

## The hijab – secularity and beyond

### Analysing debates on cultural diversity (hijab) through classical social science theory.

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**Abstract.** The main purpose of this paper is to analyze key issues in media debates regarding cultural religious issues in public everyday life. Specific attention is directed to the potential use of hijab in public services, where some sort of public uniform is required. Empirical material from the public debate on the possible use of hijab in the police force in Norway is utilized in this respect. This empirical material has been gathered from the main newspapers in Norway, including linked blogs. Arguments from selected classical social science theories are applied in critical analyses and discussions. The question of how specific arguments in the public debate link up with these different theoretical positions is addressed. .

**Keywords:** multiculturalism, intercultural communication, classical social science

#### 1. Introduction analyzing a public debate on multiculturalism

The debate on the hijab has many facets (Thorbjørnsrud 2009, Shadid & Koningsveld 2005). Public debates and systematic reflections on current issues addressing religion (hijab/Islam), society and the secular have not been linked thoroughly with more theoretical positions and reflections of society in social science. The main issue addressed in this paper concerns the following overall question;

*What specific views and theories of society are more or less inherent in different positions, arguments and critical reflections made in the hijab debate?*

In the context of this paper the following perspective are identified as the basic/specific views of society;

- *A universal secular society* critical to the impact of the sacred (Durkheim 1970 and 1972).
- *Rule governed* rational society enforcing through law neutrality and equality (Weber 1985).
- Society envisioned as a combat over territorial cultural superiority (Lorenz 1966, Wilson 1975 and 1979).
- Society as *functional pragmatic* negotiating common arrangements (Peirce 1958, Habermas 1981).
- *Modern rational societies* justifying common interests through democratic discourses (Habermas 1991) and overlapping consensus (Rawls 1987 and 1996) as social integrative processes.

#### 2. Acknowledgement and accountability

A Muslim woman (Missoum), who recently has decided to wear hijab, wants to join the police force in Norway. Creating a Muslim identity (Giddens 1991) is signified by her decision to wear the hijab in public.

An argument for wearing the scarf can be stated as follows;

“The hijab is something I choose to wear myself. It is important for me and my relation to my religion, Missoum claims. My husband has nothing to say regarding my scarf. He supports me a hundred per cent and has offered to take care of the children while I am studying”.

Missoum had made an official request to the central police department addressing the question of wearing a hijab in the police. She received a polite answer that this matter would be dealt with by the proper authorities. This request initiated a fierce debate among public authorities and other segments of citizens.

Two initial questions concerning Missoum's statements could be addressed;

- What kind of motive is behind her decision to wear the scarf?
- Is her wish, as she claims, a free and independent choice?

The first question concerns Missoum's expressions of been recognised for whom she *is*, as an acknowledgeable and accountable person. The second question concerns her conscious ability to make free and independent choices in (a secular) society. Both of these questions concerns identity formation. Issues like self-awareness, consciousness, individual conscience and personal moral capabilities are addressed in this context.

A selection of the early fierce responses to her request can be grouped into the following categories;

- Standardization
- Practicality
- Symbolic aspects, identity building and belonging
- Oppression/none oppression and power
- Tolerance, intolerance and racism
- Acknowledgement and accountability
- Policies of multiculturalism

### **3. Standardization and diversity**

Several statements regarding standardisation proclaim the necessity of a consistent presentation. The role of a police officer as a civil servant should be reflected by the uniform. Basically the uniform reflects evenness regardless of particular personal capacities, predispositions, sex and cultural/religious origin. Additionally respect, function and rank are presented when wearing a uniform.

Lack of standardisation in this respect raises were critically questioned;

“What happens when people coming from a community where wearing hijab is customary, wishes to use this as part of the police uniform? Shall anyone grown up on a farm use their particular occupational outfit as part of the uniform? What sort of uniform should a nudist apply?”

The police uniform in Norway is far from neutral, as it is equipped with 17 Maltese crosses and lions of cultural religious significance dating back to Mediaeval. Counter arguments states that these religiously linked aspects of the uniform reflect a common national cultural heritage. The *origin* of the national culture of Norway is on the other hand not necessarily Christian. What counts as *Norwegian* is highly questionable.

