HASSIDIM AND THE ‘REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION’ DEBATE IN QUEBEC

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In February 2007, Quebec’s Premier made an announcement about a question which he said went ‘to the heart of Quebec’s future as a nation’ and about which a special commission had been created to study the ‘reasonable accommodation’ issue which had gripped the Canadian province for months. (The formal name of the Commission was the ‘Commission for Consultation on Accommodation in the Practices Regarding Cultural Differences.’)

That issue had emerged when, in January 2007, a municipal council in the Mauricie town of Hérouxville had adopted a code of conduct for immigrants. The task of the Commission would be to report on the direction and escalation of the public debate about how to respond to religious minorities whose practices were clashing with fundamental rights and values. In the view of the Premier (and that of many local Quebecers) the essence of reasonable accommodation has been misrepresented in at least one specific instance: hassidic Jews had called for the installation of frosted windows in a YMCA in Montreal’s Mile End district, so that hassidic boys in a neighbouring synagogue would not be able to see women in exercise clothes. The objection to such a request was that it ran counter to a secular-based society which did not consider the religious demands of distinctive minorities to be privileged.

This paper examines the concerns of the hassidim over the unfavourable publicity which had been generated by the debate on ‘reasonable accommodation’. The data used include informal interviews and media reports as well as an account of some incidents involving hassidim and their claims on the host society. Hassidim believe that they have been more sinned against than sinning and the media have grossly exaggerated their claims and wrongly accused them of being strident.
The term ‘unreasonable accommodation’ is a legal concept which is derived from labour law in the United States of America. It was introduced to make employers cater to the special needs of their personnel — for example, the physically disabled. In Quebec, the term was evolved into the concept of taking measures which would permit religious minorities to retain their traditions in public life. For example, the Supreme Court of Canada has approved legislation to allow Sikh officers in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to wear turbans when they are on duty while Muslim girls are allowed to cover their hair during school hours.

However, some of the conflicts which have arisen recently are not as easily resolved since no legislation had been enacted to settle the issue. There is a critical distinction between an arrangement which enjoys the backing of the law and a *modus vivendi* reached by parties to a dispute. In the latter case, the concept of ‘reasonable accommodation’ may be interpreted in sharply conflicting ways and may lead to acrimonious accusations. The Hérouxville dispute is a case in point. In January 2007 the town’s local council adopted a declaration of ‘norms’ to define its way of life and to specify these norms for the benefit of prospective immigrants. For example: men and women have equal rights; children cannot carry weapons in school; boys and girls are allowed to swim together — and so on and on.

The story was picked up from New Zealand to Bahrein — typically leading (as the Reuter item did) to such a report: ²

Immigrants wishing to live in the small Canadian town of Hérouxville, Quebec, must not stone women to death in public, burn them alive or throw acid on them, according to an extraordinary set of rules released by the local council.

According to the Quebec daily, *The Gazette*, at least five neighbouring municipalities were considering adopting similar codes. Quebec’s Premier maintained that the ruling of the Hérouxville council did not represent the majority reaction in the Province and the mayors of adjoining towns conceded that the Hérouxville code perhaps had gone too far — but they also agreed that ‘there are things that must change’.³

*The Gazette* publishes a weekly column by the satirist Josh Freed. He commented on 3 February 2007:⁴

In truth, Hérouxville is a lightning rod for the anxiety and confusion many feel since Sept. 11, 2001. In an increasingly multicultural society, we want new immigrants to feel welcome in our country, but we don’t want our country to turn into theirs.

Michel Venne (a former columnist in another publication) is the founder of the Institut du Nouveau Monde, a Montreal think tank.
holding a province-wide series of forums on the future of Quebec culture. He commented on the reactions to the Hérouxville controversy:5

In the 1960s we decided as a society that we would be secular — in a way, we privatized religion. But now, a certain number of groups, mostly stemming from immigration, want their religion to be seen in open society. They want their symbols to be allowed in public. And that’s a shock for Quebecers, and they’re starting to find ways to negotiate an understanding. Thus two generations since rejecting the Roman Catholic Church, French Quebecers were circling the wagons of a hard-won lay society.

In February 2007, there was media coverage of several successful instances of ‘reasonable accommodation’ of devout religious minorities which had occurred in 2006: on 2 March 2006, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that a Montreal Sikh could wear his ceremonial dagger at school; on 22 March 2006, the Quebec Human Rights Commission told l’École de technologie supérieure that it should accommodate Muslim students who wanted to have a prayer room — but it would not be obliged to provide a separate space for them. On September of the same year, 2006, La Presse reported that many area hospitals were experiencing difficulties with Muslim women, who did not want to be seen by male doctors.

