Veil of Fears

Katha Pollitt | May 26, 2010

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By the time you read this, plucky little Belgium may have beaten France to become the first European country to ban women from wearing the burqa or niqab in public. On April 29, the Lower House of Parliament voted unanimously (with two abstentions) in favor of the ban, and the Senate is expected to approve it. The energy mustered in Brussels is all the more remarkable, given that in a Muslim population of around half a million, the number of women who cover their face is, according to the BBC, about thirty. In France, where President Sarkozy is enthusiastically pushing a ban, the number of women wearing the niqab is at most 2,000 in a Muslim population of more than 6 million; no one wears the burqa, the full-body baglike covering worn in Afghanistan. Similarly tiny numbers of face-veilers are found in the other European countries where bans have been discussed—the Netherlands, Denmark and Italy, where the conservative anti-immigrant Northern League has enacted bans in some towns it controls.

Of course, something that few people do can still be of great importance—especially if the trend is upward, as may be the case (in France the niqab was virtually unknown ten years ago; most wearers are under 40). Still, when I suggested in an e-mail exchange with pro-secular French feminist Liliane Kandel that perhaps the issue was a "distraction" from more serious issues facing Muslim women, she fired back that 2,000 was an "enormous" number and compared my point to French far-right politician Le Pen's famous claim that the Holocaust was a "detail" of World War II. She's hardly alone when it comes to extreme comparisons. In his *Slate* column, Christopher Hitchens compares face veils to bank robbers' masks and KKK regalia. That seems like an awfully dramatic way to characterize a woman's attire for grocery shopping or picking her kids up from school.

I don't like face-veiling either. It negates the individual; it reduces women to sex objects who must be shrouded to avoid tempting men; it sends the message that men's "honor" resides in the bodies of "their" women. In a conflict between women and fundamentalists, including the fundamentalists in their own families, I would want the state to side with women, on dress as in other issues of personal freedom. Yet while the French *Parliamentary Report on the Wearing of the Full Veil* nodded frequently to "French values" and gender equality, it isn't obvious how criminalizing Muslim women's clothing makes them more equal—unless you believe that they are being forced to cover by male relatives or increasingly fundamentalist communities. It was a clever stroke for Sarkozy to propose heavy fines and up to one year in prison for men who force girls and women to cover (women are also fined, but less). Some women may indeed be coerced—that's one reason there are Muslim women who support the ban. But others choose the niqab freely, as an expression of piety; indeed, 25 percent of niqab wearers are converts. Critics argue, accurately, that the Koran doesn't mandate face-veiling, but religion is what people make of it: the Bible doesn't command Amish women to dress like eighteenth-century German farm wives or Orthodox Jewish women to wear wigs. Why not

just leave veiled Muslim women alone, except where there's a legitimate state interest in verifying their identity? They've got enough problems as it is. Indeed, the ban may make their situation worse if the men who force them into the niqab decide that without it, they can't leave the house at all.

How does it help veiled women to expel them from high school (as happened recently in Madrid), deny them employment, refuse them entrance to public buildings, make them pay fines or even serve jail sentences and tacitly encourage total strangers to insult and humiliate them? In France, a woman lawyer actually got into a fistfight with a niqab-wearing woman she spotted in a department store. In Italy a woman was fined 500 euros for wearing a niqab at the post office in Novara.

Supporters of the ban in France point to security concerns and republican ideals, but it is hard to see the energy behind the ban as disconnected from anti-Muslim feeling. The parliamentary report calls the face the "mirror of the soul," and many commentators have mentioned the importance of being able to see the face of the person you are talking with; but the same people who want to ban the niqab also wanted to ban the head scarf a few years ago: is the hair also the mirror of the soul? Germany cites secularism to justify its prohibition in some states on teachers and civil servants wearing the head scarf—even one styled like Grace Kelly's, as one teacher proposed—at the same time that classrooms in several states sport crucifixes despite a high court ruling against them.

Western Europeans see themselves as progressive, open and tolerant, even as they fuss and fret over the size of mosques and, in Switzerland, vote to ban minarets. They fear Islamic fundamentalism, but they don't see how nativism and prejudice drive Muslim communities inward. You would never know from all the flowery French talk about equality and women's rights that there is such a thing as discrimination against Muslims, including the Muslim women everyone's so concerned about. A recent study by scholars from Stanford and the Sorbonne is the first to show religious rather than ethnic (i.e., anti-Arab) discrimination. The researchers applied for jobs requiring education and experience using identical fictional résumés for "Aurélie Ménard" (ethnic French), "Marie Diouf" (Senegalese Christian) and "Khadija Diouf" (Senegalese Muslim). Aurélie did only a little better than Marie, but she got three times the callbacks of Khadija. As researcher David Laitin explained, "There is no doubt: Anti-Muslim discrimination in at least one sector of the white-collar French labor market is surely holding back Muslim economic success in France." Work, education, social support and justice: that's what women, including Muslim women, need.