



A Muslim and Jewish Perspective: “Burqa bans” and the Road to True Equity in European Society

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Switzerland held three referenda in March 2021: one was a vote on whether to ban full facial coverings, one on whether to establish a Federal Commission to oversee issuance of a nationwide electronic ID to residents, and a third in opposition to a 2018 European Free Trade Association concluded with Indonesia. Yet it is only the first referendum – in favor of a so-called “Burqa ban” – which has caused waves across Europe and well beyond. By a margin of 51.2% to 48.8%, the Swiss people sent a message considered by many to be the latest chapter in the European tale of scapegoating Muslims for the continent’s challenges.

Anna Stamou (a Greek woman who began wearing a headscarf after converting to Islam) and Rabbi Lody van de Kamp (Netherlands) are both members of the European Muslim Jewish Leadership Council (MJLC). They share the perspective that the so-called burqa ban is the latest signal from Europe that religious communities are free to *believe* what they want, but the freedom to act in accordance with those beliefs is not so freely given. Citing as examples struggles to build publicly funded mosques, or introduce Islamic school curricula in Greece, or the near two-dozen countries that have banned ritual animal slaughter across Europe, Stamou and van de Kamp believe that there is a growing body of evidence that the gap is widening between guarantees of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, stated in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the practice of religious freedom across Europe.

Two tiers of Muslim citizens are emerging, says Stamou: those who are happy to accept crumbs of tolerance from policymakers and those who demand true equity in society. In Greece, Stamou says, “They [the Greek government] rely on the compliance of an older Muslim generation, that says, *I will take whatever you give me*. But if we want to work for equal society, we [Muslims] have to be proud of ourselves, to be proud to practice our religion. We are not asking for luxury, we are asking for dignity. And equality.”

Rabbi Lody agrees that there are indeed separate tracks of identity emerging within an increasingly secular Europe. As the influence of the Church and religion has subsided, so the lines of identity have blurred. What does it mean to be a citizen of Europe and how does national identity reconcile itself with religion? “When an immigrant lands at the airport in Amsterdam, it doesn’t work to give him [or her] a blonde wig and blue eyes, and say: Now you’re Dutch,” says the Rabbi.

While it’s difficult to pinpoint exactly how many Muslim women wear a burqa in Europe, the 2011 burqa ban in France was said to affect 0.04% of the French Muslim population, and less than 0.003% of the general population of France. A decade later, it is likely that the percentages remain similarly negligible in Switzerland, and across Europe.

But, Stamou and van de Kamp agree, that is how oppression starts. What begins as voters agreeing to a “harmless” concession that affects “just a handful” of people, can gradually build into greater commitment to even more oppressive outcomes. “The problem is that if we allow this, the next [suppression of our religious expression] will come,” says Stamou. For the Rabbi, the attempt to frame the proposed ban in Switzerland as a security measure against anarchic protesters is disingenuous. “It clearly hits the Muslim community,” he says.

The danger of measures like a face covering ban that disproportionately affects one community is the effect it will have on a young generation already so disillusioned by institutions like government and media, says Stamou.

Rabbi Lody has always held the belief that shining a spotlight on injustice is the best way to counter it. Stamou agrees. Her advice to Muslim women across Europe who are impacted by bans on face coverings: “Rethink and regroup. Keep the Islamic principles without betraying what you believe in.” She sees the struggle for religious freedom as one that cannot be fought quietly, or fought alone. “We have to make some waves. And be active. But we cannot do it alone. It cannot be just Muslims that demonstrate against this injustice. We need solidarity.”

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