VICTOR TEBOUL

Revisiting Tolerance
Lessons drawn from Egypt's Cosmopolitan Heritage

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Ebook cover : Alexandria, 1954. Saint Andrew's School for Boys with schoolteacher Mrs Sasson (Victor Teboul Private Collection)

For the complete list of works by Victor Teboul, please visit www.victorteboul.com

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Book Description

How does a polyglot Jewish family from Alexandria, Egypt, get caught up in the power play of the Suez Crisis? In this fascinating ebook Egyptian-born writer Victor Teboul recounts his cosmopolitan experience and his family's ordeal following the 1956 Suez Crisis and the expulsion of Egypt's Jewish community.

"Strangely enough, in Alexandria, we spoke so many languages and yet I do not remember anyone asking me to define my nationality. As if being multinational was the norm", recalls Victor Teboul as he describes in this revealing ebook the cosmopolitan flavour of his hometown and the abrupt departure of Egypt's Jews.

"When we played soccer, I admired my classmates because they were fantastic goalies or incredibly good at dribbling. I did not see them as Maltese, Italians, East Indians or Jews. So when war broke out, I was very surprised to discover that they were of this religion or of that nationality. Conflict, war, brought out these differences, but I also wonder if we had not already distanced ourselves from the Egyptians. Alexandria, for all its cosmopolitan atmosphere, was not immune to prejudice, recalls Teboul. As a pupil of a British school, had I not already been separated from Egypt's culture?"

In this intellectually and emotionally overwhelming ebook Victor Teboul revisits our age-old concepts of tolerance and multiculturalism.

(EBook cover. Victor Teboul Private Collection. Alexandria, 1954. Saint Andrew's School for Boys with schoolteacher Mrs Sasson.)

About the author

Victor Teboul, Ph.D., was born in Alexandria, Egypt. He lives in Montreal (Quebec, Canada). Victor is a writer and the founding editor of the *Tolerance.ca* webzine, which he founded in 2002 to promote a critical approach on tolerance and diversity. He is the author of several books and numerous articles. He was a member of the Jury of Canada's Governor General's Literary Awards for non-fiction.

Victor has also written and hosted several radio series broadcast on *Radio-Canada*, the French-language network of the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* (CBC). As an academic, Victor has taught literature at a college near Montreal and history at l'Université du Québec à Montreal. He was a member of the Superior Council of Education and the Quebec Press Council. He holds several diplomas and a Ph.D. from Université de Montréal.

The expulsion of Egypt's Jewish community during the Suez Canal crisis, in 1956, was at the center of his widely-read novel, *La Lente Découverte de l'étrangeté*. "In his novel," writes Nancy Snipper of *The Chronicle*, "Teboul introduced Maurice, a young boy totally at peace with the world. Part of the book explores this young boy's love affair with the multitude of cultures and languages swimming around him in Alexandria. He feels a part of everything - until war whisks off his father and family, and Christmas Eve becomes the last one spent in Egypt.

"The novel takes place in Montreal, France and Alexandria, and it is a recollection revealed through diary form of the events leading up to this war, the aftermath and a new life in Montreal that centres on Teboul's family. It covers a period from 1950 to 1990"[1].

Victor Teboul is a regular keynote speaker at various organizations and educational institutions where he is invited to speak on diversity in a multicultural world.

His latest novel *Bienvenue chez Monsieur B. !* , which could be translated as "Welcome into the World of Mister B. ! " is a work of fiction which depicts the world of power and finance within Montreal's Jewish Community. During a radio interview at *Radio-Canada International*, Teboul said it takes "hutspa" to write a novel such as *Bienvenue chez Monsieur B.!.*

Reviews and excerpts of his works can be found on his website www.victorteboul.com

Victor writes a regular column on the *Tolerance.ca* webzine. His books can be purchased at Amazon.ca as well as in bookstores and on his personal website.

