

Face-Coverings Must be Banned in All State Institutions

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Position adopted by the Board of Directors of Atheist Freethinkers—Libres penseurs athées

As atheists and secularists we reject the idea that individuals have an absolute right to wear anything they choose anywhere, at any time. Although we support the maximum possible individual freedom, we know that such freedom cannot be absolute. Sometimes limitations are necessary. Some limitations already exist in countries such as Canada where political and intellectual leaders at least pay lip service to Enlightenment principles, limitations which very few bother to question. For example, full nudity is illegal in public.

Face-coverings, i.e. clothing which obscures all or much of the human face, such as the full Islamist veil (burka or niqab) must be forbidden in at least the following situations:

- (a) For participants of official state functions, such as citizenship ceremonies.
- (b) For public servants, i.e. state employees, while on duty.
- (c) For users of public services, i.e. persons who are availing themselves of such services.

Why must face-coverings be banned? For at least two reasons, either one of which is sufficient to justify a ban:

(1) **Communication:** Non-verbal communication is a major element of face-to-face exchanges. It requires exposing one's own face and being able to see the face of one's interlocutor. A face-covering constitutes a major anti-social impediment to necessary communication.

(2) **Security:** Face-coverings impede identification of the persons wearing them and require that other, resource-consuming precautions be taken to compensate for such impediments.

Neither of these two considerations is directly related to religion or secularism. They are basic common sense constraints.

Now consider the particular case of the full veil at Canadian citizenship ceremonies. A woman who practices a particularly fundamentalist and severe version of Islam by wearing a niqab wished to wear that religious garb during the oath-taking ceremony, even going so far as to take the issue to federal courts to obtain that "right." Unfortunately, the courts ruled in her favour, for the obvious reason that Canadian laws (starting with, but not limited to, the *Citizenship Act* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*) grant higher priority to freedom of religion than to other considerations. This simply means that we must work to change such legislation.

Regardless of the legal issues, clearly the wearing of the niqab in this context should have been forbidden for the two reasons given above and for several other more specific reasons:

(3) **Religious Privilege:** To allow a face-covering for religious reasons is a clear violation of secularism because it grants a privilege, i.e. a special accommodation, based on nothing but religious belief. Furthermore, the need to identify the person wearing the niqab requires an additional effort on the part of state employees responsible for the ceremony, and this too is an unacceptable religious privilege. To allow this is to court the danger that other religious groups may also demand special accommodation, and how can they be refused once privileges are granted to the first group?

(4) **Women's Rights and Gender Equality:** The niqab is a blatant and ostentatious symbol of the subjugation and degradation of women promoted by a fundamentalist variant of Islam. Gender inequality is incompatible with democratic principles.

(5) **Freedom of Conscience of Other Participants:** By allowing one particular group to display blatantly one of its sectarian symbols during an official ceremony, the freedom of conscience of all other participants is compromised by the fact that a particular religious affiliation appears to be recognized and endorsed by the state. Allowing such religious advertising at a civic event totally unrelated to religion is similar to having large displays of commercial advertising in the classrooms of public schools.

(6) **Political Activism in an Inappropriate Context:** Islamist fundamentalism is not just a religious tendency; it is a major and very dangerous political ideology with an anti-democratic program. Wearing the full veil constitutes implicit promotion of this extremist fascist ideology—once again, incompatible with democratic principles. While this may be tolerated, for reasons of freedom of expression, outside of public institutions, such promotion is unacceptable during an official ceremony.

Thus, there are numerous important reasons why the full veil must be banned in citizenship ceremonies. In the words of Alban Ketelbuters, doctoral student at both UQÀM and EHES, the niqab is a “pornographic banner,” which is “archaic and demeaning” and “a vector of a fascist ideology.”

Not only do we reject the wearing of the full veil at any civic function, we categorically reject the malicious language of those who accuse proponents of a niqab ban of “intolerance,” “xenophobia,” “islamophobia” or even “racism.” The use of such baseless and slanderous epithets illustrates the intellectual vacuity of the argument that wearing the niqab is a “right” even during a citizenship ceremony. These specious accusations are sometimes expressed in a more subtle, implicit form, by alleging that attempts to ban the full veil are based on an emotional (therefore presumably invalid) sense of offence at the sight of wearers of the full veil. Although a negative emotional reaction to the niqab may or may not occur—it is a perfectly legitimate reflex and can lead to a deeper consideration of the issues involved—it is only the beginning of reflection. The arguments given above in support of a niqab ban are solid, well developed and independent of any emotional sentiment. These arguments stand on their own. They are motivated by a desire for fairness and equality, by respect for fundamental human rights and by an attachment to Enlightenment values including secularism.

