

Islam and Multiculturalism in Europe: An Exposition of a Dialectical Encounter

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Abstract

Events such as New York's 9/11, London's 7/7, and Paris' *Charlie Hebdo* have played dramatic roles in redirecting the focus of multiculturalism in liberal European democracies. Against a backdrop of the "failure of multiculturalism" or "multiculturalism in crisis," liberal democracies continue to struggle and stumble in their efforts to accommodate minority groups, while simultaneously trying to sustain the primary good of the majority. One stumble appears to be the effort to "emancipate" and "democratize" Muslim women by regulating their dress code. In return, liberal democracies are accused of seeking to expunge their multicultural baggage by pursuing a particular orientation of integrationism, one that disregards self-understandings of religious and cultural particularities.

By focusing upon this issue, this article explores why multiculturalism in Europe might be perceived as failing in its response to Muslims and Islam. In weighing the increasing levels of fear and insecurity among majority groups within a context of growing social marginalization among minority groups, I argue for a re-invocation of multiculturalism as a dialectical encounter. Such an encounter, based on mutual trust and respect, will lead to the equal citizenship necessary to counter the simmering alienation and skepticism that always threaten to undermine any notion of peaceful co-existence between majority and minority groups.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, liberal democracies, Muslim women, accommodationist tradition, equal citizenship

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What Is Right with Multiculturalism?

As a policy, multiculturalism is generally conceptualized as a response to the existence of multiple cultures, ways of being, and various forms of co-existence. More specifically, it is best understood as a particular response to the presence of minority communities and cultures in more developed countries. Perspectives generally stretch across a continuum: from promoting it as a means for peaceful coexistence¹ to critiquing it as standing in contradistinction to the norms of a liberal society and viewing it as a skeptical response to the condition of minority groups.²

In clarifying culture as being a human community larger than a few families that is associated with ongoing ways of seeing, doing, and thinking about things, multiculturalism is understood as referring to the state of a society or the world containing many cultures that interact in some significant way with each other.³ The concept of cultures is a laden one, for it is defined by ethnicity, language, religion, dress, race, and gender, all of which make the understanding thereof not only complex, but also raises questions as to what exactly it means to “interact” with or to recognize multiple cultures and identities. The distinctiveness of multiculturalism is explained through rights of recognition and accommodation of cultural (ethnic) minorities.⁴ The expectation of or demand for recognition is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity. In other words, if an individual’s particular understanding of herself leads her to define her identity in a particular way, then that particular identity has to be recognized.⁵

For example, an observant Jewish man might wear a yarmulke as an expression and respect of his religious beliefs. He might even consider wearing it as integral to how he understands himself in relation to his faith or how he constructs his social and moral space, a space that ultimately constructs his sense of good and bad and of what does and what does not matter.⁶ Of course, while some of us might attach value to a religious identity, others might equally attach no value to it at all. However, who we are and how we construct our identity is essentially shaped by what does or does not matter to us. And what matters to us is, in most instances, informed by a moral space or orientation. On the one hand, therefore, our identity is partly shaped by how we are seen and recognized by others. And on the other hand, it is partly shaped by how we are not seen and recognized by others.

One of multiculturalism’s challenges is to recognize the diversity constituted through multiple expressions of identity, such as wearing a yarmulke, while cultivating the spaces necessary for the expression thereof. Another

one is to manage two simultaneous processes, namely, the interests and expectations as determined by the norms of a majority group versus those of a minority group. Underscoring this particular challenge is the need for each group to both recognize and be willing to interact with the other, for how else can one understand the challenge and tension that might emerge when different groups of majority and minority people pull in opposite directions? While some might not see the necessity or value of such interaction, others might be willing to interact only on their own understanding of what does and does not matter.

It does seem, then, that multiculturalism cannot be left to individual or communal responses, but rather requires public institutional acknowledgment. On the one hand, not all individuals or groups will see the necessity for equal acknowledgment and recognition; on the other hand, even when groups are recognized as different that recognition might be limited to a group difference rather than a recognition of individual differences within the group. The latter concern, in particular, raises questions about the dilution and vanishing of minority cultures. Furthermore, it not only contests multiculturalism's acknowledgment of primary differences, but also dismisses it as "no more than the expression of the formatting of cultures and religions within a common paradigm of the lowest common denominators: a few religious markers, divorced from their context 'made equal' by legal process and established as cultural markers."⁷ Within this understanding, multiculturalism is nothing less than the obliteration of cultural depth and the reduction of differences to mere paraphernalia, like the hijab. It is important, however, to understand this argument as a specific criticism against the formatting or organization of difference with which this concept has come to be associated, rather than as a criticism against the potential accommodation that constitutes it as a particular political response.

