INTERCULTURALISM, MULTICULTURALISM, AND THE
STATE FUNDING AND REGULATION OF
CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS

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Abstract. In this essay, Bruce Maxwell, David Waddington, Kevin McDonough, Andrée-Anne Cormier, and Marina Schwimmer compare two competing approaches to social integration policy, Multiculturalism and Interculturalism, from the perspective of the issue of the state funding and regulation of conservative religious schools. After identifying the key differences between Interculturalism and Multiculturalism, as well as their many similarities, the authors present an explanatory analysis of this intractable policy challenge. Conservative religious schooling, they argue, tests a conceptual tension inherent in Multiculturalism between respect for group diversity and autonomy, on the one hand, and the ideal of intercultural citizenship, on the other. Taking as a case study Québec’s education system and, in particular, recent curricular innovations aimed at helping young people acquire the capabilities of intercultural citizenship, the authors illustrate how Interculturalism signals a compelling way forward in the effort to overcome the political dilemma of conservative religious schooling.

Introduction

A retreat from Multiculturalism is one of the symptoms of the increasing political challenges that liberal immigrant societies are currently facing in negotiating the tension between recognizing cultural differences, respecting individual rights, and maintaining social continuity. In one sense “multicultural” and “multiculturalism” are sociological terms that describe societies characterized by cultural, ethical, religious, or ethnic diversity. In a different sense, “Multiculturalism” refers to a policy orientation that emphasizes active support to help newcomers

maintain the cultural allegiances with their home country as a key component of a fair, nonassimilationist approach to social integration. Pioneered in Canada during the 1970s, and subsequently adopted elsewhere, Multiculturalism was developed at a time when tensions between the Canadian federal government and the province of Québec were high. It is Multiculturalism in this policy-oriented sense that now finds itself being routinely accused of failing to deliver what it promised: building social cohesion by facilitating the integration of immigrants, consolidating popular attachment to the fundamental principles of liberal democracy, and reducing economic disparities between newcomers and old-stock populations. In this essay, we will focus primarily on the notion of Multiculturalism as it has been operationalized in the educational policies of liberal democratic societies.

There are two typical reactions to the misgivings about Multiculturalism just described. The typical liberal-minded reaction is defensive. It consists, in effect, of attempting to reverse the political fortunes of Multiculturalism by prescribing more Multiculturalism. In this view, Multiculturalism is a sound policy approach that has been poorly explained, poorly understood, and poorly executed; the solution to the political damage that Multiculturalism has suffered is improved articulation and implementation. By contrast, a typical republican reaction is


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to urge a retreat from multiculturalist policies in favor of a more nationalist and assimilationalist approach. In this view, the multiculturalist approach to integration that seeks social cohesion through the recognition and accommodation of difference is excessively tolerant of what are considered to be “illiberal” evaluative perspectives. As such, republicans argue that Multiculturalism has run its course and should now be replaced by a different policy framework for diversity management.

In this essay we present and defend a different response to the limitations of Multiculturalism, namely Interculturalism. Sociologically sensitive to the fact that immigration can be a psychological, sociological, and economic shock not just for immigrants but also for members of the host society — and, like Multiculturalism, forged in the crucible of Canadian federalism — Interculturalism, we suggest, provides a framework that remedies the defects of Multiculturalism without falling into the trap of a retreat into assimilational nationalism. In this sense, Interculturalism represents a gain over Multiculturalism while pursuing the same set of mostly uncontroversial political ends: social cohesion, the fair integration of newcomers, and respect for cultural and ethical differences.

Interculturalism has lately gained traction among both scholars and policymakers as a promising alternative to Multiculturalism as a policy framework for social integration in culturally diverse societies. Its proponents argue that Interculturalism provides a way forward from the present turmoil over the management of cultural difference by reconceiving the basis upon which mechanisms of social integration, including school policy, can balance and combine the potentially competing demands of social cohesion and recognition of cultural differences. Yet despite the influence of the concept of Interculturalism on some European national curricula and in policy papers on cultural diversity

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6. The extent to which civic republican clashes with liberal Multiculturalism at the level of political and philosophical principle (especially principles of cultural recognition) is a matter of considerable scholarly debate. For the argument that they need not clash, see Will Kymlicka, “Liberal Egalitarianism and Civic Republicanism: Friends or Enemies,” in Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 327–346. Notably, Kymlicka acknowledges that some prominent contemporary republican theorists [his exemplar is Michael Sandel] nevertheless have a tendency to frame their defense of republican politics in terms of a clash between two worldviews: the liberal view and the republican view. Thus, Kymlicka’s own view about the compatibility of liberal egalitarianism and republicanism notwithstanding, there are good reasons to see modern assimilationist educational tendencies that invoke the label “republican,” such as those in France and the United States, as nourished to some extent by deeper intellectual roots in contemporary and classical republican political theory.


in Belgium and Québec,9 Interculturalism remains little known in comparison with Multiculturalism. The question of what defines Interculturalism and how it differs significantly from Multiculturalism remains poorly understood.10

We aim to rectify this problem by examining Multiculturalism and Interculturalism as competing approaches to social integration and diversity management in plural liberal societies. In particular, we identify and evaluate the differences between these two approaches through the lens of one notoriously difficult policy challenge: that of state funding and regulation of conservative religious schools. Our argument is structured as follows. The first section develops an account of Interculturalism by examining how it has developed as a policy alternative to Canadian Multiculturalism within the context of Québec. After pointing out some of the similarities between Multiculturalism and Interculturalism, we argue that the central distinguishing feature of Interculturalism is its elaboration of a paradigm for integrating citizens from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds into an open-ended, ongoing project of collectively defining the public culture of the nation — a project based on dialogue, intercultural engagement, and inclusiveness. In the second section, we present an analysis of what we call the “political dilemma of conservative religious schooling.” The dilemma, stated simply, is that while on the one hand Multiculturalism’s respect for group diversity and autonomy militates in the direction of leaving these schools to operate freely, on the other hand allowing conservative religious schools to operate freely runs counter to an ideal of citizenship, based on cross-cultural engagement, that is also central to Multiculturalism.11 In section three, we show that attempts to address this dilemma in the philosophy of education literature tend to converge on an arm’s length approach to the funding and regulation of conservative religious schools.


