Values and Veils in Danish and Norwegian Parliamentary Debates and the Absence of Gender

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Abstract

This is a case study on the kinds of values that were invoked in the parliamentary debates in 2009 on whether or not Danish judges and Norwegian policewomen should be allowed to wear veils for religious reasons in their line of duty. The case marks a shift and the limits of the until-then fairly liberal religious accommodation by the two states. Despite the high esteem of gender equality in Denmark and Norway, gender values are less referred to in these debates and the most common values are instead secularism, secular progress and neutrality or, more explicitly, the impartiality and credibility of the state. The findings are understood as a sign of the adaptive character of symbolic politics to focus on different values depending on the issue, as the underlying purpose is to distinguish between the majority population and (religious) minorities through the use of a narrative of secular progress. A secularism based on such narrative is used to express a clash between values associated with secularity, freedom and modernity and religion, oppression and tradition, here symbolised by the wearing of veils.

Keywords

Gender; Scandinavia; secularism; values; veil.

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Introduction

In this article I analyse two sets of debates in the Danish and Norwegian parliaments in 2009 which I understand as a shift in the respective states’ efforts to accommodate religious diversity. In both cases, one of the most common arguments against allowing Danish judges and Norwegian policewomen to wear veils...
was that the credibility of the states would be threatened. As one Member of Parliament from the Progress Party put it in one of the debates: ‘There shall be no religious or political symbols on the uniform. Norwegian police [officers] shall have the same appearance, regardless of what kind of background they have. That is the most important thing and that is how the trust of the population is earned’.¹

Debates such as these have been claimed to be the most visible signs of the ongoing controversy between different sets of values in Western European societies (Scott 2009). At the heart of the controversy, a European ‘sacred narrative of secular progress’ has been claimed to clash with its perceived opposite: the traditional, religious and oppressive structures of Islam, which is symbolised by the veil (Woodhead 2009: 89–90).

The controversy may be dated back to the 1970s, when veils became more common among Muslim women in Egypt, as part of a new Islamic revival, after a long period of a decreasing use of such garments (Ahmed 2011: 93–94). Beginning around 1990, the resurgence spread to other parts of the world and caused political controversies in a number of Western countries such as the Netherlands (Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012), Great Britain (Kiliç 2008: 442; Woodhead 2009), Austria (Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012), Hungary (Agustín and Sata 2013), Germany (Kiliç 2008: 45), France (Scott 2007, 2009; Shirazi and Mishra 2010: 45), Turkey (Shirazi and Mishra 2010: 45), Canada (Bilge 2012: 304) and Sweden, Denmark and Norway (Siim 2013).² As a consequence, France, Turkey, the Netherlands, Belgium and some German federal states have banned veiling (meaning face covering with or without an explicit religious pretext) in public institutions, while most countries have continued to allow such uses of religious clothing in the public arena (Kiliç et al. 2008; Mail Online 2015; Siim 2009; Siim and Kraus 2009).

The veil controversies may be analysed from a number of theoretical perspectives with the aim of defining the proper parameters of public religious behaviour (Bilge 2012: 306). Furthermore, veil issues are ostensibly gendered, with contrasting standards of gender values in relation to a form of religious expression that may be understood as being oppressive to women (see Bracke and Fadil 2012: 36). The tensions between such differing ideals may be particularly strong when women’s rights are perceived as core civilisational values, which may lead to an othering of anyone that does not embrace them (Agustín and Sata 2013: 65; Bilge 2012: 303). To express this particular association of national identity and gender values, Joan Wallach Scott (2009) has coined the term sexularism (see Bilge 2012: 307). Such politicisation of religion and gender may also be part of symbolic politics, which is a discursive strategy of focusing on a symbolic matter that in reality stands for something other than itself, such as to trigger exclusive notions of national belonging (Edelmann 1964: 6; Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012: 138–139).