In drawing on accommodating the otherness of others, multiculturalism is concerned with "the politics of recognition," "identity politics," and the "politics of difference."⁸ The argument is that in recognizing the differences of others' identities, as expressed through religion, language, or culture, people are accommodated and included and thereby familiarized instead of being left unknown and excluded. Stated differently, the demand for multiculturalism relates to recognizing people's different identities without stigmatizing them and accommodating (including) instead of excluding their differences.⁹ Similarly, while rights to recognition and accommodation for cultural minorities are typically invoked to explain the distinctiveness of multicultural integration, these same rights to recognition are predictably assimilative in their effects.¹⁰

In its association with diversity, difference, and inclusion, integration is not only presented as the “morally preferred” avenue over assimilation for immigrants, but also in terms of its inference of unity. Moreover, its promise of being able to avoid stigmatization makes its uniquely attractive.¹¹ However, understanding integration as a freestanding alternative to assimilation is a misrepresentation, because the integration espoused by liberals offers no protection against cultural hegemony. In turn, hegemony both shapes social understandings and critiques as well as “characterizes a culture in which the understandings of a dominant group or groups not only prevail but also are widely considered to be just because those understandings appear to be the social understandings of that culture.”¹²

To gather momentum here, it might be necessary to distinguish between multiculturalism as a political objective acknowledged by public institutions (i.e., couched in a language of recognition and accommodation) and multiculturalism as a moral objective (i.e., couched in a particular conception of relational acknowledgment that is antithetical to any form of group dominance). In paying attention to the accommodationist tradition, which is described as intuitive and as a natural response to the perceived imbalance between majorities and minorities, the contention is that regardless of differences related to ethnicity, religion, language, ways of dressing, or forms of worship, minorities are fully able to share the common political ideals of majorities.¹³ As such, those nations that adopt the accommodationist tradition find it easier to see how minority groups can become fully equal citizens.

The problem, however, is that this tradition expects the majority group to accommodate the minority group’s differences. The question of whether the latter ought to accommodate the former seemingly does not enter the debate, since the dominant majority group’s belief is implicit in this particular tradition. The minority group, therefore, would not need to accommodate the majority group because the latter’s embedded authority is not up for discussion.

This raises two concerns. One is the majority group’s contained authority, which is seemingly constituted by a collective identity that stands outside the multiculturalist debate and therefore is implicitly understood as the status quo. As such, while it might need to accommodate the minority group, its own state of affairs will remain intact and undisturbed. A related concern is the tacitly unequal majority-minority relationship, for the minority is subject to the majority’s norms and interests. The second concern centers on the presupposition of a single shared or collective cultural understanding, which the nation-state views as critical to preserving the majority group’s culture. While

relying upon a dominant understanding might be risky and dangerous, such a presupposition is a misnomer, for

[t]he danger follows not from our always knowing that a dominant understanding is the standard of a dominant group or groups, but rather from our rarely knowing that it is not and often having reason to think that it is (even if we cannot prove it).¹⁴

From the above discussion, multiculturalism clearly presents particular perspectives on how to manage a diverse society. In the absence of a meaningful dialogue between these two groups, however, these perspectives might not necessarily be capable of addressing the needs presented by ethno-cultural pluralism and, more specifically, the needs of religious minorities, which is the focus of this paper.

Muslims and Multiculturalism in Europe

Within the European context, the Swedish government introduced the concept of multiculturalism to manage the influx of immigrants. Influenced by this approach, the Dutch followed with what they considered a “minority policy.” In its attempts to counter discrimination rather than pay attention to recognizing minority cultures, Britain has historically focused on the notion of “racial equality.” And while some European countries have implemented public policies analogous to multiculturalism, others, like France, have implemented multicultural policies without necessarily understanding them as such.¹⁵

Proponents of multiculturalism argue that given the European Union’s (EU) multicultural populations, the needs of ethno-cultural minorities have to be recognized to ensure that they are not marginalized in modern societies.¹⁶ In focusing specifically on Muslims and multiculturalism in Europe, one has to realize that the contemporary migration of Muslims to Western Europe is decidedly different from that of the nineteenth-century migration of White Christian Eastern Europeans, for this identity helped them assimilate into Western European societies. In contrast, these new immigrants are either Asians or Africans, 40% to 60% of whom are Muslim. The sociopolitical turmoil emanating from the Arab Spring also means that regardless of the possible hostility they will encounter in their new host countries, returning home is not a viable option. In addition, their different culture and religion present particular challenges.¹⁷ Moreover, the complexity of migration needs to be considered in relation to the fact that Europe has no fixed external borders, which gives it an inclusive nature and means that it is continuously reconstituting itself.¹⁸