10. For one recent treatment of this issue, see Meer and Modood, “How Does Interculturalism Contrast with Multiculturalism?”

11. We are well aware that “multiculturalism” and “intercultural citizenship,” both complex and politically charged terms, are open to subtleties of interpretation that may significantly inform how these concepts are used to understand and justify policy standpoints with respect to conservative religious schooling. To avoid getting bogged down in definitional debates in political philosophy, we have opted, following Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka, for a vernacular approach. That is to say, our stipulated definition of these terms aims to approximate their meaning and use in public discourse. We have adopted Kymlicka’s definitions primarily because they seem to do this work well. The test of their legitimacy, we advance, is the plausibility of our diagnosis of the political dilemma of conservative religious schools and the typical reactions to them in the philosophical literature and in policy circles.
This approach, which has real-world manifestations in several countries’ policies on the regulation of religious schooling, ends up prioritizing religious groups’ rights to educational autonomy at the cost of neglecting the state’s responsibility to provide children with a quality learning environment and a basic citizenship education — or so we argue. Section four turns to the case of Québec’s system of school regulation, which promotes an interculturalist approach, as a promising alternative to the political dilemma of conservative religious schooling. We illustrate how the greater educational prescriptiveness of this approach leads to regulatory mechanisms designed to promote values and competencies of what we call dialectical citizenship — that is, a conception of citizenship based on culturally interactive dialogue and exchange — in all schools. We also explain how the interculturalist framework has been enacted in recent educational policy reforms, with a particular focus on the mandatory ethics and religious culture [ERC] course. We conclude the essay by highlighting some of the challenges and prospects of the interculturalist approach to the regulation and funding of conservative religious schools as a means of promoting fair terms of integration in multicultural societies.

**Interculturalism and Multiculturalism**

This section’s account of Interculturalism is based on iterations of the approach in recent policy documents in Québec, including the government report on cultural accommodation, *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation*, written by the historian Gérard Bouchard and the eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Like Multiculturalism, Québec Interculturalism has evolved over time, and we will focus our attention on the most recent versions.12

Interculturalism and Multiculturalism are conceptual cousins, and Interculturalism is best understood as a response to Multiculturalism’s perceived shortcomings. The origins of Interculturalism are complex and, like the origins of Multiculturalism itself, date back to the 1970s, when Canadian Multiculturalism was inaugurated as official policy at the federal level. At the time, many Québécois saw the enactment of Canadian Multiculturalism as an attempt to undermine their sovereignty and as a betrayal of Québec’s historical status as one of the three “founding nations” of the Canadian federation.13 Owing largely to this disgruntlement over Canadian Multiculturalism, and facilitated by the fact that Québec controls its own immigration and education under Canadian law, Québec developed an alternative policy framework for managing cultural diversity and the integration of immigrants. That policy framework became known as “Interculturalism.”


13. Rocher et al., *Le concept d’interculturalisme en contexte québécois*. The other founding nations identified in the Constitution are Canadians of British descent and the First Nations.
As we briefly noted in the introduction, what distinguishes Interculturalism from Multiculturalism is primarily that the former focuses on identifying and implementing means by which to encourage cultural and religious groups to enter into a national dialogue. Yet before we elaborate on this key difference, it is important to note that Interculturalism and Multiculturalism come together on a number of scores. First, the two frameworks share a broad social aspiration, which is to promote integration rather than assimilation into the wider societal culture. Both Interculturalism and Multiculturalism embrace cultural diversity as a defining feature of society and as an important source of social, cultural, and even economic capital. Neither approach discourages the recognition and conservation of cultural heritage or identity. In this respect, they both reject the presumptive republican-style assimilationist tendencies of French and American immigration policy. Second, Interculturalism and Multiculturalism share a number of strategies for facilitating participation. These strategies involve the implementation of a wide range of government interventions that serve to remove obstacles to social integration. Both policy frameworks support public outreach campaigns and other measures to reduce racism and increase intercultural awareness and acceptance. They each favor the accommodation of cultural and religious practices and forms of affirmative action to increase of ethnic minorities’ capacity to participate in the bureaucracy, government, and other areas of public life. Third and finally, both approaches advocate taking cultural differences into consideration in the elaboration of public policy, in the development of public programs, and in the provision of government services.

Having noted these areas of overlap, we return now to the fundamental distinction between Interculturalism and Multiculturalism, which, as indicated previously, is that the two approaches operate within a significantly different paradigm of integration. In Multiculturalism, the pursuit of integration and diversity management capitalizes on the promotion and valorization of cultural diversity as a political end in itself. By contrast, Interculturalism regards the integration of new citizens as part of a dynamic, open-ended process of transforming a common societal culture through dialogue, mutual understanding, and intercultural contact. While both frameworks are committed to using state power to ensure that newcomers are treated fairly and that their rights are respected, Interculturalism introduces a second political purpose of facilitating integration in order to enable newcomers to participate in the co-construction of a common societal culture.