In this article, I will analyse two examples of these controversies. What make them particularly interesting is that Denmark and Norway, together with the

¹ Jan Arild Ellingsen, the Progress Party/Fremskrittspartiet in Norway, 23 March 2009, at 9:24:14 pm.
² For an overview, see the results from the VEIL-project (2006–2009): ‘Values, Equality and Differences in Liberal Democracies: Debates about Muslim women’s headscarves in Europe’ (European Commission), which combined a critical frame analysis of documents with historical-institutional analysis (e.g., Kiliç, Saharso and Sauer 2008).
other Nordic countries, are rated as the most gender equal in the world (Global Gender Gap Report 2014), and that both debates are about the wearing of veils by state officials, in this case judges (Denmark) and policewomen (Norway). We may therefore expect a high degree of tension not least between ideals of equality and the wearing of veils, and possibly also between the secularism of each country and the freedom of religion.

Birte Siim (2013) has analysed these and other Scandinavian debates on the wearing of veils, using an intersectional perspective to analyse how gender overlaps with racial, ethnic, religious and other kinds of inequality and diversity. She argues that bans on the wearing of veils have been justified by the kind of authority that actors possess in each setting, as well as by institutional and national contexts (Siim 2013: 216). In short, Siim’s (2013: 230) conclusion is that media debates tend to focus on gender equality, while political and legal debates tend to focus on principles like the freedom of religion or the neutrality of the state.

While in part I will address the same debates, I will employ a different analytical approach. My aim is to analyse in what sense these debates may be understood as a clash between different sets of values and what roles religion and gender issues play in these debates. I will argue that a focus on values may be fruitful in order to analyse how debates such as these are, above all, an expression of secularism, based on a ‘sacred narrative of secular progress’ (Woodhead 2009).

I will structure the article as follows. First, I will give a theoretical background on secularism and its association with gender equality ideals and national identity, followed by an outline of how the framing of the chosen debates may be related to a narrative of secular progress and how common values are used as part of symbolic politics. Second, I will describe the Danish and Norwegian contexts and the cases of veils by state officials. Third, I will outline my method with the research question, research design, unit of analysis and will define key concepts. Fourth, I will analyse the empirical material and, finally, I will discuss the findings in relation to theory and context before I draw my conclusions.

Values at the Heart of the Controversy between Modernity and Tradition

As just referred to, the wearing of veils by Muslim women has become the most visible issue of the controversy between Western Europe and ‘Islam’, as well as between what have been claimed to be secular and religious values (Scott 2009; Woodhead 2009). The different ways that different countries have tried to deal with these issues may be associated with the form of secularism that each country chooses to practise. As perhaps the most obvious example, the strict policy of laïcité in France has caused the country to ban the wearing of veils in public spaces, a solution that other countries have so far rejected.

However, such practice of secularism may also be viewed simply as a justification of racism, as a means to keep out threats against national unity (Scott 2007: 90). This has caused some scholars to speak of new nationalism or racialised governmentality, with women’s (and gay) rights as core civilisational values (Agustín and Sata 2013: 65; Bilge 2012: 303; Puar 2007). In a similar approach,
sexualism may be the equivalent of secularism in relation to the mediation of sexual politics, nationalism and governmentality of immigration (Bilge 2012: 307; Scott 2009).

On a deeper level, these controversies may be thought of as identity issues. At the bottom line lies the confrontation between two different sets of cultural values and orientations towards modernity (Göle 2006: 145). A number of scholars have, in similar terms, described European identity as the narrative of European progress (Calhoun et al. 2011: 6–7; Casanova 1994: 30–31; Scott 2007: 95; Woodhead 2009). In short, modernity, equality, freedom, reason, science and secularity have been set as the keys to progress over tradition, hierarchy, oppression, belief, superstition and religion. This narrative is essentially European, as religion plays a different role in the equivalent narratives in other parts of the world such as the USA. There, religion is a vehicle of democracy and freedom rather than of oppression and enslavement (Woodhead 2009: 100).