The shift in these new immigrants' geographical, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, racial, and religious make-up raises distinct challenges for liberal democracies. On the one hand, Europe's borderless and inclusive nature raises questions about identity and what it means to be European. The EU's very existence has given rise to "[s]imultaneous existence of three levels of identity and governance: the transnational or European level, the national or member state sphere and the local–regional context, which includes minorities and immigrant communities."¹⁹ On the other hand, it would appear that despite its inclusive nature to those on the Continent, European societies have been criticized for their ethnic-exclusive character toward non-European immigrants.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that immigrant communities can also be accused of the same lack of cultural sensitivity as regards European society.²⁰ Consequently, managing the diversity of multicultural societies raises particular questions for both groups. For example, the concerns of minority groups might include which elements of the minority group will be accommodated and what will happen to those aspects of its identity (e.g., dress or religious practices) that are not accommodated? Where are these unaccommodated forms of identity supposed to live? What is the minority group prepared to accept and accommodate? To what extent does it want to participate in a collective form of citizenship?

The prevalence of Muslim minority groups in Europe has witnessed two significant shifts in the multiculturalism debates: moving the focus from ethnic to religious minorities, regardless of whether they are immigrants or indigenous Europeans,²¹ and where this concept should be located in the citizenship-civic virtue debate.

Any debate where multiculturalism becomes criticised leads to the citizenship–civic virtue discussion, and any debate where an inclusive citizenship is proposed inevitably discuss multiculturalism. The “citizenship–civic virtue” and “minority rights–multiculturalism” debates are precisely where the rights of the minority over the majority and vice versa are discussed in today's world.²²

Critics such as Bassam Tibi reject the concept of multiculturalism on the basis that it is generally understood as a code word for cultural relativism, which translates into the political, social, and cultural segregation of minorities. Instead, he argues for a Euro-Islamic pluralism.²³ But notions of inclusive citizenship ignore pluralistic identities and ways of being. This was evident in the United Kingdom, for example, where thousands of Anglican, Jewish, and Catholic schools are funded, but Muslims schools (until recently) were

not because it was felt that they would be unable to balance a secular and religious curriculum and that supporting them meant supporting a reactionary religion that would attack the state.²⁴

This prevalence, however, is not the only element that influenced the shift to religious minorities. Another one was the several acts of terrorism, among them those in New York (2001), Madrid (2004), and London (2005), that not only plunged conceptions of multiculturalism into crisis, but also saw Islam become increasingly linked to violence and anti-democracy. As a result, migration agendas became increasing securitized.²⁵ For example, the Netherlands, Britain, and France are moving toward assimilationist approaches to manage what they perceive as failed multiculturalist policies, while Greece, Spain, Italy, and Germany continue to struggle with the first stages of adopting a multicultural approach.²⁶ Although this preoccupation with managing ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity in the public space might not have been introduced by 9/11, the context of the EU's post-9/11 debates reflects the dogmatic and negative tone of the arguments on offer. In questioning identity difference and whether minority groups should even be recognized, multiculturalism's opponents have adopted a strong assimilationist stance.²⁷

If the events following 9/11 and 7/7 caused European countries to reconsider their migration and multiculturalism policies, as well as how to better integrate Muslims (and Islam) into their societies, then the more recent *Charlie Hebdo* events in Paris have unleashed a renewed series of anti-Islamic sentiment. While France's far-right nationalist party leader Marine Le Pen has demanded that immigration from Islamic countries be suspended and that surveillance laws be drastically broadened, anti-Islam movements such as the German-based PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West) have inspired marches in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Austria, and Norway.

Dutch politician Geert Wilders, who compares the Qur'an to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, has called for "de-islamizing" western society, closing the borders, introducing administrative detention, and ending immigration from Islamic countries as ways to protect "our democratic values and fundamental freedoms."²⁸ In the United Kingdom Nigel Farage, leader of the Independence Party since 2010, has repeated his argument that London should address the threat posed by Muslims as a "fifth column." Swiss politician Walter Wobmann, a member of the Swiss People's Party, has called upon Bern to consider banning certain groups of Muslim refugees that pose a threat to national security. In Italy Matteo Salvini, head of the right-wing Northern League, has argued that the Muslims' way of life is "incompatible with ours."²⁹

Further afield, American president-hopeful Piyush “Bobby” Jindal has used claims of Islamic “no-go zones” in Europe, no matter how fictional, to fuel his own warnings of an Islamic “invasion” and “colonization” of the United States. Underscoring the fears of Europe’s Islamization are the calls for all Muslims to “disassociate” themselves from “the attack” and terrorism, as if they all were associated with this specific attack or with terrorism in general.

