STEREOTYPES THAT DEFINE "US":
THE CASE OF MUSLIM WOMEN

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ABSTRACT. In Western political rhetoric the veil has become the epitome
of oppression of Muslim women. Several countries have gone so far as to pro-
hibit different articles of clothing associated with Islam. This article argues
that these regulations are based on two flawed assumptions about Islam
and Muslim women in particular. They assume, firstly, that these women
are forced to wear Muslim religious clothing and thus need to be saved and,
secondly, that these practices conflict with some predefined understanding
of "Western values". In light of these images, this article calls for a more
nuanced understanding of these practices and emphasizes the need to let the
subaltern speak for themselves.

*Key words: stereotypes, Muslim women, hijab, burqa, regulation of religious
practices, politics of identity.*

In the last decade, discussions about the necessity of regulating, as well as
actually regulating, traditions associated with Islam have become widespread
in Western European countries. Examples can be drawn from several places:
- in Belgium, wearing clothing covering one's face in public was unani-
  mously banned in 2010, citing security reasons;[1]
- in Germany, 8 out of 16 states introduced restrictions from 2004 on wear-
  ing religiously meaningful symbols and clothing, while several of them
  (e.g. Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg) make exceptions for "Christian-
  Western" clothing and symbols (including nuns' habits);[2]
- in France, wearing visible religious symbols (including Islamic head-
  scarves and "large Christian crosses") was banned in state schools in 2004,
  officially for reasons of safeguarding and implementing French secularism
  (*laïcité*);[3]

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[1] **Belgian lawmakers pass burka ban.** BBC. 30.04.2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/
8652861.stm>, (15.05.2011).

[2] **Human Rights Watch.** 2009. Discrimination in the Name of Neutrality. <http://www.hrw.
org/en/node/80829>, (17.05.2011). Here section IV.

[3] **French headscarf ban opens rifts.** BBC. 11.02.2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/
europe/3478895.stm>, (15.05.2011).

- again in France, a law banning clothing items covering the face and body (i.e., niqabs and burqas[4]) from schools, hospitals and public transport took effect in 2011, with punishments directed towards both women who do wear the banned clothing and men who (presumably) have forced them into doing so.[5]

The list goes on, indicating pan-European concern about Islamic dress. But state regulation of Islamic symbols has not been limited to clothing: in 2009 building new minarets was prohibited in Switzerland (until then a total of four minarets existed in Switzerland), accompanied by a large-scale campaign centred around an image of the country bristling with symbolically rocket-shaped minarets.[6]

With these regulations in mind, it is necessary to ask: what kind of picture is painted of Islam in the "West"?[7] How accurate are these images? More specifically: how are Muslim women depicted in the West? Do these images correspond to reality? What do these images tell us about the West itself? This paper tries to provide some preliminary answers to these multifaceted questions by problematizing two of the basic assumptions that underpin this rhetoric of prohibition: one being patriarchal and the other being cultural.

In general, Islam seems to be associated with several fears, ideas and stereotypes in the eyes of Westerners. Hirchkind and Mahmood have cited as examples:

> women wearing headscarves (now, *burqas*), the cutting off of hands and heads, massive crowds praying in unison, the imposition of a normative public morality grounded in a puritanical and legalistic interpretation of religious texts, a rejection and hatred of the West and its globalized culture, the desire

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[4] The niqab is an article of clothing that covers the mouth and nose (most often worn together with a jilbab); it is most popular in the countries of the Persian Gulf. The burqa refers commonly to an article of clothing that covers the whole body, leaving only an embroidered grill in front of the wearer's eyes to see through (it is mostly associated with the Afghan chadri). The hijab refers in the European context to a scarf covering the head (thus leaving the face untouched) and comes in all kinds of colors; depending on the region it may be black (e.g., in Iran), bright (e.g., in Malaysia) or patterned (e.g., in Turkey). The articles of clothing worn by a particular person depend mostly on the tradition of Islam that is followed. See **Sara Silvestri.** 2010. Europe's Muslims: burqa laws, women's lives. – OpenDemocracy. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/sara-silvestri/french-burqa-and-%E2%80%9Cmuslim-integration%E2%80%9D-in-europe>, (05.05.2011).