According to Woodhead (2009: 90), the key to understanding the symbolic importance of the wearing of veils lies in the sacred value that may be associated with secularism and the narrative of secular progress. Values, in her thinking and drawing on Durkheim, are moral issues that are associated with emotions, which may offer an explanation why symbols may be of such importance in many contexts. In that sense, values are not, first of all, rational or abstract norms but grounded in compelling images and stories. Sacred narratives, symbols like a cross or a national flag, all have the capacity to evoke powerful actions and people are even willing to die in the defence of them (see Anderson 2006; Riis and Woodhead 2010: 7–8).

Muslim veils, may appear to a non-Muslim majority population emotionally as the corresponding symbolic threats to the European narrative of secular progress in regards to the secular state, secular law and the sense of being at the leading edge of progress towards secular liberal values. In particular, veils may be felt as a threat towards women’s equality, science and rationality and individualism and self-expression (Woodhead 2009: 102).

In British public debate on veils, values such as freedom and in particular women’s freedom and liberation; secularism and secular progress; social cohesion in the sense that veils may foster ‘difference’; security issues such as terrorism; and civic values such as fairness, tolerance and politeness are felt to be threatened (Woodhead 2009: 91–95). However, the defenders of the wearing of veils also refer to values such as freedom with references to human rights as freedom of conscience, expression and religion. Freedom is furthermore referred to in relation to women’s equality, with veils as the sign of respect for women and resistance to the sexualisation of women. Woodhead’s study does not specifically address the wearing of veils by state officials but, rather, by (Muslim) women in general.

The progress of secular values may also finally be associated with an increasing degree of ‘neutrality’ from an idea that state policies built on ‘pure reason’ ought to be less biased. However, Kılıç (2008: 441–442), among others, questions such ideals, as it packages hegemonic cultural values of the majority ethnic group, rather than promotes any ‘real’ neutrality.

With all of this being said about the possibly close connections between religion, gender, values and identity issues, we also need to be aware that, when issues related to religious and other symbols get politicised, we may speak of
symbolic politics as a way of expressing that the regulation of these symbols is, above all, a discursive tool (Edelmann 1964: 6; Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012: 138–139). This means that issues of religion and gender, despite their connections with national identity, may well be instrumentalised and politicised just as well as any other value (Siim 2009: 2).

The Danish and Norwegian Contexts

The Nordic countries, of which Denmark and Norway are part, are considered to be homogenous to a high degree, with a number of shared cultural attributes and similar institutional arrangements (Esaiasson and Heidar 2000: ix). They are also taking an extreme position globally when it comes to the level of secular-rational values and self-expression values, as opposed to societies that emphasise traditional values in terms of religion and respect for authority (Inglehart and Welzel 2010). In a similar way, these countries are ranked as the most developed in the world in terms of gender equality (Global Gender Gap Report 2014). Policies of gender equality are carried out through extensive welfare systems that are based on an equality of status among citizens, regardless of class, market position or gender (Esping-Andersen 1990: 25). In other words, gender equality can be said to be integral to Nordic citizenship or to be part of ‘state feminism’ (Bilge 2012: 304; Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 7; Siim 2009: 3).

However, even the most secularised Western European countries are shaped by their respective Christian traditions and are, in that sense, combinations of both religious and secular components (Spohn 2003: 281–282). In the case of the Nordic countries, it may therefore be fitting to use the label ‘cultural religion’ or to think of religion as a cultural system that is used to define part of the bonds between histories, peoples and territories (Casanova 2001: 427; Demerath 2000). Such concepts may be particularly fitting when the Danish form of secularism is analysed. With a strong association between church and state, the relative lack of hierarchy in the Evangelical-Lutheran majority church (such as the absence of an archbishop) and with a right-wing populist party, which uses Christianity as a public cultural authority, Danish secularism may be characterised as Lutheran and based on cultural authority (Christensen 2010: 203). In comparison, Norwegian secularism may, rather, be characterised as a form of overlapping consensus, based on ethical authority with efforts to establish common values in a multicultural environment (see Rawls 1999: 446–448). Norway has a stronger focus on integration and multiculturalism as well as gender equality, with a higher degree of church-related religiosity, than Denmark. In the case of public debates on Muslim veils, this means in practice that in Denmark focus has been on veils as an expression of Islam as an oppressive cultural system in contrast to what is perceived as the modern liberal Danish system, while in Norway focus has been on gender equality, as a desirable common value (Christensen 2010: 139–155).