Ketelbuters denounces the cultural relativism which motivates acceptance of the niqab:

Is such a glorification of religious obscurantism not tantamount to a slap in the face to the millions of women who, in countries of the Middle and Near East, in Northern Africa, in other regions of Africa and in Asia, have risked their lives fighting to be free of it? Worse, it fuels the deadly confusion which consists in failing to distinguish between democratic secular Muslims and reactionary fundamentalist Muslims. [...]

Why must citizens of Muslim culture or religion who willingly adapt to the customs and manners of their host country be sacrificed to the most reactionary fundamentalists whose goal is to give sharia law priority over all other considerations? Why remain silent in the face of Islamist fanaticism when it has never been more present, more victorious or more murderous on a world scale? [...]

To fail to denounce this extreme right-wing ideology eating away at western democracies, as does a large part of the intellectual and political left, and for obscure reasons, is a veritable betrayal. For today, we must face the fact that many progressives and feminists no longer fight against religious fundamentalism. Rather, they merely accompany it, and even encourage it. Nothing is more absurd and criminal than blind tolerance of religious fundamentalism of any variety.

This is strong language indeed. Nevertheless, the failure of the Prime Minister of Canada to recognize that allowing the niqab in citizenship ceremonies is tantamount to enabling Islamofascism must indeed be considered very serious.

Furthermore, Ketelbuters makes a very important distinction between “democratic secular Muslims and reactionary fundamentalist Muslims.” In reaction to recent terrorist massacres perpetrated by Islamist extremists, some well-meaning commentators repeat the foolish mantra that “Muslims are not terrorists” and indeed that message is implicitly what opponents of the niqab ban seem to be saying. However that statement is every bit as false and dangerous as saying “All Muslims are terrorists.” The reality is that some small number of Muslims are indeed terrorists, but they are precisely the ones who take very seriously and apply the prescriptions laid out clearly in the Quran. Furthermore, there are other Muslims, much more numerous, who sympathize with the terrorists to some degree because djihad or holy war is a key concept at the heart of Islam. Democratic secular Muslims are those who have adapted to modernity by setting aside the worst of their “holy” book. Similarly, democratic secular Christians are those who reject much of what their bible commands.

We can safely assume that the vast majority of women who wear the niqab or the burka do so because they are obligated by their family and religious community to wear a sort of tent over their heads. A small number claim that they do so willingly, as a matter of personal choice, but we must maintain some scepticism about the authenticity of such claims. Peer pressure may be overwhelming and lead to a sort of Stockholm syndrome among such women. Finally, we can assume that some women who claim to wear the full veil willingly are indeed completely sincere—this may be the case for Zunera Ishaq—but that implies that such individuals are utterly loyal to Islamism and to the gender inequality which Islamists promote, and that their loyalty exceeds any respect they may have for citizenship in any country.

Regardless of a woman's reasons for wearing the full veil, the result is an endorsement of Islamism. To ban face-coverings at citizenship ceremonies would mean a very small, indeed trivial, limitation on the freedom of any woman wearing one willingly, and for a very limited duration, while simultaneously sending a strong message of support for gender equality and freedom of conscience. Thus, a niqab ban would involve a tiny cost to a very few and a major benefit to all.

Furthermore, if face-coverings are allowed at citizenship ceremonies, how then can prohibiting them be justified in other circumstances? What about voters at polling stations? Or police officers on duty? Or judges on the bench?

Anyone who forces women to wear the full veil, such as the niqab or burqa, and any woman who wears one willingly, is making a symbolic gesture of solidarity with Islamofascism. Any politician who agrees to allow the full veil at civic functions or in the public service is behaving in a manner which is complicit with that Islamofascist movement. The failure to ban the full veil in state institutions is unethical and unacceptable. It is a betrayal of Muslim women and secular Muslims. It is a betrayal of secularism, women's rights and human rights in general.

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