Also by Victor Teboul

Jean-Charles Harvey et son combat pour les libertés, Essay*,* Tolerance.ca Éditeur, Montréal, 2013, Ebook (Kindle).
Yves Thériault ou l'ouverture à l'Autre. Entretien. (Interview) Tolerance.ca Éditeur, Montréal, 2013. Ebook (Kindle).
Bienvenue chez Monsieur B. !, Novel, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2010.
La Lente découverte de l'étrangeté, Novel, Éditions Les Intouchables, Montréal, 2002.
René Lévesque et la communauté juive, Essay and Interview, Éditions Les Intouchables, Montréal, 2001.
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Le Jour : Émergence du libéralisme moderne au Québec, Essay, Éditions Hurtubise HMH, Montréal, 1984.
Mythe et images du Juif au Québec, Essay, Éditions de Lagrave, Montréal, 1977.

Magazines (Founding Editor)

Tolerance.ca®, webzine, online since 2002: www.tolerance.ca
Jonathan, monthly magazine, published in Montreal (1981 – 1986).

Radio broadcasts

Author and host of the following series aired on the cultural network of *Radio-Canada*: Diversity in Quebec, Quebec's Jewish Community, Israel's 40th Anniversary, Liberalism in Quebec.

Articles

Essays and commentaries published in collective works and in various Quebec periodicals.

For my friend, Neil Caplan

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Algerian-born Albert Camus once said that his homeland was the French language: "Ma patrie, c'est la langue française ". In a certain way, we belong to a language more than we do to a country. While writing *La Lente Découverte de l'étrangeté*, I realized how the languages of my home-town, Alexandria, were deeply rooted in me. I discovered I belonged to the languages, idioms, idiosyncrasies, that were part of that city at a certain period in time.

I also felt I had written about a civilization that had disappeared and I was of one of its last representatives. This is in itself quite a strange feeling. For if the city still exists, its cosmopolitan character belongs to the past.

But I must add that my childhood, this part of my life spent in Alexandria, is still alive in me, and not only through memories, but especially through the languages that were spoken in my hometown. I feel I am inhabited by these languages.

I am sure those of us who are multilingual have a feeling of the experience I describe. If you also happen to talk in your sleep, you certainly know what I am referring to. You wake up one morning and your companion, your husband or your wife, with whom you usually converse in English or French, reveals to you that you were speaking in a foreign language during your sleep. These other parts of your identity emerge when you least expect them.

I suppose you see now the reason why the title of this novel contains the word "l'étrangeté". It does not refer to the idea of being a stranger, but to the sensation of strangeness which occurs when, in your adult life, you question your own sense of belonging. Strangely enough, in Alexandria, we spoke so many languages and yet I do not remember anyone asking me to define my nationality. As if being multinational was the norm.

I think it is here in Montreal that I was asked for the first time where I came from.

This question "Where are you from ?" became one of the themes of my first novel *Que Dieu vous garde de l'homme silencieux quand il se met soudain à parler*.

When I came to Canada in the Sixties and settled in Montreal, people were asking me that question so often it felt as if they had been isolated for such a long time that they were not used to having people from other parts of the world come so far just to be part of their society. If you also insisted on speaking French, for after all I had arrived in Québec, then they really thought you were a strange person for, at the time, only French-Canadians spoke French. Immigrants were supposed to speak English.

In due time you discovered that this persistent question -- "Where're you from?", "D'où tu viens?" -- was caused more by profound historical and sociological factors, than by geographical distance.

But I must admit, there was also my own identity that I had to reveal. And that was in itself another ordeal. People would usually have a simple answer to a very simple question. For "Where are you from?" is indeed a very simple question. People would usually answer this question by naming their hometown or their country of birth, which would or would not get some reaction, and then the conversation would go on to some other topic. But for me, of course, it would be different, there were so many areas in my background which were not clear-cut and needed explanation. Just naming my country of birth was not sufficient.

So whenever I had to introduce myself, I would say my name and start searching for another matter to discuss, hoping to avert further questions. But they would ask: "Where're you from?"

When I said "From Egypt", they would inevitably say: "Oh! You are Egyptian!"

Which, of course, I was not. How could you have been Egyptian when you spoke so many languages much better than you spoke Arabic, when your parents held a French passport -- and when you were expelled from Egypt? It became very complicated. You had to go into all these details and it could

mean taking about half an hour to explain who you were. People, I feared, would start yawning, they would start looking at their watches impatiently. I even thought once I should ask them how much time they had to listen to my answer as it could take long, very long!