### **4. Practicality**

When women entered the police occupation some decades ago there were several practical arguments against their entrance. Women wearing long hair and skirts would run the risk of becoming vulnerable to violence, provoke male offenders and otherwise hampered in their police work.

Practical aspects concern both working conditions, safety precautions and the uniforms communicative features. Scarfs are seen as unfitted, dysfunctional and improper as features of the occupational role of a police officer. It signifies adherence to a specific religious community. This reinforces security challenges and downgrades the standardization, neutrality and sovereignty aspects of the uniform as well.

Here is an interesting parallel to the significance of long hair and anti authoritarian student revolts in the late 60's, where long hair, specifically on men, could cause safety problems could emerge when long hair was entangled in all sorts of equipment (machine guns, food processors, etc.). Long hair could hamper face and eye contact, symbolized revolt, adherence religious mysticism, drugs and lack of respect for traditions..

### **5. Symbolic aspects, identity building and belonging**

Long hair symbolised revolt against aspects of an authoritarian society. Critics associated long hair with betrayers and communism.

Segments of society, such as a religious community, use symbols to present their uniqueness and adherence. This is an important aspect of the hijab. Flag, national costumes, language, culture and religious icons are symbols of identification and demarcation in the modern global world, the nation. National unity differentiates a national “we” against “others”. These “others” can experience “us” as more or less open-minded, exercising hospitality/hostility or behaving self-centred.

Another key to *openness* is the extent to which a nation fulfils the obligations regarding human rights. Human rights signify the openness to freedom, equal rights and opportunities for individuals to experience acknowledgement and accountability.

An important aspect of the “we” and “otherness”, links with a confusion of universal secularism with national identification. Statements regarding this confusion in the hijab debate frequently promote universal values and identify them as equivalent national Norwegian values. *Similarities* (likeness) are the source of identification within the national community, contrary to the secular equal opportunity and freedom to cultivate and express the individuality of *differences* (Durkheim 1972, Lukes 1985).

## 6. Oppression and power

The national culture still inherits sacred cultural and religious values and practices of Pre-Modern historical origin. Resistance to submit to such particular value systems seems at the moment to be the case with Muslim minorities in Norway (and Europe?). Why is this so?

A fact that could be interpreted as a cause for specific upheaval, resistance and rebellious sentiments among Muslims, could be found in the global conditions of Muslim nations and societies. Nations inheriting Christian and Jewish values and practices, mixed with their presumed modern democratic development, do possess great advantages. They are dominating world economy and political processes. Monopoly of weapons of mass destruction is exercised. Here is a source of possible humiliation of Muslims that could produce sentiments linked with oppression, lack of recognition and respect. These are global basic conditions that can be interpreted as causes developing into the need for specific identity building. Unequal distribution of power can be a source of resistance against different forms of domination and oppression. Here some general conditions and stimulations to dress with the hijab as a symbolic act could originate.

## 7. Tolerance<sup>1</sup>, islamisation and racism

Islam is identified by several of its critics as intolerant and evil. Democracies of the West are envisioned as friendly, promoting freedom and peace against hostile Islamic communities. A *we* have to be prepared to fight for freedom and democracy against the *others*.

Identifying a human opponent as a member of an evil species is like reducing humanity to the power play over territory which is characteristic of animal kingdom (Lorenz 1966, Wilson 1975 and 1979). Universal moral, individual responsibility and acknowledgement is absent. Our planet is inhabited by segmented “social” species struggling for a dominant position. In the context of our hijab debate, Muslim values are assumed to be struggling for dominance. Positioning hijab in public as part of the police uniform is in such a perspective identified as a symbolic act linked to comparable struggles for dominance.

## 8. Acknowledgement and accountability

Several questions address issues regarding women’s free choice and decision to wear hijab. Is Islam *making* woman believe that wearing hijab is a way of identity creation? Are women wearing hijab indoctrinated and unaccountable? Do women dressing in Islamic symbolic outfit imply that their minds are twisted?

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<sup>1</sup> Tolerance is a questionable concept in this respect since it can be interpreted to intend that it is a “we” who has to be give room to the practice of questionable customs and values. This conception of tolerance often prevails in relativism and opinions on multiculturalism (Lukes 2008).

