



SECULARISM, RELIGION AND EQUALITY OF WOMEN

To better understand the issue of secularism, the participants at the Women's Network had the chance to hear Micheline Milot*, full professor in the Sociology department at UQAM, and a specialist in secularism. She has stayed in various countries, including France, where she was recently asked to speak about Quebec's plan on secularism, and she had a seat on the Administrative Committee of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission.

THE NETWORK IN A NUTSHELL

The Women's Network met in Quebec City on April 21 and 22 under the theme *Secularism, religion and equality of women*. This Network beat the attendance record with 124 registered participants. Dealing with such a delicate subject that awakens very deep personal feelings among many of us, the debates at this Network were held with a spirit of openness and with great respect. The participants were able to come to two conclusions in a first get-together following a quick look at the major religions. First, it is often the actions of the worst extremists that we are aware of while these are practiced by a tiny fraction of the followers of each religion. Secondly, all religions are discriminatory towards women and generally place women in a role of submission. ■

During her presentation Ms Milot explained that there are two criteria for secularism: the separation of political and religious powers and the neutrality of the State towards denominations or religious groups. The State must not be associated with a religion. Neutrality is essential in order to insure the respect of equality, and freedom of conscience and religion. A democratic State must not encourage nor discourage a religious denomination or a religious group. Ms Milot also demonstrated that the Quebec government is a secular type since these two criteria are respected.

This secularism does not, however imply that feelings of belonging to a religious group be removed from the public eye. The Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms guarantees freedom of religion which implies that all citizens have the right to believe and to demonstrate their belief or their non-belief. Therefore, it is the State and its institutions that are secular and not people.

Here in Quebec, we have seen secularization for about fifty years, that is, a progressive withdrawal of religious authorities from the cultural and moral standards of society. It is therefore normal to sense a certain uneasiness with religious expression.

The model of relations between religions and the State in Quebec is based on a relative liberal tolerance and openness to expressing diversity. However, the wearing

of religious symbols raises much debate in our institutions. For some people, the Hijab collides with Quebec democratic values, such as equality between women and men. It even threatens secularism and integration into society. Ms Milot responded to this assertion that accepting expression of beliefs encourages integration while the contrary leads to stigmatization of differences, ghettoization and eventually to conflict.

Ms Milot asked us to separate the fundamental principles which define equality versus those that are incidental. That being the case, these principles are equality of political and legal status, as well as equality in the right to work, education, justice, healthcare and lodging.

It is therefore likely to think that accepting diversity leads to a more harmonious social integration. Thus, accepting the wearing of the Hijab in public institutions, will favour the integration of the women who wear it while if it was prohibited, these women would most likely be excluded from these institutions, which would, at the same time, send a clear message to employers in the private sector.

In conclusion, Ms Milot reminded everyone that religious patriarchy exists and that the State must not take its place by telling women what is acceptable or unacceptable clothing. The issue is acknowledging the other as equal in dignity. ■

* Micheline Milot is the author of the book entitled *La laïcité*, published in 2008 by éditions Novalis.

News from the Status of Women Sector

PURSuing WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

It will be 20 years, in 2009, that an important decision on a woman's right to choose an abortion was rendered by the Supreme Court of Canada and also since the carnage at the Polytechnique. Commemorative events are planned to remind everyone that women's struggles are not over.

AUGUST 8, 2009: 20th ANNIVERSARY OF THE SUPREME COURT DECISION IN THE CHANTALE DAIGLE CASE.

Do you know who Chantale Daigle is? She is a woman who was under an injunction filed by her ex-spouse to prevent her from having an abortion. She was liable to a penalty of a maximum of one year in prison and a fine of \$50,000 if she did not comply with the injunction.

July 27, 1989, a large demonstration of solidarity gathered 10,000 people who shouted: "Not the pope, not a judge, not the spouse, it's for women to decide." and thousands of dollars were collected to help the young woman obtain justice. Time dragged on and Chantale Daigle decided to defy the Canadian legal system and, with the help of the *Centre de santé des femmes de Montréal*, she secretly crossed the border and had an abortion in the United States. On August 8, 1989, the Supreme Court of Canada decided in her favor, confirming that the rights of the fetus or those of the father have no legal merit.

On the initiative of the *Fédération du Québec de Planning des Naissances*, a committee was set up, representing womens groups and union status of women committees, including the FIQ, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision. There will be

a commemorative evening on October 8th, a workshop with the *Forum Social Québécois* as well as an educational document. The objective of these activities is obviously to commemorate and acknowledge this historical moment in the fight for abortions and Quebec feminism, but also to take the opportunity to remember that the fight is not over and that unfortunately, the stakes are still an issue today.

A VERY SAD ANNIVERSARY: 20 YEARS SINCE THE CARNAGE AT THE POLYTECHNIQUE.