It is worthwhile to consider how the reactions and responses of liberal democracies fuel the extremists’ various agendas. On the one hand, the fact that all Muslims are expected to apologize for the inhumane acts of a few Muslims feeds into the rising anti-Islamic rhetoric. On the other hand, the already disaffected Muslim youth are the ones most affected by the anti-Islam protests and calls for stricter immigration controls. Their further social marginalization serves the agenda of such groups as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram, whose continued existence depends upon those who might feel socially maligned.

Of course the *Charlie Hebdo* tragedy has raised questions and debates about the delimitation of freedom of speech as well as the lines between hate speech, religious satire, and blasphemy. But it has also refocused attention on two mutually contingent sets of other debates: the role (blame) of multiculturalism and those questions about Islam’s place in Europe as well as the broader social context in which all voices might not have an equal stake.

Repeated calls for Muslims to apologize for atrocities that they have neither committed nor supported highlights, perhaps, what can be considered as a crisis within multiculturalism itself. And this crisis resonates strongly with how liberal democracies have chosen to deal with minority groups from the outset. Above all, it relates to the successful integration and participation of Muslim citizens into European societies,³⁰ which has overwhelmingly depended upon a particular understanding of minority groups, one that constructs them as homogeneous in dress, beliefs, and culture. In the case of Muslims, this would make them inclined toward acts of violence.

Such homogeneous constructions have been shaped by a particular understanding: Minority groups sound and look different and therefore they all have to be the same as regards their difference. By focusing upon the notion of homogeneous communities, multiculturalism has come to be associated with the institutionalization of diversity, which has given rise to its self-proclaimed right to instruct those who cannot claim to know how to live, act, and dress. To this end, multiculturalism’s problem is its failure to recognize the diversity/difference within diversity/difference itself. What this means is that inasmuch as there might be Muslims who believe that suicide bombing or killing cartoonists are religious and virtuous acts, the majority of those who call them-

selves Muslim, including liberals who support any encroachment against Muslims' freedoms, are simply interested in getting on with their lives or seeking better lives in such places as Europe.

The misnomer of a singular or standardized identity creates the impression that “[i]dentities and cultures are discrete, frozen in time, impervious to external influence, homogeneous and without internal dissent; that people of certain family, ethnic or geographical origins are always to be defined by them and indeed are supposed to be behaviourally determined by them.”³¹ Moreover, the idea of a homogeneous identity appears to serve the objective of multiculturalism as a political process, namely, institutionalizing diversity by putting people into ethnic, cultural, and religious boxes. One consequence of this presumption is that this not only discounts the internal differences of ethnicity, gender, culture, class, and religion, but also undermines the potential conflict among them.³²

To summarize, entrenching the notion of homogeneous communities has had disastrous consequences not only in terms of seeing the most conservative or radical figures as the only authentic voices of minority communities, but also in terms of inadvertently serving the agenda of assigning Europe's ills to multiculturalism. In fact, it validates the stance and success of far-right parties and politicians.³³ To this end, one of the major challenges inherent in defending the freedom of speech as espoused through the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons is that secular liberal principles of freedom of religion and speech might not be neutral mechanisms for negotiating religious difference. In other words, they remain partial to certain normative conceptions of religion, language, and injury.³⁴ Within this context, I will now turn my attention to a particular grouping within those voices – Muslim women in Europe.

Muslim Women, Europe, and Islam

What makes Islam so untenable to the modern European nation-state – the obvious visibility of Muslim women in their burqa, niqab, or hijab, or perhaps the regularity with which they pray on a daily basis? Yet the Muslim community's religious practices in Europe seem far more visible only because they started from nothing. In fact, the individual's regular observance of prayers does not appear to be significantly greater than those practiced by other religions. In dismissing a religious revival, the contention is that “[i]t is the relationship between religion and public life that is changing, for religious revival in the public sphere no longer takes on the form of cultural visibility but becomes a display of religious ‘purity,’ or of reconstructed traditions.”³⁵

It would appear that we are witnessing a transformation of religion, one that is in response to deterritorialization and deculturation. The first concept offers an alternative way of looking at territories as free and interconnected assemblages instead of as bounded entities. This means that liberal democracies are not only being constantly transformed due to the physical movement of people from one territory to another, but that deterritorialization itself is found in the transmission of ideas, cultural objects, and modes of consumption in a non-territorial space.³⁶ To right-wing groups, however, transmitting ideas or others ways of being is exactly one of the reasons why they oppose the idea of an EU and its toleration of minority groups. If territories are never fixed and therefore always fluid, communities within these territories can never be static. This raises an important consideration as to how communities are constituted, as well as how majority and minority groups connect as assemblages and how the former supposedly accommodate the latter.