The most novel aspect of Interculturalism is precisely this proposal to replace nationalist attachment — the standard justificatory base of the duties of citizenship and obligations to one’s fellow citizens on the nationalist model — with a commitment to a collective political project. Interculturalism rejects the nationalist principle according to which the state is a tool for the purposes of advancing the well-being and prosperity of the dominant national group.14 It proposes to

14. The idea that one of the state’s central goals is to promote the interests of a national group is one of the “principles of the multicultural state” as defined by Kymlicka. See Kymlicka, “Multicultural States and Intercultural Citizens,” 162.
substitute personal attachment to the fixed identity referents of the nation with a view of citizenship that is grounded in the collective effort to codetermine a common societal culture. Bouchard and Taylor describe this “promise of codetermination” as the focal point of social cohesion in the interculturalist state:

The society to which one is deeply attached is this collective enterprise that has taken shape over the centuries, centered on certain values or ideals, which, of course, have continued to change. It belongs to the past but perpetuates itself as a heritage and as the future. In this way, everyone can grasp this past in order to prolong the thread that wove it, without there necessarily being agreement on everything that composes it. Some individuals have direct ancestors in this past and others do not, but everyone can adopt the project that this society proposes. The path has been shaped but one can enter it at any time, which means that one has the right, therefore, to contribute to mapping out the rest of the itinerary, in a word, to codetermine it. . . . It is the dreams, decisions and common projects, in short everything we have achieved together, that will give substance to this new and perhaps fragile identity.15

Aside from those features it shares with Multiculturalism, and the redefinition of the sense of national community as a collective project formed through citizens engaged in cross-cultural dialogue and interaction that lies at its heart, Interculturalism adds three further elements that reinforce and elaborate its distinctive co-constructive civic ideal. These three key elements are a focus on dialogue, an acknowledgment of sociological asymmetry, and an emphasis on the idea of a moral contract.16

Dialogue refers to a tenet of Interculturalism according to which the process of constructing a common political culture takes place through encounter, democratic interaction, and cultural exchange among citizens of various cultural origins and values perspectives. In this respect, all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in this collective project. In contrast with Multiculturalism, which seems to promote diversity as an inherent social value, Interculturalism considers the acceptance of difference, mutual respect, and cultural rapprochement to be conditions facilitating convergence toward a common societal culture.

Sociological asymmetry posits that in the process of political dialogue, the values, beliefs, and practices that immigrants bring with them and those of the dominant cultural space into which they have moved do not carry equal weight. This is in opposition to Multiculturalism, which, at least in practice, tends toward strict, abstract cultural egalitarianism in its conceptualization of intercultural relations.17 Sociological asymmetry is manifested, in part, through conceptions of integration obligations that differ according to whether citizens are new arrivals

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17. In the 1970s, the government of Pierre Trudeau issued an official statement on Multiculturalism that noted, “To say we have two official languages is not to say we have two official cultures, and no particular culture is more ‘official’ than another.” This policy, which has never been repudiated by the federal government, still arguably represents the dominant interpretation of Multiculturalism as it is
or are long established. Newcomers are responsible for integrating and adapting, while established citizens have the responsibility of welcoming and accepting newcomers by [among other things] learning about and engaging with their cultures and adjusting their practices in order to facilitate social inclusion. The ideal is of a balanced but asymmetrical give-and-take of adjustment, exchanges, and compromise between the home society and those of new arrivals.

The moral contract refers to Interculturalism’s explicitness about the fixity of the legal and civic framework to which immigrants, like all citizens, are subject. The notion of the “moral contract” between citizens calls on all citizens to further the basic societal values of individual rights and freedoms, democratic participation, the promotion of a common public language, openness to plurality, and intercultural dialogue.18

In conclusion, the similarities and differences between Interculturalism and Multiculturalism can be illustrated by way of a useful [if somewhat simplistic] contrast between two “guiding metaphors.” In the multiculturalist ideal, the state is bound to respect cultural diversity in the form of numerous cultural groups or voluntary associations that, in many cases, choose to cultivate cross-cultural relations in dialogue, but that, in a substantial number of cases, choose the path of isolation — socially, politically, and educationally — from the larger, intercultural society. Given these characteristics, Multiculturalism’s guiding metaphor has emerged as the mosaic. The guiding metaphor for Interculturalism is, in contrast, becoming part of a story. The story has a determinate past, but its future is open — it is a future that should, ideally, be shaped by all its characters, both old and new.

The Political Dilemma of Conservative Religious Schools

In this section, we turn our attention to the problems associated with regulating and funding religious schools in liberal societies. In doing so, we aim to further sharpen the differences between Interculturalism and Multiculturalism by accentuating their divergent policy implications.

