THE VEIL IN THE WEST*

IN 2004, FRANCE passed a law banning the wearing of headscarves in public schools, capping 15 years of debate and controversy. While French politicians have now moved on to debating whether they should outlaw the face-veil as well in all public spaces, other European nations have also begun to wrestle with what to do about the veil.

Christian Joppke, a political scientist at the American University of Paris, takes up the ''headscarf problem'' in his new book, *Veil: Mirror of Identity*. Aware that writing about the headscarf has become a veritable cottage industry, Joppke asks: ''So why another headscarf book?'' (p. ix). (A more interesting question might be, why the near obsession with the headscarf on the part of liberals and liberal states?) Joppke notes that the plethora of books on the headscarf have concerned specific national contexts and have therefore failed to regard the ''Islamic headscarf as a challenge to liberalism'' more broadly (p. ix). He posits that liberalism is both ''a *modus vivendi* for reconciling many ways of life'' and ''a way of life in itself'' (p. ix). Britain represents the former, procedural variant of liberalism that ''encourages illiberal extremism,'' while France represents the latter, ethical variant of liberalism that ''risks to turn into its repressive opposite'' (p. ix). Germany represents a third, possibly illiberal, way. Joppke's point – reflected in the title of his book – is that the way these various nation-states respond to the headscarf depends on, and therefore reveals, the kind of liberalism they exemplify. Like a liberal Goldilocks, Joppke finds the German model too Christian, the British model too permissive, and the French model just right.

The book's one merit lies in its description of the ways in which Britain, France, and Germany have dealt with the problem of the headscarf, and Joppke is adept at synthesizing the various legal and political arguments mobilized in each national debate. Unfortunately, other aspects of the book are less successful: Joppke consistently contradicts himself, misreads a number of his key sources on the Islamic tradition, and traffics in Orientalist stereotypes about Islam.

According to Joppke, the headscarf challenges the liberal state's commitment to gender equality since it ''points to the subordinate status of women'' (p. 14). Much feminist scholarship has already dwelt on liberal states' uneasy relationship to gender equality, so I will focus

* About Christian JOPPKE, *Veil: Mirror of Identity* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009).

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on another angle of Joppke's problematic analysis. Despite the fact that a number of social scientists have argued that the headscarf has multiple meanings and is worn for different reasons in different contexts, Joppke maintains that individual intention and social context do not matter and that the headscarf retains a ''stubbornly objective dimension'' (p. 13). He conflates various national contexts, using three anthropological studies of the Islamic revival in Egypt to make claims about Muslim women's veiling in France, Britain, and Germany (claims that are based, incidentally, on a willful misreading of those studies). Moreover, by attributing one objective meaning to the veil, regardless of vastly differing geographical and historical circumstances, he not only mirrors the ''fundamentalist'' stance he so actively criticizes – a stance that cannot countenance individual interpretation and scriptural evolution – but he also contradicts his ensuing caveat that ''one must distinguish carefully between what Islamic doctrine holds and what ordinary Muslims think or believe'' (p. 122).

That caveat turns out to be mere lip service: Joppke has little interest in the relationship between scripture, interpretation, and practice, and the book is loaded with various Orientalist clichés about Islam – yes, Islam, the entire tradition, everywhere and all the time. ''Islam [...] entails the subordination of women'', Joppke intones (p. 6). ''Islamic law cannot be changed in any way, and least of all by human beings'' (p. 9). ''Islam is inherently geared'' towards ''fundamentalism'' (p. 9). Islam is ''a religion of 'world-conquering warrior[s]''' that therefore contrasts with ''Christianity [...] where the masculinity of the Old Testament God is loosened up by 'the person of Mary''' (p. 7). Lest we miss the point, Joppke cites Samuel Huntington: ''The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam'' (p. 111). Yet Joppke seems confused. He writes that the headscarf controversies are ''an *exception* to the rule of successful accommodation of Islam in Europe'' (p. 108, original emphasis), before, on the very next page, repeating that ''the headscarf and the entire challenge of Islam'' constitute an ''affront to liberalism'' (p. 109). If Islam, as Joppke claims, has largely been accommodated in Europe, how is Islam such a grave problem? He also maintains that ''Muslim integration in France has been stunningly successful'' (p. 28). But if Muslims have integrated and (one assumes) adopted liberal values, yet Islam and liberalism remain opposed, are liberal Muslims not real Muslims? Or not real liberals? Or is it that France has a problem with Islam but not with the millions of Muslims who live there – and what would that even mean?

Joppke's inconsistencies are not restricted to the domain of gender and Islam. He writes that Islam – with its "penchant for being 'secularization-resistant'" (p. 9) – presents a threat to liberalism's commitment to neutrality. That principle of neutrality drives his critique of Germany as well, where the Islamic headscarf but not the Christian cross is rejected in the classroom. Hence his preference for French secularism. Astonishingly absent in this discussion are France's own exceptions, most notably the region of Alsace-Moselle, still ruled under an early-19th century Napoleonic *concordat* with the Catholic Church so that church and state are not separated. Does the existence of Alsace-Moselle (defended, even by French critics of the headscarf in schools, as part of France's "tradition") make France an illiberal and non-secular democracy? Or does it, instead, compel us to reconsider the terms of secular neutrality, and to revisit the fraught relationship between liberalism, secularity, and Christianity? "It is time to stop denying that Islam constitutes a fundamental challenge to liberalism," Joppke admonishes (p. xi). This may be true, though not in the way Joppke believes. Rather, perhaps Islam and Muslims represent such a challenge because dealing with them reveals many of the contradictions – about neutrality and gender equality, for example – that underlie secular liberal democracy.

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