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This is a secular society. It used to be Christian, but most Anglican churches are empty on Sunday and religion plays a very small part in everyday life. When someone serves me in a shop or checks me in at an airport, I usually have no idea - or interest - in whether that person has a religion or not. Why should I, any more than they know whether I'm religious or an atheist? We don't need to know that about each other - and in fact not knowing plays a vital role in making sure we all get on with each other. In a secular society, everyone is entitled to his or her religious beliefs, to go to church or the mosque or the gurdwara - and so are those of us who don't belong to an organised religion or have no religious beliefs at all.

That's worked in this country for many years, as it does in other Western democracies - and it's one of the principal differences between theocratic states, which force a single religion on everybody - I'm thinking here of Islamic states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran - and flagrantly abuse human rights as a result. We don't hang gay men in this country, or stone women to death, or charge women who've been raped with adultery because they can't produce four male witnesses. I'm just as unhappy, by the way, with the rhetoric of Christian fundamentalists in the United States - the difference being, in a democracy, that the rights of gay people and women are protected by secular law.

What I see happening in Western Europe now is a challenge to secularism - an attempt to turn the clock back and bring religion into every area of public life. It's being driven by radical Muslims, but one of its dire effects has been to invigorate other faiths and we're already seeing the Anglican and Catholic churches flexing their muscles over such issues as their 'right' - in inverted commas - to discriminate against gay people. So what I'm arguing isn't specifically against Islam, it's against the return of religion - and inevitably conflict between religions - to a central role in public life. It just so happens that the most visible symbol of that movement to desecularise British society is the Muslim veil in its various forms - the niqab, jilbab, burka and so on.

I have absolutely no hesitation in saying that I find the practice of covering women offensive. I'm not even certain that it's Islamic - I spent yesterday afternoon with a group of Muslim women, including the distinguished sociologist Kadiga Safwat and the Iranian writer Shusha Guppy, who are all adamant that the Koran does not require women to be veiled. And it's certainly clear that the vast majority of women who cover themselves in countries like Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia do so not out of choice, but to avoid being beaten or killed.

It has to be said, at this point, that wearing the niqab and the jilbab has a rather different meaning in Western Europe. Apart from anything else, it's a very recent phenomenon in this country - certainly not an established practice. One woman I interviewed adopted it only four years ago, and a BBC researcher told me he hadn't been able to find any woman who's been wearing it for more than three or four years. The women who have adopted the niqab say they're doing it out of modesty, but the paradox is that there could hardly be a more certain way to draw attention to themselves. That's why I regard it as a very deliberate political provocation - and those of us who oppose it are entitled to make a political statement back. There's no doubt in my mind that British women, born and educated here, who suddenly start wearing extreme forms of Islamic dress are signalling their rejection of most of the things I value about British society - including the right of women to enjoy public space on the same terms of men. Saying that women can't go outdoors unless they cover their faces and bodies signals that they have

only conditional access to the wider world - and the result, in theocracies such as Iran, is a ludicrous situation in which women aren't allowed to go to football matches or take part in mixed athletics. One British Muslim I interviewed told me she can't eat in a restaurant unless her table is screened to avoid men seeing her eating - imposing extraordinary limits on her life as well as being completely paranoid.

This goes to the heart of my objection to the veil - that it rests on a view of male-female relations which is nothing less than paranoid. According to this view, men live on a knife edge of lust which they are quite unable to control - and the entire responsibility for policing that lust falls on women. I've been told this by women who wear the niqab - a couple of months ago, one of them told me that men used to drool over her every morning on Ealing Broadway tube station until she started wearing the niqab - and it's certainly the view of the Grand Mufti of Australia, Sheikh Taj Aldin al Hilali.

This is what Sheikh Hilali said in a sermon on adultery to 500 worshippers in a mosque in Sydney in September: 'If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside....and the cats come to eat it....whose fault is it, the cats' or the uncovered meat's? The uncovered meat is the problem. If she was in her room, in her home, in her hijab, no problem would have occurred'.

The Sheikh also ruminated on a series of gang rapes in Sydney six years ago, talking about women who 'sway suggestively', wear makeup and what he considers immodest dress. Then the case comes to court and, I quote, 'you get a judge without mercy [rahma] and he gives you 65 years....but the problem all began with who?'

Blaming the victim isn't exclusive to Islam, but this pernicious notion that women are responsible for men's behaviour, no matter how bad, is in essence the creed of the rapist. It's also incredibly insulting to men, the vast majority of whom are able to glimpse a woman's face on the way to work or across a crowded restaurant without planning to rape her.

Its effects on women are even worse. There's no doubt at all that it isolates Muslim women, many of whom are economically and socially marginalised in the first place - especially if they have only recently arrived in this country, as opposed to women born and brought up here. We talk a great deal about multiple identities these days but the only thing we know about a woman who wears the niqab is that she's a devout Muslim - and that she subscribes to ideas, such as the ones I've outlined above, that many non-Muslims regard as outlandish. It's a way of forcing minority religious opinions down everyone's throats, to the exclusion of everything else, and it's hardly surprising that so many people (including Muslim women who don't wear the veil) feel uncomfortable with it.

What it also does is set up a category of 'modest', 'pious' women who deserve respect and protection, while the rest of us - as Sheikh Hilali put it so vividly - are actually inviting sexual assault. We've already seen some non-Muslim men rushing to defend the niqab on precisely these grounds - that they'd rather see a modestly-dressed Muslim woman than a Western woman in the 'sluttish' clothes (I'm quoting the actor Steven Berkoff here) that I choose to wear.

It's because the practice of covering women damages all of us that I'm so opposed to it. In conclusion, I want to make a distinction between calling for it to be banned, which I've never done - although there are clearly circumstances in which it cannot be worn for practical reasons, such as in classrooms or when a woman is a witness in a court case - and challenging the ideology it represents. The niqab, the jilbab and the burka are symbols of inequality. They represent a paranoid account of relations between the sexes, and a very deliberate challenge to

the secular nature of the British state. The increasing presence of the veil on our streets rightly causes anxiety in the minds of everyone who believes in universal human rights. For all those reasons, I find it deeply offensive.