

Headscarves: Secularism Vs Islam

NOTE: Footnotes have reference to the Bibliography in Volume 4 of the series *Studies in Christian-Muslim Relations* found earlier on this Islamica page.

To say that there is a lot of turmoil today between Islam and the Western World is both truism and understatement. This turmoil is associated with terrible tragedies that no one should make light of. It also has called up issues that should make us take notice. There are clashes of worldviews in various places. Secularism runs into unexpected challenges from Muslims that expose its underbelly of intolerance.

One such issue is that of neutrality. Reformed Christians or Calvinists, all the way back to 19th-century figures like Groen Van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper, both of whom are among the spiritual progenitors of the Christian Reformed Church, Boer's denomination, have fought long and hard battles to overcome the myth of secular neutrality with its oppressive consequences. That battle has spilled over into other countries, including Canada, and been joined by others.

Islam is similarly waging a war against secularism and its pretended neutrality. Like the Reformed and some other Christians, it has long regarded that pretence as a cruel hoax. While secularism reduces religion to a narrow marginal slice of life, both Reformed and Muslims insist that religion is all of life and that, in fact, life as a whole is in essence a religious enterprise.

Unfortunately, I don't think I am mistaken in my observation that the Reformed in Canada are slowly caving in to the lifestyle that secularism, along with its individualism and materialism, offers them. That is a subject worthy of a serious article. I mention it here only to contrast it to the current Muslim stance of bucking secularism in every direction by insisting on exercising Muslim human rights and by exposing the thinly disguised contradictions inherent in secularism. In the process of doing so, they also challenge the reduced view of religion that secularism always seeks to impose on "people

of faith.” They turn all kinds of issues that on the surface seem innocuous with no apparent spiritual connection into religious issues.

I did not really put that correctly. Muslims do not *turn* them into religious issues; they *recognize* and *experience* them as religious. They have an impact on their religious practices, goals, policies, yes, on their lives as a whole. Matters that most Westerners, including many Christians, dismiss as merely secular or mundane, are picked up by Muslims as directly affecting their faith.

Earlier this year, *Christian Courier* published an article of mine about how the Miss World pageant led to riots in Nigeria that left 200 or more dead in its wake, not to talk of destroyed churches, mosques and other properties. Without exonerating Muslims from their share of the responsibility for those riots, I did explain that this happened because the organizers of the event were secular people who had no idea about the far-ranging sensitivities of this wholistic Muslim religion to which half of Nigeria adheres. That even the Christian President was not astute enough to foresee the problems and forestall them only shows how Christians have often bought into the secular tunnel vision with its reductionist view of religion and have thus handicapped themselves.

Something similar is taking place right now with respect to the innocuous headscarf. Did I put that correctly? It seems I am careless again! Can a headscarf be considered innocuous? I published an earlier article about Miss World on a Nigerian website and described the pageant as an “innocuous” event. Several Muslim writers attacked me fiercely for that term. Innocuous? There was nothing innocuous or innocent about that event, I was aggressively corrected. It was a premeditated, direct attack on Islam.

And here I am, referring to a headscarf as innocuous! I should really be more careful. That headscarf has become the focus of a lot of attention in both the West and the Muslim world. In this article I describe how and explain why this is happening. I do so with the help of two articles culled from the website <khilama.com> that you can find in the “sidebar” at the end of this article. One describes a German situation; the other, a French. *Please read them both before continuing with this article.*

In France, the home country of liberty, equality and fraternity, a national struggle is waging about the scarf. It is amazing how this supposedly universally-valid common

sense of secularism can be so easily upset. The entire mother country of secularism feels threatened enough to embark on a long national debate, involving its highest politicians, that likely will lead to outlawing the little headscarf! Surely that development shows the fragile basis of this “neutral” so-called common sense philosophy.

This French story is not confined to ideas and politics; it came down to individual cases on the ground. In Aubervilliers, near Paris, two sisters, Alma and Lila Levy, were expelled from their school for refusing to take off their *hijabs* or scarves that were regarded as illegal “ostentatious symbols of religion.”¹ Neither is the French story confined to these two girls. More reports claim that “Muslim girls wearing headscarves have been expelled from public schools, which have the authority to ban ‘ostentatious signs of religion’.” These girls argue that “they should be free to wear what their religion dictates.” But, according to Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, all of this is for the noble cause “to defend secularism and protect ‘all women from fundamentalist pressures’.” Phew, that should give you a sigh of relief! How can you argue against such noble intentions? And then this additional assurance: Raffarin said “This is not about religion. It’s about lifting constraints on women.”² But if it is not about religion, how about beliefs, faiths, worldviews and assumptions?

