

# The Great Unbeiling

By: Kevin Valbonesi

Student 806-161-741

[kevinvalbonesi@gmail.com](mailto:kevinvalbonesi@gmail.com)

For: André Maintenay

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It seems as if France has been in conflict with Islam forever. Even before France was called France, it was at war with the adherents of Islam. The Germanic Franks who lived in Gaul (the region that would become France) fought the Muslim Moors from Africa. Later, the French would be marching off to the Middle East to expel the Muslims from the "Holy Land." Now, France has laid down the sword and is instead waging war with Islam over ideology, specifically, the issue of the Islamic veil. When referring to the veil in this document, it is in reference to the hijab, niqab, and burqa, which all cover a woman's head to varying degrees. This paper recognizes that all of the above head coverings are distinct, but for the sake of brevity, and the issue of any Islamic covering of a woman being central to the discussion, the shorthand of "the veil" will refer to them all.

In April 2011, France passed a law, which bans the veil in public places, subjecting those caught wearing it to a fine. While the number of women who wear the veil is comparatively small, roughly two thousand in a population of sixty-three million, the issue has still sparked controversy around the world, and it has called into question the values of France. Much of the debate is focused around France's constitution as a secular state, and the concept that embodies the spirit of French society: *laïcité*. The central concerns for this analysis of the debate are defining *laïcité* and how the veil fits in with this concept. For those on the side of the ban, *laïcité* prevents Muslims from becoming ascendant and enforcing their ideals, possibly fundamentalist ideals, on the whole. For those opposed to the ban, *laïcité* forces Muslims into marginalization and segregation. For the author of this paper, it is not *laïcité* but the veil itself, which promotes segregation and a break with the ideals of French society. It is a complex issue,

and it is critical to understand how it affects the idea of what it means to be French, and what the consequences of veiling are on society at large.

The first task is to define what *laïcité* means. The term has never been clearly defined by the French government, but vaguely corresponds to a freedom of religion on the condition that the government itself is secular. The French have come to define themselves as a secular people, and they believe this is for the best as it allows for a rational and fair polity that does not favor the freedoms and beliefs of one group over the other. Pascal Bruckner argues that instead of this being an authoritarian tool to suppress the people and their culture, this move by the French government promotes freedom. "The republic accords its citizens the full and complete right to belong to all cultural, religious, folk, and linguistic associations they want to, provided that these associations are not seen as superior to the common law and do not become pretext for one group or another to call for separate rights in the name of their convictions." (Bruckner, 62) Many would be quick to offer this as a definition for *laïcité*, and it offers a neutral and satisfying answer to how religion is to operate within the French state. The question one must ask next is how do the Islamic headdresses come into conflict with this definition of *laïcité*?

The majority of the rhetoric coming out of the French government figures in support of the ban focuses on the veil as a tool for fundamentalists to subjugate women. In his address to the nation, President Nicolas Sarkozy took the time to let the opinion of his party be known in regards to the veil. "The burqa is not a religious sign, it is a sign of the subjugation, of the submission of women. I want to say solemnly that it will not be welcome on our territory." (Sarkozy, 2009) For Sarkozy and his supporters, allowing the veil to go

unchallenged is to give permission to those touting their interpretation of sharia law to achieve ascendancy over the other religious groups, and most importantly to them, over the secular citizens of France. There is an issue of women being suppressed in more extreme forms of Islam, and the French government does not want to be perceived as supporting a backwards ideology such as misogyny. Later in his article, Bruckner expresses the plight of veiled woman, referring to the way in which the veil reduces them to little more than a shadow of a human being in the eyes of the public. He further explains that these women then become ambassadors of a sort, for the more radical versions of Islam. "These ghosts in black silently campaign for the concealment of all women – and characterize as indecent those who do not do it. But this is exactly what the Wahhabist and Salafist sects who encourage this type of practice count on: using covered women as emissaries of a pure and harsh Islam that seeks to reinvigorate European Muslim communities tainted by contact with the decadent, wicked, corrupt West." (Bruckner, 64) To allow the wearing of the burqa to continue in France, the leaders worry that all French women would become the victims of an Islam that seeks to repress them, to make them anything less than the equals of men; a right they fought hard to obtain in 1946. When it is the law of the state to keep the government and society secular, Islam therefore has no right to impose itself and its values on the French, and as these women are indeed French citizens, they should be forbidden from wearing a garment that denies them these rights, according to Sarkozy's side.

