

Ban The Burqa In Britain? No Thanks.

Over the past decade, cries to 'ban the veil' have spread across Europe, with countries as diverse as France, Russia, Turkey and Holland considering or imposing bans to 'banish the burqa'. Recently, it seems, Britain's government has joined the chorus, with ministers echoing Sarkozy's claim that the veil is "not welcome." Such ministers seem to be of the opinion that a ban will be tantamount to a knight in shining armour to these poor, repressed damsels in distress and that this 'noble' imposition will allow the government to swoop into these women's lives, free them from the rule of a patriarchal culture, eliminate oppression, enhance state security, integrate them further into British culture, and be back in time for tea.

Veils -in particular the fully concealing 'burqa'- often trigger associations with extremism, and, as such, are treated with prejudice and trepidation. However, far from eliminating extremism, a ban could breed it, with law-abiding citizens being branded 'threatening' and 'oppressive', and grouped with the tiny minority who actually pose a threat. Prohibiting the veil is synonymous with declaring an individual's culture unwelcome and, if someone is made to feel misunderstood and isolated, then a situation is created in which their mindset may gradually become more extreme.

Extremism aside, the veil is a garment that makes many Europeans feel uncomfortable, for the simple reason that it is not European. Fair enough. However, discomfort is not an adequate reason to ban something and alienate a culture, as Daisy Goodwin points out in her article 'Seeing through the burqa ban'. For her, a ban cannot be justified "...simply because their adoption of a medieval style of tribal dress makes me feel uncomfortable." If that were the case, where would the bans stop? Facial piercings? Tattoos? Sure, criticisms of the veil can - and definitely should- be made, and under no circumstances should anyone be forced into wearing it. However, by the same token no one should be forbidden from choosing to wear it - 'choosing' being the operative word, as - fundamentally- it should be a choice. Britain prides itself on being a diverse and free society, and thus a ban would be utterly contradictory and - in the words of Ed Balls- "not British".

Those who support a ban often take the stance that such a move will liberate women who are forced into subordination by men who insist their wives or daughters cover up in the name of modesty. Apparently, a ban will liberate all veil-clad women, who will lift their veil and weep a grateful 'thank you' to the government- a government who, by erasing centuries of culture, has rendered their lives happy and free from oppression. Nonsense.

A ban on the veil will merely isolate women further, increasing oppression. Those who wear it often do so because they feel they have to, for cultural, religious or - unfortunately -patriarchal reasons, reasons that are an intrinsic part of their identity. Forbidding these women to wear the veil in public would not westernise their mindset: they would still feel compelled to do so because their culture runs deeper than their clothing. Similarly, if every British woman was forced to wear a veil, it would not become the norm overnight, and many would feel conspicuous and uncomfortable for the rest of their lives.

Moreover, banning the veil would be a blatant infringement of basic liberties -the right to be "free within society from oppressive restrictions" - a

right that we take for granted. Of course, the gang of 'liberators' trumpet their belief that a ban will free these women from a misogynistic and oppressive culture, and that after this restriction – which will make everything hunky dory in no time – Muslim women will be free to live a life of freedom and equality...right? Wrong. A ban would merely replace being restricted by cloth to being restricted by their home. Women who wear the veil will not have their culture completely altered by a ban, and will simply be further isolated as, rather than be seen outside without a veil- a garment which, however oppressive, they have the right and often feel the need to wear- they will simply stay indoors. Those chanting 'ban the burqa' need to realise that it will not erase centuries of culture; it will not alter what Muslims feel to be the appropriate way to dress. Liberty will not be enhanced by the ban, but compromised, and, as the Euro Muslims Editorial Desk points out in its article "Burqa, Niqab or Bikini: Is It a Personal Choice?" (October 7th 2009) "[...] outlawing the burqa merely trades one form of compulsion (you must wear this) for another (you may not wear this)." Banning things to achieve liberty is like bombing for peace: a complete contradiction.

A seemingly persuasive argument by those who favour a ban is that the veil is a barrier which prevents women from integrating into British society. It is depressing to think that we live in a culture in which only one type of person exists. Diversity promotes national vitality, yet some ministers declare that veils are unacceptable as they symbolise an unwillingness to integrate into British culture. It seems that the only way to be a valued member of British society is to look like a valued member of British society. Apparently – according to Jordan Childs - a ban will break down the "barrier between cultures" and allow for active participation in British life. It is baffling to think that there are those who cannot see the glaring flaws and hypocrisies in this notion.

It seems obvious that integration is not prevented by the wearing of a headscarf, but by the deep-rooted discrimination that these women face. It is typical of British culture to point its petulant finger at another culture, rather than looking at its own flaws and weaknesses. Banning the veil would be a prime example of Britain's inability to accept responsibility for her own failures, immediately placing the blame on others and declaring smugly that lack of integration is the fault of the evil, burqa clad monsters, and not the intolerant hypocrisy of British society. Banning the veil would be astonishingly counter productive, for it is precisely this lack of respect and tolerance that causes the gap between our cultures to widen. Would you want to integrate and become part a culture that does not respect your views or attempt to understand your culture? No, and I challenge you to find someone who would. Demanding integration is an oxymoron: Abdelmalek Sayad in his book "The Suffering of the Immigrant" states that demanding the integration of immigrants into a culture that is not their own "[...] is like wanting to forget, wanting to be natural or wanting to sleep". Integration cannot be forced, it can only be developed as a consequence of other factors, such as mutual respect and tolerance, and it would be precisely these factors that would be destroyed by prohibiting the veil.

The image of Britain that the government is striving to portray is one of nationwide *Sesame Street*, in which every citizen –regardless of religion, race, ability and gender- co-exists in a peaceful and productive manner and –of course- has the occasional singsong. I do not recall the episode in which 'Big Bird'

was told his yellow plumage was unacceptable and was forced to change. A veil is only threatening if you allow yourself to be threatened by it, and it is time Britain recognised that wearing one does not automatically turn someone into an uncooperative terrorist. The state cannot, and should never be able to, define someone. Until it is accepted that not everyone dresses or thinks the same, and this witch-hunt is terminated, then the very basis of our democratic liberty is compromised.

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