In deference to their Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim clientele, clinics provided prenatal classes for women only. When he heard that, the following November, Mario Dumont (the ADQ leader) voiced his disapproval — complaining that although Sikhs could wear kirpans when attending school, the majority of citizens of the country were not sure that they would be allowed to mention the word ‘Christmas’ during school hours.

On 18 November, La Presse reported that an angry father had been in touch with the newspaper to complain that he had escorted his daughter to a communal clinic and they had to wait for five hours, because an Orthodox Jew with a deep cut in his hand was treated first, so that he could be home before the start of the Sabbath.

Some have claimed that resentment against devout religious minorities is especially noticeable in the case of devout Muslims and ultra-observant hassidim.6

Hassidim in the News: Initial Examples

In November 2006, a headline in the Canadian Jewish News stated: ‘Letting male officers deal with Chassidim just a suggestion, say Montreal police’.7 The controversy had occurred after an article appeared in the October issue of an internal police department newsletter. That department’s inter-cultural division had been running a series on the city’s
various ethnic and religious communities to sensitize the force to cultural differences. According to the article, if a female officer had difficulty in communicating with a hassidic male, or if he refused to make eye contact, that should not be interpreted as disrespect or resistance: it could be only a reflection of beliefs about appropriate interactions between men and women. Inspector Johanne Paquin defended the recommendation as realistic — stressing the need for officers to understand the people they serve. Inspector Paul Chabbo, head of media relations, told the Jewish weekly that it was a ‘suggestion’ only — comparable to a case of the police agreeing to the request by a victim of a sexual assault to speak to a female officer. It has certainly not been a directive nor was it meant to be an insult to female officers. He explained:8

It was simply a tool to better understand Jewish customs. It’s telling them, ‘Don’t be surprised if he doesn’t look at you’. All it’s suggesting is that, in certain cases, it may be better to let a male colleague intervene.

The president of the Police Brotherhood understood the matter differently. In his view, the police hierarchy had issued a recommendation — more than a suggestion — and he said that he was surprised by it: ‘It’s completely absurd that our policewomen do not have the right to the same respect as men. We are in Canada, after all’.9 In the end, the police department claimed that it had all been a misunderstanding.

The initials CLSC stand for Centre Local de Services Communautaires. The Journal de Montreal reported on 15 December that the CLSC in Thérèse de Blainville was offering ‘special privileges’ to the hassidim of Boisbriand — such as treatment at home on the Sabbath (when Orthodox Jews do not use means of transport); ensuring that female nurses wear long sleeves and long skirts to accommodate the community’s concern over modesty; providing that only male nurses treat male patients, etc. On that same day, the CLSC held a news conference to announce that it was ‘at ease’ with these practices and that the home visits for religious reasons were very rare — perhaps about 35 out of the total of 27,000 made in the past year.

**The YMCA Controversy**

Allegations involving the hassidim appeared in the media on several occasions in 2006 and in November of that year a dispute with the local YMCA at the edge of Outremont achieved great prominence. There were headlines stating:10

Faith, fitness, clash in Mile End

and:11

Gym, Jews don’t see eye to eye
Window kerfuffle just the latest conflict
Readers of *The Gazette* and *Globe and Mail* across Canada discovered that one hassidic community had become involved in a controversy and confrontation pitting members of the local YMCA against the Yetev Lev Satmar synagogue.

The YMCA building had been renovated about a dozen years earlier and four large windows had been installed on the second floor rear wall, in an exercise room used by women. That room faced the back of the Satmar synagogue and school, separated by an alley. The hassidim maintained that the sight of women exercising, while wearing tights, was corrupting young boys studying Torah and they wished the view to be blocked. After about a year, the Y had agreed to have the windows covered with shaded blinds — paid for by a hassid.

But by March 2006, these blinds were in disrepair and the man who had provided them was now reluctant to pay for new blinds. The *Globe and Mail* explained that the hassidim did not wish their teenage boys to become ‘distracted by the exposed flesh of women doing their Pilates, aerobics, and other activities’. The synagogue had installed tinted windows in its own building, but that could not prevent the students from opening the windows or from going outside during breaks.

In February 2007, the Y installed frosted glass in their own windows, which cost the hassidim about 1500 Canadian dollars. The Y’s manager stated that some of the users of the exercise room had been consulted and he was quoted as saying that ‘some wanted to keep the blinds for the privacy they afforded’ but in the end the Y opted for frosted windows because ‘...this kind of window lets in light, and is also safe and more durable than blinds’.