The question of how states should fund and regulate religious schools is a source of persistent conflict in liberal democratic societies. Positions are often entrenched, with partisans on opposing sides of the debate disagreeing most acutely about the relation between the state and conservative religious schools. Catering to parents who sometimes regard exposure to alternative ways of life as potentially undermining their efforts to initiate their children into the beliefs, values, and rituals that comprise their religious perspective, conservative religious

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schools are widely seen as purposely denying exposure to alternative traditions that are present in the wider societal culture. In this section, we offer a diagnosis of this difficult public issue and go on to suggest that Interculturalism may have the potential to remedy it. Following a suggestion by Will Kymlicka, we argue that the case of state regulation of religious schools gives rise to a dilemma that is structured by a conflict between two imperatives of what Kymlicka calls “the multicultural state”: respect for group autonomy versus a certain ideal of citizenship that embodies the spirit of openness to cultural difference.19

The first horn of the dilemma is constituted by the idea that the multicultural state should afford religious schools extensive freedom from regulation. According to Kymlicka, this idea is based on three general principles. The first of these principles is that the state is not the instrument of a dominant national group. Second, and consequently, the state rejects policies that would assimilate newcomers and historical minorities into the dominant national culture or exclude them from public life. Third, being committed to a framework of individual rights, the liberal multicultural state acknowledges and may attempt to rectify any past violations of the rights of minority groups that have been perpetrated in order to assimilate or oppress those groups. A commitment to each of these three principles means that when individuals and groups demand state support for religious schools, the multicultural state has powerful reasons to support them.20

Practically speaking, there are several reasons why religious organizations may wish to press such demands.21 As Rob Reich observes, some religious groups might regard state schooling as threatening them with assimilation.22 All schools play a central role in cultural transmission and the culturally protective environment that religious schools offer families may be seen as essential to maintaining or restoring the particular combination of beliefs, practices, and shared values that characterizes their religion. Furthermore, state schools have historically been used to assimilate the children of minority groups to the majority culture, and when the state curriculum fails to recognize the experiences and contributions of a minority group, it can increase that group’s sense of marginalization within society.23 Finally, in jurisdictions where Protestant or Catholic schools are entitled to state funding, there seems to be a strong case to be made that the state has an obligation either to provide equal support to all religious schools or else to withdraw support from all such schools, including those presently funded, in the name of

20. Ibid., 150 and 154.
21. Of course, there are also reasons why many religious parents may not choose to exercise these rights. For example, when a family has no intention to return to or maintain strong ties with their country of origin, they may judge that sending their children to a state school or secular private school will be more conducive to their children’s social adaptation.
state neutrality. A recent example from Canada illustrates how multicultural principles of cultural equality, freedom, and nonoppression become the preferred political currency in educational policy debates. In the province of Ontario, a coalition of Jewish, Sikh, Muslim, and Armenian Orthodox Christian religious leaders undertook a vigorous lobbying campaign to extend Ontario's policy of state support for Catholic schools to all faith-based schools and succeeded in making the issue of funding religious schools a decisive issue during a provincial election.

If the principles of respect for group diversity and autonomy in the multiculturalist framework militate strongly in the direction of leaving conservative religious schools to operate freely, Kymlicka argues that an ideal of culturally interactive and engaged citizenship, also central to Multiculturalism, makes allowing conservative religious schools extensive autonomy a politically problematic policy option. Kymlicka describes this ideal as follows:

An intercultural citizen is someone who not only supports the principle of a multicultural state, but also exhibits a range of more positive personal attitudes towards diversity. In particular, it is someone who is curious rather than fearful about other peoples and cultures; someone who is open to learning about other ways of life, and willing to consider how issues look from other people's point of view, rather than assuming that their inherited way of life or perspective is superior; someone who feels comfortable interacting with people from other backgrounds, and so on.

This ideal of citizenship implies that attitudes of tolerance and respect for cultural difference should be combined with an inclination to cherish intercultural contact and dialogue. Such citizens acknowledge the centrality of culture to identity


25. Labeling itself the Public Education Fairness Network (PEFN), the group’s position was that the “Catholic schools–only” policy discriminated against other religious groups unfairly. Catholic schools are different from other faith-based schools, they argued, only by virtue of having been present longer in Ontario, an accident of history that should have no moral or political relevance to the government’s policy of school regulation. Notably, John Tory, leader of the Ontario Conservative Party, adopted the PEFN position as part of the party’s platform in the 2007 provincial election. The fact that a major political party endorsed the cause of equal funding shows the appeal of principles of multicultural fairness in public debates about religious schools. Of greater significance is the fact that positions on both sides of the debate coalesced around the question of whether to extend funding to all religious schools equally or to withhold such funding altogether. Principles of multicultural equality were the focus of attention for those on different sides of the debate, the disagreement was about how best to implement these principles. Incidentally, Tory’s party lost the elections, a loss some analysts attributed in part to his support for this controversial proposal. See CBC-Toronto, “Religious Groups Call for Faith-Based School Funding,” CBC News, August 28, 2007, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/story/2007/08/28/religious-schools-funding.html. Compare these events with the similar demands in the UK on the part of Muslim schools discussed in Harry Brighouse, “Religious Belief, Religious Schooling, and the Demands of Reciprocity,” in Deliberative Democracy in Practice, ed. David Kahane, Daniel Weinstock, Dominique Leydet, and Melissa Williams (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), 49–50.

and, on this basis, are receptive to the idea of a “right to culture.” In this view, recognizing the importance of an attachment to one’s home culture is a question of respect for human dignity. Committed to the idea that culture is a repository of traditional knowledge about how to live well, Kymlicka’s “intercultural citizen” generally holds that cultural pluralism adds richness to society and takes advantage of opportunities to familiarize him-or herself with expressions of cultural difference.

In this light, the very raison d’être of conservative religious schools seems to constitute a tacit rejection of this ideal of citizenship. To be sure, many religious schools actively promote its values, and as Michael McConnell has argued, some may be as effective in doing so as secular state schools. A small subset of conservative religious schools, however, caters to parents who tend to regard exposure to alternative ways of life as potentially undermining their efforts to initiate their children into the beliefs, values, and rituals that comprise their religious perspective. Such parents would see intercultural contact and openness to difference as potentially corrupting and a threat to their way of life rather than conducive to their children’s positive development. At least in part, these parents choose conservative religious schools because their idea of civic education clashes significantly with that which is favored by the multicultural state.