Perhaps that is the reason why I decided to write novels, I could reply by saying that all the answers were in my books.

Que Dieu vous garde de l'homme silencieux quand il se met soudain à parler is about the Sixties in Québec. Canada itself was going through an identity crisis. Those were the years when we, Canadians, got our flag and our national anthem. It was interesting to look back to those years and describe what it was like for someone who just immigrated to Canada to be caught in between the French and English-Canadians.

The family whose story I tell in this first novel -the Ben Haïms- were the victims of nationalism and of the rebirth of history. There is a scene in this novel where they finally become Canadians and they participate in a ceremony where they have to answer a few questions about Canada's history.

They find it all very ironic, because they fled a country where this emphasis on things past created problems for them.

So when the judge asks them questions on Canada's history, Haïm, the father's narrator, is very shocked to discover that history was also becoming important in this country to which they had emigrated and he replies by explaining that the Ben Haïms chose Canada as a safe place to immigrate because, they thought, it had no past, no history, and that was what had attracted them to this land. "In the country we fled", he tells the judge, "when people started remembering their own history, that is when trouble started for us!"

History in a way was catching up with this family from Egypt.

It is a theme that I am still interested in. What shall we do with our histories? Do our histories contribute to divide us or to unite us? I leave the question open.

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La Lente Découverte de l'étrangeté is different. First of all, it is written in the first person and in diary form. It is about childhood and adolescence.

These were not particularly difficult periods in my life. I was not a victim of violence, of sexual abuse or of incest, which are quite popular literary themes nowadays. My "trauma", if I have to have one, was caused by the brutal departure I had to live through. I still have vivid memories of our expulsion from Egypt, which was caused by the fact that we did not have the right passport and were not therefore "true" Egyptians.

In fact, I remember quite well two specific periods: 1952 and 1956.

1952 was the year of the Revolution that overthrew King Farouk.

I still remember the tanks that were lined up in front of our summer cottage in the outskirts of Alexandria, not far from the King's palace, in that summer morning of the year 1952. I can still remember the noise of the slowly moving tanks and the clicking sound of their wheels that had awakened me and got me out of bed.

And then, later, 1956, the year of the Suez Canal War, which was still another dimension of this strangeness I was referring to earlier.

When Egypt moved to gain control of its Suez Canal, the colonial powers, France and Britain that is, opposed that decision, and they managed to have Israel attack Egypt so that they, France and Britain, could intervene. And during this power play, we the cosmopolitans, the polyglots, were caught in the middle.

Our childhood years are extremely important formative years, as we all know. When I look back to those years, I am fascinated by the fact that, except for one particular incident, I did not perceive my friends as belonging to such or such a nationality. When we played soccer, I admired them because they were fantastic goalies or incredibly good at dribbling. I did not see them as Maltese, Italians, East Indians or Jewish. So when war broke out, I was very surprised to discover that they were of that religion or of that nationality. Conflict, war, brought out these differences.

I was surprised to discover that my friends needed a document by which they could be identified – a passport. This document suddenly took on considerable importance. Your whole existence depended on having the appropriate thin little booklet. You needed it to get out of the country, of this country you thought was yours until the day before.

It contained your photograph, this image of yourself with an "official" smile. It was very odd to discover all of a sudden that you were French or Italian or British. I was discovering that I had friends who belonged to these nationalities, despite the fact they had never been to France, Italy or Britain and sometimes they did not even speak the language of their purported nationalities.

Sadly, passports, identity cards and so on are becoming again part of our lives right here in North America since September 11, 2001, and it brings to mind memories of what it was like to constantly look for this document which was supposed to prove your identity.

I have said earlier that as a child I was not conscious of differences and of nationalities. There was an exception to this. I knew I was not exactly Egyptian. There were those "other" people who either worked for us or were associates of my father's business. The people I refer to are the Arabs.

I remember very vividly my first years in primary school, the Saint Andrew's School for Boys, when a young boy, who had what I believed to be Egyptian-Arab features, was asked to sit beside me. I remember his name was Fouad. I recall quite well that I got up and went to see our class-teacher (who was Greek, by the way) and told her that I could not sit beside an Arab.