[5] **French Senate votes to ban Islamic full veil in public.** BBC. 14.09.2010. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11305033>, (15.05.2011).

[6] **Swiss voters back ban on minarets.** BBC. 29.11.2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8385069.stm>, (15.05.2011).

[7] In the context of this paper, words like the "West" and "Western" belong in quotation marks, emphasizing the problematic nature of these kinds of labels. Some of these problems are discussed at length below.

to put aside history and return to a pristine past, and the quick recourse to violence against those who are different.[8]

The prevalence of such mental images is also demonstrated by media analyses[9] and surveys conducted in various Western European countries.[10] These reports indicate a widespread negative attitude towards people of Muslim faith, especially when it comes to locals (i.e., Muslims living in Western Europe). Such images have a very long history,[11] but these attitudes resurfaced after the events of 9/11 that have become the central symbol of Islamic fundamentalism.

A veiled Muslim woman has long been used as the epitome of the oppression and patriarchy of the Islamic world. This image has run through the media and politics as well as arts and literature. Although the burqa covering the whole body is rare even in most Muslim countries (an estimated 90% of Islamic women *do not* wear a burqa[12]), and especially so in Western European countries (about less than 2000 women wear a niqab in France[13] and an estimated 30 wear a burqa in Belgium[14]), one can rest assured that an article or news coverage touching upon Muslim topics in the European media is accompanied by a picture of a veiled woman. At the same time it is

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[8]   **Charles Hirschkind; Saba Mahmood.** Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency. – Anthropological Quarterly, 2/2002, pp. 339–354. Here p. 348. Italics in original.

[9]   E.g. **Laura Navarro.** Islamophobia and Sexism: Muslim Women in the Western Mass Media. – Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge, 2/2010, pp. 95–114.

[10]   For example, a survey conducted by Münster University, covering Germany, France, Denmark, the Netherlands and Portugal, found that about 80% of respondents thought that Islam in general discriminates against women, about 70% drew a direct link between Islam and fanaticism and about 60% between Islam and violence. See **Detlef Pollack.** 2010. Studie "Wahrnehmung und Akzeptanz religiöser Vielfalt". <http://www.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/religion_und_politik/aktuelles/2010/12_2010/studie_wahrnehmung_und_akzeptanz_religioeser_vielfalt.pdf>, (05.05.2011).

[11]   See **Edward W. Said**. Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2003[1978]. **Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**. Can the Subaltern Speak? – Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader. Eds. Patrick Williams, Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, pp. 66–111. For Western images of Muslim women throughout history see **Leila Ahmed**. Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, pp. 144–168. For a background on the French law of 2004 see Navarro 2010, pp. 107–109.

[12]   **Leila Ahmed**. 2006. Muslim Women and Other Misunderstandings. An interview with Leila Ahmed. <http://download.publicradio.org/podcast/speakingoffaith/20061207_muslim-women.mp3>, (26.11.2010).

[13]   French Senate votes... 2010. According to different sources there are about 3.7 – 5 million Muslims living in France, being therefore the largest Muslim community in Europe. The niqab or burqa is worn by about 0.04–0.05 percent of them. The proportion of these Muslims that are even religious is not known.

[14]   **Belgian lawmakers**... 2010.

generally assumed that she is forced into wearing it, that she is humiliated by wearing it and has no choice to do otherwise.

In this context, this article argues that Western discourse about the Islamic veil (or other Muslim symbols) is actually hardly about clothing at all. It is rather a political and identitarian question, not a discourse directed against certain types of religious dogma or a "clash of civilizations". The question of the veil thus attests to the changing role of religion in contemporary societies:

> religious debates and conflicts are no longer primarily waged over matters of belief, the true god, salvation, or other substantive issues of faith, as they once were; it is instead religion as the basis of identity and identitarian cultural practices – with co-religionists constituting a community, nation, or "civilization" – that comes to be the ground of difference and thus conflict.[15]

The question of burqas and headscarves is thus distinctly political, exemplifying the attempts to (re)construct identity and safeguard its boundaries by constituting a feared or even demonized "Other".