In conclusion, the broad principles of liberal democratic multicultural states, which garner widespread popular support among citizens, militate in favor of limited regulation of religious schools and, in jurisdictions where faith-based schools receive state funding, equal treatment and privileges for all faiths and for nonreligious groups as well. On the other hand, the values of respect for difference, religious freedom, and human diversity that animate these principles also open the way for conservative religious groups to use schooling to isolate children from the rest of society. When faith-based schools inculcate children with exclusionary worldviews, when they indoctrinate children, making it difficult for them to exit the religious group, when they teach that those who do not share their religion or obey its precepts are morally corrupt, they encourage a deep sense of exclusivity that seems anathema to the multicultural ideal of contact and dialogue. The irony of conservative religious schools in multicultural societies is that parents who chose them often do so in hope that their children will not develop precisely that sense of tolerance, openness to difference, and dialectical citizenship that, in the mind of large numbers of their fellow citizens, legitimates these schools’ claim to self-regulation and impartial treatment at the hand of the state. The impression that conservative religious schools want in this sense to have their multicultural cake and eat it too undoubtedly contributes to the hostility that some people harbor toward such schools.

The Standard Multiculturalist Approach to the Funding and Regulation of Conservative Religious Schools and Its Limitations

How should the state respond to the political dilemma of conservative religious schooling? In this section, we concentrate on elaborating the ways in which a certain common policy response to this dilemma may exacerbate, rather than attenuate, the costs that unregulated conservative religious schooling entail for civic education and the cause of social cohesion in multicultural societies.

The common response we have in mind is when the liberal democratic multicultural state sets out the goal of adequately promoting the dispositions, skills, and values of dialectical citizenship as a regulatory constraint on policies that would grant state funding to separate religious schools. According to this response, eligibility for state funding becomes conditional on religious schools demonstrating that they contribute sufficiently to these goals of citizenship education.

How conservative religious schooling might run counter to forms of citizenship education that will adequately prepare young people for life in a pluralist liberal democratic society has been examined in different ways by different authors in the philosophy of education literature. Eamonn Callan, for instance, argues that student homogeneity in religious schools is an impediment to the development of tolerance. Noting that religious schools tend to limit opportunities for interaction with children from outside the religious community, he suggests that these environments do not engender respect for diverse ways of life.28 Others claim that, in addition to providing an environment in which intercultural contact is minimized, religious schools deliver inadequate civic education when they teach a curriculum that does not conduce to tolerance.29 This arises, for instance, when they teach exceptionalism (that is, the belief that their religious group has been chosen by God to receive divine revelation), when they instruct that nonmembers are evil or sinful, or when they forbid or discourage personal relations with outsiders. Similarly, the promotion in some conservative religious schools of manifestly illiberal attitudes such as gender inequality, racism, or homophobia, which run counter to the basic assumption of moral equality between citizens, stands in clear tension with reasonable civic educational goals of liberal multicultural states.30 In addition, several authors express reservations about the ability of conservative religious schools to foster children’s autonomy, one of the basic values of the liberal state.31 According to these authors, a religious education...

constitutes a threat to autonomy when it fails to develop young people’s ability to think critically about social and personal values — as expressed, for instance, in religious doctrine or in the pronouncements of a religious authority. This stifling of critical reflection may also, they claim, significantly curtail group members’ capacity to decide to exit the group.32

Harry Brighouse has referred to this common liberal democratic policy response as the “standard” approach to the regulation and funding of religious schools.33 According to this approach, if a religious school does or could meet specified criteria established by the ideal of multicultural citizenship, then it is deemed eligible for state funding, while a religious school that fails to meet the specified criteria, or is deemed unwilling or unable to do so, would be tolerated but would have to be financially self-supporting.

This funding-conditionality argument is adaptable — and has been adapted — both to jurisdictions in which religious schools are routinely funded (for example, in the Netherlands and in France) as well as to those where the state does not directly finance private schools (for example, in many U.S. states). In Canada, Jocelyn Berthelot, for example, has used this argument to object to Québec’s policy of offering state support to so-called “ethnocultural schools.” “Québec,” Berthelot urges, “should immediately put an end to the public financing of ethnocultural schools; these schools favor neither the government’s policy of integration nor the development of democratic citizenship.”34 Similarly, taking inspiration from McConnell’s observations about the relatively high levels of civic engagement among religious Americans, Frances Kroeker suggests that if their capacity to promote civic educational goals such as respect for diversity, tolerance, openness to difference, and autonomy is the main criteria for deciding whether religious schools may receive state funding, then many religious schools deserve state support.35 There are religious schools, she thinks, that promote these goals as well as or even better than state schools.

