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Muslim Head Scarves and French Schools
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A French government commission recently recommended that French schools should ban students from wearing religious symbols. This ban would include large Christian crosses, Jewish yarmulkes, and especially the Muslim headscarf called a hijab.

It was the controversy over the hijab that prompted the commission's recommendation. The controversy stems from the view of many French officials, including President Chirac, that the hijab is a political symbol, implying the rejection of French nationalism and values. To make the issue more confusing, feminists on both sides of the Atlantic have argued that the hijab is a sign of women's oppression and thus constitutes an anathema in modern society. The ongoing hijab controversy shows both an ignorance of its place in Muslim culture and a lack of self-awareness of religion's role in French society and history.

To begin with, the hijab is a political symbol only in the eyes of the French. In traditional Muslim societies, the hijab, which designates only the headscarf and not the full body and face covering of the chadur, is simply a modest form of dress (and a moderate one at that). It is not even a symbol, like a cross or Star of David. Wearing it is a matter of proper public attire. For the French government to forbid its wearing would be the equivalent of America requiring girls to wear bikinis to school. For children of public school age, decisions about dress should take place in the family, not in the government.

There is some accuracy in the feminist charge of the hijab as male oppression of women, but only some. The truth, as usual, is more complex. In Muslim societies from Egypt to Iran to Indonesia, many women are highly educated and work as doctors, lawyers, professors and other professions. Many wear the hijab, and even parts of the chadur, by choice. They find that by removing their body from view, they are taken more seriously for their skills, judgment and personality. The hijab actually aids their equality with men rather than hinders it.

But why would the French government involve itself in this matter in the first place? The answer lies in the historical circumstances that shaped France's secular culture and its nationalism.

French secular culture grew out of the Enlightenment, as did American secular culture. But in

America, secularism grew out of Protestantism, or, more precisely, out of the many protestant denominations that existed in the United States. In France, by contrast, secularism arose by fighting a single religious entity, the Roman Catholic Church, which had been established in France for nearly 2000 years.

The secular triumph led to the general exclusion of religion from French schools, which essentially meant Catholicism, a religion the secular society viewed as an ongoing foe. Now, under the pressure of Muslims immigrating from former French colonies, this attitude has simply been transferred from Catholicism to Islam, without any attempt to understand Islam.

To complicate the situation, French nationalism has long been uncertain about whether religious differences interfere with national loyalties. Following the collapse of the French monarchy, for instance, Napoleon asked French Jews whether they could be loyal French citizens, or whether their religion instead made them members of a Jewish nation. Their response was that, yes, they could be loyal French citizens who practiced the religion of Judaism, just as other loyal Frenchmen practiced the religion of Catholicism. Napoleon accepted this answer and gave them full French citizenship.

The hijab raises the same question in the minds of French leaders. When French politicians see the hijab as a "political symbol," they understand it as a rejection of membership in French society. To them, it indicates that Muslims in France refuse to consider themselves French and to become loyal members of French society--an obvious misinterpretation.

The proposed ban on the hijab stems from misunderstandings of religious difference, which is not a sound basis for public policy. However, all hope is not lost. The "hijab commission" also recommended the official recognition of Muslim holy days as national holidays. This constitutes a better approach to the Muslim presence in France.