This 2006 confrontation had been described at the time as a clash between skin and scripture. At the YMCA, Renée Lavaillante was a sun-loving Pilates practitioner and she had resented the attitude of the synagogue’s members. *The Gazette* described the conflict as ‘...made in Mile-End tempest in a teapot, boiling over in the street’ and it had reported that Renée Lavaillante had told Abraham Perlmutter, a Satmar hassid: ‘To you, I represent evil, and I should hide myself’. She had compared the frosted windows to wearing a veil and commented:

I don’t think that in Montreal we should have to hide ourselves to work out.

An Outremont resident was equally resentful:

We can’t let ourselves be imposed upon by extremist religious groups. What’s next? Separate gyms for women and men? Wearing long pants and long sleeves to exercise?

Mr Perlmutter was quoted by *The Gazette* as responding, in English:

For me, when women are half-naked, that causes problems. We are neighbours. We respect you. We just ask you to respect us.
But in the end, he decided that there was little hope of mutual understanding and declared:19

There’s more to this petition than what you say, . . . You are not looking for the sun. You are looking for trouble.

Faced with a petition of some 100 names, the manager of the YMCA felt compelled to re-open the discussion with his consultative committee and the users of the second floor classroom. In March, the Y announced that it was removing the frosting in accordance with the wishes expressed by a majority of its members. The poll was conducted from 17 to 28 February among 302 members or about a tenth of the branch’s adult membership.20

The Y’s Local Advisory Committee — composed of members and non-members, including area residents and representatives of partner organizations — made a similar recommendation. The manager said: ‘We discussed the situation with representatives of the Chassidic Jewish community. We feel confident that our decision is the best one possible under the present circumstances’.21 The Y would make the modification at its own expense.

In the end, the Y’s administrator and the hassidim agreed that the matter of the blinds and windows had always been one between friends and had been blown out of proportion by the media.22 But as the Y management tried closing the curtain on the controversy, the debate on accommodating religious minorities in the province continued on other fronts involving other minorities.23

In September 2007, The Gazette reported on the ‘reasonable accommodation’ travelling commission’s visit to St. Jérôme under the caption, ‘Laurentian residents vent anger with Hasidim’.24 The following are some of the concerns which these residents voiced:

‘We’re playing the game of . . . the great rabbis with their archaic values,’ Val Morin resident Jean-Pierre Bouvrette told a packed hall of 175 people in downtown St. Jérôme . . .

‘There are a lot of arguments, and we get along less and less,’ said Val Morin resident Roger Cuevrier, complaining about the ‘ever-growing number’ of Hasidic Jews in his village — and their unreasonable demands. ‘The last shot they directed at us, was they set themselves up next to the baseball field and asked us to shut off the lights when they pray on Saturday evenings,’ he said.

‘It’s really a mentality that’s separate’ St. Hippolyte resident Lise Casavant said of the Hasidim . . .

John Saywell, of Argenteuil, said when he hears a Hasidic Jewish leader speaking only in English on the TV news, he thinks it’s wrong. The community should make the effort to speak French.

I now turn to a consideration of how the hassidim made sense of the unfolding events and their replies to their critics — which ranged from mild concerns to intense disapproval and opposition.
As Viewed Through the Hassidic Lens

The controversies concerning the rights of religious minorities to preserve their culture may be conceptualized as a series of claims and counterclaims made by the various involved parties. While there is hardly consensus over what constitutes either reasonable accommodation or its absence, the controversies are fuelled by stereotypes which characterize the minorities whose activities have been resented. The stereotypes, or ‘pictures in our heads,’ are constructed by selecting and putting together some of the more conspicuous traits which are supposed to categorize a group of people. These stereotypes are typically gross over-simplifications, but they are not necessarily wholly inaccurate. In short, it is difficult to prove that the belief is totally unfounded and it is relevant here to note Katz and Braly’s seminal conceptualization of stereotypes as rigid impressions — conforming very little to the facts and arising from our defining first and observing second.25 The famous theorem that ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’26 is a reminder that reality is socially constructed and that people respond as much, or more, to the meaning a situation has for them than to the objective features of that situation.

