Governments in the European countries of France, Spain and Belgium are trying to persuade their parliaments to ban the public wearing of the burqa, the veil which some Muslim women wear over their face. In the Middle East, the governments of Egypt, Jordan and Syria have banned burqa-wearing in the universities.

The French government argues for its ban on the basis of respect for the dignity of women. The Jordanian administration focuses on security, showing criminals using the burqa as a disguise when robbing banks. Indeed, many countries seem to be worried about security, since the bulky robes usually worn with a burqa can easily hide explosives or weapons.

What unites these actions is the emphasis on a woman NOT wearing the burqa. That makes sense to most of us in the first world, where we do not have a tradition of female covering. Our secularizing goal is to liberate women from having to wear this outfit. But many Muslim women prefer to wear the burqa or other covering clothing; many consider it traditional. Others find that it enables them to work with male co-workers and be taken as an equal rather than as a sex object. Preventing women from wearing a burqa thus becomes a form of social engineering, of forced behavior, rather than of religious liberty.

So how should a society balance legitimate interests of security or education with each individual’s right to religious freedom?

Religions themselves suggest an answer. Most religions have a concept of sacred space, an area where their god is especially present. Although diluted in modern times, the concept of special places, buildings, cities or even mountains set aside for religious or divine purposes appears in most world religions.

Ancient Judaism believed its Jerusalem Temple was holy because God “dwelled” there. In Islam, the mosque containing the Kaaba in Mecca is sacred. In Christianity, the places where Jesus performed miracles are deemed holy.

Places such as these, as well as lesser religious sites, have rules about preparations or clothing needed for entering them. Muslims should wash before entering a mosque to pray. One should don a yarmulke in a synagogue and in some a prayer shawl as well. Catholic priests wear liturgical vestments when leading worship at the altar.

Similarly, Hindu priests must dress in a particular way when worshipping their god or goddess. Women and men are expected to cover their shoulders and knees at Christian religious sites such as the Vatican or monasteries.

In an analogue to the notion of sacred space, non-religious institutions like governments should have secular sites that are special to it. Like sacred sites under religious control, which promulgate their own rules about dress, these special secular sites government control could have their own dress codes. In many places, such as airports, this already takes place.

Governmental institutions could designate places such police stations or universities as having this status. To enhance security, for instance, they could ban any clothing that hides the body’s appearance, whether worn on the head or face, the torso, or the legs. This would effectively exclude the burqa at a place where that exclusion makes sense. Modern airports already practice something like this during their security checks on passengers.

My point is that the banning of the burqa and the trampling on religious freedom should not be arbitrary. It should apply to only to places where that ban makes sense. All space not designated as special to a government or a religion (or a private home, of course) would thus be public space and people could wear whatever they wanted, whether revealing, modest, or covering clothing. There would only be a few limited places where normal expectations freedom of (religious) dress would not apply.

This would balance each individual’s right to freedom of religious or secular expression (with regard to dress) with the right of a few institutions, secular and religious, to determine the kind of clothing worn on their premises. The banning of the burqa in Syrian and Egyptian universities would fit into these guidelines, but France’s banning of the burqa on city streets would be too intrusive into the lives of private individuals.