With the growth of religious diversity (Kühle 2011: 208), both gender equality and religion have become increasingly politicised. In relation to religion, this has been particularly the case with the right-wing populist Danish People’s Party and to a somewhat lesser degree with its counterpart in Norway, the Progress Party. These parties have increasingly used religion as a way of political profiling.
in a highly-competitive political environment (Lindberg 2013, 2014). As a measure of the salience of such politicisation, the parliamentary debates on the wearing of veils by state officials together with other symbol-related issues constituted 23 per cent of the speeches with references to religion in Denmark and 12 per cent in Norway in 2008/09 (Lindberg 2014). Survey data from Denmark has also shown that the prime reason for resentment towards immigrants is fear of the cultural and religious values that they may bring (Schmidt 2009: 46). As part of this process, Muslims have become the other of national identity, the means through which to define what ‘we’ are not, particularly in Denmark (Jacobsen 2009: 26–27).

In a similar way, the right-wing populist parties tend to politicise gender equality in relation to religious diversity, despite the fact that such issues are not normally included in their agenda (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007). With an emphasis on the importance of gender equality in relation to issues violating women’s rights, these parties find wider acceptance for their criticism of practices that may be associated with Muslims, such as enforced marriages and genital mutilation. Thus, alliances between right-wing populists and left-wing parties over immigration policies make them odd bedfellows, as they otherwise rarely share similar standpoints.

### The Two Cases of Veils Among State Officials

Both Denmark and Norway have applied an accommodating policy on the wearing of veils (Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012: 136). Court cases over the wearing of veils by private employees have been solved with references to legislation against discrimination on the basis of religion (Siim 2009; Siim and Kraus 2009). Furthermore, in 2008, a proposition by the Danish People’s party to ban the wearing of veils when speaking in parliament was turned down by all other parties (Siim 2013: 224).

However, (Siim and Kraus 2009: 22; see also Siim 2013: 224–226) describes the outcome of the Danish parliamentary debates in 2009 on the wearing of veils by judges in a court of law as a ‘remarkable shift’, as all religious and political symbols were already banned, despite a statement from the Independent Board of Judges that nothing prohibits judges at least from wearing veils in courtrooms. The debates were fuelled by an advertising campaign by the Danish People’s Party, showing a picture of a judge wearing a niqab with the text ‘the Islamic headscarf is the sign of female submission’ and with claims of tyranny (Siim 2013: 225).

In a similar way, the Norwegian parliamentary debates in 2009 on the wearing of veils by policewomen marked a shift. It was initiated by changes in the dress code for police officers, according to which veils were banned as part of the uniform (Siim 2013: 226). The justice minister Knut Storberget disagreed with this decision, but the final outcome, after a media debate and political resistance, confirmed that the wearing of veils by policewomen was banned. The debates in the Norwegian parliament on this issue were initiated by the Progress Party (Lindberg 2014). In 2010, the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Tribunal decided that the decision was a violation of the right to religious freedom. However, this time the justice minister disagreed with the opposition to the ban and left the regulation untouched (Siim 2013: 227).
Method

As stated in the introduction, my aim with this study is to analyse in what sense the Danish and Norwegian parliamentary debates in 2009, on the wearing of veils by state officials, may be understood as a clash between different sets of values and how religion and gender issues are used in such context. Therefore, my main research question is: What kinds of values are invoked in the reasons given to defend or criticise the right of state officials to wear veils?

