established in
Québec since the 1970s. This perspective calls for a review of
interculturalism, immigration, secularism and the theme of Québec identity.
The Commission has decided to follow the second course with a view to
grasping the problem at its sources and examining it from every angle. (n.d.
Commission website – mandate section)

In the weeks that followed, widespread public consultations were held. Thirteen
research projects were commissioned, 31 focus groups were held, as well as 59
meetings with experts and 23 meetings with representatives of socio-cultural
organizations. A 15-member multidisciplinary advisory committee was set up. Four
province-wide forums were held in which over 800 people participated. In addition,
31 days of public hearings were held in Montreal and the regions, some of which
were broadcast live on television. Over 900 individual and group briefs were
submitted to the Commission (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008b, p. 35).

For the purposes of this paper we will focus our attention on the 98 page
abbreviated version of the report as this is likely what was read by more members
of the public rather than the 272 page full report (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008a). The
report’s title, “Building the future: A time for reconciliation”, gives a clear
indication of the conclusions of the Commission co-chairs: the francophone majority must resolve its issues with the ethno-cultural minorities in order to ensure a peaceful and prosperous future.

In a rather simplistic summation of the province’s history the co-chairs state, “Readers should bear in mind that our reflection is delineated by the basic societal choices that Quebecers have made in recent decades. Their low birthrate and desire to sustain demographic and economic growth have led them to opt for immigration (2008a, p. 11)”. It should be noted that old-stock francophone, Catholic Quebecers are targeted as the source of the problem. The authors state: “To all appearances, the key signs of dissatisfaction came from Quebecers of French-Canadian origin” (2008a, p. 21). According to the report, 71.7% of Quebecers whose mother tongue is French found Quebec society overly tolerant of accommodation, as opposed to only 35.2% of those whose mother tongue was not French (p. 22).

The overall appearance of the report is light and airy, with wide margins and relatively large font size. Different coloured text boxes for each chapter as well as text in bold and in colour serve to emphasize the authors’ main points as well as let the reader find them quickly if he or she is merely skimming the report. What first strikes the reader is the use of the pronoun “we”. The Commission co-chairs use “we” to refer to themselves, but also use “we” when referring to the collective, thereby assuming ownership of the report, and at the same time signifying that that
they are part of the insider group and have the authority to speak on behalf of the collective. These two uses of “we” leads to some confusion at times. For example, “This is the key objective that we set for ourselves. Having discussed at great length what separates us, it is now time to explore the other facet of what we are and what we can become” (2008a, p. 5).

Another salient feature of the report is the frequent use of the verb “must”. Its use serves to give a sense of authority and urgency to the recommendations made. Eighty-five occurrences of this verb were identified in the 95 page report. For example, “(…) emotion has entered the picture, creating tensions that we must now resolve (2008a, p.5)”, and “… We believe that vigorous soul-searching must be undertaken … (p. 84) and “… Québec must seek to reach a consensus against a backdrop of growing diversity …” (p. 94).

The overall message of the report seeks to be reassuring regarding the magnitude of the threat to Quebec cultural identity. The Commissioners tell the French-Canadian majority that their cultural identity will have to change somewhat, but that the threat is small and therefore they will still remain the dominant cultural group. The heading of Chapter 2, “A Crisis of Perception”, points the finger of blame clearly at the media for its presentation of the facts and sensational reporting practices. Twenty-one of the most mediatised cases were reconstructed by researchers who
found significant distortion between the facts and public perception for 15 of them (2008a, p.17).

The authors state that the requests for accommodation remain relatively small and that the “current situation is under control” (2008a, p. 27). The Commissioners question the level of fear expressed by French-speaking Quebecers: “…is the fear expressed not disproportionate to the demographic weight of Muslims in Québec, who accounted for 2% at the most of the population in 2007? (p. 69)”. While the figure may be accurate, this statement ignores the real fear of the Christian francophone majority, which is related to their dwindling numbers and the impact that this may have in the long term on Québécois cultural identity.

The Commissioners also exhort French-speaking Quebecers to develop a strong identity in order to behave like a “serene majority” (2008a, p. 75). They warn that, “The identity inherited from the French-Canadian past is perfectly legitimate and it must survive, but it can no longer occupy alone the Québec identity space. It must hinge on the other identities present, in a spirit of interculturalism, in order to prevent fragmentation and exclusion (p. 75).

