

When Religious Freedom and Gender Equality Collide

What happens when religious freedom affronts feminist sensibility? The question came to the fore earlier this month when female teachers at a high school in Germany boycotted the school's graduation ceremony in protest at the refusal of a male Muslim student to shake hands with a female teacher on the grounds of modesty. Although the teenage student made it clear that he was not refusing the handshake out of any feeling of disrespect for the teacher, citing "religious reasons" for his unwillingness to do so, the teacher was outraged or offended, or both, and joined with other teachers in demanding that the student be barred from attending the school's graduation ceremony.

The incident at the Kurt Tucholsky high school in Hamburg has stoked up the ongoing debate and controversy on the topic of whether Muslim students should be forced to shake hands with those of the opposite sex.

Explaining why several teachers chose to boycott the graduation ceremony in protest at the head teacher's refusal to accede to their demands that the boy be excluded, one of the teachers wrote that she and others would not participate in this event "and allow an extremist to use it for misogynist religious propaganda with the approval of the school management."

While opinion was divided in Germany over the student's refusal to shake hands with his teacher, there appeared to be little sympathy for the teachers' boycott of the graduation ceremony. "It also punished the other students who had been looking forward to celebrating finishing school with all their teachers," wrote a journalist in *Spiegel* magazine. "And did it help?"

The journalist went on to praise the head teacher of the school for her handling of the situation: "She took her Muslim students seriously. She did not try to bend them to fit in with a supposedly German way of doing things. She understands that respect is not coupled to a handshake and that not everyone who doesn't want to shake hands is a misogynist extremist."

A month earlier, Muslim parents withdrew their child from a school in Berlin after a teacher terminated a parents' meeting because the father refused to shake hands with her.

What is one to make of such situations? Could something similar happen at schools in the United States? If so, whose side should we be on? Where should we stand when a student's sense of religious freedom clashes with a teacher's sense of sexual equality? Should a student's freedom of conscience take precedence over a teacher's rights?

These are not only good questions, and difficult questions, they are questions that go to the very heart of multiculturalism. There is, however, a great difference between the ability to ask such questions and the ability to answer them. If such questions cannot be answered we are in for a turbulent time as the multicultural melting pot comes to a boil. If we cannot find answers we might begin to see the melting of the melting pot, a multicultural meltdown that could threaten the very fabric of our society.

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[IMAGE CREDIT: Pixabay]