My study is designed as an influential case study, which means that I will use it to explain why a seemingly problematic case does not challenge the given conceptual model (Gerring 2007: 61). Here, I intend to show why values of the freedom of women are less referred to in the debates on the wearing of veils among state officials, despite the major importance of gender equality in Denmark and Norway. From that, I will draw the conclusion that references to different values may have a common theoretical ground, in this case a common narrative of secular progress. In comparison, the value most commonly referred to British public debates on the wearing of veils was that of freedom, particularly of women, and I will compare the results from my case study with the results from that study to discuss my conclusion (Woodhead 2009).

The unit of analysis of this study consists of records from parliamentary debates on the wearing of veils by state officials in Denmark and Norway in the first half of 2009 (Folketinget 2009 and Stortinget 2009). I will study the records through content analysis, where I will analyse each speech that contains a reference to religion in these debates and characterise it with regards to the value that is invoked in the argument, for or against the use of veils by state officials (Krippendorff 2004: 33).

I understand religion in a substantial sense, as beliefs, language, symbols, activities and institutions that are used to regulate the cleavage between the empirical and super-empirical perceptions of reality (Hill 1973: 42–43). I operationalise religion as the occurrence of words such as religion, Christianity, church, Islam and Muslim and with symbols and practices that may be associated with these religions, such as crosses and the wearing of veils.

With Woodhead (2009: 96–99), I understand values as moral issues that are associated with emotions and that are not, first of all, rational or abstract norms, but grounded in compelling images and stories. Also like Woodhead (2009: 91–95) in her analysis of British public debates on the wearing of veils, I operationalise values in the following way: freedom (references to women’s freedom, feminism and sexual liberation); secularism and secular progress (references to religion as a private matter and to modernity and secularity); integration and social cohesion (references to obstacles to the integration of immigrants); security (associations with Islamic extremism); and civic values (references to fairness, politeness and tolerance). Furthermore, I will include the freedom of religion in the value of freedom and characterise and analyse any additional values as well. Finally, I will translate and include some quotations to illustrate the different speeches and the values that they invoke.

3 Folketinget in Denmark: L98 23 January, L98 19 May, L98 29 May. Stortinget in Norway: S08-09 51:3 12 February, S08-09 53:1 18 February, S08-09 64:14 23 March, S08-09 74:6 28 April, S08-09 93:1 3 June.
Empirical Analysis

In general, I characterise the Danish parliamentary debates on the wearing of veils by judges as the more aggressive, with a much higher number of speeches made with references to religion and veiling. Meanwhile, I characterise the Norwegian debates as more ambiguous over the issue of allowing the use of veils and other religious symbols among policewomen, especially as Muslim veils were allowed at that time by the army and the customs service.

In the Danish debates, 147 speeches have references to religion and I have been able to characterise the invoked value in 113 of these. In the Norwegian debates, 60 speeches have references to religion and I have been able to characterise the invoked value in 32 of these. In the rest of the speeches, the references to religion are not part of the actual argumentation and therefore not relevant to this analysis.

I will structure my empirical analysis on some of the values that Woodhead (2009: 91–95) found in British public debates on veils and one additional value. In the Danish and Norwegian debates, I found the values of freedom, secularism and secular progress and social cohesion, but not security and civic values. The additional value is what I will label neutrality, as I will explain further.

Freedom

The value of freedom is invoked in about every second speech with references to religion in the Norwegian debates and in about one third of the speeches in Denmark. On further examination, two different kinds of freedom are intended: freedom of religion and the freedom and liberation of women.

In many cases, the value of freedom of religion is used to defend the right to the wearing of veils by state officials, but it is also used by other Members of Parliament to distinguish between what should be applicable in general and what should be the case among state officials. In other words, it would be in order for a Muslim woman to wear a veil outside the setting of a position as state official, but not in her work as a judge and/or policewoman.

