

Burqa Battle Is Over Competing Visions of Religion in Public Square

The burqa should be as accepted in American life for Muslims as the bolo tie is for Texas Baptists, the yarmulke is for Jews, the ornate cross-necklace is for Catholics and plain clothing is for the Amish.

The battle over the burqa, an outer garment worn by some Islamic women, has broken out between President Barack Obama and French President Nicholas Sarkozy.

Obama said in Cairo: “[I]t is important for Western countries to avoid impeding Muslim citizens from practicing religion as they see fit — for instance, by dictating what clothes a Muslim woman should wear. We cannot disguise hostility towards any religion behind the pretence of liberalism.”

Sarkozy said on June 22 in a speech at the Palace of Versailles: “The burqa is not a sign of religion, it is a sign of subservience. It will not be welcome on the territory of the French republic.”

“We cannot accept to have in our country women who are prisoners behind netting, cut off from all social life, deprived of identity,” said the French president. “That is not the idea that the French republic has of women’s dignity.”

Sarkozy reflected hostility toward religion; Obama displayed respect for religion.

Their disagreement is over two competing visions about the role of religion in Western culture. The American vision is of a pluralistic democracy where all religions are equal in the public square. The French vision is one of a secular society, a society that dictates to religion.

The American vision advances the separation of church and state. The state can't establish a religion — religion is freely practiced. As such, the state doesn't tell people of faith what to wear.

The French vision marginalizes religion, controlling religion when it tells people of faith what to wear.

While American Christians boast about the superiority of our vision of religion over the French, our cocky talk has a deep flaw. When some of us talk about religious liberty, we are really talking about religious liberty for the Christian version of religion. We think non-Christians ought to accept the dominant expressions of Christianity — our holidays, our language, our form of prayer, our day of worship. Non-Christians should just be happy that we allow them to practice their faith, preferably out of sight. Of course, second-class citizenship isn't really religious liberty for all.

The practice of the American vision is imperfect and in need of constant reformation. Nonetheless, I wouldn't trade it for any other way.

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