

## Religious Freedom at Risk: The EU, French Schools, and Why the Veil Was Banned

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This book gives an interesting and easy-to-read account of the bans on veils in France, concentrating on the area of education. It examines the 2004 law that banned ostentatious religious symbols in schools and, to a lesser extent, the ban on full-face-covering veils in all public places, which came into force in 2011. It looks at these bans in the light of the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), with a focus on three cases.

Adrian illustrates her narrative with interviews conducted and observations made during 2005–2006, when she taught English in a French school, mainly in the vocational section of the school, with mostly Muslim students who lived near the school. During her stay, she also conducted in-depth interviews with three women living in the area of the school. The interviews and observations give a good illustration of what it is to be a Muslim person/pupil in France and are used to support the arguments that the author is making. However, it is a pity that these interviews took place almost ten years ago, long before the law of 2011. It would have been interesting to revisit some of the people interviewed then and to examine how the attitudes have been influenced by the more recent law.

Adrian places the debates on the laws banning veils in the context of international human rights jurisprudence concerning freedom of religion. She argues that a proper understanding of this right would lead to an overruling or severe modification of both French laws. The ECtHR has afforded the states too wide a margin of appreciation and has not required much in the way of proof in relation to the necessity of such laws. Adrian thus argues that ‘we are falling short of the standards which we have set ourselves when it comes to protecting equality and freedom, especially in relation to religious minorities in general and Muslim groups in particular’ (p 1).

Chapter 1 explains that the right to freedom of religion anchors the book. Adrian discusses the riots that took place in France in 2005 and what these mean for her research. She also clearly sets out her own position in this project. Chapter 2 sets the scene and describes the specific area where she spent her time in France, giving information about the peculiarities of the school and of the French education system.

Chapter 3 critically analyses religious freedom and the case law of the ECtHR on this. This analysis begins with a discussion of the right to religious freedom and then focuses on three main cases: *Refah Partisi v Turkey* (2001), *Sahin v Turkey* (2005) and *SAS v France* (2014). Adrian argues that, in the first two

cases, the ECtHR afforded the states a very wide margin of appreciation and showed a narrow understanding of Islam, largely adopted from what the state party in question put forward. In *SAS v France*, this approach to religious freedom did not change, despite the fact that the ECtHR dropped the idea of the veil as a security threat, as a threat to human dignity or as an infringement of gender equality.

Chapter 4 contains an examination of the question why the two laws were adopted. It discusses the history of *laïcité*, and the work of the Stasi Commission, whose report led to the adoption of the 2004 law. The analysis is also linked to how the people interviewed saw *laïcité*. Chapter 5 looks at the question of why women veil, through interviews with three women who wear the veil. The author categorises seven reasons to veil and then concludes that veiled women share in publicly held values. This part of the book could have been supported by more evidence: three interviews do not seem to be enough to draw conclusions and author could have looked, for example, at the work of Professor Eva Brems of Ghent University, among others.

Chapter 6 examines issues and definitions of integration and assimilation, and the meaning of integration in France. The author stresses the fact that the veil is not seen as an expression of individuality but as indicating membership of a group. This brings with it the fear of communitarianism, which is seen as a threat to the French Republic because it fragments France. The fear of this was mentioned in 95 per cent of the interviews. The idea of integration in France, according to Adrian, contains elements of an unhealthy assimilation, based on an idea of similarity that renders cultures invisible.

One thing is puzzling, however, and that is why the European Union is mentioned in the title of the book. The author mentions the EU twice: once in one sentence in relation to Turkish accession to the EU and once when referring to the Stasi Commission, the Commission tasked with exploring the application of the principle of *laïcité*. Neither mention makes clear why the EU is relevant or important for the subject discussed. The title of the book did not need 'the EU' in it; given that it is there, however, one would expect the book to discuss EU law and its relevance for the topic.

Overall, the book is interesting and easy to read and gives a good account of the 2004 and 2011 laws banning the headscarf and face veil in France, illustrated by material from interviews and observations.

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