The aforementioned bans and regulations contain two central assumptions, one emphasizing the patriarchal and the other the cultural dimension that will come under discussion below. Firstly, if women wearing Islamic garments had a choice they would not wear a headscarf, niqab, burqa or any such clothing. That is to say, it is assumed that these women are oppressed or even enslaved and need to be saved or forcibly emancipated. Secondly, the continued toleration of Islamic symbols has a negative effect on "European" (or, more generally, "Western") culture and values (e.g., secularism, nation-state, etc.). In other words, it is assumed that Islam in itself is incompatible with some kind of coherent understanding of "being Western".

The emancipation of Muslim women

The goal of the emancipation of women has been used in political rhetoric for both justifying the prohibition of Islamic dress[16] and starting the war in Afghanistan in 2001[17]. This kind of discourse, however, ignores at least three interconnected aspects of Islamic dress and the women wearing it. Firstly, these women are discursively deprived of their free will. Secondly, the context and history that give meaning to the practices under discussion are ignored. Thirdly, a black-and-white contrast between the situations of women from

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[15] **Rajeswari Sunder Rajan; Anuradha Dingwaney Needham** (eds.). The Crisis of Secularism in India. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 2–3.

[16] E.g., **Sarkozy speaks out against burka.** BBC. 22.06.2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8112821.stm>, (15.05.2011).

[17] E.g., **Laura Bush.** 2001. Radio Address by Mrs. Bush. 17.11.2001. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>, (29.11.2010).

Western countries and women from Islamic traditions emerges, making one look free and the other in bondage. In the following text these images will be examined further.

The question of whether Muslim women need to be "saved" from the burqa and other Islamic clothing items is closely related to the everlasting structure-versus-agency debate. Is it social structure (i.e., societal norms, values, expectations) that coerces Muslim women to wear such clothing against their will? Or is it their free choice? As always, the social world does not follow any binary rules. Instead, the real situation is always dialectical and interdependent: nothing is the mere result of the structure and nothing is absolutely open to free will.[18] In other words, the subject is inevitably constrained by the social milieu and yet always has some freedom of action to change his or her environment. In this context, there can be no distinction between one's "true" desires as opposed to societal pressures – the two are inseparable.

Several social scientists who have studied and/or themselves grown up in Islamic communities have argued that wearing a headscarf should not be directly taken as a lack of free will,[19] as is usually done by Western discourses that portray Muslim women as passive and oppressed. According to Saba Mahmood in her ethnography on the grassroots women's piety movement in the mosques of Cairo in Egypt, most women make the decision to wear a headscarf (or other such items of clothing) independently and "freely" (i.e., as freely as one can make decisions in the context of a societal structure) as a sign of their piety, modesty and morality.[20] For the women who participated in Mahmood's study, the practice of veiling oneself was inseparable from their desire to live piously and virtuously, and the different versions of the Islamic dress were seen as instruments that help to achieve that. The veil can therefore be a symbol of opportunity and freedom, rather than one of oppression and powerlessness.

The same is confirmed by Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnography of a Bedouin community in Egypt where the practice of veiling is seen as "a voluntary act by women who are deeply committed to being moral and have a sense of

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[18]   For some theoretical background see **Peter L. Berger; Thomas Luckmann**. The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. New York: Anchor Books, 1967. Pierre Bourdieu. The Logic of Practice. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

[19]   **Lila Abu-Lughod**. 2006. The Muslim woman: The power of images and the danger of pity. – Eurozine. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-09-01-abulughod-en.html>, (01.05.2011). **Ahmed** 2006. **Saba Mahmood.** Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

[20]   **Mahmood** 2005, ch. 5. This kind of piety and modesty in everyday practices is called hijab (meaning literally a curtain or a cover) in Arabic. This applies to both men and women. In the West, however, this word is commonly defined very narrowly, referring distinctly to the women's head garment.

honour tied to family"[21]. Also, women themselves choose when and for whom they veil and for whom they do not[22] – it is, thus, not a strictly regulated practice but rather a way of showing respect and modesty depending on the social context. To complicate the common view even more, the practice of wearing Islamic modest dress can even be seen as "a sign of educated urban sophistication, a sort of modernity"[23], as opposed to being one of traditionalism and lack of good education. Although these examples are drawn from Egypt, they do demonstrate the manifold meanings that different religious items of clothing can convey. Tying these practices unequivocally with passivity and coercion is therefore rather arbitrary.