The basic political attraction of the standard approach is clear. By permitting schools that do not promote the ideal of dialectical citizenship to operate (although without funding), the state avoids the impression of exercising its authority to stifle particular expressions of collective life and conceptions of the good life. At the same time, the state demonstrates its overarching commitment to the ideal of multicultural citizenship by making state support conditional on the promotion of this ideal. In striking this particular balance between the competing demands of

32. See especially Reich, “Multicultural Accommodations in Education.”
34. Jocelyn Berthelot, Une école pour le monde, une école pour tout le monde. L’éducation québécoise dans le contexte de la mondialisation [Schools for the world, schools for everyone: Québec education in an era of globalization] (Montréal: VLB Éditeur, 2006), 144.
respect for diversity and multicultural citizenship education, the state also appears to absolve itself of responsibility when schools elect to reject the dialectical ideal.36

The standard approach to resolving the dilemma of conservative religious schools, then, has clear political advantages for the state; however, it also has several apparent educational and social limitations that count against it.37 First, as we have already emphasized, there are foreseeable negative consequences for the education of children who attend religious schools that opt out of state funding. The ultimate responsibility for children’s education, as Brighouse and Michael Merry remind us, lies in the hands of the state.38 Leaving the quality of the education that some children receive to the vagaries of private fundraising efforts abrogates this responsibility. Furthermore, as we suggested earlier, the goals of multicultural civic education are not merely a set of arbitrary preferences of the dominant majority culture. They appear to be internally related to the principles of the multicultural state insofar as both draw normatively on such shared values as tolerance, respect for difference, and individual rights. Assuming that the children of isolationist religious families are generally less likely to be exposed to these values in their private lives and generally more likely to be sent to conservative religious schools, the standard approach has the perverse effect of denying an adequate civic education to some of the children in society who stand to benefit most from such an education. In other words, if we accept that it is in the best interest of all children in plural liberal democratic societies to receive the kind of civic education that will help them acquire basic competencies of democratic citizenship [such as autonomy, critical thinking, and the ability to engage in dialogue], enable them to understand their rights and liberties, and provide them with basic tools to defend those rights, then it is children who attend conservative religious schools who are most likely at the greatest risk of not receiving such an education.

36. Another far less common response is to adopt a libertarian approach, which consists in subjecting all religious schools to the same regulatory scheme and, in this way, to detach eligibility for state support from civic educational goals altogether. One example of the libertarian response to the political dilemma of conservative religious schools is that of the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision on Arizona’s voucher scheme [see Arizona Christian School Tuition Organization v. Winn et al., no. 09-987, 2011, www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/10pdf/09-987.pdf]. The decision upheld an Arizona state law that funnels tax dollars [in the form of a tax deduction for money paid in tuition fees] to any accredited private religious schools. According to this view, it would be a violation of state neutrality if the state were to dictate to conservative religious schools how they should or should not socialize their children, presumably as long as these schools meet minimal criteria for safety, educational quality, and respect for children’s rights under the law. Rather than offering a balanced response to the dilemma, this approach seems to consist in asserting the priority of multicultural diversity over the ideal of dialectical citizenship.


A second limitation of the standard approach is the foreseeable negative consequences for the civic education and civic educational experiences of children who attend state schools or state-funded religious schools. Direct interactions with people who have different beliefs and backgrounds provide obvious and crucial learning opportunities in the context of civic education for the ideal of multicultural citizenship. The standard approach, however, seems conducive to reinforcing pockets of homogeneity within the school system, as parents will tend to send their children to schools that represent their own cultural and religious beliefs. This polarization along religious lines not only deprives children from secular families of potentially enriching contact with religious perspectives [and vice versa], but it also deprives religious children of opportunities to appreciate the internal diversity of their own religion. What we are suggesting here is not that religious heterogeneity within the classroom and school is a necessary condition for an adequate civic education in a pluralistic society, only that the standard approach would almost certainly contribute to the school-choice phenomenon whereby children from some religious families are funneled into religiously homogeneous schools, and would thus lead to less rather than more heterogeneity across the school system as a whole.

Finally, in addition to polarizing school populations along religious lines, the standard approach risks pushing conservative religious groups further to the margins of society. The policy confronts religious parents with a choice between a financially stable moderately religious school, obliged on pain of having its funding revoked to promote an ideal of citizenship with which the parents may disagree, and a financially precarious conservative religious school, which is free to socialize children in ways that may be more compatible with parents’ religious convictions. The predictable outcome is a pattern of increasingly religious concentration in school attendance where only the most conservative religious families (who already likely attend the same conservative churches, temples, synagogues, or mosques) send their children to conservative religious schools. These families are therefore further cut off from the potentially tempering influence of their community’s religious moderates and confirmed in their suspicion that mainstream society is hostile to their outlook and way of life.

In sum, the standard approach consists in striking a particular compromise with regard to the dilemma of conservative schools. But that compromise comes at a high price. The standard approach [a] threatens to neglect the state’s responsibility to ensure that all children receive a quality education, [b] is liable to encourage school demographics that are antithetical rather than favorable to a civic education tailored to the needs of multicultural citizenship, and [c] is likely to contribute to rather than attenuate social fragmentation. We conclude that these costs constitute excellent reasons to jettison the standard approach as a policy framework in favor of a more attractive alternative that, as we will advance in the next section, is inspired by Québec’s experiment with applying the interculturalist approach to the education system.
Policy Implications of the Interculturalist Approach: 
The Case of Québec

The idea of a shared social project, of a national community grounded in intercultural dialogue — which, as we argued in the first section, constitutes the key difference between Multiculturalism and Interculturalism — provides the material for suggesting a solution to the political dilemma of conservative religious schooling and the attendant difficulties of the standard approach to funding religious schools. Although, as we have noted, Interculturalism and Multiculturalism have important similarities, Interculturalism’s prioritization of inclusive dialogue and interaction among citizens warrants greater educational prescriptivism. As a result, there is a striking difference in terms of the educational implications of the two approaches to social integration. The imperative of preparing future citizens to participate in the shared project of social transformation that defines Interculturalism suggests the need for a set of curricular guidelines that will apply to all citizens, regardless of their cultural, social, ethnic, religious, or evaluative affiliations. As we have suggested, the standard approach tends toward either offering blanket funding with light regulation, or offering funding to religious schools with regulatory strings attached while leaving religious schools that refuse the regulatory conditions to operate largely free from regulation. By contrast, the interculturalist approach encourages a more interventionist system of school regulation. In this schema, funding for private schooling is not attached to the ability of particular schools to demonstrate that they are adequately pursuing certain curricular goals; rather, pursuing certain curricular goals is a condition of the very entitlement to operate legally. This section presents a case study of how this shift in emphasis from the focus on funding to a focus on regulation plays out in practice in Québec’s education system.