Members of these minorities are often considered by their critics to be overly demanding and therefore to harbour unreasonable expectations — while these minority members believe that they know the true cause of the attention which has come their way. The hassidim are no exception and in what follows, I identify their perception of both why and how they achieved such unwarranted prominence in the media. I consider their claims about inappropriate generalizations characterizing their alleged unfriendliness; their proposed solution to the inevitable problem of strained interaction with outsiders; and their assessment of the underlying motive of critics who single them out as both unfriendly neighbours and as a minority which is prone to violate the law to suit its own interests.27

Inappropriate Generalizations

Recently, a friend who lives in the heart of Montreal’s hassidic neighbourhood casually said to me: ‘Billy, you know the hassidim. Why are they so unfriendly? Why don’t you tell them to hire a P.R. person so that they can be a bit more friendly? I’m not asking for a lot, just a simple hello. Would it kill them to be a little more friendly?’

As a rule, hassidim take strong exception to the charge that they are unfriendly and object to such generalization. They argue that the Ethics of Our Fathers emphasizes the religious imperative to be a good neighbour. Indeed, a hassidic woman in talking about that subject, commented:
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In *Ethics of Our Fathers* it says you should greet all your neighbours. I know all the neighbours on the block, even the biggest antisemite, because that’s the kind of person I am.

Contrary to some speculations by their critics, hassidim have not made a group decision about how cordial they must be in their relations with non-hassidic neighbours. That is left to individual predilection. Another hassidic woman said to me, when I introduced the subject, that she has a hassidic neighbour who is distant and consistently unfriendly:

Tell your friend that hassidim are people. Forget about what they look like. Some are friendly and some are not. And to generalize because one person doesn’t say hello!

A Tasher hassid was of the same opinion:

It’s such an individual thing. I say hello because that’s my nature. If somebody says hello to me, I’ll always answer. I’m not interested in getting involved in a conversation… but I’d certainly be friendly to say hello.

Another Tasher claimed that he took special care to be friendly and courteous, that his community showed great sensitivity in its relations with outsiders, to ensure that they were cast favourably:

When I drive in the street, there’s not a single car that I pass at a stop sign, that I don’t give the right of way. And they notice it because there aren’t many people that look like me. So, if you care, you make an effort.

He then referred to the Tasher ambulance service, which is freely offered to outsiders in some situations or public events. Festivities for Quebec National Holiday take place in June and Saint Jean Baptiste is one of the patron saints of Quebec. Tasher paramedics volunteer their services in case of any accident. He said: ‘…Saint Jean Baptiste, we’re always there every year. You’re not going to tell me it goes unnoticed…’.

Another hassid stressed the differing attitudes of members of his community:

I am sure that a lot of people in Outremont make an effort to be nice to their neighbours, but unfortunately there are a lot of people that don’t give a damn.

In August 2007 Allan Nadler described the Outremont hassidim in *The Gazette* and commented: 28

…sadly, there is a dearth of positive interaction between them and their francophone neighbours. The argument most frequently leveled against the insular Hasidim… was that the Hasidim were just downright unfriendly and, thus, made for bad neighbors.
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Nadler did not claim to have conducted a controlled sociological study, but he greeted passersby sometimes in hassidic garb and at other times in shorts and a T-shirt. He stated that when he was dressed as a *goy* (a Gentile) and said ‘Bonjour’ to hassidim they reacted pleasantly:29

While a few of the Hasidim, caught off guard, did a silent double-take, almost all made a point of smiling and returning my French greetings.

(He contrasted that with their lack of response when he was dressed as a hassid and addressed the francophones in the area with ‘Bonjour’.)

Nadler concluded:

So, when a Hasid fails to take the initiative in saying ‘good morning’, it is less likely a reflection of any personal hostility than one of studied indifference to his material surroundings.

This leads me to the next point.

The ‘Nip it in the Bud’ Perspective

Nadler’s conclusion, that hassidim are unfairly characterized in matters of greeting and acknowledging their non-hassidic neighbours, is well grounded. However, the explanation (that their reactions are a reflection of their cultural make-up) is not applicable to their reluctance, indeed even refusal, to become better acquainted with their non-hassidic neighbours — whether they are Jewish or not. They reason that the best approach is to maintain a carefully-measured distance, to engage in studied avoidance, and to apply this principle without exception.

Concerns over matters of insularity, and the likely consequences of interaction across carefully-constructed boundaries, frequently slip into my conversations with hassidim. However, while gathering material for the present paper, I deliberately focused discussions on the topic of hassidim and their neighbours. One Tasher woman explained:

We don’t want to be influenced by the outside... We are concerned about outside influences. We’re trying to shelter our kids. And it’s not that you’re not good. I wouldn’t let my kid play with an ultra-religious Christian neighbour because Christianity and Judaism have different views on things.

A Satmar woman was of the same opinion and commented on an article in the *National Post* in which the Jewish author stated:30

Hasidim have zero interest in any social interaction with the outside world... What neighborhoods get with Hasidim are voluntary ghettos in their midst... and absolutely no social interaction.