At the same time, the authors seek to reassure the majority that although change is necessary, it will not affect their status in the social and cultural hierarchy:
Constant interaction between citizens of different origins leads to the development of a new identity and a new culture. This is what has been happening in Québec in recent decades without altering the cultural position of the majority group or infringing on the culture of minority groups.

(2008a, p. 42)

The Commissioners appear to obfuscate regarding the depth of the crisis. While they state that the “foundations of collective life in Quebec are not in a critical situation at present” (2008a, p. 10), they recognize in the same paragraph that, “Our society is sufficiently divided at present and we must seek to reduce splits and tensions instead of exacerbating them. The time has come for compromise, negotiation and balance” (p. 10). They also recognize that “there is deep disagreement on many topics related to our mandate” (p.11) and that “with the help of debate on accommodation, Quebecers have engaged in self-examination and questioned themselves as never before perhaps since the Quiet Revolution” (p. 21). This gives weight to the assertion that the reasonable accommodation debate is representative of a period of intense examination of the narrative of cultural identity by the francophone majority.

5.3. – Media coverage of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission

Media attention was closely focused on the Bouchard-Taylor Commission at certain junctures in particular: when the Commission was first announced,
during the public consultations, and upon release of the report. Data from several newspapers has been reviewed in relation to questions of cultural identity within the context of the Commission via the Eureka.cc database. As previously mentioned, three newspaper sources were reviewed for key themes: *Le Devoir* (daily broadsheet distributed nationally and aimed at an intellectual readership), *La Presse* (daily Montreal broadsheet aimed at a middle class readership), and *Le Soleil* (daily Quebec tabloid). The entire content of the newspapers were searched, which yielded articles as well as editorials and letters. A total of 116 items met the search parameters of “accommodements raisonnables et Bouchard et Taylor et cultur* et identité”. Formal content analysis was not performed on the data set; rather key themes were determined through close reading of the texts with a particular focus on the passages in the vicinity of the word “identité” (McKee, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Immediately obvious was the difference in the level of coverage between the three newspapers. While *Le Soleil* published 17 documents that met the search criteria, *La Presse* published 32, and *Le Devoir* was significantly higher at 73 documents published. Given that *Le Soleil* is a daily tabloid-style newspaper published in Quebec, one may surmise that this topic was considered of less interest to its readership, possibly due to the fact that Quebec City does not receive many immigrants in comparison to Montreal and the highly publicized cases involving accommodation primarily occurred in the Montreal area.
In addition, the three newspapers differed considerably in the number of articles published in the various categories. While *Le Soleil* devoted 65% (11) of its coverage to news articles, 25% (4) to op-ed pieces and 6% (1) to letters from the public; *La Presse* allocated 37.5% (12) of its coverage to news articles, 25% (8) to editorials and 22% (7) to letters from the public. *Le Devoir*’s coverage was almost evenly divided between editorials/opinion pieces and letters from members of the public at 25% (18) and 23% (17) respectively, while news articles made up 50% (37) of the items that met the search criteria.

Of significance is the fact that while devoting a similar percentage of coverage to editorials and letters, the two Montreal newspapers had considerably different levels of news article publication related to cultural identity with *Le Devoir* publishing three times more news articles over the same time period. Given that *Le Devoir* is aimed at an intellectual readership, while *La Presse* is aimed at a middle-class readership one is led to infer that the topic of Québécois cultural identity may have loomed more largely in the minds of the province’s intellectual elite.

References to cultural identity within the context of the commission began from the time the commission was announced in both *Le Devoir* and *La Presse*. In general, the content of the articles and the vocabulary used around the term were
much more alarmist in *Le Devoir* than *La Presse*. For example, terms such as: worry, peril, fear, threat, anxiety, crushing, defence, loss, crisis, anguish appeared more frequently in *Le Devoir*. However, a term that occurred repeatedly throughout documents in both newspapers was “malaise”, which translates as uneasiness or discomfort. It appeared clearly to this reader that the reasonable accommodation debate was responsible for a great deal of anxiety among the francophone majority.

For instance, in a news article published in *Le Devoir* on August 15, 2007, prior to the beginning of public audiences of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, the term “malaise identitaire” appears twice, along with “problème identitaire très sérieux” and “crise”. In addition, verbs and adjectives such as “craignant”, “craintifs” are found in the text (Cauchy, 2007). On October 31, 2007, in a news article published *La Presse*, Cardinal Marc Ouellet uses the term and is quoted as saying that “le véritable malaise identitaire” du Québec (…) n’est pas relié à la place de la religion dans l’espace public (…)” (Beauchemin, 2007).

