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**The Burqa in France: Freedom For Whom?**

*President Obama recently criticized a French law that prohibits Muslim girls and women from wearing body- and face-covering garments in public schools. "It is important for Western countries to avoid impeding Muslim citizens from practicing religion as they see fit,"Obama said in Cairo, "for instance, by dictating what clothes a Muslim woman should wear."

But French President Sarkozy this week gave his support to attempts to bar Muslim women from wearing body-cloaking robes such as the burqa. "The burqa is not a religious sign," Sarkozy said. "It is a sign of subservience, a sign of debasement. It will not be welcome on the territory of the French Republic."

What's your view? Is this a private religious matter or a public/government one? Is the burqa welcome in America?*

Snarled questions challenge all participants to avoid snarling. My temptation is rather to remain silent, stymied, because I find myself agreeing and disagreeing with everybody. But "On Faith" asked me to participate, so I have overcome my temptation.

Not surprisingly, since it has played so huge a part in the histories of both France and the United States, FREEDOM is the civic value motivating both Presidents as quoted in the "On Faith" introduction to the questions. I'm approaching the questions by asking a question: Freedom for whom?

1.....Freedom for RELIGIONS, Obama answers. The original intent of our First Amendment was freedom of "church" (various Christian denominations) and "state" (the Federal government, not state governments). By the end of the 19th century, it had become clear that the principle (1) should be expanded to include state governments and (2) would *not*be expanded to include the practices of all religions: Congress banned Mormon polygamy.

2.....Freedom for GOVERNMENTS. As the U.S. anti-polygamy legislation shows, supervening over "the separation of church and state" is the principle that government is free to forbid such religious practices as the public, in the persons of their elected representatives, deem to *violate*"the American way of life," which is a culture basically compounded of Biblical and Enlightenment values. Sarkozy spoke from this principle in specifying a religious practice (which he wrongly denied to be religious) as un"welcome on the territory of the French Republic."

3.....Freedom for WOMEN, Sarkozy answers. *Gender equality* is a basic in the present culture of France, and (to quote "On Faith") "a French law...prohibits Muslim girls from wearing body- and face-covering garments in public schools." He clearly stated the cultural reason: such garments, specifically the burqa, signal the "subservience" and "debasement" of women.

4.....Freedom for THE INDIVIDUAL? "Women" are a category; what is the *opinion-range* of Muslim women in France? If a woman chooses to wear the burqa, are the French police to demand her removal of it?

Commentary

1.....What is proper burqa "territory" (to use Sarkozy's word)? French law says not the public school, and Sarkozy says not any public territory: only the mosque. The Roman government did not forbid Christian women to wear a head-covering in public, but the general Christian practice was to do so "when worshiping," when in church (1 Corinthians 11:7-16, ending with "women are not independent of men, and men are not independent of women"; Galatians 3:28 is specific about gender equality "in Christ Jesus," i.e. in church). / I agree with Sarkozy. This is a public/government matter, not a private religious matter. The burqa should not be "welcome in America."

2.....A more *somber* matter: among the world's religions, Islam alone claims that all "territory" not under its control is "war territory" (\*dar es harb\*) on the way to becoming "peace territory" (\*dar es salaam\* [under shariah, Muslim law]). In this eschatological perspective, burqa-wearing on French "territory" is the camel's nose in the tent. France is largely post-Christian with a low birth-rate. French Muslims are religious, with a high birth-rate. Unless Christianity revives, by 2050 France will probably be under shariah.

**BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT  |  JUNE 25, 2009; 10:50 PM ETSAVE & SHARE:                       
PREVIOUS:**[**HIJAB TODAY, YARMULKES AND CROSSES TOMORROW**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/michael_otterson/2009/06/hijab_today_yarmulkes_and_crosses_tomorrow.html)**| NEXT:**[**OUR MUSLIM ALLIES**](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/gustav_niebuhr/2009/06/our_muslim_allies.html)

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I dress as I please, and that includes bikinis on the beach, halter tops and Daisy Dukes in the summer. I see no reason why a woman who wishes to cover herself should not be allowed to do so.
Please don't drag out the "submissive" argument. While a submissive role would never work for me, there are plenty off women who do choose it, and they aren't all Muslim. There are women whose husbands decide what they can and cannot wear, where they can and cannot go, whether they can or cannot hold a job. It's a relationship dynamic that I would find absolutely unacceptable for myself, and my husband knows better than to try to forbid me to dress as I please, go where I wish, or do what I want. But just as other people don't get to decide that I cannot wear my mini-skirts, I don't get to decide that they can't wear their burqas.
I can understand the need to be able to see a person's face for the purpose of a photo i.d. such as a driver's license, but if a woman does not wish to show her limbs or visage to the general public, that is her decision to make, not mine to make for her.

**POSTED BY: LEPIDOPTERYX | JUNE 30, 2009 3:50 AM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

when I see a woman wearing the burqua in the US, I am overcome by many emotions, and they compete with each other. I feel sorry for her because I think she has no choice and is forced to wear it, either by her husband or by her father. I'm angry at her because she's in the US and therefore she does have a choice and she should just stop wearing it. I'm confused by her because I wonder if she actually thinks she should wear it and it's not her father or husband making her wear it. but if she thinks she should wear it, I would like to ask her WHY? Why does she think that GOD cares what she wears? God cares about what she does with her life, not what she wears. In a world full of war, ignorance, starvation, poverty, cruelty, and environmental degradation, why would anyone think that GOD cares what people wear. I would try as hard as I could to convince her that it's only MEN who want her to wear it. Not God. And finally, I'm frightened by her because it's a visual reminder to me of the belief in arbitrary, discriminatory, illogical and often-ridiculous cultural concepts that belonged to the world of 1000 years ago but shouldn't belong to the world of today. I'm frightened that there is such little progress after all this time and I wonder if the religious zealots of the world will overcome the educated people of the world just by the sheer force of their population.

**POSTED BY: MONA1950 | JUNE 28, 2009 2:45 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

Willis Elliott:

I would imagine that you are going to get quite a response to this, although there seems to be very little action on the blog right now, unsurprisingly, given the events of the last couple of weeks.

In the meantime, I would suggest that you flesh out the point you make in the last paragraph, in other words, provide the statistics European nations have given on birth rates among the different faith groups, these nations' demographic predictions. Then, I think, it would be helpful if you explained why you think shariah rule is the inevitable outcome.

The issue of the burqua is an interesting one as it calls into question, in ways other issues do not, the religion/state divide. Perhaps, you could elaborate on this as well, possibly, using the comparison to polygyny as a starting point.

What is desperately needed in this discussion is a vocabulary that includes but moves beyond words like "values" and "American way of life," in other words, substantive, nuanced comment. So far, those among the panelists who have given this matter the most thought are, understandably, struggling.

Farnaz

**POSTED BY: FARNAZ1MANSOURI1 | JUNE 26, 2009 1:20 PM****REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT**

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