What in my upbringing had made me do that?

Alexandria, for all its cosmopolitan atmosphere, was therefore not immune to prejudice. As a pupil of a cosmopolitan British school, had I not already been separated from Egypt's culture?

It might appear paradoxical, for my father was well-versed in Arabic. He had gone to a Jewish school and his generation of Egyptian Jews was, as we say in Quebec, perfectly well integrated to Egypt's culture.

When I returned to Egypt and to our neighbourhood in the late 1980's, our former neighbours came to me and asked me about my father. "That man, they said, who kept a Quran in his house and would recite verses out loud." My father had asked me to go to the local mosque and make a donation in his name. These people, I discovered, also knew of his attachment to this particular place of worship for, when I asked them to show me the way, they said: "Ah yes, the mosque… your father had it constantly repainted whenever he made a good business deal!"

When I got there, I had a strange feeling of having been to that mosque so many times before. As in a flashback, I remembered when as a child I used to go to that building to drop a few coins in a small green box.

How strange indeed: Islam was part of my identity and yet I spent time denying it, feeling some sort of rejection toward the people who professed that religion.

So being from Alexandria, as far I am concerned, is a life filled with so many contradictory identities. For, in a certain way, the Muslim world is also part of my memories. Whenever I am in Jerusalem and I hear the muezzin, I am transported back to my childhood. For Islam is not to me a foreign experience: it is part of me. And neither is Egyptian food, Egyptian exclamations, the sound of Um Kalthoum's voice in a café, or that of rolling dice on a backgammon board. These sensory experiences are part of my emotions.

Writing *La Lente Découverte de l'étrangeté* allowed me to reconstruct my past and understand what was going on. I must specify that I had started writing a diary when the 1956 war broke out and that I continued writing it all through my adolescent years. The diary was written in English, as that was, I suppose, the language you were expected to use when you wrote. After all, I had gone to an English school.

When I read my diary 50 years later, I am struck by my need to be precise: the dates of our departure, the time we had breakfast on the ship, and later all those details on the girls I started dating! Everything had to be written down. For I was also discovering France. We were among the first Jewish refugees to arrive in what was supposed to be the country of our ancestors. Hadn't we a French passport and wasn't that the official reason for our expulsion from Egypt?

This is also the period of my life when I discovered *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Reading and writing, I discovered, were two wonderful companions in times of quest and despair.

I think my diary helped me considerably in reconstructing my identity. It also must have helped me as a child to deal with what we were going through.

While writing *La Lente Découverte de l'étrangeté*, which was inspired by my diary, another theme came to me quite naturally. Perhaps it had something to do with my father's death which had occurred in the meanwhile.

In the novel, I describe the difficulty I had communicating with him: I spent countless hours in silence in his company while his clock was constantly ticking in the background. So, although we never discussed at length our departure from Egypt, I suppose I always felt some unexpressed admiration for his ability to forget and forgive. His ability to forget allowed him not to feel resentful or vengeful towards the Egyptians for what he had gone through.

I still remember the humiliations he had lived there and how angry I was at what I perceived to be passive reactions on his part.

I believe this ability to forget is part of tolerance. I think we have reached a stage in the West where we should take a close look at this possibility: how to learn to forget and forgive. Amnesty and amnesia have a close etymological relationship.

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Our life experiences, I suppose, do influence our outlook on the world and on people.

Perhaps the idea of tolerance is one of those themes that could be traced back to my experiences. I am sensitive to differences, to people with multiracial backgrounds, to people who are defined as belonging to minorities (when in fact they do not), to various forms of exclusion, and so on. But I am intolerant when people keep telling me I belong to a minority,

to a "cultural community", as is so often referred to in Quebec. I am especially irritated when they also think they are being open-minded by saying that.

Today, being part of a cultural or an ethnic group means in fact being of part of a new majority. Because we are living in a cross-cultural era, not a multicultural era. Reality is multidimensional.