There are those, however, who believe that the banning of the veil has in fact had the opposite effect: it has suppressed the women who wear it. Instead of simply being citizens, women wearing the veil become stigmatized, subject to an

“us and them” mentality. Even before the veil was banned outright, Muslim women found themselves the targets of suspicion, fear, and persecution due to the damage caused by Islam’s image by extremists. Journalist Myriam Hunter-Henin says this on the possible effects of the ban: “Long-term effects of the ban may therefore worsen rather than improve women’s dignity. Moreover, the situation of veiled women can only deteriorate after a ban. Penalizing women who wear the burqa does not liberate them.” (Hunter-Henin, 627) Rather than liberating them, the ban is forcing them to remain prisoners in their home for fear of victimization. Hunter-Henin adds: “Integration will not be improved by the ban. A report from the Open Society Foundation already reveals that since the debate on the face veil began in France, 30 of 32 burqa-wearing women interviewed had experienced verbal abuse, and some had also been physically assaulted. As a direct result they preferred to limit the amount of time they spent outside the home.” (Hunter-Henin, 627) Laïcité is certainly acting counter to its ideal if the absence of religion in the public sphere is hindering the freedoms of the French citizens. Certainly, one can appreciate the plight of the Muslim women, and as this ban in theory applies to other religious groups and paraphernalia, soon, people wearing turbans or yarmulkes may also fall under the crosshairs of public aggression. Journalist Anna Greer, describes one scene of aggression that emerged out of the growing unrest over the veil. “One image that has stayed with me from the Cronulla riots all those years ago was of a hijabi running away from three young white men who were trying to rip off her headscarf. There was a lot of talk during that time of “their’ women and “our’ women.” (Greer, 17) In effect, this bill makes all women wearing any variant of the veil, an extremely visible lawbreaker, and in a country where xenophobia

and religious intolerance is clearly a hot issue, these women become large targets for persecution. One must also remember that for these women, the veil is the only means they have to defend themselves from the objectifying gazes of men, it is their religion's way of offering a means by which they may protect their virtue. There are fears that the French government will continue to dictate what people can and cannot wear, or do, and will use this power to further persecute those it deems out of line with its ideals.

It is the opinion of this author that the issue of the veil needs to be addressed as an issue of the social contract. Citizenship in any country requires the individual to live in accordance with the constitution of the country, provided of course that the constitution itself is not in violation of any essential human rights. Laïcité taken as the mandate for religious freedom in private, and the secular public life offers a way for Muslims to avoid persecution based solely on their dress. Many interpretations of the Koran simply call for women to dress modestly, not necessarily to be veiled, and it is perfectly viable for a Muslim woman to dress in a way that deters impious gazes from men, especially in a country like France, where fashion and the garment market are so prolific. Women may dress modestly in public in order to integrate and be perceived simply as French citizens, and they may veil in private, be that at home, or at the mosque, as per their interpretation of Islam. Religious symbols and attire create unnecessary tensions and rifts between members of a community, compounding divisions already created by income inequality and racial tension. It is fact that any religious ornamentation marks an individual out as distinct, or different, from everyone else. In a society where first impressions are everything, it does many individuals harm to be equated to the biased opinions about their faith

and/or culture. The veil is particularly disruptive to a French citizen's ability to interact with society because it deprives them of their identity; one only sees the veil, not another human being. It is in the interest of a polity to foster unity, not separation, within its people, for a people united may achieve greater things than a people divided.

In the coming months and years, many are going to have to re-evaluate what it means to be French. The question of the veil has yet to be resolved, with some still fearing it as the first step down a slippery slope to a radical Islam that would suppress their rights, others viewing its illegal status as a step on a different slope down towards total suppression by the government. For others, it is simply a question of the individual separating their public life from their religious life in order to integrate better with society at large. There is much hope for France, however. The French government has gone at lengths to build a mosque in honor of the Muslims who fought alongside them in the world wars, and the rise of cosmopolitan areas such as Marseilles show that the idea of French-ness is indeed quite diverse. France, and the world at large, stand to benefit if they reach an understanding with Islam. One only needs to look at how the Muslim scholars preserved and re-introduced classical knowledge to Europe in its darkest ages, helping to kick off the Renaissance, leading to a very bright future indeed.

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