The *Fédération des femmes du Québec* set up a committee, on which the FIQ sits, to prepare the commemoration of the 20 years since the massacre at the Polytechnique. Last year's initiative of 12 days of action to mark the fight to counteract violence against women will be held again. There will also be a human chain and other activities held on December 6, 2009. Check the FIQ web site.

POLICY AGAINST VIOLENCE

The first policy to counteract sexual and racial harassment was adopted in November 1992. The sector received the mandate to update the latest version: "To Work in Dignity", adopted in 2001. To accomplish this, the sector asked local teams to send all the policies and codes of ethics adopted at the local level. ■

"DAMS THAT ARE NOT A UNANIMOUS CHOICE FROM ONE AMERICA TO ANOTHER"

Within the framework of a solidarity caravan which traveled throughout Quebec from April 16 to May 1, 2009, two invited guests came to inform the participants of the impacts of the construction of the big hydroelectric dams in northern Quebec: Marie Dominik Langlois, Coordinator of the Committee for Human Rights in Latin America (CDHAL) and Mériilda Saint-Onge, an elder Innu from Betsiamites. She gave a lively account of the disastrous consequences on the Innu communities from hydroelectric development—for their culture, their way of life, their hunting grounds and their spiritual life.

Following the ways of the western world being imposed, these communities are being faced with serious health problems, such as diabetes, alcoholism and drug addiction as well as violence against women and children. ■

"I was born in the woods, beside a lake. In my parents' time, people returned to their birthplace, they named it. Me, all that I can say is that I do not know where I was born. The land is now flooded. I do not know where I was born, I have never gone there and I know that it does not have a name."

Mériilda St-Onge



2008 commemorative event of the carnage at the Polytechnique on December 6, 1989.

THE WEARING OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN PUBLIC



Michèle Asselin

It is clear for the FFQ that the debate surrounding religious symbols represented by the Hijab should be held on the basis of the right to equality between men and women, by pursuing the fight against all forms of religious integrism. As a society, we must both avoid the stigmatism of women who belong to certain minority groups and cultural relativism, which consists of suspending the application of a right in virtue of cultural and religious requirements. Nothing can justify practices that encroach on the physical and psychological integrity of women.

This issue has constantly come up over the last few years within the women's movement and in the media. Michèle Asselin, President of the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) presented the members of the Network with the FFQ's position developed over a more than two year period of reflection on the wearing of religious symbols in Quebec public institutions.

It must be pointed out that even if it is an issue of wearing religious symbols in general, it is the Hijab that is drawing attention. The FFQ approached this issue from three points of view, that of the Quebec secular model, the situation of immigrant women in the job market and a feminist analysis.

Michèle Asselin first explained that the model that prevails in Quebec is one of open secularism, based on State neutrality, which is aimed at treating all people equally by not favouring any religion. That being the case, a law prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols in public institutions could not be considered neutral because it would favour people for whom the religious or spiritual beliefs do not require the wearing of such symbols.

The second issue is the integration of immigrant women into the job market. The FFQ believes that prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols in public institutions would only increase discrimination against women who are already victims of discrimination, stigmatizing those women who wear the Hijab in other institutions or workplaces or in the public eye. This could block their access to the job market. That being the case, financial autonomy for women is an essential condition for equality.

Thirdly, Michèle Asselin reminded the attendees of the principles that guide feminist intervention. These principles are supported by the need to respect the pace, choices, values and needs of the women concerned by avoiding a rigid application of these principles, concerning our own frame of reference and our desire for autonomy and change.

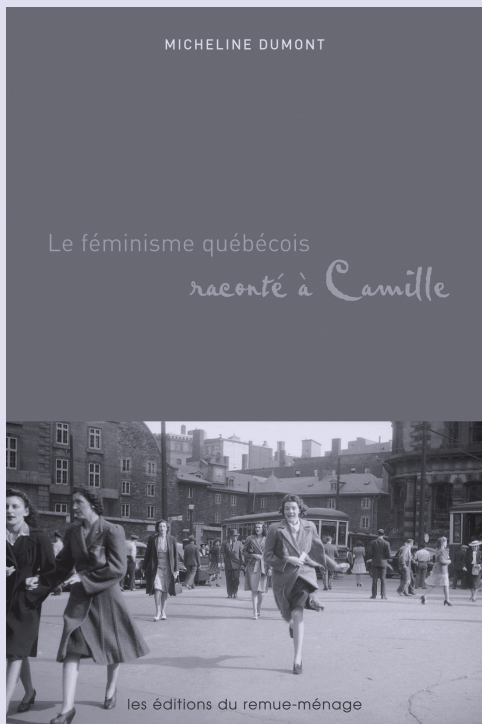
Thus, while the FFQ is against all religious and political obligations which would make women wear a Hijab here in Quebec or elsewhere in the world, the FFQ is also against the State imposing a restriction on women or men who choose to wear a religious symbol. Nevertheless, there should be an exception for people in positions of power or authority as well as for those practicing trades or professions where safety requires the prohibition or restriction of some religious symbols.