Entailing a comprehensive system of regulation of private education and a set of curriculum guidelines, Interculturalism substantially informs the educational experience of all Québec students. It forms the ideological axis of a system that provides extensive funding for religious believers to educate their children according to their religions’ guidelines, but that simultaneously frames that funding within a system of regulation that specifies clear limits to the scope of religious education.

Québec’s current system of education includes a vast network of Anglophone and Francophone public schools, as well as a large number of private schools, almost all of which are publicly funded. As of 2010, 19 percent of Québec students attended private secondary schools and 7 percent attended private elementary schools, although these totals are much higher in urban areas.39 Both at the elementary level and at the secondary level, students attending private schools are

eligible to receive from the state approximately 60 percent of per-pupil funding provided to public schools. In total, Québec allocates almost half a billion dollars per year to funding private education. Given that Québec has an extensive tradition of private religious education (until the 1960s, education in Québec was largely in the hands of the Catholic Church), this generous funding scheme is not surprising.

Yet despite this tradition of extensive funding, all Québec private schools operate within a tight regulatory climate. The Education Act specifies that all schools, whether funded or not, must possess a permit from the Ministry of Education, Recreation, and Sports in order to operate, and in order to hold this permit, they are required to respect the government-mandated curriculum, including the new ethics and religious culture (ERC) program [not to mention science curricula that include information on evolution]. In Québec, if private schools do not adhere to provincially mandated curriculum guidelines, they are, at least in theory, not permitted to operate. Furthermore, there is no possibility of easy exit from the system through the mechanism of a home school. In order to be approved for home schooling, parents must submit any textbooks they plan to use along with an educational plan that demonstrates that they are following the government-mandated curriculum.

This curriculum, the Québec Education Program (QEP), is in many respects a standard state curriculum; although it is heavily influenced by progressive educational currents, it includes all the usual academic subjects. There are also a number of ways in which it is significantly influenced by the ideal of Interculturalism. In this connection, the QEP features five “broad areas of learning,” each of which is supposed to be dealt with across a number of subject areas. One of them is “citizenship and community life,” the aim of which is


44. Ibid. The government also requires compliance with Bill 101, a language law that specifies that all new immigrants to Québec must be educated in French.


46. Ministry of Education, Recreation, and Sports, Québec Education Program: Secondary Education, Cycle One (Québec: Gouvernement de Québec, 2004). This will be cited in the text as QEP for all subsequent references.
“to enable students to take part in the democratic life of the classroom or the school and develop an attitude of openness to the world and respect for diversity” [QEP, 28]. This general aim is broken down into a number of subgoals — all of which are consistent with Interculturalism — including a respect for the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship and an emphasis on developing a “culture of peace” [QEP, 29]. The subgoal that is most interesting from the perspective of Interculturalism, however, is the goal of participation and solidarity, which includes “decision-making process(es) based on compromise, consensus, etc.; establishment of egalitarian relationships; debate and argumentation; leadership; mutual help; community action projects” [QEP, 29]. This particular aspect of the broad area of learning is inextricably linked to two of the key elements of Interculturalism: dialogue and the moral contract. The aim is to create citizens that are aware of their rights, accommodating of difference, disposed to interact with one another, and ready to work together on a shared collective endeavor.

The influence of Interculturalism is also evident in Québécois’s new ERC course. ERC, a mandatory subject in all Québécois elementary and secondary schools (including, of course, private schools) since 2008, is broken down into three basic “competencies”: ethical reflection, knowledge of religious culture, and the capacity for dialogue [QEP, 66]. The ethics competency requires that students learn to deliberate about ethical questions, to structure their arguments coherently, and to clarify their disagreements or differences through interaction with others. The religion competency, which has as its aim helping young people acquire a body of general knowledge about religion (that is, “religious culture”), implies a cultural approach to religious education that aims at sociohistorical understanding religious traditions. The dialogue competency is articulated as a set of skills — such as attentive listening, mutual respect, and openness to diverse perspectives — that enable students to develop strategies that promote dialogue and to avoid obstacles to dialogue.

The competencies of the ERC program are, again, underwritten in significant ways by the key elements of Interculturalism. Consider first the religion competency, which contributes to facilitating dialogue. Substantial knowledge of religious diversity better equips students for living in a pluralistic society where they may have to interact with people who have different religious views. Second, the ethics and dialogue competencies within the ERC program are linked to Interculturalism’s emphasis on dialogue and the moral contract. Skills in dialogue enable citizens to contribute productively to the dialectical process of pursuing the common good while the moral contract ensures that this dialogue proceeds in a way that is respectful of the legitimate and relevant differences of citizens and their basic rights and freedoms. In other words, it is seen as necessary to equip students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds — including those from conservative religious backgrounds — with the skills, attitudes, and conceptual frameworks necessary for dialogue so that they will respect others who may be different from them in important ways and encounter them with a view toward living together in a better way and participating in the collective project of building a common political culture. From the perspective of Interculturalism, then, the
three basic competencies of the ERC program are mutually reinforcing: education in “ethics and religious culture” provides a basis for learning, through dialogical engagement, how to participate in a collective pursuit of the common good in a pluralistic society while recognizing deep differences in evaluative outlooks as a valuable social resource.

