



Activity 2 – France and the Burkini Ban

In this activity, we will try to understand current debates in France around demands for a ban on the burkini, a piece of clothing which covers the head and the body and which is used by Muslim women. The ban has caught the attention of the world when a policeman recently ordered a woman to take off her burkini on a beach in Nice.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/24/french-police-make-woman-remove-burkini-on-nice-beach>

This incident provoked global outrage. In this exercise, we will attempt to understand the French government's discomfort with certain markers of religious identity in public places. The French model of secularism, often referred to as *laïcité*, denotes a strict separation between the Church and the state. We need to go back in time to when this model of secularism first emerged. In the 1880s, following the establishment of the Third Republic in France, the leaders of the Republic attempted to replace the Catholic school system with non-religious schools in many parts of the country. This laid down the contours of *laïcité*. The French model of secularism involves a degree of animosity between religion and the state; the state defines the sphere of religion and controls religious activities.

The French state has been especially hostile to expressions of faith in public spaces. In 2004, the hijab, a headscarf worn by Muslim women which covers the face, was banned in public schools. In 2007, veils worn by Muslim women covering the face were banned.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/burkini-ban-ruling-france-sarkozy-nice-beach-pictures-muslim-islam-a7208476.html>

Now read the articles below and try to understand the larger politics of banning religious symbols

- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/26/burkini-ban-france-failed-minorities-muslim>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/24/france-burkini-ban-secularist-equality-muslim>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSbFnNYYcvU>



- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xgvzn3m0Zul>
- 1. To what extent can a secular state interfere with the religious beliefs of people?
- 2. Was the burkini ban justified on the grounds of 'public order' as the French state seems to argue?
- 3. Are burkinis or other markers of religious identity, in public places, a sign of 'backwardness'? Think about what the activists say in the videos.

The French Aversion to Islam

We further ask if the discomfort with religious symbols in France is actually an expression of Islamophobia. A lot of scholars and commentators have argued that the French distaste for religion in public spaces is especially harsh when it comes to the religious symbolism of Islam. Joan Wallach Scott in "The Politics of the Veil" traces the historical relationship of the French state with the veil. She notes that the veil became a site of protest and resistance by Muslim women during the struggles of independence in the French colonies, such as Algeria. The discomfort with the veil is linked to an aversion for a person who is culturally dissimilar from the French. The enterprise of colonialism was based on the imagination of a cultural 'other' who then had to be 'disciplined' by the coloniser. The coloniser not only occupied the territory of the colonised, but castigated indigenous cultures as 'backward'. Scott argues that the distaste for the veil is an extension of this very idea.

We will read the articles below and try to engage with the broader politics of the banning of the veil.

- A review of Scott's book: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14464>
- <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/08/economist-explains-19>

Some questions to think about regarding the relationship of France and Islam:

1. Is the state's attitude towards Islam shaped by the coloniser's perception of a different culture?
2. How does the French state try to regulate religious women's lives? Are Muslim women's voices marginalised?



Watch the following videos and then attempt to discuss some of the questions that follow:

- <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/upfront/2016/10/islam-myth-french-secularism-161007131555990.html>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIIzF9FWyoQ>
1. Is the French model of secularism desirable in multi-cultural societies?
 2. Does the series in the second video help you understand the ban on the veil in a different light from the first?
 3. Is there more to the ban of the veil than secularism? Is the second video saying something about this?