

# Modesty, Faith, and Burqa Bans

In America, talk about dress codes usually revolves around miniskirts, half shirts, and what sayings and gestures cross the line of appropriate for printed t-shirts in public spaces. Yet this issue could soon evolve into discussions of when dress in the name of modesty and religious observance also goes too far.

This thought came to me while taking a train through the snow-covered mountains of Southern Germany recently. Across the center aisle sat two couples of Arabic descent. One woman wore a traditional scarf, or hijab, over her hair and neck; the other was completely covered in a black burqa except for her eyes.

During the hour long train ride, my one-year-old son squirmed on my lap and my four older children chatted and periodically complained of boredom. Our neighbors mostly kept to themselves and kindly ignored our rather noisy crew. But when my son got really restless and began fretting, the uncovered woman peeked over and began the typical face-making and peek-a-boo type motions that women the world-round, apparently, instinctively do when trying to engage and entertain fussy babies. I experienced that common feeling of relief and kinship with this stranger, who was showing me that, rather than being bothered by the disturbance, she was on my side, and understood the gnawing stress of trying to keep a toddler still and quiet while traveling.

I looked closer at the figure next to her and could see from the set of her eyes that that woman was smiling too. That woman buried under a blanket of black had the same instincts, the same desire for connection, to alleviate the boredom of tiny members of the human race and help a fellow woman with

her hands full. Sadly, of course, she really couldn't participate because she was almost entirely obscured from view.

That's not modesty, I thought, that's eradication.

Opponents of burqa bans argue that such laws are an assault on women's fundamental freedom to decide what to wear and how to worship. A woman's decision to cover herself harms no one else, and therefore isn't a legitimate state interest.

Those are compelling arguments for anyone who appreciates the concepts of limited government and personal freedoms. These are the arguments I've made myself when grappling with this difficult issue. Yet as such full covering becomes more commonplace around me in Germany, the other side of the issue—and the very real harm caused by the presence of burqas and fully covered women—becomes clear.

Women cannot participate as equals in the public space when entirely disguised, when their ability to show emotion and communicate is so intentionally handicapped. The message their presence sends is that they are meant not to be noticed and aren't supposed to interact with others. And I increasingly ask myself how voluntary this all really can be.

My children have seen enough fully-covered women that they didn't ask why she was dressed that way. They know it has to do with religious beliefs and that the person underneath is just like anyone else. They just looked past her, as if she wasn't there, which I suppose is really the point.

The difference between covering one's hair and fully covering one's face may seem like an arbitrary distinction, but it's not. One can cover their hair and neck for the sake of modesty, while still being able to participate in conversation, display emotion, and connect with others. That's just not the case with the burqa.

I had no reason to think the covered woman on the train was forced by her husband to cover herself. I also know that the women who are pressured into covering may be made worse off by rules that prevent the use of burqas; they may end up confined to their homes rather than being allowed to go out while covered.

Yet a society that countenances the full covering of women isn't one that accepts women as equals.

Newcomers to the West ought to be free to practice their religion and bring traditions with them. Yet surely if an influx of migrants came from a society where one particular minority group or homosexuals were expected to wear a particular dress meant to identify them and constrict their ability to interact, I think we'd recognize this as bigotry of which we'd want no part. We should take women's humanity just as seriously. We must expect migrants to embrace a full and complete acceptance of our understanding of basic human rights. This has to include that women are to be treated as full participants in public life, and that simply isn't possible when they are hidden from view.

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