

Freedom of religion has its own demands

Joan Chittister | Jan. 23, 2007 | From Where I Stand

I found myself staring at a picture on a friend's mantelpiece this week. There they were, seated on a low ridge along an outside wall of a cobblestone street. They looked casual enough.

There were two women, three teenage girls, one child, all of them huddled together, no man in sight. Their bodies were swathed in heavy black abayas, their faces circled in hijabs, veils that covered everything but their eyes, nose and mouth. Underneath each of the long black skirts, in a kind of playful, mocking way, their toes snuck out through the straps of their sandals.

It wasn't that there was anything wrong with the scene. These were, it seemed, average Muslim women resting after a stroll, perhaps, or shopping, or even on their way to the mosque. They were quiet and motherly, calm and relaxed. But they were Muslim. Not simply Muslim believers -- like Methodists or Baptists, Evangelicals or Catholics -- in a pluralistic Christian culture. These were Muslims who represented a part of the Islamic world who find themselves in the midst of an identity crisis in the West.

So what do these women have to do with us?

I have no idea where the picture was taken. All I know is that it is coming soon to a street near you. Traditional Muslim garb, especially for women -- and western reaction to it -- is spreading. France, Holland, Belgium, Spain, Germany, England and now the United States, as well, (See Human Rights without Frontiers International, hrwf.net [1]) have all made attempts in some form or other to ban the burqa or limit the public use of the Muslim headscarf or hijab.

The notion of difference, of cultural separation, symbolized, some feel, by these barriers to "integration and communication" makes many parts of the West uneasy. Based on principles of equality, assimilation, and homogenization -- the kind of democracy that is inclined to reduce differences to the level of the least common denominator -- the very notion of a growing population that is self-consciously "other" raises a whole new set of questions for us.

What is tolerance? What does freedom of religion demand? When is a country really a united country?

Is the religious tolerance we practice based more on a subtle expectation of sameness than on the real freedom to be different? And where does religious "difference" end and public identity begin? Is there a point at which

distinction becomes difference, or difference becomes distinction, in the deepest sense of the word and must, therefore, be curbed? In any society? Here and in Muslim societies, as well?

In the global village in which we all now live there is a simmering dis-ease everywhere. You can live here, the world seems to be saying from one end of it to the other, but you must look like us as well as behave like us, behave like us as well as be like us. Whoever "us" is. In some Muslim countries, the expectation is that women -- all women, Muslims or not -- must be covered from head to foot. In the West, on the other hand, those who are covered from head to foot make us uncomfortable.

The fear that there might be developing among us a culture within a culture gets more pronounced everywhere, every day. The power of religion to separate as well as to unite is seen in secularist countries -- meaning those not theocratic or governed by any particular religious law -- as a major obstacle to the development of the state itself.

In the United States, for instance, a Muslim woman in Florida has been denied a driver's license for reasons of security because she refuses to have her picture taken without the niqab, the full face veil of the burqa, even though nine months before 9/11 she had been granted a license regardless.

In 2003, a woman in Pennsylvania was suspended from teaching for one year because she wore a cross to work. The reason, the officials there said, is "to protect people of all faiths from being offended."

The chairperson of the Refugee Tribunal in Ireland, a Catholic, confesses, "This kind of clothing makes it very difficult to relate to these people as individuals."

Clearly the problem is deep-seated, but is it a new one? Even here?

The fact is that Brenda Nichol, the woman suspended from teaching for wearing a cross, was suspended on the basis of Pennsylvania's Religious Garb Prohibition passed in 1895 and upheld in 1990 by the 3rd U.S. Court of Appeals in the case of a Muslim teacher in Philadelphia who wore her head scarf and abaya to school.

In fact, until the 1960s in the United States, Catholic nuns were not permitted to teach, or even to take courses in public colleges, if they wore religious clothing.

So here's the problem. Catholics often speak with reverence and affection about the religious habits commonly associated with membership in a religious order until changes in dress became common for religious after Vatican II. The habit, many insist with fond nostalgia, did not depersonalize nuns. In fact, many would love to see it returned, they say. But if that's the case, what is the difference between habits for nuns in public places and head scarves, abayas or burqas for Muslims? What is the real issue here: security, communication, integration? Or something else? And if it's something else, what is it? Fear or prejudice or national chauvinism? And what does that say about us, about them, about the world around us?

From where I stand, it seems to me that all of us, here and around the world, could all use a good conversation about the role of dress in public arenas and the place of religious dress in secular societies. Otherwise, our

commitment to freedom, however it is couched in political terms anywhere around the world, however much we declare ourselves committed to independence and democracy here, takes on a very hollow ring.

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[1] <http://hrwf.net/>