The value of freedom and liberation of women is only used in a few cases in these debates and then to argue against the right of state officials to wear veils, due to the importance of communicating the equality of men and women to the general public. In the following example, the value of the freedom and liberation of women is also combined with secularism in the sense of a wish for a higher degree of separation of religion in general from society:

My position is basically clear. I think we should fight for as few women as possible wearing religious symbols, whether it’s a cross, skull caps – sorry, women don’t wear skull caps – whatever it is, because I actually think that we get the best society when religion plays a lesser role than it does today (Karen Hækkerup, Social Democratic Party/Socialdemokraterne in Denmark, 23 January 2009, speech 104).

Secularism and Secular Progress

The value of secularism and secular progress is invoked in about one third of the speeches with references to religion in the Norwegian debates and in about one quarter of the Danish speeches. In all of these cases, the value is used to argue
against the right of state officials to wear veils by arguing that religion belongs strictly to the private sphere. However, some Danish Members of Parliament in favour of allowing veils among judges then argue that it is very hard to draw the line as to what ought to be considered a religious symbol or not, such as a beard or a wedding ring. In the Danish case, particularly, the logotype of the Courts of Denmark and the presence of the Danish flag in courtrooms are given attention in the debates, as they both have crosses on them. However, as it is argued by the opponents of the right of judges to wear religious and/or political symbols, the flag and the logotype are not a matter of religious symbols but, rather, expressions of Danish culture. In a Norwegian example, secularism is explicitly directed towards Islam:

Now courts of law are obviously the next target, if we are to believe what we read in the press today. Now we get a lot of cases in which some immigrant groups make special demands. Now it is the hijab, we have had demands for halal food in prison. We have got [gender]-separated swimming lessons, and we have even had demands for alcohol-free days at restaurants in Norway in order to adapt to Muslims (Per-Willy Amundsen, the Progress Party/Fremskrittspartiet in Norway, 18 February 2009, at 10:09:32 am).

Social Cohesion

The value of social cohesion is only invoked in single cases in these debates, and then in combination with secularism, to argue that the wearing of veils hampers social cohesion in society. In the following example from the Norwegian parliament, social cohesion is not invoked to argue for or against the right for policewomen to wear veils, but it is nevertheless part of a discussion of the consequences of the current situation of religious diversity:

The recent derailments in the public quarrel about integration and Islamisation shows that there is a great need for a broad debate about the common values that we want to characterise the development of society. It is important to ensure that groups do not develop that do not feel that they have something in common with the rest of society. There must be something in common that binds us together. A core of these values is the broad Christian and humanist inheritance that Norwegian society is founded on, and that is an important foundation for human rights (Bjørg Torresdal, Christian Democrats/Kristelig Folkeparti in Norway, 3 June 2009, at 09:18:06 am).

Neutrality

The value of what I will here label neutrality is invoked in about one fifth of the speeches with references to religion in the Norwegian debates and about twice as often in the Danish debates. Behind this label are claims that too many people would feel uncertain about whether a judge in particular, but also a policewoman, wearing a veil, would be impartial in their practice of law. Thereby the legal certainty could be questioned, which in turn would be in violation of the right to an impartial trial as part of human rights. In the debates, a number of Danish Members of Parliament refer to an interview with the Minister of
Justice, Brian Mikkelsen from the Conservatives (Konservative Folkeparti), as an expression of the heart of the matter:

You may get into a situation where the judge says: ‘it is adjudged that Allah is great’. It is also an utterance that will arouse suspicion that one is not completely neutral. Or if the judge prays to one or the other god (Kristeligt Dagblad, 13 November 2008).4

Summary and Discussion

In this case study, I have analysed Norwegian and Danish parliamentary debates in 2009 on the right of state officials such as officers in a court of law and/or policewomen to wear Muslim veils. My aim has been to analyse in what sense these debates may be understood as a clash between different sets of values and what roles religion and gender issues play in these debates. Therefore, my research question has been: What kinds of values are invoked in the reasons given to defend or criticise the right of state officials to wear veils?