In *Le Soleil*, the term “identité” did not appear in association with the Commission until September, 2007 when the public hearings began, which was six months after the Commission was announced. Overall, the vocabulary associated with the term was less passionate than that found in *Le Devoir* and *La
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Presse; it gave the impression of being somewhat removed from the debate. Some examples are: uncertainty, questioning, seeking, promoting, threat.

For instance, a news article published on November 1, 2007 was entitled, “Le ‘mythe’ de l’incertitude identitaire” (Cliche, 2007). The title is part of a quotation taken from the President of an organisation working in the area of immigration. The fact that the author of the article has chosen to put quotation marks around the word “mythe” gives the reader the impression that author does not agree with the conclusion of his source that the uncertainty surrounding Québécois identity is merely a myth.

From the three papers, only one example was found of an immigrant giving voice to negative observations about Quebec society. “En effet, deplore-t-il, ‘une fois arrivé ici, il ne suffit plus d’être francophone (comme le sont bien des immigrants venus d’Afrique du Nord): il faut se débarasser de sa foi, et meme de son nom pour trouver du travail. C’est absolument indigne” (Cliche, 2007).

(Translation: True enough, once you have arrived here, it is no longer enough to be francophone (as are many immigrants from North Africa): you must get rid of your faith, and even your name in order to find a job. It is shameful.)
There were very few other occasions where immigrants were given a voice. Those that were quoted tended to be relatively undemanding of Quebec society and related positive immigration experiences. In an article that was published in all three newspapers, Clara Hortua, who immigrated to Quebec from Columbia three years ago “[…] a plaidé pour que, quand on arrive dans un nouveau pays, on suive les lois et les règlements et qu’on apprenne la langue” (Lévesque, 2007). (Translation: […] pleaded that when a person arrives in a new country, they follow the laws and the rules and they learn the language). Interestingly, none of the people requesting accommodations in the cases that made the headlines were interviewed. The newspaper debate appeared clearly to be taking place primarily among old-stock Quebecers.

5.4. The Political Context

In order to fully comprehend the reasonable accommodation debate that shook the province, it is also necessary to understand the political context which formed the backdrop. It is noteworthy that two provincial elections were held during the period under study, one in March 2007 and the other in December 2008. One of the unstated reasons for the creation of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission in February 2007 was to stifle the debate during the election campaign given its extremely contentious nature. All the same, the topic could not be completely avoided and both the Liberals and the Parti Québécois (PQ)
suffered from the gain in popularity of the more right wing Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) under Mario Dumont’s leadership (L’analyse, 2007).

In March 2007 Jean Charest’s Liberals formed a minority government with 48 seats. The ADQ went from a mere 4 seats in 2003 to official opposition with 41 seats in the legislature. Mario Dumont received a good deal of media coverage during the reasonable accommodation debate for criticizing the weakness of the Liberal government under Jean Charest, and defending the values of mainly rural, pure laine Quebecers. His party appeared to have benefited from this stance. The Parti Québécois (PQ) under André Boisclair had their second worst showing in years, with 31 seats, and Boisclair’s leadership was called into question. Boisclair, who had adopted a moderate tone during the reasonable accommodation debate, resigned from the leadership of the PQ in May 2008 because of his party’s poor election results.

In November 2008, less than two years into his government’s term, Jean-Charest called an election, declaring that he needed a “clear mandate” to manage the economic crisis (Boivin, 2008). Since the 2007 election, the Parti Québécois had sought to reclaim its position as defender of Québécois culture in order to regain seats lost to the Liberals and the ADQ. MNA Pauline Marois had been positioning herself to replace André Boisclair as leader and introduced the controversial Quebec Identity Act. She was acclaimed leader when Boisclair resigned. The strategy appeared to work since, although the Liberals came
out of the election with a majority government, the PQ resumed its place as official opposition and the ADQ was relegated to the level of support it had in 2003.