The response of certain liberal democracies (e.g., France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands) reveals that the attempted accommodation of Muslim women, as representatives of Islam, has assumed an exceedingly narrow and regulatory form. By dictating a specific dress code, certain liberal democracies, in response to what is perceived to be the loss of control and order in their territory (deterritorialization), are seeking to maintain an en-framed construction of identity that considers any type of veiling not only as a threatening form of reterritorialization, but also as an illiberal way of being. As a starting point, however, it is worth considering what liberal democracies hope to achieve in this regard.

All of the arguments justifying burqa bans and hijab regulations are inconsistent because they implicitly favor majority practices and encumber minority practices. As such, they are incompatible with the principles of equal liberty and equal respect.³⁷ While Paris has been relatively consistent in attempting to separate church and state by restricting a wide range of religious manifestations, these very restrictions are in themselves unequal and discriminatory.³⁸ Its insistence on a single nation and a single culture has caused the state to pursue a policy of assimilation: “[D]ifferences were to be accepted only if they were not judged to be against the principles of French culture, which are universal.”³⁹

The French school dress code forbids the hijab, yarmulke, and “large” crosses, but the burden is unequal for the first two are religiously obligatory for the observant, whereas a cross of any size is optional.⁴⁰ Two aspects about these bans and regulations are worth pondering, for they were largely put in motion by the *l'affaire du foulard* (the scarf affair) and the later *l'affaire la*

voile (the veil affair). One is the vociferous attention that Muslim women's dress has received from liberal democratic governments, thereby creating the impression that the terror with which Islam has become associated is predominantly located within Muslim women. In other words, because they insist on veiling they must be capable of terrorist acts. The ensuing logic is that if liberal democracies succeed in unveiling and thereby liberating them, the threat of terrorism will have been addressed.

The second point of consideration concerns the questionable treatment of Islam as a religion that is both undemocratic and oppresses women – thereby leaving liberal democracies with the responsibility of emancipating Muslim women from what is their perceived voicelessness. One can even assert that when liberal democracies deem it their right to tell women to unveil when they clearly do not want to, they are doing exactly what they accuse Muslims of doing: oppressing women. It therefore stands to reason that oppression assumes many guises and tends to exist, regardless of whether the perpetrator thereof recognizes it as such.

Perceptions or experiences of oppression also yield unpredictable responses. Consider the example of the twenty-three French Muslim girls who were excluded from their schools in November 1996. If they had been asked why they persisted in wearing their headscarves, it would have become apparent that the meaning of wearing this item of clothing was changing from being a religious act to one of cultural defiance and increasing politicization.

Ironically, it was the very egalitarian norms of the French public educational system which brought these girls out of the patriarchal structures of the home and into the French public sphere, and gave them the confidence and the ability to resignify the wearing of the scarf.⁴¹

It would seem that in not approaching Muslim women's dress code as an act of religious conscience, but as a potential political threat that needs to be regulated, has indeed led to the politicization of Islamic identity and dress.⁴²

At this stage it might be necessary to clarify that while some women wear such attire purely as a religious injunction, others might do so for cultural reasons or to make a political statement. To this end, some might argue that the problem with Islam is not with Islam as a religion or a belief system, but with Islam as a politicized belief system. In my opinion, however, religions are always political. At a conceptual, pragmatic, and historical level, Islamic practices have always been political. For example, the various jurisprudential categories, as espoused through the four mainstream Sunni schools of thought, have primarily been affected by the political. It is my understanding that one

cannot dichotomize between Islam as a belief system and Islam as a political system, which means that speaking about a politicized Islam as opposed to a non-politicized Islam is akin to arguing that Islam is separate from people's Weltanschauung (worldview). The argument, therefore, that liberal democracies try to regulate the Muslim dress code in order to depoliticize Islam does not stand to reason, for a depoliticized Islam does not exist.

