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Why the French Hate the Headscarf

By Michael Welton
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Saba Mahmood is a very talented scholar who has assimilated a post-colonial sensibility. She has learned to look at the world through the eyes of those who have been the pedagogical objects of European colonialism. The literature on Orientalism is vast. The evidence suggests that Europe cannot easily shake off the deep-seated assumption that its way of life and scholarly products are the Archimedean point for comprehending the entire world.

Tomoko Masuzawa (*The Invention of World Religions* [2007]) demonstrated provocatively that the idea of "world religion" is an intellectual construction that implicitly assumes that Christianity is the only universal religion that breaks free from locale and particularity.

In our current time of shrunken minds and shrivelled hearts, panic and fear coursing through the imagination of Muslims and Christians has rendered it impossible to stand back from our situation and look ahead to a reconciled world. Muslims are pouring into a spiritually and intellectually unprepared Europe, some of whose citizens are reacting to them with extreme hostility and ignorance.

In turn, some Muslim men are acting in reprehensible ways towards young women. Even here, the old colonialism is still operative as European classes are held to teach Muslim men about how to treat western women. Europe always knows what is good for their students.

In this modest essay, I want to merely suggest that the perceptions that Muslims and Christians have of each other can be grounded in the taken-for-granted European assumption that Western Christianity is a superior religion.

Even in its secular modern form, it is supposed to be superior to all other ways of life, suffused as the latter are by a non-Christian religion such as Islam that has yet to learn the Western truths about how religion ought to be present in the life of a society.

That's the keystone of the foundation. In Europe, Christianity has been tamed and consigned to the private sphere. That is the way a modernized Christianity should be present in the interior lives of the few individuals who may attend church.

A third assumption has to do with the often-missed and mistaken idea that the "secular state" is tolerant of all forms of religious expression; it is, therefore, allegedly uninvolved in the religious life of the state. To make this case, I draw upon the scholarly w0rk of Saba Mahmood, John Bowen and Tariq Ramadan.

Mahmood ("Can secularism be otherwise? In M. Warner, J. Vanantwerpen, and C. Calhoun (Eds.) *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* [2010]) begins her critical questioning of Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age* [2007]) by declaring that he "delineates his object of study: a coherent religious tradition, coextensive with a spatial geography, whose historical unfolding can be plotted without accounting for non-Christian religious traditions that have coexisted within that very space of 'Latin Christendom'" (p. 285).

Mahmood raises two salient points. For one thing, Latin Christendom is not as homogenous as Taylor makes out. Secondly, it is not understandable without grasping its encounters with others in new worlds. "These encounters," she observes, "did not simply leave Christianity untouched but transformed it from within, a transformation that should be internal to any self-understanding of Christianity (ibid.)."

Omission of this story is akin to the omission of the history of slavery and colonialism from accounts of post-Enlightenment modernity—an omission that enables a progressivist notion of history and normative claims about who is qualified to be 'modern' or 'civilized'" (p. 286). This is devastating and intriguing commentary.

Mahmood's powerful core idea is that Christianity's self-understanding was increasingly shaped by its "enmeshment in an imperial world order" (p. 287). Missionary work, then, was "important to developments within Christianity and to many of the central ideas and institutions of Latin Christendom" (ibid.).

Mahmood points out that missionaries shaped educational systems, bringing in forms of western-styled rationalism and ways of thinking about the world. Mahmood states that in the period from 1858-1914, the zenith of colonial power, every corner of the globe was penetrated by Christian missions.

"Importantly, these missions did not simply pave the way for colonial rule (as if often noted) but played a crucial role in shaping and redefining modern Christianity to fit the requirements of an emergent liberal social and political order in Europe" (p. 287).

For Mahmood, Taylor fails to "acknowledge the immense ideological force the 'empirical history' of Christianity commands in securing what constitutes as the properly religious and secular in the analytical domain" (p. 289).

But this securing, Mahmood argues, comes at great cost. It is to "engage in a practice through which the 'North Atlantic' has historically secured its exceptionality—the simultaneous uniqueness and universality of its religious forms and the superiority of its civilization" (p. 290).

Western secular modernity, then, retains in some way traces of its Euro-Christian origins. But the consequences are grave: "To inhabit this founding gesture uncritically (as Taylor does), by which the West consolidates its epistemic and historical privilege, is not simply to describe a discursive structure but to write from within its concepts and ambitions—one might even say to further its aims and presuppositions. The fact that Taylor sometimes inhabits this discourse ironically (evident in his acknowledgement of other possible accounts one could give of secularism) does not undermine the force of this discourse but only makes it more palatable to a post-imperialist audience" (ibid.). This is *tour de force* criticism.

Mahmood has also contributed wise thoughts to the controversial debate surrounding the notion of "political secularism." She thinks that Taylor is largely indifferent to political secularism. But as scholars such as Wendy Brown, Talal Asad, Rajeev Barghava, Peter van der Veer and John Bowen have observed, the secularity of the state does not mean that the state washes its hands completely of religion.

