

The French are enjoying a debate about their cultural identity. Obviously the word “enjoying” is a euphemism, since the focus of the debate, whether or not to ban the burqa — full female coverage with an eye screen — in public, has riven the population of France, and by no means along the obvious fault line of Muslim vs. non-Muslim.

Algerian-born Fadela Amara, France’s cities minister, reinforced her view in an interview with the Financial Times: “The vast majority of Muslims are against the burqa. It is obvious why. Those who have struggled for women’s rights back home in their own countries — I’m thinking particularly of Algeria — we know what it represents and what the obscurantist political project is that lies behind it, to confiscate the most fundamental liberties.”

President Nicolas Sarkozy had called for a ban on the public wearing of the burqa altogether. But as of this writing, apparently a compromise has been struck and the burqa will be banned in public buildings only.

A partial ban is better than nothing, though, and may hopefully serve to inject some steel into the spine of other European nations who feel threatened by the rise of anti-Western radicalization amongst their own growing Muslim populations.

Some pundits argue that the numbers of women in France in full coverage are small — in the low hundreds. But more recent estimates run much higher. A report by the minister of the interior conservatively estimates there are at least 2,000, not a nugatory figure, considering that 15 years ago there were virtually no niqabs or burqas in France. If they are not banned now, it may be impossible to do so when there are critical masses of them, as there surely will be as radicalization rates trend upward, if not checked.

Critics will claim that these garments do no harm to others and nobody has the right to interfere with women’s religious choices in a free society. But President Sarkozy got it right last June in explaining to Parliament why the burqa is “not welcome in the French Republic”: “The burqa is not a sign of religion; it is a sign of subservience.”

Sarkozy understands what most people refuse to acknowledge. Full coverage is not about religion; it is about ideology. Full face coverage is an ideological symbol of hatred for democracy, particularly the democratic value of gender equality. While some converts wear full cover as a badge of religious commitment and some educated Muslim young women wear it as a political gesture, by and large full cover goes hand in hand with women leading lives of grim physical and mental deprivation, and often routine, unchallenged, lifelong abuse.

Most women wearing the niqab or burqa can never aspire to a Western model of citizenship. They have not been provided with the kind of education or upbringing that would allow them to understand the meaning of freedom as we know it. It is insulting to the intellect to speak of women in these “walking coffins” in the same breath with the words “choice” or “rights.”

But to hold such rational views is to beat against a strong current of political correctness. As is now the norm whenever hypersensitive Muslim nerves are brushed by political decisions involving perceived insults to Islam, the French debate on cover as well as the recent referendum-driven ban on the further construction of minarets in Switzerland have provoked a great deal of hand-wringing anxiety amongst Islamophobia-phobic liberals.

Unwillingness to criticize the burqa, implying a corollary willingness to abandon these imprisoned women to their fate, even within Western borders, is morally tantamount to depraved indifference to voiceless suffering. Liberals hide behind the iron rubric of non-judgmentalism of other “cultures,” but that strain of logic would have absolved slave owners in the “culture” of pre-Civil War America.

Yet even conservatives who agree that fully covered women are chattel and a walking insult to American values

struggle with the issue of legislative bans against what is misleadingly considered a garment. It seems draconian to prescribe what any individual can or cannot wear in public.

They must first understand that the burqa and niqab are not articles of clothing. They are tents thrown over clothing. In their intention and their effect, they perform the function of a ball and chain. Full cover is worn as a reminder to the wearer that she is not free and to remind the observer that the wearer is a possession, something less than a full human being.

Licia Corbella, a Canadian journalist, visited Afghanistan in 2003. She writes in a June 2009 Calgary Herald article of her interactions with Afghan women. Every woman she asked said she hated the burqa. Many of them, never having felt sunlight on their faces, had lost teeth and hair to Vitamin D deprivation. But the worst aspect of the burqa is its depersonalizing effect. Corbella writes:

Women in burqas don't seem human. After just a short while in Afghanistan, women in their blue burqas seem like ghostly apparitions devoid of a face, individuality, or humanity.