Missoum claims her capability and right to make her own decisions. She also seems to indicate that prejudices against the hijab are based on lack of knowledge and experience with people dressed in this outfit. On the other hand she does not judge her critics as inferior based on sex, culture, race or other undisputable characteristics. If that was case her statement could be associated with a more or less fundamentalist position. Facing her opponents, she demonstrates a secular acknowledgement of their arguments and addresses these with counter arguments. She does not claim that all her opponents have a false consciousness produced by an evil national culture, making her critics unaccountable. She seems to adhere closely to the requirements from the discourse ethics advocate by Habermas (1981) that can count as ideal for democratic dialogues.

## **9. Policies of multiculturalism**

Integration is the dominant policy arrangement linked to the hijab debate in Norway. Several questions are addressed in this respect;

Integration into a national context is integration into what? Integration related to religion, the flag, costumes, cultural, etc.? Or is it about secular values? But are secular values identical with national values, or are they processed as universal global rights crosscutting national boundaries? What then about the contradiction inherent in the law of nations and the right to create one owns “way of life”, versus the obligation to fulfil the demands of universal human rights? Does handling this contradiction, require dialogues based discourse ethical principles? Do we have to sort out justifiable rational arguments from irrational arguments related to neo fascism and/or religious fundamentalism?

## **10. The basic dilemma of the secular**

Any citizens, where secularity penetrates into the legal code and judicial system, should experience processes towards freedom and equal opportunities. Modern societies express these processes through recognition of universal human rights as the foundation of their institutional arrangements and rights of their citizens. Recognition of rights and obligations rooted in universal human rights implies the right to practice specific interests, religion, culture and language. On the other hand, recognition of these rights demands that specific national, cultural and religious practices are shaped and transformed according to the basic principles of the universal rights. This implies, among other things, that the universal rights are exercised in ways that give every recognised citizen *equal opportunities* to exercise their rights. Additionally the specific freedom embedded in the universal rights should be exercise to *encourage* equal practices of these opportunities for all (the modern welfare policy argument). These principles are closely link with the categorical imperative of Kant (1978 and 1995).

The law of nations recognises the sovereignty of every nation to self-determination. This right extends also to communities and collective identities. What happens when exercising the right to self-determination comes into conflict with universal human rights?

## **11.Views, visions and images of society**

A vision of humanity, where human conduct is administered by biology and instincts like the animal kingdom, promotes a view of humans where natural forces and intentions deprive humanity of its responsibility for its own destiny. Predestination decides their fortune and future by forces they cannot manipulate or control (Weber 2005), either these forces are originating in biology, instincts of nature or religious divine forces (Kant 1977).

Modern rationality and secularity promotes an alternative vision of mankind. Mankind in modern secular society continuously enhances his/her abilities and capabilities to make rational choices about their future and destiny. This is a future and destiny solely a product of their capacities and actions.

From these theoretical foundations, visions of a secular society striving to acknowledge accountable participants in public discourses, have their origin. Such recognition is the case for both Muslims, Christians or more or less secular member of society. Foundations for formal rules guiding these discourses are encountered (Habermas 1981 and 2004). So is our capacity to judge the rational of different visions. Visions of society that strips mankind of capacities and responsibilities to create his/her future and fortune are visions

basically contrary to modern secular rationality. The content of such visions, either linked to biological or divine forces, are *irrational* in this perspective.

## 12. Outcomes of the debate and analyses made

The debate demonstrates certain fundamental perspectives on mankind and the progress of this particular historic society. They express judgements that can be linked to theoretical positions and considerations in social science. A brief summary is listed in the following bullet points;

- 1) Some positions possess inherent hostility indicating neo fascist sympathies.
- 2) Public discourses base on acknowledgement, accountability and secular tolerance.
- 3) Uncertainty about secularity creates ambiguity, uncertainty and fear/anxiety regarding otherness.
- 5) Lack of knowledge of the concept of the secular could promote growing fascism.
- 4) Otherness originating from the pre modern history prevails in so-called secular nations.
- 6) Secularity is demonstrated through dialog and public discourses concerning the hijab.
- 7) Competence building and knowledge creation through debates in public spheres (the hijab debate), encourages the evolvement of secular universal values towards an accountable future.

This list summarises some of the issues in the analysed discourse on hijab in the present context. The *formal* (pragmatic) rules and procedures governing this discourse is the outcome of the historic specific *content* of the secular society and modern rationality.

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