The Satmar woman told me that this was a true conclusion:

We are not friendly as a group. So I would say to [this Jewish author] ‘You’re right. You integrated very nicely. When you go to the concert,
nobody knows if you’re Jewish or not’. I’ll bet you if she has three children, one of them is intermarried. We stayed this way to stay the way we are.

For hassidim, protection and preservation require erecting fences or enclosures and there must be full implementation at the street level. There must be strict rules of behaviour and rigorous standards of modesty — arguably more stringently enforced today than was evident among hassidim in America in the past. The sexes are now separated at a very early age and it is considered highly inappropriate for a man and a woman to interact in public, or even for a married couple to show signs of affection (such as holding hands) while walking in the street. Since contact can easily have unwanted consequences, a practical precaution is to avoid strictly any integration altogether. One hassid said to me that outsiders ‘don’t understand the whole woman thing…. The general thing is that you don’t talk to a woman, and they don’t understand it’. Another hassid went into more detail:

If you don’t start a conversation, you have less problems. If you start a conversation, then you have to explain to them where the boundaries end. Let’s say you have a neighbour. You start with the Bonjour. It’s hard to say to a neighbour, ‘We are neighbours, we are going to say Bonjour, and this is where it ends. So if you don’t start, you don’t have a problem. Somehow you have to make a boundary…. If you’re in desperate need of an egg, I’ll give it to you, but don’t give it back to me because I don’t want to start to interact with you…. If you can find a magical way for everyone to understand this is Bonjour and this is all you’re getting, or help with your tyre when you have a flat tyre,… not because of hostility… It’s very difficult.

Another strategy is to respond non-verbally. I was told:

I know someone in Montreal… he never says hello. It’s a nod with the head, and that’s enough.

Many hassidim claim that face-to-face interaction or, more accurately, the lack of it, is certainly not the root of the problem: that there is something more sinister at play among their more vociferous critics — a general dislike of Jews and an intense disapproval of hassidim in particular.

‘Why are Hassidim All over the News?’

The preponderance of stories featuring hassidim in the media greatly concerned a hassidic woman whom I met, as well as some hassidic spokespersons, but it must be stressed here that these stories seemed in 2007 to be of little concern to most hassidim. However, it is certainly true that there had been in the past twenty years clashes between
Outremont’s hassidim and their non-Jewish neighbours. In 1988, the Outremont City Council, by a vote of six to three, denied an application by the local hassidim of the Vishnitz sect to amend the municipality’s zoning law in order to allow for the construction of a synagogue on a vacant lot for residential use. The media referred to this decision as ‘the Outremont affair’. In June 2001, Quebec Superior Court ruled in favour of hassidim in Outremont who wished to establish a permanent eruv: the case is reported in an earlier issue of this Journal.31

The woman who had asked, rhetorically, why hassidim were all over the news, had refused to accept the possibility (as suggested by some of her friends) that she suffered from some paranoia about the issue. Indeed, both French and English publications have recently featured a great many reports about hassidim — mainly critical. Moreover, the hosts in radio talk shows have invited opinions from listeners on incidents involving hassidim. In June 2007, there was a front-page headline in La Presse about a meeting between prominent Jews and Mario Dumont, the leader of the Action Démocratique du Québec (ADQ).32 Dumont had gone to the home of a retired Jewish senator for the meeting, in a prosperous area. Several editorial cartoons appeared in Quebec newspapers, lampooning Dumont and using stereotypes evoking memories of antisemitic propaganda.33 The caricatures parodied Dumont’s efforts to reach out to the province’s Jewish establishment when he became leader of the Official Opposition in the last provincial election. La Presse featured him ‘... grinning toothily, sporting earlocks and an oversized black fur hat’. The Vice-President of B’Nai Brith Canada denounced as ‘hateful’ the insinuation that Mr Dumont’s meeting with community leaders had transformed him into a ‘Hassidic Jew of swarthy complexion, with a convulsive laugh and a deranged mind’.34

In July 2007, reports were published about the purchase by Satmar hassidim (for three and a half million Canadian dollars) of a property at St. Adolphe’s Miramont Sur Le Lac suitable for vacations. An official of the small town, Michel Binette, stated in an interview with Radio-Canada that he was worried about whether the Satmar vacationers would integrate into the new surroundings: he did not want to see the Miramont (on Lac de la Montagne, in the outskirts of town) become ‘ghettoized’. He added that he hoped that St. Adolphe would be spared situations like those of its neighbours; he was referring to the municipality of Val Morin, a neighbouring town, which had spent 100,000 in legal costs when it accused a group of Belz hassidim of contravening zoning laws by converting two residences into a religious school and a synagogue.35

The mayor of St. Adolphe eventually apologized for Binette’s remarks, saying that the opinions he had expressed in the Radio-Canada interview
were not shared by the council. He regretted Binette’s choice of words:

Whatever their religious allegiance, the council wishes to welcome the new citizens with a spirit of openness.