At first, when my translators would tap me on the shoulder and suggest I "take a picture of that burqa over there," I would gently correct them by saying, "you mean, that WOMAN in the burqa?" In a couple of days, however, I too was referring to them as simply burqas.

For conservatives who can't get past the sanctity of the individual's right to freedom of expression, they might reconsider full coverage as less an expression issue than a public decency issue.

Normally we think of decency as a unilateral phenomenon involving too little body coverage. In private we may wear or not wear whatever we want. But we don't allow public nudity, and there are bodily functions that are natural or appropriate in private that we do not permit in public.

In the last few years, since I have been exposed to the sight of real women in full cover walking in my own neighborhood — not many, but it didn't take many to stimulate interrogation of my reflexive discomfort in their presence — had never considered that decency is not a static phenomenon, but runs along a spectrum.

On one end of the spectrum is public nakedness. It's forbidden. There are nudists for whom nakedness is a philosophical imperative, but they have always been, and will always be, a quirky fringe group at the margins of society. They compliantly confine themselves to designated enclaves because they understand it is unreasonable for them to claim the right to impose the sight of their nakedness on others for whom public nakedness is indecent.

For the same reason, there is no need to tell people they may wear bikinis on a beach but not in a courthouse or house of worship. Everyone is well aware of the rising stringency of propriety codes according to the degree of gravitas conferred by the setting or institution.

Moving to the opposite side of the spectrum, we find that the psychological discomfort we feel in seeing a person with exposed genitals in public is similar to what we feel in the presence of someone with the face fully covered. Outside of ski slopes, men in ski masks are threatening and nobody has a problem saying so. Curiously, although not in the same sense — we don't fear physical aggression from covered women as we do covered men — people also find covered women psychologically threatening. But we don't like to admit that, because we can't articulate why this should be so.

I have come to believe that our discomfort with covered women relates directly to our sense of public decency. On the naked end of the decency spectrum, there is too much intimacy for comfort; on the fully covered end there is too much mystery for comfort. Too little coverage provokes disgust; too much coverage provokes anxiety. Nakedness projects the uncomfortable image of the human being as an animal; full coverage evokes the image of the human being as an object.

That is why most people intuitively adjust their clothing to the middle of the decency spectrum to meet the psychological needs of their fellows — and to have their own met in return.

Standards of decency are decided by communities, not by academic theorists or politicians. Or should be. Prejudices around decency are a useful fact of life in communities, because living together in psychological comfort is important to a feeling of neighborly security. If you cannot smile at a neighbor and expect to be smiled at in return, you are not inhabiting a wholesome social climate.

It is no use pretending fully covered women do no harm to the social fabric. They arouse internal disturbance: a mixture of pity, guilt, fear (of the men who own them), and resentment, the last because in any encounter with them we feel shunned. Thus any Westerner privileged to live according to the value of gender equality, as most of us do, who says that the sight of a woman in full coverage neither upsets nor offends him or her is either lying or has no heart.

The question of full coverage is not one of tolerance, or rights, or choice, or freedom of expression. It is a question of social and civic propriety. No citizens can be said to be free if their faces are not open to reading by their fellows. And no citizens can be psychologically comfortable sharing public space with citizens who refuse to be seen.

It is naive to believe that veiled women raised according to medieval patriarchal codes of gender relations will somehow muster a sense of moral agency robust enough to throw off their cover without the protective arm of the law between them and the wrathful kinship groups they have “shamed” by their autonomy. The escalation of honor killings in the West should leave us in no doubt about the price Sharia-bound women pay for freedom.

And without exception, women in full cover live in accordance with Sharia law. Moreover, they are in thrall to men who would like to see Sharia law officially recognized in the countries they inhabit and full coverage extended to all women.

For these and other reasons Sharia law is anathema to democracy. Therefore, for our political and collective psychological health, we should support full coverage, Sharia’s most visible symbol, being banned in France and in all Western countries without guilt. Democratic Muslims will thank us for such a ban, and as for undemocratic Muslims — well, if democracy wasn’t what they wanted, why are they here in the first place?