So if political Islam cannot be depoliticized, then what is provoking these banning and regulation agendas? One feasible answer resides in the representation of Islam as intolerant, violent, and intent on terrorism. It is easy to validate this representation by drawing on terrorist atrocities ranging from the series of suicide bombings in London, the killing of serving soldier Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich, and the cowardly attack on Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai to the attack on *Charlie Hebdo* and the ongoing horrors committed by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Common to these atrocities is not just the acts of terror themselves, but the perpetuation of a particular language of fear.⁴³ This fear typically starts from a real problem – the killing of 14 people in France during 2012, for example, was just as real as the attacks in Belgium. People had a reason to fear for their lives and be anxious about their economic security. Fear, however, is easily displaced onto something that may have little to do with the underlying problem. In fact, it often serves as a surrogate for the disliked target. Consider the assumed linkage of the murder of seventy-seven Norwegians to Islamic extremists until it became evident that the right-wing terrorist Anders Behring Breivik was guilty. But even after this became known, such media giants as CNN and Fox continued to speak about “jihad.”⁴⁴ At other times fear presents fiction as fact, as became evident when an American “terrorism expert” depicted Birmingham as a “no-go zone” for non-Muslims.

Fear is held to be sustained by the notion of a disguised enemy. As a result, the idea of a woman covering her face by wearing a burqa has taken on a huge symbolic significance in current debates over Islam's role in Europe.⁴⁵ When fear becomes the dominant basis of a response, the inevitable outcome is to exclude, marginalize, and vilify. The more it enters the discourse, the more the inclination to get to know and understand declines; the more that which is unfamiliar is kept at bay, the easier it becomes to stoke the fear. And so France, Belgium, and Italy have banned the burqa and the niqab, despite the fact that only a small minority in these countries actually wear them.

Kosovo, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Belgium have imposed restrictions on wearing the hijab in schools and other public spaces. In Switzerland, where only four of the 150 mosques actually have a minaret, a referen-

dum was passed to ban the construction of any minarets associated with mosques. But fear does not only lead to the vilification and exclusion of minority groups; it also perpetuates skepticism toward multiculturalism, as was vividly evident in right-wing and liberal European society's response to the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*. If one accepts fear as a legitimate encumbrance on multiculturalism, then it can be shown to trouble and disrupt co-existence and move those multicultural communities, which might previously have lived together in harmony, toward suspicion.

Finally, one needs to consider why liberal democracies, which are in principle committed to equal representation, have chosen to focus their agendas related to integration, participation, and democratization upon Muslim women instead of Muslim men. First, while the predominant demand for recognition in multicultural contexts is that of cultural identity, the questions of whether, to what degree, and with what meaning one wants to be recognized as a woman is itself a matter of deep contention.⁴⁶ The (mis)recognition of women is problematic partly because there is no clear or clearly desirable separate cultural heritage by which to redefine and reinterpret what it means to have an identity as a woman. The failure to recognize them as individuals who have ideas, talents, skills, and values of their own has meant that

[t]he predominant problem for women as women is not that the larger or more powerful sector of the community fails to notice or be interested in preserving women's gendered identity, but that this identity is put to the service of oppression and exploitation.⁴⁷

Second, targeting Muslim women and specifically their dress code is significant. On one level this approach reveals a perplexing fixation on that which is visible, commonly understood by liberal democracies as a visible oppression, with little consideration of why she chooses to express her identity in a particular manner. On another level it conflates issues of gender with issues of culture and religion, thereby making the same mistake when dealing with minority groups, namely, ignoring the myriad of differences that exist within each of these categories.

Thus far, I have argued that the challenges facing multiculturalism in Europe exceed mere tensions between notions of assimilation and accommodation. Both the shift in focus from ethnic to religious minorities, as well as the location of multiculturalism within the citizenship-civic virtue debate, have been aggravated by the perceived anti-democracy threat of Islam. In response, liberal democracies that might previously have recognized the need

to not marginalize ethno-cultural minorities are now looking at the increasing securitization of their migration agendas and adopting strong assimilationist approaches.

One such approach is the enforced unveiling of Muslim women in the public sphere. In their efforts to “emancipate” them from an oppressive Islam and move them into a European democracy, liberal societies have yet again ignored the necessity and importance of dialogue and a willingness to engage in a majority-minority interaction. Has anyone asked Muslim women living in liberal democracies whether they would like to remove their hijab or niqab? Does it matter if those who wear these items actually do not wish to remove them? Who decided that the emancipation of women is directly correlated to not wearing a veil? Can one argue that those who do not wear such attire are in fact emancipated? And will their perceived emancipation lead to a better co-existence between majority and minority groups?

