

Book Reviews

Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space

John R. Bowen

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 290 pages.

Western anthropologists are typically concerned with interpreting the non-western world's unfamiliar cultures for western audiences. The French law banning the hijab from public schools presents itself as just as baffling as any non-western custom. Thus, it is fully understandable that it would take an American anthropologist to interpret this event, especially for those in Anglo-Saxon cultures, where in spite of Islamophobia and discrimination against the hijab, concepts of religious tolerance and multiculturalism have generally translated into legal protections for women and girls who wish to wear it in public spaces. So with a catchy title designed to appeal to this widespread bafflement, the author seeks to explain the intellectual underpinnings and political processes that led to this banning of "ostentatious" religious symbols in public schools on March 15, 2004.

Bowen, whose earlier work looked at religion and social change in Indonesia, focuses on the public deliberations about the issue of the hijab as well as on wider issues related to Muslim integration in France. He interviews politicians, bureaucrats, academics, journalists, public intellectuals, Muslim leaders, Muslim women, and (importantly, since it was a missing dimension, as he points out, in the lead up to the law) Muslim high school girls. He studies public texts and focuses especially on the crucial role played by an often hysterical media in forming and firming up public opinion in support of the law.

Since French discourse about social and public issues usually traces a genealogy back to the Republic's founding, Bowen starts by taking us through how French political theory conceives of the relationship between the individual, state, religion, and society – French republicanism. This, along

with a chapter on the specific relationship between Islam and the state, forms part 1 of the book: “State and Religion in the Long Run.”

Here he lays the foundations of French republicanism as part of his attempt to explain how the French came to embrace such a law, particularly the republican concept of removing specific (e.g., historical, ethnic, and religious) differences among different citizens from the public space as a way to achieve equality, and the sometimes proactive role that the state must play in achieving this. This is seen as the state guarding “neutrality” among its citizens. In this context, a bureaucrat mentions (without embarrassment) that there will “never be Sikh civil servants in France” (p. 14), since the Sikh’s religious headgear contravenes the state’s public role of religious neutrality. Not for the last time does it sometimes feel that, elaborate explanations referencing French political philosophy notwithstanding, the best explanation for “why the French don’t like headscarves” is simply racism.

Part 2, “Publicity and Politics, 1989-2005,” contains three chapters centered around the headscarf. Chapter 1 presents the debates over the meaning of the word *veil* (Fr. *voile*). Chapter 2 contains interviews with school girls about the hijab, the history of the problems over the hijab in schools when they first surfaced in 1989 until the lead up to the law, examinations of politicians’ speeches about the law, and the work of the Stasi commission (the commission of experts set up to investigate the issue and recommend solutions). Chapter 3, “Repercussions,” examines the immediate post-law period as the French tried to assess the law’s positive or negative impact.

Part 3, “Philosophy, Media, Anxiety,” focuses on three underlying themes and discourses (in three separate chapters) that Bowen believes came together to influence public opinion in support of the law: fears of communalism (Muslim segregation and non-Frenchness that rends the Republic’s unity); Islamism (the international political Islam that threatens French republican values, the veil as a symbol of Islamism); and sexism (the veil as a symbol of women’s subordination and Muslim practices of gender segregation) that undermines the republican values of gender equality and *mixité*, the idea of men and women mixing in public space (women-only swim times at public pools are opposed for this reason). The media’s role in hyping these “threats” is contained in this part.

One of the book’s most enjoyable aspects was the way the author interwove these analyses with personal anecdotes relevant to the book’s themes. For instance, he describes at length an evening seminar on “Does religion

impede the liberation of women?” that he attended and even spoke at by chance. He quotes the participants and describes the event’s atmosphere to such a degree that we feel like we are attending the seminar with him. This method and style is repeated throughout the book. Thus, as he takes us from the distant to recent past to the present, sometimes on a day-by-day or month-by-month basis, we feel that we are living through the lead up to the law in real time. It makes for enthralling reading.

This method also allows a multiplicity of voices to speak through Bowen’s rendition, such that he conveys, both respectfully and with a sense of understanding, the many-shaded perspectives both for and against the law, as well as for and against the veil, without interposing his own opinion too much. He also permits the critiques made by all sides to be heard. In fact, he seems to take pride in the fact that even after reading the book, people may not know exactly what he himself thinks of the law. He writes that his interest lies less in supporting a pro or con perspective than in exploring the reasons and processes behind a public deliberation over social policy (p. 7).

Bowen’s anthropological approach provides a compelling insight into the French context and allows for similarities and differences to be noted in other contexts, as many other countries deliberate publicly over the place of Muslim headscarves in their societies.

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