"As victims, we can never be wrong"

The French language is one among many other languages spoken in North America. It does not belong anymore solely to Québec, just as the English language does not belong anymore only to the English. British culture and British literature are being transformed today by the very people whose parents were, in the recent past, citizens of its colonial Empire. From Salman Rushdie to Taslima Nasreen, these writers also criticize their own countries of origin as well as Islamic fundamentalism.

I believe that so-called minorities should start acting like the majority they are. Not that racism and exclusion have disappeared or are disappearing. But this new Cross-cultural era demands that we stop acting as victims.

Which does not mean to stop denouncing injustices. It means we should go now one step further and take a close look at our own communities. We should go beyond the usual denunciation of racism that we have been accustomed to, whether we are Jewish, Muslim, Arab, Afro-Canadian, Anglo- or Franco-Québécois. Because as victims we can never be wrong. Victims are always right. Or they think they are, and it is very difficult to convince someone who thinks of himself or herself as a victim of the contrary.

If we look at modern societies, we will discover that they have evolved because of interaction among its different groups. The battles of the past - whether of unions against business, or the secular movement versus the Church, or women’s and gay rights against traditionalist society- have led to enormous changes in our societies. They have allowed for peaceful change.

They have also permitted our societies to absorb people of different cultural backgrounds and creeds, and despite continued inequalities they do form

part of our society, because we do share common values. If we look back at the Sixties, where violence was the norm, things have since then evolved through peaceful change.

These "battles" of the past should be part of our common heritage. They should be part of our education as acquired values and should be promoted as such. It is not sufficient to declare that we must respect each other as individuals or as communities. That goes without saying. We should go one step further and recognize that if Québec and the rest of Canada have evolved, have accepted and favoured social change, these societies accomplished these changes through criticism and interaction between groups.

It is true, of course, that this was not always accomplished peacefully, if we think for instance of the 1970 October crisis, in Quebec, when a British diplomat was kidnapped and a Quebecois minister assassinated by the FLQ (Front de libération du Québec). And yet, even during and after this Crisis, Canadian society was not vengeful toward the members of the FLQ.

I believe that, despite the horrors of the 20th Century, we still have in the West a system that should be preserved and perfected by education. But by keeping in mind that the necessity for social critique and interaction is what allowed us to be who we are today.

Self-criticism should be the basis of this new approach. All communities should have this value at the basis of their own educational system, because we are losing this basic faculty: the ability to criticize our own communities. Political correctness and ethnocentrism exert considerable pressure nowadays and impose upon the individual to remain silent.

We have until now encouraged religious education through multiculturalism, but where do we draw the line between religious fundamentalism and religion? How do we reconcile secular values that were in fact part of what I called earlier acquired values, with increasingly religious fundamentalism?

Québec, in particular, has succeeded to a great extent in distancing itself from tradition and religion, and because of their vulnerablity as francophones, many Québécois today would rather shy away from questioning the role religion plays in defining the identity of various groups of our society, from fear of being called racists.

"The freedom to celebrate the human body"

Another reason behind this attitude is that culture today is perceived as entertainment. Culture is often another Montreal Festival. We do not equate culture with values. We do not associate culture with what makes people lie naked in the streets of downtown Montreal in the midst of several hundred nude bodies in order to be photographed by Spencer Tunick, as they did in May 2001.

Yet, it is not the photograph in itself that is cultural. Rather, it is the freedom to celebrate the human body which is.

This then is Montreal, this is Canada and this is modern Québec.

Let us keep this basic freedom, let us keep our public spaces free from religious coercion and religious propaganda.

Culture in English-speaking countries has become a synonym for entertainment instead of being recognized as a set of beliefs and of values. And yet it is precisely values. Because most Francophone Quebecers today do not perceive themselves as having strong religious beliefs or convictions, some may confuse this neutrality with a lack of values. But freedom of expression and criticism are basic values. Secularism, which is a strong cultural and historical value, is also equated with an absence of values.

Because the rest of Canada has viewed integration in the mainstream of society through the lens of multiculturalism, it has largely ignored the duality between secularism and religious tradition. Surely, integrating into Canadian society is not just getting your own religious beliefs recognized. It is also being part of a multi-religious society, or maybe of a secular society -- that is, of people who conduct their lives according to moral guidelines, which are humanistic and not necessarily religious. Which raises the question: should not religion be a private thing? Should we not adapt our religion to society, rather than the other way round?