5.5. Political Discourse

In terms of the discourse of the political elite, it was not homogeneous and reflects the interests of the various actors as well as tensions in the definition of Québécois cultural identity. All political parties wanted to be seen to be responding to the crisis. In October 2007, Liberal Immigration minister Yolande James introduced *Bill 106, An Act to Promote Action by the Administration with respect to Cultural Diversity* (Gouv. Québec. Nat. Assembly, 2007c), whose objective was to promote equal access to employment in public bodies. This bill can be seen as an attempt to make the public service more reflective of the diversity of Quebec society and increase opportunities for employment for members of the subordinate groups, in other words, to allow members of the subordinate group a greater measure of recognition within Québécois cultural identity. This bill was not even discussed in the legislature at the time it was submitted and was not passed.

During the same month, Parti Québécois deputy for the region of Charlevoix, Pauline Marois, introduced *Bill 195, the Quebec Identity Act*, which proposed the establishment of a Quebec citizenship, a Quebec constitution, changes to the interpretation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in order that they better protect Quebec culture, the equality of the sexes and the secular nature of public
institutions. In addition, *Bill 195* proposed legislative measures to ensure the quality of the French language spoken in Quebec, and the integration of immigrants, notably by way of a three-year period during which time immigrants would commit to learning French to a level deemed appropriate by the Minister (Gov. Québec, Nat. Assembly, 2007d). There was both public outcry and support for this Bill (PQ would bar immigrants, 2007). On the same day another PQ MNA introduced *Bill 196* whose objective was to enshrine Québécois values in a Quebec Constitution (Gov. Quebec. Nat. Assembly, 2007e). Neither of these bills were discussed or adopted.

However, in November 2007 Liberal minister Benoît Pelletier introduced *Bill 43, An Act to amend various electoral legislation with regard to the identification of electors* (Gov. Quebec, Nat. Assembly, 2007a), which would require all voters to uncover their faces in order to be identified. The bill took aim particularly at Muslim women who wear the veil, and it passed easily. This topic had been intensely debated at both the federal and the provincial level, and the decision of the Quebec government was contrary to the federal ruling. In December 2007 *Bill 63, An Act to amend the Charter of human rights and freedoms* was introduced by the Minister of Culture, Communication and Status of Women, Christine St. Pierre (Gov. Quebec. Nat. Assembly, 2007b). Its objective was to affirm in particular that the rights and freedoms announced in the Charter are guaranteed to men and women equally. This bill was passed quickly as well and can be seen as a gesture in response to fears that the influence of non-Christian religions (particularly
Islam) would erode women’s rights in the province. The gesture was essentially symbolic since gender equality is already enshrined in the Charter.

Since the Bouchard-Taylor report was published the government has taken a number of actions and several items can be seen as a direct response to public anxiety over reasonable accommodation and to recommendations made by the Commission. In March 2009, Minister of Immigration Yolande James introduced Bill 16, which was identical to the aforementioned Bill 106 (Gov. Quebec, Nat. Assembly, 2009). This can be seen as a response to the Bouchard-Taylor Commission’s recommendation to make the public service more reflective of the province’s cultural diversity. The outcome is unknown as yet.

In addition, the Ministry of Immigration and Cultural Communities website informs readers of three new measures developed in 2008. The documents are entitled: Pour enrichir le Québec: Affirmer les valeurs de la société québécoise, Pour enrichir le Québec: Intégrer mieux, and Pour enrichir le Québec- franciser plus – intégrer mieux (Gov. Quebec. Min. Imm. 2008a, 2008 b, and 2008d respectively). It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in an in-depth analysis of the discourse held within these documents, although they are rich in allusion to concerns raised during the reasonable accommodation debate. The discussion will be limited to their key features.
The first point in *Pour enrichir le Québec – Affirmer les valeurs de la société québécoise* (2008a) explains that potential immigrants will now be asked to sign a declaration stating that they are aware of and willing to live according to Quebec’s core values. They are also asked to indicating that they are willing to learn French if they do not speak it already. The core values listed are: Quebec is a free and democratic society, church and state powers are separate, Quebec is a pluralist society, Quebec society is based on the rule of law, men and women have equal rights, rights and freedoms must be exercised with due respect for the rights of others, and the official language of Quebec is French. A sample declaration is included in the report.