Examples of studies giving a voice to Muslim women themselves are rather scarce in Western Europe. One very telling exception, however, is a study conducted by the Open Society Foundations in France where 32 women wearing full-face veils (i.e., niqabs) were given the opportunity to speak openly about their reasons for wearing it. In the case of these women, similarly to the ones in Egypt, they "adopted the full-face veil as part of a spiritual journey"[24]. Some also explained their choice by describing the aesthetic nature of the veil, while others cited unwanted male attention as a factor.[25] One young woman somewhat curiously chose to wear a niqab instead of a headscarf simply to avoid being recognized by her parents and their friends from whom she wanted to conceal her conversion to Islam.[26]

In addition to achieving piety and virtue, the practice of wearing headscarves and niqabs in Western Europe has also been associated with a reaction against the more assimilated life-styles of one's parents and against "the rigid policies of a state that insists on dictating the ways in which personal practices of religious piety should appear in public"[27]. The prohibition of these practices can thus even be counter-productive, forcing more women to wear them simply out of protest.

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[21] **Lila Abu-Lughod**. Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. – American Anthropologist, 3/2002, pp. 783–790. Here p. 786.

[22] *Ibid*.

[23] *Ibid*.

[24] **Open Society Foundations.** 2011. Unveiling the Truth: Why 32 Muslim Women Wear the Full-face Veil in France. <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/home/articles_publications/publications/unveiling-the-truth-20110411/a-unveiling-the-truth-20100510.pdf>, (17.05.2011). Here p. 13.

[25] *Ibid*.

[26] *Ibid*., pp. 40–41.

[27] **Hirschkind & Mahmood** 2002, p. 352. See also **Navarro** 2010, p. 101. How else could one explain, for example, the sincere wish of two French atheists' daughters to wear an Islamic headscarf? **Jewish dad backs headscarf daughters.** BBC. 01.10.2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3149588.stm>, (15.05.2011).

The reasons for veiling oneself are therefore very wide-ranging and rather personal. In addition to piety and virtue, wearing different Islamic garments can convey very different meanings: from avoiding being objectified by men to provoking the rest of society, thus making it a highly contextual practice. As the above examples demonstrate, women from both Muslim and Western countries wear Islamic garments for reasons that cannot be labelled as simply "coercive" or "oppressive". While real coercion has happened as well – most notably in Afghanistan under Taliban rule[28] – the reasons for wearing head-scarves are more varied than normally believed. These examples thus cast serious doubt on the usual liberal conception of freedom that is so often used in Western rhetoric as it blurs the distinction between societal norms and one's "real" desires.[29] Can one then *assume* that these women are coerced into or oppressed by wearing these garments?

This question can also be approached from a different angle by asking: are *Western* women free in their choice of clothing or are their choices also governed to some degree by cultural-societal norms and expectations? It is here that Lila Abu-Lughod's ironic question, mimicking the Western way of thinking about these issues, is very telling: "Did we expect that once 'free' from the Taliban [Afghani women] would go 'back' to belly shirts and blue jeans, or dust off their Chanel suits?"[30] That is, is it belly shirts and blue jeans that make us free? Are not both Islamic and Western women (and men) suf-fering from the "tyranny of fashion"? Why should it be that Muslim women are more coerced into it as opposed to "Western women"?

It is in this context that it becomes truly justifiable to ask how representa-tive and accurate images of Muslim women are in Western countries. As has been asked again by Abu-Lughod, would it be representative of Westerners "if magazines and newspapers in Syria or Malaysia were to put bikini-clad women or Madonna on every magazine cover that featured an article about the United States or a European country"?[31] As pointed out earlier, only a small fraction of Muslim women wear dresses that cover them from head to toe and these pieces of clothing are especially rare in Western countries. The same could be assumed about wearing bikinis and overly sexualized Madonna-style clothing in the West. Instead, people from both Western

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[28]   Yet even in this context burqa has been seen by some as a liberating piece of clothing since it enabled women to walk in public spaces (thus liberating only in the context of a strictly seg-regated society). See **Abu-Lughod** 2006.