To conclude, whereas the standard approach to the political dilemma of conservative religious schooling tends in the direction of the continued operation of unfunded, oversight-free conservative religious schools, the adoption of the more prescriptive intercultural framework mitigates the difficulties inherent in this approach through a broad scheme of school regulation. Rejecting the politically expedient strategy of washing its hands of the problem of conservative religious schooling when such schools refuse to contribute to the socialization of children into the ideal of multicultural citizenship through appropriate forms of civic education, the interculturalist approach, as demonstrated by the case of Québec, implies the adoption of a strong regulatory response. This idea of a collective project does not require participation, only that all citizens be helped to acquire through publicly funded education the capability for such participation. Interculturalism, as it is instantiated in the Québec context, tries to offer that chance to all citizens. Hence, it rejects policy options that would relegate the children of conservative religious believers to an underfunded, unregulated educational underclass.

THE INTERCULTURALIST APPROACH TO THE REGULATION AND FUNDING OF CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS: SOME CAUTIONARY NOTES

In this essay we have argued that Interculturalism offers an interesting way forward from the intractable problem of the public funding of conservative religious schools. Interculturalism’s substantial potential to address the significant tension between respect for cultural difference and multicultural citizenship that conservative religious schools raise in liberal democratic plural societies resides primarily in its ability to ground a strong case for a universal regime of citizenship education. However, a number of unanswered questions and outstanding problems remain, and our aim in this final section is to develop some cautionary notes and qualifications regarding our position.

First, we would like to reiterate and reinforce the point that, in spite of what may be good reasons to prefer Interculturalism over Multiculturalism, endorsing Interculturalism does not imply rejecting Multiculturalism’s many salutary features. As we discussed in the first section, the two frameworks are similar in terms of their core tenets. Notably, Interculturalism accepts all three of Kymlicka’s “principles of the multicultural state,” specifically that the state [a] is not the instrument of a dominant national group, [b] rejects assimilationist policies, and [c] is committed to a rights framework and to rectifying historical injustice. The value added by the shift to Interculturalism, we have argued, comes from the ways in which it inflects these principles, through Interculturalism’s

introduction of the notion of a shared collective project, so as to illuminate more wide-ranging policy options that recognize cultural differences while also supporting the development of citizens’ capacity for greater social inclusion and participatory citizenship.

A second cautionary note is that the framework of Interculturalism is, in some respects, particular to postnational societies such as Québec and many European countries. It was created in response to a specific set of historical circumstances, and it operates within a unique context. In the case of Québec, Interculturalism operates in the context of a rather precarious nation within a larger federation: a small minority of Francophones that is surrounded by a large, increasingly diverse Anglophone population. Québec, as a minority society, struggles constantly to protect its historically fragile identity, and for this reason, there is a great deal of motivation for the construction of a distinctive collective national project. However, as Bouchard and Taylor have emphasized, if Québec is to remain a vibrant and strong society, this project cannot be a backward-looking one. It must emphasize interaction among cultures, both within and outside of Québec.48

A third point that must be acknowledged is that the implementation of the ERC program, the curricular centerpiece of the interculturalist approach in the education system, has faced legal hurdles reaching the highest levels of the Canadian judicial system. In one recent case, parents argued before the Supreme Court of Canada that the ERC course prevented them from freely exercising their constitutional right to religious freedom. More specifically, they claimed that exposure to a variety of religious perspectives in school interfered with their ability to transmit their religious beliefs to their children.49 Another, perhaps even more complex legal challenge has come from the private Jesuit high school Loyola College.50 Here, the issue is whether the government’s insistence that the ERC course is to be taught from a neutral, nonconfessional perspective constitutes an unacceptable limit on the school’s employees and the religious order’s right to freedom of religion.

A fourth issue, perhaps the most serious of these cautionary notes, is that Interculturalism leaves a number of serious challenges regarding school funding unresolved. This is clearly illustrated in the case of Québec education. Although Interculturalism may be able to better address the difficulty of conservative religious schools through regulation, some of the thorny problems with the standard approach to school funding would persist under the current Québec funding system. Although all Québec private schools are required to teach a


curriculum that supports Interculturalism in theory, the actual effect of funding religious and ethnoculturally focused private schools may be to isolate students from particular religious and cultural backgrounds. In addition to this difficulty, the system of funding in Québec has, predictably, created a system in which students of higher socioeconomic status are concentrated in the private system; as of 2005, 32.3 percent of private school students in Québec reported an annual family income higher than $110,000. Isolationism along socioeconomic lines is, of course, hardly less in tension with Interculturalism’s prioritization of interaction than isolationism along religious lines.

All of these challenges are significant, and undoubtedly a great deal more work needs to be done. Our primary goal in this essay has been fairly modest: to argue that Interculturalism, through the system of curricular regulation that it warrants, seems to hold promise as a way of breaking the impasse around the funding and regulation of conservative religious schools. Yet, as should be clear, our hopes for the idea of Interculturalism go significantly beyond this. With Interculturalism, Québec is embarking on a remarkable social experiment in terms of how it integrates difference. We believe that Interculturalism has significant import beyond the context of Québec, and we would urge others to observe the results of this Québec experiment as it unfolds.