Re-invoking Multiculturalism as a Dialectical Encounter

If who we are and how we construct our identity is partly shaped by how we are seen and recognized by others, it follows that our identity is created dialogically in response to our relations.⁴⁸ And if “[h]uman identity is dialogically created and constituted, then public recognition of our identity requires a politics that leaves room for us to deliberate publicly about those aspects of our identities that we share [...]”⁴⁹ Thus inasmuch as the majority groups of liberal democracies need to engage in dialogue with such minority groups as Muslim women, minority groups need to be willing to engage with their host societies. In addition, another particular awareness is required: Muslim women, like any other group within a minority group, do not enter society only as individuals but from and within particular social, religious, political, and gender structures that cannot be excluded. This means that such a dialogue between Muslim women, in their capacity as constituents of Islam and multiculturalism in liberal democracies, can only be meaningful if it is considered a “constant dialectical and dynamic movement between the sources and the environment, whose aim is to find a way of living harmoniously.”⁵⁰

A dialectical encounter must create the space within which both groups can meet as they are and as they want to be, not how one expects the other to be, act, or dress. This type of encounter is decidedly different from such proposals as Euro-Islam, which requires Europeans to “de-ethnicize the notion of citizen” and Muslims to “abandon their supremacist attitudes based on phased out doctrines” so that a “citizenship of the heart” may be attained.⁵¹

Muslim identity, like that of Muslim women, is not closed and confined within rigid and inflexible principles.⁵² It would therefore be quite problematic to determine “supremacist attitudes” and those that might be based on “phased out doctrines.”

In fact, a common argument used against their attire is that it hinders the idea of Muslim women’s emancipation because it is based on “phased out doctrines” of female oppression. Yet many modern educated women who live in liberal societies choose to wear such attire precisely because it emancipates them from what they perceive to be the over-sexualization of women. To this end, wearing the hijab can be understood in relation to three dimensions: visual (to obscure from sight), spatial (to separate), and ethical (to retain one’s modesty). Therefore, reducing or assimilating this particular dress code “[t]o a scrap of cloth that men have imposed on women to veil them when they go into the street is truly to impoverish this term, not to say to drain it of its meaning.”⁵³

For Muslims, faith can only be based on an understanding of the texts (the Qur’an and Sunnah) and the context in which they live. This means that they have to acquire an understanding of both in order to remain faithful to Islam’s injunctions. While radicals could make a similar claim, one needs to be reminded that the large majority of Muslims, like the large majority of all people, do not violate the faiths of others. In following the argument that faith is based on understanding, any understanding would necessarily have to be informed by the knowledge of something – in this case knowledge of why Muslim women choose to veil. The Qur’an is replete with verses telling human beings to use their intelligence and knowledge. Muslims are reminded that they should use these abilities when determining what is good and bad, regardless of the context in which they find themselves.⁵⁴ What follows from this is that while faith is based on knowledge, choice is based on freedom.

The freedom for Muslim women to veil is just as much a choice as is the freedom for Muslims to violate their own faith and those of others. On the one hand, then, these women have to make certain choices for themselves, such as how they dress and engage with others. And on the other hand, Muslims are responsible for enacting their faith in a way that will best evoke its tenets of justice, peace, deliberation, and consultation – all of which are antithetical to any forms of violence and oppression. Fulfilling this responsibility entails acknowledging that Islam, as revealed through the primary sources, comprises a “context of engagement with human needs in specific time, which, in turn, opens up the appropriation of the ‘meaning’ intended into every paradigm of meaning.”⁵⁵ A Muslim’s identity, therefore, is neither frozen nor definitively relegated to a seventh-century milieu. Moreover, Mus-

lim women do not need to be emancipated by the modern nation-state from their religious conscience because their emancipation is already reflected in their freedom to choose how they wish to enact their Islamic identity.

If liberal democracies are intent upon realizing their multiculturalism policies, which are based on a “politics of difference” and an “accommodation of cultural (ethnic) minorities,” then they should draw on Islam’s plurality, specifically on this plurality as expressed through Muslim women. Inasmuch as these women engage in a dialectical encounter with the context in which they find themselves, multiculturalism’s commitment to acknowledging all differences can itself be an opportunity of dialectical encounter.

But to do so, it needs to understand the primary goods of people from the perspectives of minority individuals and not from the political limits of a majority group. Banning and regulating a specific dress code not only undermines its adherents’ capacity to freely choose to observe it, but also brings into contestation particular understandings of democracy and its related virtue of freedom of expression. These same virtues are being espoused to support the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons and to expel Muslims from Europe.

