

Secular Extremes or Status Quo?

A law passed in France in September 2004 is portrayed as taking a stand against religious symbols in public. It also shuts out other traditions. By André Murry



In September 2004, France introduced a law that barred what it called conspicuous signs of faith—such as Islamic headscarves, Jewish skullcaps, Sikh turbans, and *large* Christian crosses—from state schools. Interestingly, the law allowed items such as *discreet* jewellery because a complete ban would have violated European human rights laws.

There are two points to note about this law before we proceed. First, headscarves, skullcaps, and turbans are unambiguously and indisputably headscarves, skullcaps, and turbans. But at what size does a small cross become a large cross? Second, religious traditions, such as the wearing of the headscarf, skullcap, and turban, are fixed and easily identifiable. On the other hand, the wearing of jewellery bearing religious motifs (which is most common among Christians and is prohibited or not favoured in other religious traditions) is seen by the state more as an expression of individual identity than religious faith.

Soon after the law came into force, a handful of Muslim and Sikh students were expelled from school by local authorities. Their options

were to either remove their headwear or go to a private school. French officials would like us to believe that the state is encouraging secular principles. If one accepts this position, one must realize that such extreme secularism actually infringes on the human rights of the individual. It raises crucial questions about the rights of the individual vis-a-vis the state and vis-a-vis national identity, about what exactly one means by the rights of the state, and how one defines the nation. These issues are discussed below.

Hosts and guests

An argument commonly heard is that people from other cultures must “adapt” to the “host” society. This means not only learning a new language and customs, finding a livelihood, and participating in the community; apparently, it also means means abandoning parts of one's identity. There are two crucial assumptions behind this way of thinking. First, that the vast amalgam of features that make up the national identity is non-negotiable and cannot be modified by the cultural expression of new arrivals. Second, that the other is a guest and must behave as a guest. What this effectively means is that the others must modify their identities for the opportunity of living in the “host” environment. Even long-term residents, who have integrated well in other respects, must suppress their religious expression in order to fully conform. But, by asking people to renounce part of their identities, does the state not infringe on the human rights of individuals? French officials reject this by claiming the new law is aimed at encouraging secularism.

Secular extremism

Religions are man-made. Secularism can also become a religion, and it will become one if people start blindly to follow it. Secularism should itself not be raised to the level of a God. What is required is to put individual freedom before any kind of dogma. If people wish to wear headscarves or turbans, let them. Let us see this as an expression of individuality, not of religion, and let us celebrate the human diversity such expressions represent.

Maintaining cultural superiority

The effect of the law banning religious symbols is to keep religion out of certain areas of life. This is a good thing. Religion has no place in matters of state or where other people are affected. Religion is a personal affair. But it is hard to see how the way one dresses is of concern to anybody else, except from the standpoint of etiquette. Etiquette, however, is unwritten and cannot be enforced. And that perhaps is the point. Etiquette changes. Perhaps the problem is that etiquette has become so relaxed that headscarves are no longer considered *louche*. The new law effectively puts the headscarf and the culture it represents back in its place—at the margins of French society. That is its effect—and perhaps what was intended, since the law has relatively little effect on Christian symbolism.

Reforming the other

Liberals have argued that laws like the new French law emancipate certain people, such as girls and women in Muslim households. As such, they argue, these laws should be seen as reformist. This might be true, but such laws also disrupt cultural traditions that may mean a lot to a family. A headscarf does not represent repression; it is more correctly seen as part of a tradition than as a symbol of repression or backwardness. Regressive tendencies do need to be addressed with legislation. If illiberal tendencies exist in certain traditions, and if reforming these tendencies is the goal, then building a climate in which all traditions are respected and openly discussed will give people the opportunity to make their own choices. That's important because people will then have made their choices freely and without being patronized.

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SIDEBARS**Tradition's Power**

Ceremony and ritual spring from our heart of hearts: those who govern us know it well, for they would sooner deny us bread than dare alter the observance of tradition.

– *F Gonzalez-Crussi, Notes of an Anatomist (1985)*

Tradition Scorned?

Conventional people are roused to fury by departures from convention, largely because they regard such departures as a criticism of themselves.

– *Bertrand Russell, The Conquest of Happiness (1930)*

Changing the Tradition

We were born here. We haven't got another world that we carry around in our heads. We have to compete. We had to take on a lot of the battles that [our parents] couldn't or wouldn't engage in. We had to redefine the image they'd given of Indians as these ethereal, exotic people, clannish never quite involved.

– *Meera Syal, interview in The Guardian, (6 April 1996) about 2nd generation immigrants in the UK.*

Invisible Man

I am an invisible man...I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people

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refuse to see me.

– *Ralph Ellison, The Invisible Man (1952)*

Under Western Eyes

They want us to redefine Islam to fit the agenda of the West.

– *Speaker at Hizb ut Tahrir meeting, London, November 2004.*

Respectable People

Customs and convictions change; respectable people are the last to know, or to admit, the change, and the ones most offended by fresh reflections of the facts in the mirror of art.

– *John Updike, New Yorker, 30 July 1990.*

It's the Intolerance

What is objectionable, what is dangerous, about extremists is not that they are extreme, but that they are intolerant. The evil is not what they say about their cause, but what they say about their opponents.

– *Robert Kennedy, The Pursuit of Justice (1964)*

Live and Let Live

Perfect behaviour is born of complete indifference.

– *Cesare Pavese, This Business of Living: Diary 1935–1950 (1952, transl.)*

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