It is true that this is a complex issue which awakens deep feelings among many of us. It is helpful to remember that even if we can be upset by some practices, this is not a good enough reason to ban them in a democratic society.

In conclusion, Michèle Asselin recalled that the Fédération des femmes du Québec is against integrism of all religions and that she does not intend to take a break in the pursuit of the fight against the violation of women's rights and all the violence to which they are subjected.

The discussions took place in a spirit of openness and, according to the participants themselves, they led to "erasing certain prejudices and enlarging our reflection". The participants welcomed the presentation with much interest and warmly thanked Michèle Asselin for her enlightening talk. ■

THE WOMEN'S NETWORK'S FAVORITES



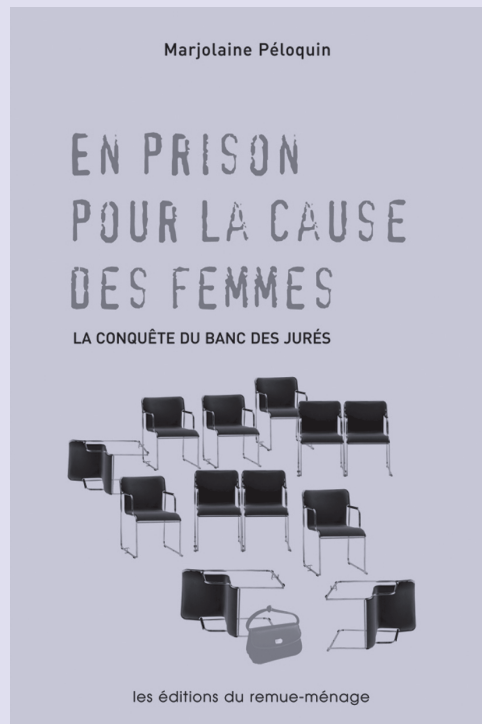
obtaining the rights that we, women, have dearly acquired over the last century. The book is easy to read and tells us of several organizations who played a pivotal role in feminist struggles.”

This work keeps the memory of our history alive and demonstrates that feminism is neither out of date nor futile, but on the contrary, always necessary.

IN PRISON FOR WOMEN'S CAUSES

Chantal Roy, member of the Status of Women Committee, read the book, *En prison pour la cause des femmes*, written by Marjolaine Péloquin, and published by the éditions du *Remue-ménage*. Unfortunately, she could not speak about what she had read because she could not get union leave to attend, however, Martine Éloy, consultant for the sector, gave an account from Chantal to the participants: “I devoured this book from cover to cover, that is why I have made it my favorite.”

Marjolaine Péloquin has been involved in the feminist movement since she participated in the *Front de libération des femmes du Québec* (FLF). In 1970, a woman did not have the right to be a juror in Quebec, so the women of the FLF organized an action to denounce this practice which relegated women to the role of minors. Marjolaine



Péloquin decided to reveal this little known episode in our recent history. Her book falls within a Quebec which has just suffered the shock of the War Measures Act. It reveals all the ups and downs from the inside and the results of the Action of Jurors. Seven young women stormed the jury box during a spectacular procedure on March 1, 1972. They were immediately jailed for willful contempt of court. The Juror's Act was changed on June 18, 1971, thanks to the audacity of these feminists. ■

LE FÉMINISME QUÉBÉCOIS RACONTÉ À CAMILLE

Annie Pinard, member of the Status of Women Committee shared her favorite work of Michelle Dumont, *Le féminisme québécois raconté à Camille*, published by the éditions *Remue-ménage*.

“This book is the history of feminism as told by a grandmother to her granddaughter. The struggle of women is revealed and how by gathering together they resolutely succeeded in

1995: The “Bread and Roses” March

The participant watched a video on the Bread and Roses March. In 1995, eight hundred women, with nine demands, walked for 10 days throughout the towns of Quebec. They were supported by 20,000 people united to greet them on their arrival in Quebec City. Two members of the Women's Network joined in the march: Michèle Allard, from the Institut universitaire de cardiologie et pneumologie de Québec, and Marie-Josée Forget du Syndicat des Professionnelles en Soins de l'Estrie. They gave an account of this formidable experience.

The women of Quebec proposed to the whole world the “World March of Women to Eliminate Poverty and Violence Against Women”. Groups of women from 160 countries responded to this call in 2000 and declared “We will march for as long as all women are not free”. This international movement to promote women's causes is now well implanted and women march every 5 years. This is how, on March 8, 2005, the World Women's Charter for Humanity made the world tour. In 2010, the world march will be launched at the international level on March 8th. In Quebec, women will march from October 12 to 17, first in their locality, then in their region and in a multi-regional contingent, to finally meet in a large provincial gathering in Rimouski on October 17th. Check the FIQ web site for up-to-date information.