[29]   For a longer discussion on these questions see **Mahmood** 2005, ch. 1 and pp. 148–152.

[30]   **Abu-Lughod** 2002, p. 785. One example of the discourse that Abu-Lughod caricatures is given by French feminist Elizabeth Badinter: "The veil... is the symbol of the oppression of a sex. Putting on torn jeans, wearing yellow, green, or blue hair, this is an act of freedom with regard to social conventions. Putting a veil on the head, this is an act of submission." Cited from **Hirschkind & Mahmood** 2002, p. 352.

[31]   **Abu-Lughod** 2006.

countries and Muslim communities wear very different articles of clothing and follow diverse norms of dress; it would be thus impossible to single out one representative piece of clothing from either.

Yet this is exactly what is done regarding Muslim women. As has been demonstrated by many social scientists studying the images of Islam in the West, Muslim women are mostly portrayed in the Western mainstream media in three particular ways: as passive, as victims and/or as veiled.[32] These stereotypes are reinforced by the fact that in news about the Muslim community or especially about Muslim women they themselves are hardly ever given the chance to express their opinions[33] – the discourse is *about* them, but not *with* them. Instead of seeing them as active, i.e., able to speak for themselves and for their community, they are usually portrayed as passive, "lacking individual or personal attributes"[34].

This attitude from the news media thus reflects underlying societal stereotypes about Muslim women but, at the same time, helps to perpetuate itself by potentially marginalizing these women even further. Moreover, the current marginalized situation of Muslim women "tends to be explained almost exclusively according to theories on Islamic culture"[35]. It is therefore not different socio-economic inequalities or identitary politics that are portrayed as the reason for the position of Muslim women; the reason is rather shown to be Islam itself.

Another aspect of this story, besides the real diversity of significance of the veil and the way it is used to portray Muslim women, is the hypocrisy of these images. In short, this attitude could be entitled "emancipation abroad, justification at home". From colonial history, the most infamous example of such hypocrisy is the case of Evelyn Baring who was the British consul general in Egypt from 1883. In his day he was one of the most vocal proponents of the need to unveil Muslim women, regarding the veil as the "first and foremost" symbol of the inferior status of Islam (as opposed to Christianity).[36] This kind of view about Islam was not, of course, anything unheard of or surprising at the time; it rather belonged to the political mainstream. What is interesting however is that Baring who was the fiercest champion of the

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[32] **Navarro** 2010, p. 100. See also **Gema Martín-Muñoz.** 2002. Islam's women under Western eyes. – OpenDemocracy. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/article_498.jsp>, (05.01.2011).

[33] **Navarro** 2010, pp. 100–101.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 99.

[36] **Ahmed** 1992, pp. 152–154. **Ahmed** 2006. **Markha G. Valenta.** How to Recognize a Moslem When You See One: Western Secularism and the Politics of Conversion. – Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World. Eds. Hent de Vries, Lawrence E. Sullivan. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, pp. 444–474. Here p. 456.

unveiling of Egyptian women was also, back in England, a founding member and sometime president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage (founded in 1909).

This is only one example of how Victorian colonial power modified feminist ideas for their own imperialist ones. As Leila Ahmed put nicely: "Feminism on the home front and feminism directed against white men was to be resisted and suppressed; but, taken abroad and directed against the cultures of colonized peoples, it could be promoted in ways that admirably served and furthered the project of the dominance of the white man"[37]. The question, then, was and still is about power, not about the freedom of women. (It should also be noted that Victorian dress was anything but "emancipating" at the time.)

This predominantly patriarchal character of both Western and Muslim cultures has not changed over the last century. As many contemporary studies on the position of women in Western societies conclude, sexual harassment and violence directed against women has no religion or skin colour; i.e., it can be found in every society or, more specifically, in every sector of every society.[38] This problem of the position of women is thus a global issue not confined to any one culture or era. But why is so much attention directed against one (perceived) expression of power over women's bodies, while so little attention is paid to the global problem of violence against women?[39] The question of veiling is once again about Islam, the cultural "Other", not about "saving" Muslim women.

