

Personal photo by Asli Akbas



Religious Freedom and the Headscarf Controversy

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As a Turkish woman who wears a headscarf, I think wearing a headscarf is not a detached issue from the freedom of belief or religion. It is one of the religious responsibilities of not only Muslim women but also many women from the traditions of Judaism and Christianity.

According to Islam, religious deeds, including wearing a headscarf, should be done as a person's choice with the intent of pleasing God. To me, any "religious" state institutions should not have the right to force women to wear a headscarf on behalf of God or any secular state should not deprive women from the right to wear a headscarf, thereby interfering in the relationship between religion and people. I think the only way to solve the headscarf issue is to establish or strengthen genuine democratic state institutions that do not use the headscarf issue as a tool of power or repression.

Westerners' negative feeling towards the headscarf is very understandable since many women are forced to wear it in many "Islamic" countries. The Islamic headscarf also brings to mind many events, like the Iranian Revolution and 9/11. But, Islamic clothing or the headscarf should be considered separately from these contexts. Westerners need to accept that there are many different motivations for Muslim women to wear headscarves and most of the women with headscarves wear them by their free will. Moreover, the Western democracies require the kind of thinking that respects all religions and free will.

I had the chance to live in the United States before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Of course, the reactions to my headscarf were different during those two periods. I lived almost three months in New York City before 9/11 and I was practically invisible in the streets. Then, I remember, when I got on the subway two days after 9/11, people were looking at me like I was a danger to them. But this reaction did not last very long. The United States and American people overall have had a culture of genuine democracy for decades, longer than many countries or communities have. Also, this country is more welcoming of foreigners and different religions and cultures than most of the countries in the world, including my country, Turkey. But it is obvious that the American public relies on the media a lot while they make up their thinking about Islam and other cultures.

Specifically, my country, Turkey, is an exceptional Muslim country with its 99 percent Muslim population and being a secular state. In Turkey, the Islamic headscarf in public life has been a very controversial issue for decades. For example, Muslim women in Turkey are banned from wearing the headscarf while they work in state institutions and they cannot work as doctors, lawyers, or teachers in state buildings. Although more than half