It is impossible not to notice the similarity between this document and the Hérouxville Standards, although the Ministry document is couched in more refined and less inflammatory language. This fact was picked up on by the press as the *National Post* put the two documents side by side to compare them, which was then relayed to the Quebec public by *Le Devoir* (David, 2008). The declaration is essentially of symbolic value given that it holds no legal weight. However, symbolism is important when it comes to cultural identity and this can be interpreted as an attempt by the government to allay the fears of the francophone majority regarding the influence of the increasing number of immigrants on their cultural identity.
The second document, *Pour enrichir le Québec – intégrer mieux* (2008b), lays out five objectives with respect to the integration of immigrants. The first objective is to promote an awareness of the positive contributions of immigration to the province’s development. The reasonable accommodation debate served to alert the government that its discourse regarding the necessity of immigration for Quebec’s future prosperity and the contributions of immigrants to Quebec culture and society were meeting resistance among some members of the francophone majority. It therefore intends to increase its efforts to encourage Quebecers to broaden their narrative of cultural identity in order that it be more inclusive.

The four other objectives in this document are related to facilitating the economic integration of immigrants: assistance with making professional contacts before arrival, assistance in obtaining a first professional position. The situation of immigrants from French-speaking North Africa (*le Maghreb*) is recognized as particularly problematic and an additional document has been elaborated to address their concerns. Their unemployment rate is significantly higher than the provincial average despite the fact that immigrants from this region are much better educated than the average native-born Quebecker (35.7% compared to 14.0%) (Gov. Quebec. Min. Imm., 2008c, p. 1). It became clear during the reasonable accommodation debate that difficulties finding employment commensurate with their qualifications is a major barrier to integration. This situation with immigrants from French-speaking North Africa
can be attributed to public perception that they are representative of the essential Oriental “other”.

The third document, *Pour enrichir le Québec – Franciser mieux – Intégrer mieux* (2008c), responds to the enduring concern of the francophone majority regarding the preservation of the French language. Although not the focus of the reasonable accommodation debate, it is never far below the surface in Quebec. Parti Québécois MNA Pauline Marois brought the topic into the debate with her controversial *Quebec Identity Act* in which she proposed that a certain level of French be required in order to stand for public office. Although this idea was roundly rejected, public feeling was that the government could do more to help non-francophone immigrants learn French. The measures proposed are very ambitious and include: French language courses available on line prior to immigrating, French language courses available upon arrival and not limited to new immigrants, a tax credit for employers who allow employees to learn French on company time, French classes developed to correspond to what is needed in the various professions. Underlying the overt concern for the preservation of the language is the recognition that a common language is a necessary condition for a shared cultural identity.
Conclusion

All things considered, it is clear that the reasonable accommodation debate in Quebec can be viewed as a manifestation of the shifting narrative of Québécois cultural identity. The narrative of the francophone majority had achieved some stability from the Quiet Revolution to the 1990s when francophone Quebecers threw off the authority of the Roman Catholic church as one of the central elements of its identity and made the survival of the French language in North America its principal rallying point. Also critical at that time was the shift from a ‘French Canadian’ identity to a ‘Québécois’ identity, as well as the extraction of power from the anglophone elite.

However, increasing immigration from non-European, non-Christian countries, in particular French-speaking North Africa, began to raise new issues that had never before been dealt with. This, in combination with intense media coverage of events relating to Islamic terrorist activity, particularly since 9/11, served to create a heightened feeling of threat among the francophone majority. The Oriental “other” became the nucleus of that fear. A crisis started to build when the media began to focus heavily on requests for adjustments to societal rules and norms of behaviour, and in some cases to distort the facts. Both the kirpan affair and the publication of the Hérouxville Standards represent important turning points.
Documentary evidence indicates that the debate has been most intense in Montreal and among the province’s intellectual elite while the religious minorities in question were given little opportunity by the media to speak for themselves. As a result of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, it would appear that official discourse has been adjusted in order to place even more emphasis on the positive contribution of immigrants to Quebec and on their fundamental necessity for Quebec’s future prosperity. At the same time, in order to appease members of the francophone majority, a number of measures have been put into place to reinforce the values that are deemed critical by old stock Québécois.

Although power is still held firmly in the hands of the Christian francophone majority, the narrative of cultural identity has been destabilized and is beginning to shift. We are currently witnessing the plasticity which has allowed it to adjust slightly in order to create some room for subordinate groups to see themselves better reflected within it. This may mark the beginning of a new period of relative stability of the cultural narrative; however, given the demographics of Quebec, it is more than likely that additional concessions will be required in the future.
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