However, a few days later, *The Gazette* reported that the new owners of the resort area had constructed a fence without a permit, contravening local bylaws. The town had no choice but to fine them a thousand dollars: the fence was both too high and too close to Lac de la Montagne, which the estate overlooks. The president of the Coalition of Outremont Hasidic Organizations (COHO) commented: ‘They don’t want them here, plain and simple’. He was quoted as stating:

You know what they say, if it walks like a duck, it talks like a duck, it must be a duck. The message is, these guys bring trouble wherever they go. If you can get more anti-Semitic than that, I want to know how.

He added:

We are ready to integrate but not to assimilate. We’re going to keep our beliefs and our customs and our kosher butcher and what have you. The French Canadians have given up on their religion but we haven’t and we don’t intend to.

Radio talk shows in the city featured the situation surrounding the arrival of the hassidim in Saint-Adolphe, especially stressing their ghettoized existence and their attitude to neighbourliness.

This question of neighbourliness was again raised in an article in *Le Journal de Montréal* by Richard Martineau. He refuted the B’nai Brith claim that the cartoonist had shown antisemitism by his portrayal of Mario Dumont in hassidic garb and physical appearance. Martineau denied that he himself was in the slightest way racist. He had lived in Outremont for several years. He had hassidic neighbours to the right of his home, and to the left, and in front. In spite of all his smiles and many attempts at neighbourliness, they never spoke a word to him, because he was not Jewish. And their children always refused to play with his children because they were not Jewish. He added that he had a confession to make. A few weeks earlier he had looked at some houses in Outremont. One of them caught his fancy, but he did not buy it: ‘Vous savez pourquoi? Il y avait trop de juifs hassidiques dans la rue’.

But the hassidim were especially angered by the columnist Barbara Kay. Under the headline ‘Not in my backyard either’, she referred to the front-page story in the previous day’s *National Post* (‘Town Uneasy About Jews’ Resort Purchase’) which stated that a senior official of the town had told a reporter that people were anxious about a group ‘that might not integrate into the Saint-Adolphe

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community with the result that the property would be ghettoized’. She commented on the allegation that this could be an antisemitic code for ‘We don’t want Jews here’: she dismissed that interpretation, insisting that the words Hasidim and Jews were ‘not sociologically interchangeable’. She maintained that non-hassidic Jews had successfully integrated into the cultural life of various Laurentian towns and, in her words, ‘give value added to their communities’. By contrast:

What neighborhoods get with Hasidim are voluntary ghettos in their midst, from which they derive modest economic benefit, and absolutely no social interaction. Hasidim may live as they choose, but they must understand that their cult-like presence is not, sociologically speaking, value added to a small and struggling community [Saint-Adolphe].

She concluded by claiming that she also would worry if hassidim moved en bloc to her neighbourhood and asked whether such a reaction would make her, a mainstream Jew, an antisemite?

That article produced a raft of responses and, not surprisingly, some letter-writers identified her as a self-hating Jewish individual. Hassidim whom I met were irritated by what they believed to be her inability to understand that antisemitic hassidic-bashers (for this is what they are in the eyes of most hassidim) do not generally draw the nuanced distinction which she had done, differentiating between mainstream and hassidic Jews.

However, what angered the hassidim particularly was the attitude of journalists and commentators who focused their attention on hassidic activities, when other minority groups — engaged in very distinctive behaviour — did not receive much media attention. They believed that hassidim were deliberately vilified and that any minor infringement was magnified. The reports about Saint-Adolphe were seen as a good example of such malice and a hassidic woman was particularly indignant. She complained:

Where’s all this hatred against the hassidim coming from? I have a cottage in Val Morin and there is a wonderful ashram [the reference is to Ashram Sivananda Yogi Camp] and the yogi has a fantastic spread there. And large numbers of people come there on Sundays and clog all the roads, and nobody says a thing. It’s their enclave. They’re there. Ever read an article about the ashram? Why are you reading this?