To conclude, it should not be in any way ignored how women are suppressed, citing some cultural or religious norms or customs. But what should be borne in mind is that this kind of discursive or physical repression occurs and is a problem in *both* Western and Muslim communities. What is crucial in this respect is the question of what to count and what not to count as an expression of oppression. This question, however, should be answered by the

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[37] **Ahmed** 1992, p. 153.

[38] See **Group of Specialists for combating violence against women.** 2000. Plan of Action for combating violence against women. The Council of Europe. <http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/equality/03themes/violence-against-women/EG-S-VL(97)1_en.pdf>, (17.05.2011). Here pp. 16–25. For the prevalence of the various types of violence against women in France see **Maryse Jaspard**; the ENVEFF group. Nommer et compter les violences envers les femmes: une première enquête nationale en France. – Population & Sociétés, 364/2001, pp. 1–4.

[39] As Markha Valenta has forcefully put it: "While a veil on the heads of a handful of girls is perceived throughout much of continental Western Europe as having the potential to undermine the West's hard-fought democratic values, the continued battering of women – much like the lucrative traffic in Eastern European women, girls, and boys forced into prostitution – apparently poses little danger to European societies. /.../ At least it's not un-Western". **Valenta** 2006, p. 456.

respective women themselves and no-one else. The problem, then, lies in the way the West continually regards the post-colonial world and the people from it with an air of superiority. This kind of attitude results in a polarized image of the situation of women in these traditions and, therefore, a lack of attention to the real problems women face in either. What is needed is a contextual understanding of the practices under discussion, as opposed to top-down arbitrary interpretation.

This central point is very well spelled out by Saba Mahmood:

> the liberatory goals of feminism should be rethought in light of the fact that the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated desire whose motivational force cannot be assumed a priori, but needs to be reconsidered in light of other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject.[40]

In other words, women are different everywhere and the ones best aware of their particular problems are these women themselves. As seen from Mahmood's and Ahmed's ethnographies as well as from other studies of Islamic communities, the traditions and norms of Islam are criticized and adapted according to changing conditions also from within the Islamic tradition, just like different social movements (incl. feminists) have criticized and adapted different Western traditions. The rhetoric of "saving" someone should thus be abandoned if it fails to take into account the social context and cultural differences stemming from it.

The protection of Western values

The second rhetorical device in the discourse of prohibition lies in "Western values" that need to be protected from the Islamic infiltration symbolized by women's dress.[41] But speaking of "Western" (or "European") values, culture, or even civilization leaves open the meaning of these concepts. It is assumed to be common sense, known to everyone without further explanation. But what *are* these "Western values" that need to be protected from Islam? At the risk of sounding banal, are there any common denominators that are shared by all Europeans which distinguish them from all non-Europeans? And furthermore, is there such a category as "real European" as opposed to all others? Or in the cultural sphere, is there such a thing as "authentic culture" that needs to be protected from all that is foreign or potentially "contaminating"?

To start with, one needs to problematize the big concepts used above: namely "values", "culture" and "civilization". None of these notions has a

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[40]   **Saba Mahmood.** Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival. – Cultural Anthropology, 2/2001, pp. 202–236. Here p. 223.

[41]   E.g. **Swiss voters back**... 2009; and **French Senate votes**... 2010.

clear and non-controversial definition. Rather, these are all ambiguous and all-encompassing words, mostly used as cognitive shortcuts to very abstract concepts and ideas.

