

WOMEN, GOD, THE BURQUA AND THE VEIL: DIVERGENT SIGNALS FROM PARIS AND BRUSSELS

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The Islamic veil has again come under the spotlight of the media at this very beginning of summer. Totally divergent signals on the matter are emanating from two European capitals: Brussels and Paris.

Speaking on 22 June before the Congress (an extraordinary meeting of the National Assembly and the Senate), French President **Nicolas Sarkozy** stressed that the full veil **'is not the idea that the French Republic has of women's dignity,'** before adding that the true **'sign of subservience'** of women, **'the Burqua was not welcome in France.'** Immediately thereafter, he announced that Parliament would launch a wide-scale investigation and review of this matter. The work of this parliamentary commission, consisting of 32 deputies chosen from all political persuasions and regions will begin in July and will last six months.

It is generally estimated that some twenty thousand women – many of them converts – wear the Burqua in France. They are all under the influence of the Salafist movement, which is especially extremist and reactionary.

It should come as no surprise that the defenders of the Burqua are up on the ramparts and the Islamist sites have been invaded by 'posts' denouncing the intolerable attack on their liberties of which the President of the Republic was guilty, while part of the Arabic speaking press went on the offensive. At times they deployed curious arguments. Thus, the daily ***al-Hayat*** asks in all seriousness: **'What would be the reaction of the French and of Europeans if they had to cover their hair in the Islamic countries?'** It is hard to imagine a better entry for the record books of denial of reality and on stupidity. You just have to recall that **in Saudi Arabia wearing the veil is de facto imposed on non-Muslim women.**

But the most astonishing thing is what happened in Belgium, a country which may be small in terms of square kilometers but which has an oversized imagination and a country where you will never be disappointed if you expect the worst.

Several days ago, **Mrs Mahinur Özdemir** – an elected MP of Turkish origin who is **26 years old** – took her oath before the regional Parliament of Brussels with her head covered in a veil, thereby becoming the first parliamentarian to wear the veil in Europe. A national MP, **Mr. Denis Ducarme (Liberal)**, asked that a new legislation be adopted to prohibit religious signs in the elected assemblies.

Several days later, **we learned that an internal note circulating in the Ministry of Justice recommended allowing employees of this state service to wear ‘outer religious signs’ if that was their wish.**

These three cases are obviously very different from one another, but they all serve to rekindle discussions not only about the veil and on the **rights of women**, but also and above all about the **place of religion in society**.

Let’s begin with the Burqua. It is obvious that the President of the Republic is right. The Burqua is unacceptable in Europe. Aside from the fact that the full veil (the Saudi ‘Niqab,’ or the Afghan Burqua) totally prevents identification of the person wearing it in public– which is obviously contrary to public order – it transforms a woman into a phantom reduced to the level of a simple possession of a man (whether her father, her husband, her brother), to a subject with abridged rights: today the Niqab or the Burqua; tomorrow, in the name of the same logic, why not proceed to polygamy?

Let us challenge this absurd reasoning: if, in the name of political correctness and respect for individual liberty, you admit that a woman may go for a walk in the street entirely covered in a veil, why not admit in the name of that same liberty the rights of militant and radical nudists (yes, indeed, such people must exist...) to take a stroll naked, showing off their privy parts?

Let’s move on to the **veil of Mme Özdemir**. This young member of parliament – who otherwise has been the subject of complaints for her denial of the Armenian genocide... – argues that she campaigned for office wearing the veil and was elected, claiming therefore that **those who voted for her knew her convictions before they sent her to take a seat in Parliament**. That is all correct. The issue here is not to pass judgment on the religious convictions of Mme Özdemir or of anyone else. That is none of our business, nor is it what we are proposing. It is just that in the system of representation which prevails in Western Europe, **an elected parliamentarian is not just the representative of those who cast their vote for him or her but of all of the citizens of a given geographic area, an electoral district, and by extension, of the entire nation**. Once elected, Mrs Özdemir now represents not just the Muslims but also Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Evangelists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Sikhs, etc. And, to be sure, atheists. **An elected representative does not ‘belong’ to his own group and can represent this incredible diversity only if he or she agrees to put to one side the most specific elements identifying his/her own faith. To say the opposite means opening the door to religious and community splits within the popular assemblies.**

Finally, let’s pause for a moment to examine the question **of the outer religious signs and symbols worn by state officials** and those employed in the public services. Such an idea could only sprout in the minds of the especially imaginative bureaucrats of the country where surrealism became the fashion of political life even more than of artistic expression. The fact is that it’s not for the officials to decide what is good for them or not, but for the society which they are there to serve. There should be the sense that **public service is ‘neutral’ and that– no more than any company would be – it is not a place to proclaim one’s religious or political convictions.**

Although, acting in the name of freedom of religion and individual rights, public employees can serve users while their head is covered in a turban or a veil, or by exhibiting an enormous cross on their chest, **it is obvious that the same respect for individual liberties should allow other public employees to work while wearing a T-shirt proclaiming: ‘God doesn’t exist,’ ‘Jesus died and that’s a good thing!’ or (why not) ‘Neither God nor Master; Down with the State.’** Aside from the fact that this

would create some disorder, it is not hard to imagine the **tension** which this confrontation of opinions would generate and the likely recourse and endless disputes which would develop.

And there is even worse to consider. **When the convictions of others are exhibited and thrown in my face without my asking anything, I have the right to challenge them and, for example, to ask to be served by another employee with whom my own beliefs are better suited.** Let's be perfectly clear: personally I think that the Islamic veil is a mark of women's inferiority in relation to men, a status of inequality which I reject. **Therefore I must have the right, if someone in the state service imposes his or her view, to refuse to be served by a veiled woman. Otherwise, it's my freedom which would be scorned...**

Neither the Burqua nor the Niqab have their place in our streets and no outward sign of religiosity can be tolerated in the public services or in elected assemblies.

The principle of secularism must be confirmed and defended tooth and nail, because only secularism allows us to coexist peacefully and in conditions of mutual respect: God (whether he exists or not) has no place in the public sphere.

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