So what should liberal democracies be doing in order to (re)invoke a dialogue with Muslim women and a dialectical encounter with Muslims in general? What shape should multiculturalism policies take so that the voice of one group might engage with that of the other for the purposes of co-existence, rather than assimilation or mere toleration? While toleration is an essential and necessary democratic virtue, it is not enough for mutual respect,⁵⁶ which is critical to a democratic society because it expresses the equal understanding of each person as an individual and a citizen. As such, it enables citizens to discuss their differences and helps them resolve disagreements.⁵⁷ To this end, mutual trust is both defined by consensus and should cultivate spaces of and for dissensus, since the individual can be who she needs to be, without fear or regulation from the other, within the dialectic of dissensus.

Notions of dissensus between what might constitute universal human rights claims (e.g., freedom of expression) and notions of particularistic claims (e.g., wearing the veil as a symbol of modesty) are constitutive of democratic legitimacy.⁵⁸ Therefore, the version of multiculturalism to which I am appealing first recognizes the heterogeneity of communities (e.g., religious and cultural particularities have to be understood in relation to the individual’s self-understanding of that particular religion or culture). Second, any recognition of equal citizenship cannot be enacted in the best interests of the majority because equal citizenship means taking into account the primary good of both groups, which means mutual accommodation. Third, if human identity is dialogically constituted, then marginalizing minorities by

regulating their attire is antithetical to the public deliberative context that is necessary for a democratic society.

In its treatment of the Muslim “Other,” Europe is once more experiencing an Enlightenment dialectic that it first encountered with the experience of Jewish modernity in the nation-state.⁵⁹ The challenge for multiculturalism, therefore, is to recognize both the difference and that this difference is exactly what constitutes multiculturalism. Given that Europe in itself is not homogeneous, liberal democracies are responsible for keeping multicultural aspirations intact, including those of veiled women. To continue along a trajectory of banning and regulating not only undermines free action and thought, but also raises concerns of the (re)emergence of an exclusivity that has tainted Europe before and simmers under the guise of anti-multiculturalism protests. And if familiarity is what seems to drive modern Europe’s understanding of multiculturalism, then it should be well-versed in the inhumanity that can evolve from the steady steps of exclusion.

In recognizing difference as difference, rather than searching for ways of accommodation, multiculturalism has the opportunity to cultivate new types of communities – communities that come into existence because of differences and offer alternative ways of connecting and co-belonging as assemblages of people. Instead of regulating such communities through unequal notions of accommodation, multiculturalism should move away from collective communities of belonging and toward singular communities of co-belonging. Although communities, like citizenship, are not contained or closed, they do have to be constrained. This means that while all people from minority groups have to be able to see and live their singularities within different types of communities, acts of oppression and violation can never be tolerated. Minority groups, just like their majority counterparts, should have the right to bring their singular identities to the public arena without a language of fear, whether that fear exists in social marginalization or in personal security.

To this end, it ought to be possible for all people from each group to co-belong to communities of faith, culture, language, or nationality. It has become evident that multiculturalism “cannot capture the complexities of creating a culture in which those who are not at home can nonetheless find a home; a culture in which those who feel their otherness can nonetheless create a new vocabulary such as to extend the limits of our imagination by making us aware of the multiplicity within each of us.”⁶⁰ To my mind, only when multiculturalism begin to approach difference as an enhancement of co-existence will Muslims begin to move toward conceptions of equal citizenship and equal dignity not only as ethical concepts, but also as visible and lived experiences in a free, just, and re-imagined society.

Conclusion

In this article, I have raised concerns about the regulatory response of liberal democracies to Muslim women's dress code. I have argued that (1) these regulatory responses are distinctly exclusionary, misinformed, and marginalize minority communities and that (2) such prescriptions render liberal democracies guilty of seeking to expunge themselves of their multicultural baggage. They are also guilty of pursuing a particular orientation of integrationism that negates the moral constituency of what it ought to mean to acknowledge and recognize the self-understandings of religious and cultural particularities.

In contesting the homogenization of minority communities and in appealing for peaceful co-existence, I have argued for a reinvocation of multiculturalism as a dialectical encounter. As such, I have maintained that a dialectical encounter, one that seeks harmony between understandings of faith (in this case Islam) and the environment or context, has to be committed to acknowledging differences within difference. This means that the primary goods of people, such as Muslim women who choose to veil, must be understood from the perspective of Muslim women as opposed to that of the oft-disconnected vantage point of political will. By treating all minority communities or groups as a singular group of difference, multiculturalism deprives itself of any potential dialectical encounter with the otherness of others. This ultimately sets in motion practices of alienation that both undermine and threaten peaceful co-existence and regard.

Endnotes

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