Let us take the example of "culture". In common understanding it refers to a distinct and coherent set of traditions, social norms, practices, shared beliefs and attitudes. In the real world, however, it would be extremely difficult to pinpoint what "belongs" or does not belong to a particular culture, or where one culture ends and another begins. What is more, culture is not something static, homogenous, delineated, or primordial – even though this is the way the concept of culture is usually perceived. Cultures have rather formed (and will continue to form) through different contacts with and influences from other cultures, all of which are dynamic from the inside out.[42] There is thus no single origin of any culture and its transformation is constant and perpetual. As a consequence, as argued by Jean and John L. Comaroff,

> [c]ulture always contains within it polyvalent, potentially contestable messages, images, and actions. It is, in short, a historically situated, historically unfolding ensemble of signifiers-in-action, signifiers at once material and symbolic, social and aesthetic.[43]

The rhetoric of cultural authenticity, which is implied by the necessity to protect it from outside influence, is thus more of a political doctrine, creating the illusion of a coherent and static tradition. This perceived unity, however, does not exist outside these power relations that have created it.[44] In other words, it is only by the use of power that the regular flow of time is fixed within definite boundaries, creating the image of a static cultural tradition. Thus, the Thomas theorem applies here: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"[45]. Therefore, one culture is conceptually distinct and different from another culture plainly because it is conceived that way

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[42]   In the context of Islamic headscarves it is interesting to note that the practice of wearing them has come to Islam from Christianity. See **Ahmed** 2006. For more on the common roots of Islam and Christianity that lead to Ancient Greece, see **Talal Asad**. Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 168–169.

[43]   **John L. Comaroff; Jean Comaroff**. Ethnography and the Historical Imagination. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992, p. 27. See also **Homi K. Bhabha**. The Location of Culture. London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 1–18.

[44]   For a longer discussion on the intersection of culture and power, see **Comaroff & Comaroff** 1992, ch. 1; and **Ruth Marshall**. Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, ch. 1. For an ontological background, see **Ernesto Laclau; Chantal Mouffe**. Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics. London: Verso, 2001[1985], ch. 3.

[45]   **Jan Kubik**. Ethnography of Politics: Foundations, Applications, Prospects. – Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power. Ed. Edward Schatz. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, pp. 25–52. Here p. 38.

discursively. This discourse, however, is always closely entangled in power relations.

What does this conceptual question have to do with "Western values" and their relationship with Islam? As Edward W. Said has very thoroughly demonstrated, "the Orient" and "the Occident" (which are themselves very problematic notions) are indeed products of a type of discourse – they are political ideas rather than essentialist starting points.[46] It is the orientalist discourse from such figures as Gustave Flaubert to Bernard Lewis, perceiving the Orient as unchanging and completely different from the West, that has created the "Other" for the Western world; the "Other" to define oneself by.[47] Because of this, "[t]he relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony".[48]

In other words, there is nothing natural about how the Orient and Islam in particular are perceived in the contemporary Western world – it is a question of power, rather than that of objective description. This binary opposition therefore does not hold water. It is, rather, a result of certain discourses that function *as if* such clear-cut opposition exists, ignoring at the same time the real diversity on both "sides", or the very absence of this kind of cultural boundary. What is important in this context, however, is that these kinds of perceptions, in addition to mirroring underlying power relationships, also shape and structure the lives of many people affected by these images, including Muslim women living in Western Europe. The case of Evelyn Baring, outlined above, is another case in point.

It is out of these power relations that the images discussed earlier have originated, structuring the lifeworlds in both the East and the West in turn. Consequently, the main question should not be about the *content* of the Western values, as such essence is only an illusion embedded in power relations, but, paraphrasing Talal Asad's argument about the concept of modernity, "why it has become hegemonic *as a political goal*, what consequences follow from that hegemony, and what social conditions maintain it".[49] In other words, we should look for the ways in which this power over the "Other" is exercised through discourse: what kinds of images it is based on and what assumptions lie underneath it. This is exactly what this paper has attempted to do.

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[46] **Said** 2003. See also **Asad** 2003, pp. 161–170.

[47] This is especially true after the collapse of the Soviet Union which had represented the primary image of the "Other" for Europe for nearly half a century.

[48] **Said** 2003, p. 5. The notion of hegemony, to use Comaroff's lucid definition, refers to "that order of signs and material practices, drawn from a specific cultural field, that come to be taken for granted as the natural, universal, and true shape of social being – although its infusion into local worlds, always liable to challenge by the logic of prevailing cultural forms, is never automatic". **Comaroff & Comaroff** 1992, p. 28.