Another hassidic woman (who also has a summer cottage in Val Morin and was angered at the media attention to the acquisition of the Saint-Adolphe property) also referred to the tolerance shown to the yogi:

If Meharesh Yogi would have bought this place [the hotel property], what would anyone have said? They don’t interact either, they’re busy meditating. So who brought all this attention to the media?
Another person asked:

Do you really think the same would happen if the Jehovah’s Witnesses moved in? . . . We’re getting it in the neck. It’s safe to target the Jews.\textsuperscript{43}

The hassidim were particularly sensitive to the attention which their acquisition of the Saint-Adolphe property had provoked because a little earlier there had been a series of suspicious fires in Val David, just up the road from Saint-Adolphe, where some 50 hassidic families from Montreal and New York have cottages. These fires were also reported by the press.\textsuperscript{44}

In sum, the hassidim believe that they have been singled out for attention, for prejudiced attention. According to most of them, whether complaints about them centre on alleged zoning violations, their school buses blocking traffic during the early morning rush, parking illegally on city streets which the police conveniently ignore, or providing schools which fail to meet minimal standards and requirements — these all reflect the resentment of a handful of people who are motivated by their alarm at the increasing presence of hassidim in their neighbourhood. That resentment has been caused by both xenophobia and antisemitism, they believe.

\textit{Conclusion}

It is ironic that hassidim — a religious minority which has placed insulation from mainstream society as its highest priority — should be featured of late so persistently by the media. While it is not entirely clear how or why this has come to be, their straddling two worlds (attempting to preserve an ancient tradition but simultaneously embracing elements of modernity) seems to have heightened their visibility, making them a newsworthy subject.

It is not easy to predict the outcome of the ‘reasonable accommodation’ debate in Quebec. It may intensify before becoming ignored as a matter of immediate attention. But in the short run, it is likely to remain an issue since Quebec is increasingly reliant on immigration and since numbers of migrants arrive with sets of religious beliefs and practices differing from the mainstream. Add to this mix an ideology of multiculturalism, interpreted as encouraging newcomers to preserve their identity, and the stage is set for disagreement — and even conflict.

Though always visible owing to their distinctive garb and overall appearance, hassidim were traditionally silent in matters of public life. Their general strategy was to deflect attention from their community and, by way of quiet diplomacy, to secure arrangements with public officials. Their demands were minimal: as guests of the government, they were grateful for any religious freedoms granted to them. But times are changing and the hassidim are changing with them.
They are both more strident and more likely to insist on what they believe to be rightfully theirs. As citizens, landed immigrants, and taxpayers, they expect protection under the same constitution which safeguards the welfare of all citizens, entitling them to the same services received by others.

According to a 2005 demographic survey, there has been a dramatic increase in Montreal’s hassidic population from 1996 to 2004 and an even greater growth is predicted for the years ahead. With increasing numbers, even greater political advantages may be claimed. Add to the situation a younger generation less prepared than their elders had been to remain silent in the face of perceived discrimination, along with a neighbouring non-hassidic population which feels threatened by the pace at which hassidim are purchasing properties locally, and the likelihood is that this easily identifiable Jewish group will continue to be featured in the media.

NOTES

1 Formally called the Commission for Consultation on Accommodation in the Practices regarding Cultural Differences, the body is co-chaired by a historian and sociologist of the Université du Québec and a retired McGill University professor. The commission was expected to get underway in March 2007 and to submit its report within a year. Its threefold mandate includes: to draw up an accurate portrayal of how accommodations are being made; to conduct a wide-scale inquiry in all regions of the province to find out what Quebecers are really thinking ‘beyond polls and spontaneous reactions’; and to arrive at recommendations on how accommodations are being made which are ‘respectful of the common values of Quebecers’.


3 The Gazette, 3 February 2007, p. A8. The reference, here, was to the revelation of special treatment for some religious minorities (Jews and Muslims, mostly), by government-funded institutions:

- Hospitals, CLSC’s [Centre Local de Services Communautaires], the police, schools, sports and recreation facilities, and driver-licensing centers — all are on the hook for arrangements they’ve made with minorities to get them to use their services.

- Among the better-known examples: providing male examiners for hassidic men when they take their driving test, offering unisex pre-natal classes for conservative Muslim, Sikh and Hindu women who don’t want men present; and giving extra paid holidays to Jewish and Muslim daycare workers in public schools.

4 The Gazette, 3 February 2007, p. 2.

5 Ibid., p. A8.

6 In February 2007, The Gazette offered a one-year chronology of the province’s ‘reasonable accommodation’ controversy.
The newsletter also offered a hypothetical situation of a police duo arriving at a bakery at the corner of Hutchison and St. Viateur streets, the heart of the hassidic area, to investigate a reported robbery. The Jewish clerk is questioned by the female officer, but directs his answers to her male colleague and never looks at her. The article explains that this is normal because ‘according to the Torah, the holy book of the Jews, men should not fraternize with women’. Sometimes, says the author, there is no choice but to let the male officer take over.