Rather, the sovereignty of the secular state provisions the power to "regulate religious life through a variety of disciplinary practices that are political as well as ethical" (Mahmood, p. 293).

The secular state authorizes a normative model of religious subjectivity

Mahmood's Foucault-flavoured ideas point to how easy it is to miss the way the secular modern state actively authorizes normative models of religious subjectivity and practice.

In *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (2007), John Bowen deftly explains how French Republican thinking requires that people who live together must agree on basic values. Collective interests take precedence over individual interests and pluralism. But these "collective interests" assume that Euro-Christianity has exited public space, setting the benchmark for religious practice.

In this situation, the state must construct institutions and policies to assimilate newcomers into French society by "teaching them certain ways of acting and thinking" (p. 11). The public school serves the essential function of educating the children and youth to be French citizens. "In the Republican ways of understanding French history," Bowen states, "integration and laïcité are twin signposts on the road to realizing the French political model" (p. 12).

The French state has taken its present form primarily as response to the religious wars and conflict of earlier times. This means that the state actively monitors organized religion because the public space must be neutral toward religion. One can only enter public space as citizen: this demands abstracting from one's individual characteristics (not an easy matter).

It also means that the French state will both determine the boundaries of religious belief and practice and require something of Islam, Christianity or another religion they choose to recognize. Recognized religions can celebrate their faith in designated buildings and teach their principles in this delimited space.

The old soap-box preacher that has appeared on street corners in the US or the UK is not permitted. Nor is the selling of religious literature on the sidewalks. This violates public order. Bowen (2007) points out that the French state uses its coercive and normative power to contain religious expression to buildings and define the scope of its collective life as worship in the same structures. It keeps a watchful and wary eye on the activities of religious leaders.

Thus, even the historic French Roman Catholic Church has to perform its liturgy inside the familiar, often lavishly gorgeous and empty, churches where they can teach for private life. But the French state is trying to bottle lightning. Religion is about (or can be) all of life and that includes public life. For instance, Pope Francis, the Argentinian liberation theologian, speaks to global issues such as poverty, Israeli state violence in Palestine or climate change.

No state can tell him what to speak about or that he should whisper in the corridor. As for Islam, its "public ritual practices," Bowen observes, "which include sacrifice, scarf-wearing, and prostrations in exotic buildings, are felt by some to threaten public order" (p. 20). While one can make a compelling case for the analogy between the head scarf and the nun's habit, or the mosque and cathedral, the French uneasiness reflects the newness of these religious symbols. It also reflects taking for granted that Western Christianity is a superior religion to Islam.

One can ignore the presence of crucifixes and churches—this is part of French history after all—but "crescents and mosques" is a possible threat to Republican notions of the common good.

Indeed, after 1989 many French citizens did perceive Islam as a potentially malevolent presence and Muslim students its instruments. Essentially, children of Muslim immigrants—perhaps

reacting to both their parent's lukewarm faith and the western-engendered chaos in Islamic countries—proclaimed Islam as their new identity.

This was in tune with Islamic political leaders who also advocated Islam as their guide for all of life. Thus, when three girls appeared wearing head scarves in their school in 1989, it was really a spark that ignited simmering fearfulness. Bowen (2007) accentuates the potency of Islamic identity formation for a "generation doomed to cultural orphan hood and ontological fragility" (p. 67).

This meant that Islam was now been lived in a very public way; resentment was fueled as French citizens competed for jobs, contended with visible cultural differences and faced the "unalterable newness on putatively ancient French soil" (p. 68).

Cultural and post-colonial theorists have given some attention to the contentious way the Islamic body and use of space disrupted taken-for-granted French (Catholic) modes of self and religious expression. In fact, the debates around the multiple meanings of the use of the veil, hijab or head scarf has become a minor industry.

Those on the secular left saw the head scarf as a sign of female oppression; many Muslim girls and women spoke of their right to make their own decisions and express themselves. The comfortable privatization of religion as integral part of the French secular state has been resisted and contested. The Muslim girls and women were struggling to "negotiate a sphere of social freedom and authority…" (p. 71).

Tariq Ramadan (*Western Muslims and the future of Islam* [2004]) observes that: "Many [Muslim] women in the West now indicate their right to be respected in their faith by wearing the headscarf and by giving visible sign of the modesty in which they wish to be approached: but their faithfulness to Islamic rules does not prevent them from having completely Western tastes when it comes to the style or color of their clothing" (p. 143).

In the end, the French state passed a law against religious symbols in public schools. Bowen (2007) comments: "The voile, for that was what the law was about, had become a symbol of mounting Islamism and decaying social life" (p. 242).

Here, the law as harsh pedagogue sent a firm message to Islamists and Muslims. The Republic had to be the orienting light for living together in public spaces. And this meant living in a "public space from which ethnic, religious, and other characteristics are erased, and the public schools that model for their pupils the erasure of differences and the collective embrace of the Republic" (p. 246).

If this form of "political secularism" persists in France and elsewhere, we can only predict much calamity and sorrow ahead.