These secular arguments sound strikingly similar to Nigerian Muslim aims to defend Islam and protect women from secularist and immoral pressures! It is not the first time I notice striking parallels between these two faiths or worldviews. Who borrowed a leaf from whom?

In The Netherlands, Muslims complain that they are forced to remain inconspicuous, just like Jews and Catholics in earlier centuries. A *hijab* would definitely increase their visibility.³ Even though in that country the radical Kuyperian form of pluralism has long reigned in education,⁴ in 2003 A. D., the same tired, old Liberals who fought this pluralism at its beginning in the 19th century again popped up in their attempt to prevent religious schools, this time not only Christian but Muslim schools as well.

¹V/S, 14 Oct/2003.

²Khilafa.com, 29 Nov/2003.

³N. Rigter, 25 Nov/2003.

⁴D. Todd, 2 Aug/2003; 9 Aug/2003.

This issue is not confined to Europe either. In Canada, that self-appointed champion of multi-culturalism, College Charlemagne, a Montreal private school, expelled a Muslim girl for wearing the *hijab*. In this case, the issue merely provoked editorials comments.⁵

In some Muslim parts of the world, not surprisingly, the same *hijab* is mandatory as a positive symbol. Saudi girls are persecuted for uncovering their faces, while Muslim clerics warn against the danger of easing up on women's rights. In Egypt, it is not legally mandatory, but it is the subject of much discussion centering on the question of Muslim identity.⁶

According to Abubakar Ibrahim Malumfashi, a Nigerian Muslim writing in the Hausa language in 1988, the *hijab* is meant for women when they are in the presence of men other than husband or relative. It is also to be worn in the presence of non-Muslims in order to clearly identify themselves as Muslims and, thus, as different. It is part of the general female Muslim fashion that is meant to protect women from men, while it also serves as religious identity. Nigeria's Kano State Government, in line with its adoption of sharia, has decided to make wearing the *hijab* mandatory for all school girls.⁷ All of this, just like the French, in a noble attempt to protect vulnerable females!

The basic issue here is, of course, that Islam and secularism reject each other's worldviews or faiths. An additional complication is that secularist and multi-culturalist ideologies have no legitimate room for *hijab* restrictions. Such restrictions are not *supposed* to happen in a perfect secular world. But what do you do when situations arise that threaten the comfort zone of the secularist? Then secularism's substrata of intolerance will suddenly pop up and its contradictions exposed.

All of this is the bill Western nations pay for their secular blindness to the nature of religion. They thought they were just importing cheap labourers with a funny religion. That religion, according to secular theory, would soon fizzle out and its adherents develop into a proper European proletariat that would do all the dirty work. That may work for Christian minorities in some Muslim countries, but Muslims do not accept that for long for themselves. They demand their rightful place under the sun, even when they

⁵ I. Peritz, 24 Sep/2003. *VS*, 26 Sep/2003.

⁶*VS*, 16 Oct/2003.

⁷*Naija News*, 25 Sep/2003. *REC*, Oct/2003.

withhold that right from minorities in some of *their* home countries. For France, it is the boomerang of their famous revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity, but only on *their* terms. Those terms are now being challenged by a revived Islam. It is the bill to be paid by a secularism that is increasingly regarded as “ignorant and arrogant” and that is now undergoing a crisis even in Europe.⁸ The glorious revolution has come home to roost-- and that by an innocuous *hijab*!

We do live in an interesting and challenging world!

SIDEBAR 1:

German State Plans Headscarf Ban⁹

A German state has begun moves to ban Muslims from wearing headscarves to schools. The bill was proposed by the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg following a supreme court ruling that allowed a Muslim teacher to wear a headscarf. The legislation is expected to gain approval from the state parliament early next year.

Civil rights groups say a ban would hamper religious freedom but six other states are planning similar laws. “The aim of the law is to forbid state teachers from wearing symbols which could be regarded as political,” said Erwin Teufel, state premier of Baden-Wuerttemberg. The region’s Education Minister, Annette Schavan, said the headscarf was “seen as a symbol of cultural division and part of a history of repression of women.”

In September’s ruling, the federal constitutional court ruled the state could not ban a female Muslim teacher from wearing a headscarf because

⁸B. Sauvaget, 1 Dec/2003. J. Luxmoore, 1 Dec/2003,

⁹Khilafa.com. 13 Nov/2003.

there was no law against it. But the court also said German states could ban headscarves in schools if they passed new laws. The ban will not apply in religious education classes, and Christian and Jewish symbols will not be banned.

Three states want headscarves banned in all public services.