As gender equality was a fundamental value of our society, ‘female officers should not have to defer to their male colleagues to accommodate the religious beliefs of hassidim’, said Jacques Dupuis, Public Security Minister in the national assembly, after the matter was raised by the opposition Parti Québécois. Featured in the media in a manner that seemed to foster an unreasonable expectation on their part, hassidic spokespersons maintained that they never made any request for special treatment by the police. Alex Werzberger, president of the Coalition of Outremont Hasidic Organizations (COHO), commended the police department for its efforts to sensitize officers, and claimed he had never heard a word about the matter despite his close relations with the police.

The best outcome would be for the parties to try again to find a more generally acceptable compromise. Perhaps frosting half the window would do it, or installing blinds or even strategically placed plants. What makes this seemingly trivial dispute important is that it’s a precursor of far more serious issues we’ll have to negotiate as our society grows even more diverse. If we don’t find a way to live together in something like harmony, we run the danger of disintegrating into a patchwork of mutually hostile communities. And that would be unbearable.

For example, the tabloid Journal de Montréal dedicated a front page to an expose of a pair of sugar shacks south of Montreal which made efforts to allow Muslims to enjoy the annual spring maple tradition known as sugaring off. While the fatty feast of bacon, pea soup, pancakes and massive doses of maple syrup usually includes pounds of pork (meat forbidden from the diet of devout Muslims), one sugar shack removed the pork from some food.
HASSIDIM AND THE ‘REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION’

27 According to an article in The Gazette of 31 March 2007, when the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the right of a Montreal orthodox Sikh boy to wear his ceremonial dagger (a kirpan) to school, Jashir Kaur (a Sikh herself) and her community felt a backlash immediately: ‘People don’t like the part of the world we come from — they think we’re troublemakers’ she said. She added: ‘And there’s the kirpan, which people here think is a weapon to kill somebody with, when it’s not…. You can explain as much as you like. They just don’t understand’.
29 Ibid.
31 As it happens, this wasn’t the first time the cultures clashed in the neighbourhood over seemingly trivial matters which masked underlying tensions and issues of religious tolerance. Relations between Outremont’s hassidim and their non-Jewish neighbours were occasionally strained over the past 20 years. In 1988, a benchmark year, the Outremont City Council — (in a vote of six to three) — denied an application by local hassidim of the Vishnitz sect to amend the municipality’s zoning laws to allow for the construction of a hassidic synagogue on a vacant lot zoned for residential use. The request to re-zone from residential to commercial-institutional usage was tagged ‘l’affaire Outremont’ by the media.

In June 2001, a Quebec Superior Court ruled that the hassidic Jews in the City of Outremont were entitled to establish an eruv and mark it off with thin wiring even if the connecting wires crossed public property. In a ruling that the presence of such wiring was no different from churches which ring their bells on Sunday to summon worshippers, Judge A. Hilton upheld the constitutional right of Orthodox Jews to permanent eruvim. In the particular matter, Outremont had the duty to accommodate the hassidic Jews, as had other municipalities on the island of Montreal. He dismissed the argument of Mouvement Laique du Que´bec, that the eruv’s presence forced non-Orthodox Jews to live in a religious ghetto and, therefore, infringed their rights. He ordered the city not to dismantle the eruv again.

33 Eliciting the most concern was a cartoon in Sherbrooke’s La Tribune by Hervé Philippe showing Mr. Dumont with dollar signs in his eyes greeting a pair of apparently Jewish businessmen with large noses, curled hair locks and kippas. ‘Welcome my friend$’ read the caption bubble, all the S’s changed to $.
The Quebec Superior Court ruled in favour of the municipality, which said the hassidim were contravening zoning laws. The hassidim have appealed.

Canadian Jewish News, 12 July 2007, p. 5.


Ibid.


Ibid.

According to Jack Jedwab, executive director of the Montreal-based Association for Canadian Studies: ‘The people who were very involved about five, six years ago about language, looking at the size of lettering on signs, and complaining about too much English being spoken, have moved in on this issue’ — referring in particular to the editorial cartoons in Quebec newspapers lampooning Mario Dumont. In his view, what he terms the ‘accommodation police’ have been out in force as the hand-wringing over what’s reasonable has intensified.

Canadian Jewish News, 28 June 2007, p. 31.