My analysis shows that one of the most common values that have been invoked in the debates is freedom, and in particular the freedom of religion, both in defence of the right of state officials to wear veils and to distinguish between what should be permitted outside the setting of the position as state official and what should be permitted at work. Meanwhile, the freedom of women and women’s equality has been referred to more rarely. Another very common value that has been invoked is secularism and secular progress, by arguing that religion strictly belongs to the private sphere. However, such a distinction may be problematic with the presence of Christian symbols such as the cross in courts of law, a problem that some Members of Parliament explain as expressions of Danish culture rather than of religion. The third value that has been invoked most often is what I have labelled neutrality, with references to the assumed uncertainty that in particular a judge dressed in a veil may cause. Finally, social cohesion has been a value that has only been invoked in single cases. However, in a quote from one of the Norwegian debates, the value of social cohesion is associated with the assumed risk that Norwegian society is about to lose its common foundation of values.

In my understanding, these debates are a crucial example of the controversy between Western Europe and ‘Islam’, as they concern the identity of the states (Scott 2009; Woodhead 2009). While Denmark and Norway have applied largely-accommodating policies regarding the wearing of veils, these debates also mark the limits of such policies (Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012: 136). In the following, I will discuss the empirical analysis in relation to the theoretical background and structure it in two main points: how secularism is used with reference to cultural values and assumed neutrality, and how the concept of symbolic politics and the narrative of secular progress may explain why references to the freedom of women and women’s equality have been relatively few here.

4 ‘It is adjudged that’ is a translation of ‘thi kendes for ret’, which is an idiomatic expression that Danish judges use to introduce their verdict.
First, I argue that, most commonly, these debates are used to underline what are understood as cultural values as part of the secularism and neutrality of each state. While social cohesion as a value has only been invoked in individual cases, the quote from Bjørg Tørresdal about the assumed loss of a common foundation of values in Norwegian society may indicate that the values approach to these debates is key to understanding their actual purpose in defining common identity (Göle 2006: 145). As I will show next, certain values are in fact played out against others in line with the sacred narrative of secular progress (Woodhead 2009: 90).

The most obvious example perhaps is the value of secularism, according to which religion ought to be confined to the private sphere. The neutrality value may be considered to be closely related to the secularism value in that it assumes that there can be a neutral approach to public office if one adapts to, in this case, the non-Muslim majority population. In Kiliç's (2008: 441–442) understanding, such approach to neutrality packages hegemonic cultural values of the majority rather than representing any real neutrality.

This is underlined by the fact that certain Christian symbols are referred to as being cultural rather than religious, at least in the Danish context with its strong association between church and state that contributes to an understanding of religion as a cultural system and to the characterisation of Danish secularism (Casanova 2001: 427; Christensen 2010: 203; see also Demerath 2000). In this sense, secularism may be considered to be a justification of racism, as a means to protect national unity against a diversity of ethnic influences (Scott 2007: 90). Meanwhile, Norwegian secularism has been claimed to be characterised by overlapping consensus, to be based on ethical authority (Christensen 2010: 203; see also Rawls 1999: 446–448). According to Christensen (2010: 149–155), these different forms of secularism are also visible in public debates on Muslim veils in Denmark, focus has been on veils as an expression of the oppressive traditional culture of Islam, and in Norway on gender equality. However, in the debates in the study at hand, it is not that obvious, as I will show next.

Second, I argue in the following that the fact that references to freedom of religion and gender equality are overshadowed by references to neutrality should be explained through the mechanisms of symbolic politics with the narrative of secular progress (Edelmann 1964: 6; Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012: 138–139; Woodhead 2009).

The value of freedom has been invoked to a high degree in both countries. As part of this value, the freedom of religion may be referred to by both the Members of Parliament that support the possibility for state officials to wear veils and their opponents, although for different purposes. Nevertheless, this way they may all claim to express a common identity of tolerance towards religion in principle, as part of human rights and, therefore, part of progress and modernity.