I would prefer we keep in mind that, as Canadians, we do have common values that transcend our specific groups and our educational systems. These shared common values, together with a neutral space free from any imposed

religion or political dogma, should be at the very foundation of the definition of Canadian identity.

This would need, I imagine, some form not only of self-examination but also of "self-forgetfulness," if such a term exists.

Although we cannot forget what happened on September 11, 2001, we should also bear in mind that some degree of forgetting is part of the healing process of any human being. Think of France and Germany -- or of Japan and America -- and the years of war they went through.

While the values of the century of Enlightenment did not prevent subsequent atrocities, they still represent a guiding light for a society that is egalitarian before the law, whose citizens are free to criticize those who govern them and who are encouraged to do so.

I think we have criticized Canada for its ill-treatment of Italians, of the Japanese, of Jews, of the First Nations, of Doukhobors, of Francophones. And rightly so. But it is also time we took stock and looked at the reasons why our parents and grandparents came here. And I sincerely believe that this interaction, this self-social criticism, was at the foundation of this society.

I was speaking recently with a Moroccan-born popular radio-producer whose program for prison inmates can be heard weekly in Montreal. He was telling me that he started doing radio shows when he realized that the media in his native country were reserved only for the people in power and not for the ordinary people. Isn’t that fantastic? He developed skills here because of some form of limitations that were imposed upon him in his native country and he was able to recognize it. That is also self-criticism.

I have discovered along the way that Quebec (and Canadian) values do exist. And I was always surprised, during my teaching career, whenever I asked my students to define their values to hear the long silence that followed.

When we speak of values, we tend to think in a legal way, because we have so many rights entrenched in our Canadian and Quebec Charter of Rights. We forget that our values produced the legal system that has been adopted by our legislatures. It is because we have those values that we have charters of rights and not vice versa.

But there are also other values that are typically Canadian, typically Québécois. There isn't a law to force you to be generous, to welcome people of other nations, to assist others, to be curious about other cultures, to be interested in what goes on in the world, to be involved in helping other nations. And to be critical.

And it is not easy to criticize your rabbi or your imam, your pastor or your priest. If "it is written" in the Bible or in the Quran, that makes criticism very difficult.

If we want our society to evolve, we owe it to ourselves to be self-critical of our own communities.

"The ability of being humane without being religious"

I read an article once in the *Atlantic Monthly* [2] where the author was quite right in asking why we always have so many secular sociologists studying religious movements. It should be the other way round, he suggested: the religious movements should have their own sociologists attempting to understand why there are people who are <u>not</u> attached to any religion. They should be indeed intrigued and maybe even have some light shed upon them as to why so many people can be humane without feeling the need to have some deity dictate their behaviour. Perhaps they are capable of being humane without being necessarily religious.

So this is the reason I founded the Tolerance.ca webzine, in 2002, devoted to self-criticism, because as I propose, we should go beyond dogmas and beliefs. Our society is a free and diverse one. Let us keep it that way. Let our media reflect this diversity and this freedom.

In France and in Europe today, a new generation of Muslims is developing a form of Islamic religion which is integrating into its own culture various aspects of French Republican values.

In our schools and in our mentalities, we should look into ways of reinforcing a neutral and non-religious dimension to our plural identities.

Revisiting Tolerance. Lessons drawn from Egypt's Cosmopolitan Heritage is an updated version of a presentation made by Victor Teboul at Vanier College, in Montreal, during the International Week for the Elimination of Racism, in 2002.

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[1] Nancy Snipper, "Jewish Writer Reviews His Diary And a Wonderful Book Is Born", *The Chronicle*, West End Edition, Montréal, Wednesday, Sept. 25, 2002, p.7.

[2] "Kicking the Secularist Habit" by David Brooks, *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2003, Volume 291, No 2, p. 26 and 28. Also worth reading in the same issue, "The Language Police" by Diane Ravitch, on the new vocabulary of political correctness.