

Beneath the Veil: Secularism vs. Islam in France

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France's draft law banning the wearing of full veils in public easily passed the National Assembly Tuesday by a vote of 335 to 1.

This near unanimity is especially interesting in light of a recent survey conducted by the Washington-based Pew Research Center across Europe and in the United States. Two-thirds of American respondents said they would oppose similar legislation in their states, while more than a half of those surveyed in European countries expressed their support for the move (71% in Germany, 62% in the UK, and 59% in Spain).

These findings cause one to look back to the dawn of European civilization. Throughout the 20th century, immigrants and refugees could feel welcome in France, be they Russian, Armenian, Iranian, or Arab. Many exiled foreign leaders, such as Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, found a home away from home there.

Many of these immigrants continued to observe traditional customs and dress, yet the French didn't seem to mind the Oriental veils and headscarves standing out in the Parisian crowd.

So why are public attitudes changing now? It's all about fear. As recently as a hundred years ago, France was still a big colonial power, with vast holdings in North Africa, Indochina, and other parts of the world. Back then, the illusion of European supremacy over non-Europeans allowed the French to tolerate all manner of ethnic eccentricity. Many saw it as part of France's special mission to preserve cultural diversity.

But now Europe's moral supremacy is fading away, with the Chinese, the Indians and the Latin Americans coming to the fore. All these cultures are non-exclusive and compatible with European culture, whereas Muslim culture is in many ways its polar opposite. The black veils, which Muslim women see as a soft wall protecting their purity from the filth of the outside world, represent something much darker and more ominous to a European. This explains the growing intolerance toward Muslim dress on the streets of Paris and other European cities.

During the rise of Islamic tradition in the 7th century, the veil was an indispensable part of women's outfit across the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire, and North Africa. In Constantinople, Jerusalem, Mecca, Alexandria, and Antioch, women would generally cover their faces when going out - not so much as a sign of religious piety as for hygienic reasons; the veils helped them protect their skin in the hot and dry climate.

It is not at all surprising that the Koran should mention the veil. The holy book of Islam carries quite a few medical prescriptions, ones that would have been sensible for the time and the place in which Islamic civilization was born.

Western civilization, which was essentially transplanted from the eastern Mediterranean, includes a manner of dress better suited to the cooler weather of the north. In Europe, veils gradually became nothing more than decoration on hats. Meanwhile, the Muslims, facing a civilizational disaster brought about by the invasion of Genghis Khan, tried to give a religious meaning to dress conventions originally based on hygiene.

We can now hear an echo of this civilizational disaster. Today's Muslims are becoming increasingly aware they are lagging behind not just their European colonizers, but other non-Muslim civilizations.

The cultural discrepancies between Muslims and Europeans may lie in the attitudes of Islam and Christianity to the human body. These two faiths are branches of the same Mediterranean tree. In the 7th century and beyond, leaders in both religions, but especially in Christianity, tried to convince the faithful that the only way to become spiritual was to rise above their physical needs and desires. In Europe, Christian churches have punished and even executed people for adultery. Even unconventional sex with one's own spouse was a punishable offense. These extremes were largely absent from Islam, but a fear of displaying the body has persisted in the Muslim world. As French scholar Helene Carrere d'Encausse rightly notes, European civilization today is based not just on the Christian tradition, but also on the conflict between religion and secularism that emerged in the Enlightenment era (with Voltaire among the most outspoken secularists).

The cult of the body - including the female body - in today's Europe harkens back to the pre-Christian era. Unlike its European neighbors, the Muslim world continues to stick to Islamic values. A clash, therefore, is inevitable.

Europe has come a long way in trying to rid itself of imbalances. The most vivid testimony is, perhaps, the concept of the United States as a harmonious Europe, free from medieval extremes and deeply ingrained complexes. So we should not be surprised by the difference in public attitudes to the Islamic veil on the two sides of the Atlantic. Europe and North America do not share all of their cultural values and, naturally, they will not respond to modern-day challenges in the same way. This is not to say that America's multi-ethnic and multi-racial society is not afraid of current global transformations. It's just that Americans' fears are of a different nature.

How the Muslims will respond to the latest French challenge remains to be seen.....

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