[49] **Asad** 2003, p. 13. Emphasis in original.

Due to the nature of concepts like "culture", "values" and "civilization" it can be seen that the "problem" of Islamic headscarves in Europe today is purely political; it is not about some cultural or civilizational difference. It is based on an arbitrary boundary drawn between "us" and "them", "authentic Europeans" and "immigrants",[50] "Western secularists" and "Muslim fundamentalists" with the purpose of "returning" to some conception of a "pure" past that has never existed.[51] Images of Islamic headscarves or full-face veils, so popular in contemporary Europe, thus function as constant mental reminders of the perceived threat "our" way of life is under, at the same time reinforcing these images in return. The very *existence* of this threat, however, is never questioned.

The most obvious example of these "Western values" under threat is the concern over secularism. This notion itself is, of course, very broad and multifaceted, but also too abstract to be attributed only to one "civilization". Therefore, is secularism really a "Western value" common to all countries and societies deemed "Western"? Examples from the real world, once again, refute such simplistic interpretations: there are many countries with Muslim majorities that are formally secular (e.g., Syria and Turkey[52]) while many European countries still officially have state religions (e.g., United Kingdom, Norway and Greece). It is, then, hardly anything distinctive or even common to the West, while the same could also be said about ideas like freedom, equality and democracy.

When delving deeper into this rationale for restricting women's dress, more questions emerge. Obviously the question of whether Islamic headscarves or veils are at odds with the principles of secularism depends largely on the definition of secularism one uses. Is it simply the absence of state religion or is it something deeper, implying enforced dereligionization as in contemporary France? As seen from some of the examples discussed at the beginning of this article, it is, again, a matter of interpretation. The French legislation from 2004, for example, banned all visible religious symbols including skullcaps, large Christian crosses and all Islamic headwear, thus leaving room for symbols like small crosses and small Stars of David. The exact size of a large or small cross remains open to interpretation. In addition to being targeted rather clearly against particular pieces of clothing, such bans also raise the question:

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[50] For more on the dichotomy of "autochtonous" people and immigrants in the Netherlands see **Peter Geschiere**. The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, ch. 5.

[51] This conception of cultural purity thus functions as an empty signifier, to use Ernesto Laclau's term. According to him, societies are always organized and centered on the basis of some unachievable ideals. "Although the fullness and universality of society is unachievable, its need does not disappear: it will always show itself through the presence of its absence". **Ernesto Laclau**. Emancipation(s). London: Verso, 1996, p. 53.

[52] Both of these countries have also imposed restrictions on the women's dress.

what exactly is "secular clothing"? Taking into account the fundamentally dynamic and hybrid nature of cultures and such values, it is impossible to tell. Or, to be more exact, it would be possible only in an arbitrary way from the position of power.

Conclusion

As seen from the above discussion, the European fear of Islam is largely based on symbols and images that have little to do with the situation on the ground. These images, however, have very deep roots, reaching down into colonial policies, cultural history and patterns of immigration. Contemporary bans on and regulation of all things perceived to be Islamic mirror these deeply embedded false images of that religion and the people identifying with it.

The veil is one of these symbols used to incite fear of Islam in Europe. As argued earlier, however, it is used in such a way mainly for purposes of power, not for that of "freeing women". And yet the burqa has become the "face of Islam" in the West as if it represented the whole way of life associated with Islam. Therefore, for the reasons explained above, Westerners should seriously call into question everything they think they know about Islam and instead let the subaltern speak.[53] This current obsession with Muslim clothing and headwear leads, at best, only to a very limited understanding of hundreds of millions of people worldwide, especially if this obsession is coupled with stereotypical images entangled with power relations. All too often one forgets that these images and the political discourses that rely on them also have very real consequences for Muslim women whose freedom of choice is restricted by the patriarchal systems they live in, be it either Western or Muslim. Rather than focusing attention on the fight over symbols like veils or headscarves, more serious attention should be paid to the broader problems of patriarchy and racism that shape life on both sides of the imagined boundary between the East and the West.

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[53] This phrase has become famous from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work. See **Spivak** 1994.

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