However, while the freedom of women and women’s equality was a common value in Woodhead’s (2009: 91–95) study on public debate on veils in Britain, that is not the case in these particular debates in Norway and Denmark. This may come as a surprise, given the integral role of gender equality or possibly state feminism in the Nordic countries and the claims that, in particular, Norwegian debates on veils focus on gender equality (Bilge 2012: 304; Christensen 2010: 149–155; Ellingsæter and Leira 2006: 7; Siim 2009: 3). Nonetheless, these findings are well in line with Siim’s (2013: 230) conclusion from comparing Scandinavian media debates, where the focus was on gender equality, and legal and
political debates, where the focus was on principles like the freedom of religion or the neutrality of the state.

While I agree with Siim (2013: 216) that the kind of authority that actors possess in each setting, as well as the institutional and national contexts, may explain this, I would like to develop that analysis further. The fact that the parliamentary debates in this study are related to the wearing of veils by state officials rather than women in general is important. It means that the issue at stake is not just general principles on gender and religious equality or even the authority of the actors but the very identity of the modern state in terms of public trust, as I will argue next.

While Norway at this point allowed for the wearing of veils by soldiers in the army and officials in the customs service, police officers are more associated with public trust and public appearance, which may make the matter more sensitive. In the Danish case, the stronger focus on ‘neutrality’ highlights even more the vital relationship between law and public trust, which is necessary in a democracy. The message from a number of Danish Members of Parliament is, then, that Muslim women cannot be part of such trust, at least not when they wear veils.

Moreover, political competition may be another key to understanding why explicit gender issues are less common as part of the values in these debates. While in particular right-wing populist parties have been claimed to politicise religion as well as gender issues as part of symbolic politics to gain political influence, we can assume that they and other parties have simply found other reasons in these particular debates that are assumed to be just as effective (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007; Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012: 138–139; Lindberg 2014). As part of the logic of symbolic politics, the issue at stake is not the real issue but an underlying, presumably racist, one (Edelmann 1964: 6; Scott 2007: 90). In this case, by invoking the value of neutrality, common ground is established among parties on both the left wing and the right wing, although possibly for different reasons. Gender issues are here merely an expression of the underlying controversy over what may be perceived as threats towards the narrative of secular progress and are, therefore, considered to be interchangeable if other values related to that narrative are considered to fit better with the particular case.

In relation to this particular study it is therefore less possible to claim that feminism or sexularism has been used as means to demean Muslims, while the kinds of secularism that have been expressed here may well be means to justify such islamophobia (cf. Scott 2007: 90). Nevertheless, these debates are still ostensibly gendered, in the sense that the main focus is on a particular group of women (see also Bracke and Fadil 2012: 36).

Conclusion

To conclude, my analysis has shown that in particular the values of secularism and secular progress and neutrality have been used to underline a clash between a ‘sacred narrative of secular progress’ and what is perceived as its opposite, in this case represented by Muslim women wearing veils while working as state officials (Woodhead 2009: 90). The form of secularism that is practised in Denmark in particular underlines a Lutheran Christian identity in contrast to what Islam is thought to stand for, while the Norwegian debates are characterised by
a higher degree of ambiguity between a secularism based on ethical authority and a secularism that is closer to the Danish kind (see also Christensen 2010: 203). However, explicit references to women’s equality have not been used to argue for banning the wearing of veils by state officials to any great degree in the debates in either of the two countries.

As I understand these findings, references to common cultural values are used to express the secularism and neutrality of each state (Göle 2006: 145; Kiliç 2008: 441–442). Furthermore, I interpret the lower degree of explicit gender issues as an indication that the main issue at stake is a clash between the narrative of secular progress and values that are perceived as the opposite of that narrative (Woodhead 2009: 90). Gender issues may therefore be tuned down in exchange for other values, in this case neutrality of the state. This interpretation may contribute to our understanding of how symbolic politics work in practice, where the issue at stake is an expression of another underlying issue and therefore may be replaced, if that suits the intended cause (Edelmann 1964: 6; Hadj-Abdou et al. 2012: 138–139).

References


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