



## PRESS RELEASE

*For immediate release*

### The Quebec Charter of Values: A major advance towards secularism

Montreal, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2013 – *Atheist Freethinkers* (LPA-AFT), an association which promotes secularism and supports the rights of atheists, welcomes the intention of the government of Quebec to adopt a so-called Charter of Values which would formally establish the secular status of the Quebec state. The project is outlined on its website [www.nosvaleurs.gouv.qc.ca](http://www.nosvaleurs.gouv.qc.ca).

The proposed Charter would formally declare separation of religion and state, the religious neutrality of the state and the secular nature of its institutions. It would impose an ethics of restraint and religious neutrality for public servants. It would prohibit obvious religious symbols in the public service. And it would establish clear guidelines for so-called “reasonable” accommodations. Furthermore, it would make it mandatory for any client of public services to have one’s face uncovered in order to be served. All of these measures go in the direction of formalizing the secular nature of the state and assuring the independence and autonomy of the state from religion. This is very good news.

However, like most who support the proposed Charter, we do so with some reservations. Firstly, the title “Quebec Charter of Values” is very badly chosen. What Quebec requires is a Charter of Secularism, a charter which expresses values which have universal, human import, the values of the Enlightenment.

Secondly, it has not been proposed that the large crucifix be removed from the wall of the Quebec National Assembly in Quebec City. This object was installed there in 1936 by the Duplessis government of the day, with the aim of consecrating its alliance with the Catholic Church. If the crucifix is a “Quebec value,” it represents the worst possible value in this context. Its presence in the most important venue of the Quebec state is a blatant violation of secularism, a glaring symbol of non-secularism! The Charter should stipulate its removal – to a museum for instance. To leave it in place would be totally inconsistent and expose the authors of the Charter to charges of hypocrisy. However, it is important to realize that keeping the crucifix in the National Assembly is not explicitly stipulated in the proposed Charter. In fact, this crucifix is not even mentioned there.

Thirdly, the proposed ban on state employees wearing religious symbols while on duty has been poorly formulated. The plan is to include an official dress code in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. However, this Charter is a quasi-constitutional document and should stipulate only the principle that public servants must exercise restraint – so that public services remains neutral with respect to religion – and establish a mechanism for the implementation of this principle. The dress code and other aspects of the behaviour of public servants belong to the implementation of this principle and should not be included in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* itself. In that way, the details and timing of the implementation would remain open to democratic debate.

The draft Charter was released barely a week ago and we continue to study it. Other aspects of the project may require critical analysis. Moreover, a completely secular charter would include several provisions not included in the announced project – such as cutting public funding to private religious schools; banning prayer at municipal council meetings; banning prayer rooms in government buildings; ending religious accommodations granted for ritual slaughter of animals; prohibiting mutilation of the human body without valid medical reasons and without the consent of the adult concerned; withdrawal of the *Ethics and Religious Culture* program from public schools; and removal of tax incentives to religious institutions and members of religious orders. These omissions remain to be addressed.

The organization *Atheist Freethinkers* commends the government for its courage. We note that the government is not responsible for the inflammatory and demagogic excesses of the exaggerated political opposition that arose against its attempt at secularization, even if such excesses could have easily been predicted. This project is not an exercise in identity politics. The numerous accusations of intolerance, xenophobia and even racism are extremely dishonest and even defamatory. Nevertheless, the government could have prevented the worst and minimized the damage by avoiding any measure which the

opposition might use as an excuse. Excluding religious symbols is necessary in order to ensure not only the religious neutrality of the public service but also the perception of neutrality. By the same token, the government must not only avoid identity politics but also the perception of such politics. If the proposed Charter had specified the removal of the crucifix from the National Assembly, if its authors had chosen a title with more universal scope, if the plan for gradual removal of religious symbols had been better presented, then the intellectual vacuity of the opposition would have been obvious and that opposition would have been greatly defused.

Despite our reservations, we support the proposed Charter. It could serve as a model for other Canadian provinces and jurisdictions, each adapting the Charter appropriately and provided of course that the model is improved upon – in particular by avoiding the failings discussed above.

As atheists, we greatly value freedom of religion because atheists and apostates are often among the first victims when that freedom is violated. We know that freedom of religion is incomplete or even hollow if it does not include freedom *from* religion. Thus secularism is important not only for us as atheists but also for believers: it is essential that public institutions, i.e. state institutions, be independent of any religion and, at the same time, that total freedom to practice the religion of one's choice, or to practice none, be protected in the private sphere and in the public sphere outside of such institutions.

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