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SIDEBAR 2:

MPs Urge French Ban on Religious Grounds

Move to Reaffirm Secular Nature of State Institutions Fuels Row

By Jon Henley¹⁰

France edged a step closer yesterday to outlawing Muslim veils in schools after a cross-party commission of MPs backed legislation to ban all visible symbols of religious conviction from state-run institutions. The decision by the commission is sure to inflame an already hated debate that cuts to the core of one of France's most pressing problems: how far the secular republic can accommodate the demands of Islam. Or, put more bluntly, is being Muslim compatible with being French?

The question is a vital one. With more than 5 million followers in France, an increasingly outspoken Islam--now tainted, rightly or wrongly, in the public mind by notions of fundamentalism and terrorism--has become the country's second-largest religion.

Opponents of a law on veils in schools, the decade-old dispute that has become the white-hot focus for the whole secular state debate, say it could further marginalise France's already disadvantaged Muslim immigrants, pushing from into the arms of the fundamentalists. "In the current climate, when passions are running high, such a law will be felt by the Muslim community as a suspicion," said Dalil Baoubakeur, the moderate imam of the

¹⁰Khilafa.com, 13 Nov/2003.

Paris mosque and president of the French Muslim Council. “It would be turning our back on the wise solution.”

Mr. Boubakeur is, unusually, backed by France’s archbishops, who fear that new legislation would threaten the delicate century-old balance achieved in France between the primary Catholic faith and an overtly secular state. “A law would reawaken old conflicts, confrontation and exclusions,” Claude Dagens, the bishop of Angouleme, said last week. The bishop of Evry, Michel Dubost, added: “Legislation would target the surface of things. The root problem is far bigger than that of headscarves in schools—it is the whole huge question of how to successfully integrate third-generation Muslim immigrants in France.”

But teachers and a clear majority of politicians are adamant that such legislation is the only solution. Under a 1989 court ruling, it is not illegal to wear religious symbols in state schools, considered by most French to be the near-sacred cornerstone of the republic and therefore the ideal place to transmit its core lay values. But the law does forbid “ostentatious” religious signs that “constitute an act of pressure, provocation, proselytism or propaganda.” Headmasters and teaching staffs of individual schools periodically invoke this to justify the suspension or expulsion of Muslim girls who insist on wearing *hijabs* at school—sometimes even to Physical Education (PE) classes.

The most recent high-profile case involved two teenagers, Alma and Lila Levy, from the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers, who refused to remove their full headscarves before entering their classroom. Both girls, who were portrayed in the French press as having “fallen prey” to fundamentalists, were expelled earlier this month. “Schools are not just public spaces. They must be autonomous places protected from aggressive proselytism, intolerance and polemic,” said a Paris secondary school teacher Herve Ricard. “Every religion must be treated the same, none must be singled out for favouritism or punishment. That is the intransigent condition of true neutrality, that is genuine secularity.”

The ruling UMP party's General Secretary, Philippe Douste-Blazy, said yesterday that a law that banned every visible sign of religious conviction--cross, skull-cap or headscarf--would "help all those millions of Muslims in France who are genuine republicans, who believe in an Islam in France, rather than an Islamic France." Otherwise, he said, "10 or 20 years down the line we could have some very serious republican problems indeed."

The French president, Jacques Chirac, and the prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, have both spoke out vociferously against the wearing of "ostentatious" symbols of faith in schools, the civil service, and in state institutions. Mr. Raffarin, as well as several other cabinet ministers, however, are hesitant about a new law, arguing that it is always better to "convince than to constrain," and that legislation "should always be the last possible solution." Mr. Chirac has said he will await the verdict, due at the end of this year, of a special commission on protecting and enforcing France's secular principles. However, comments by the commission's members so far leave little doubt that it will back legislation, leaving the government with little choice.

The debate is far from conclusive. "It is a big problem," admitted Mr. Ricard, the Paris teacher. "Many French people consider the headscarf a political, not a religious, symbol. In some countries girls who refuse to wear it are stoned. And many Muslims, even moderate ones, consider any attempt to ban it as more or less racist. In today's climate, there's no way of knowing where that could lead."

In a veiled criticism of France's secular view, 22 prominent Europeans, including former presidents, prime ministers and Nobel laureates, urged the EU not to ignore the continent's Christian roots in its draft constitution. The signatories of the statement did not directly demand a reference to religion in the document, but said that Christianity was at the core of Europe's common identity. France has staunchly opposed any reference to religion in the new constitution, but the Pope and half a dozen EU countries, including Spain, Poland and Ireland, want one.

***Postscript Note:* Check out the following references about the differences between France and Canada. Canada would allow the hijab. VS, Sept. 26, 2003; Oct. 14, 2003; Oct. 16, 2003; Nov. 11, 2003; Nov. 14, 2003; Dec. 4, 2003; CC, 17 Nov., 2003.**