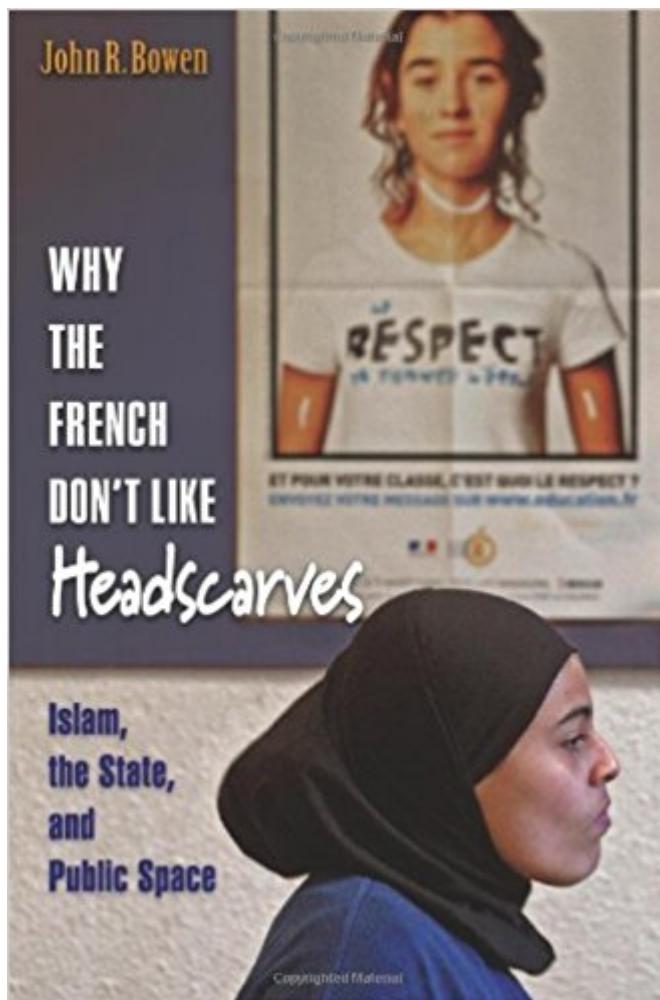


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# Why The French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, The State, And Public Space



## Synopsis

The French government's 2004 decision to ban Islamic headscarves and other religious signs from public schools puzzled many observers, both because it seemed to infringe needlessly on religious freedom, and because it was hailed by many in France as an answer to a surprisingly wide range of social ills, from violence against females in poor suburbs to anti-Semitism. *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves* explains why headscarves on schoolgirls caused such a furor, and why the furor yielded this law. Making sense of the dramatic debate from his perspective as an American anthropologist in France at the time, John Bowen writes about everyday life and public events while also presenting interviews with officials and intellectuals, and analyzing French television programs and other media. Bowen argues that the focus on headscarves came from a century-old sensitivity to the public presence of religion in schools, feared links between public expressions of Islamic identity and radical Islam, and a media-driven frenzy that built support for a headscarf ban during 2003-2004. Although the defense of *laïcité* (secularity) was cited as the law's major justification, politicians, intellectuals, and the media linked the scarves to more concrete social anxieties--about "communalism," political Islam, and violence toward women. Written in engaging, jargon-free prose, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves* is the first comprehensive and objective analysis of this subject, in any language, and it speaks to tensions between assimilation and diversity that extend well beyond France's borders.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"As Bowen rightly suggests in the closing section of his book (having dealt with recourse to legislation in the middle), underlying concerns about the development of separate communities (communautarisme), radical Islam and gender discrimination are concealed by the dispute over headscarves."--Malcolm Crook, *Times Higher Education Supplement*"[An] excellent book"--Richard Wolin, *Nation*"[A] lucid and thought-provoking book."--David A. Bell, *New Republic*"John R. Bowen notes that since the French Revolution, in which the church was seen as a prop for oppressive state policies, the government has historically discouraged public displays of religion. . . . Why the French Don't Like Headscarves should be read by every American who holds public office as well as everyone else who cares about this great question of our day: What should we ask of those who want to live in our country?"--David Kirby, *Chicago Tribune*"John Bowen's Why the French Don't Like Headscarves is . . . more a book about French political culture writ large than about Islam and France. And so it should be: Islam is now intrinsically linked with the definition of what it means to be French in political terms. . . . Bowen cleverly and vividly describes for an American audience the French political debate without simplifying or distorting it. He skillfully blends historical background, factual descriptions of events, in-depth analysis and lively discussions with philosophers and politicians, social workers and ordinary people he meets in the street. The sample of opinion he proffers conveys well the full complexity and diversity of the debate, which Bowen makes intelligible for a large audience."--Olivier Roy, *American Interest*"Bowen gives a very good account of the national controversy. Bowen interviewed a number of the actors, on both sides, from the top levels of government down to some expelled girls, and produces a well-balanced account.... Well worth reading."--Jean-Paul Poirier, *European Review*"Thoughtful and refreshing. . . . Even though the book focuses on France, issues about identity, religion in schools and the best way of achieving integration are highly relevant to many Western societies. Why the French Don't Like Headscarves is a timely publication that should increase understanding of such controversial subjects."--Clarissa Woodberry, *Culture Wars*"Bowen . . . provides a good discussion of France's historical traditions."--Philip H. Gordon, *Foreign Affairs*"American anthropologist John Bowen . . . explains why headscarves on young French girls sparked an international debate on the nature of secular society and the role of religious observance in contemporary European society."--Kathy English, *Globe and Mail*"Bowen's sharp analysis flicks between the debate's twin poles: are girls wearing scarves to be treated as individuals or as 'future citizens of France'?"--Tony Maniaty, *Australian*"Bowen has written an excellent study on French political culture. He should now add a similar study on the political culture of Muslims in Europe in general."--Hendrik Hansen, *International Review of Modern Sociology*"Bowen's study is restricted to an account of a debate in France but it

has the potential to inform similar questions around other issues of dealing with cultural differences. The research employs a creative methodology to deal with an informed and self-conscious public sphere. The book should become mandatory reading for students of social sciences as well as policy makers."--Mohammad Talib, *Journal of Islamic Studies*"This book is a sensitive narrative analysis of events leading up to the banning of headscarves in public schools. Bowen never judges, he only narrates. He does not come to any conclusions about the outcome of the law, but aims at an increased understanding of the problems of diversity, integration and fragmentation facing the French. This work is important for the understanding of France today, but it is also relevant to all Western societies."--Wilhelm Pretorius, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*"Bowen lets his discerning narrative voice take readers on a journey through contemporary France, shaking the very foundation of this society. This is important. The idea of the enlightened and secular European, needed to discipline the religious despot from the south, is far from limited to France."--Per-Erik Nilsson, *Temenos*"One of the fascinating aspects of Bowen's book is the way in which he assembled his information and documentation about the 2004 law. . . . The vast number of cases which he culled in researching his book is both admirable for its depth and for the way in which intra-Muslim passions were ignited in the debate over headscarves."--Arnold Ages, *Chicago Jewish Star*"Bowen wrote a marvellous book which illustrates that 'affairs' concerning Muslims and non-Muslims cannot be explained in terms of a general incompatibility of Islam and the West, but call for detailed analysis of local civic cultures, as well as a contextualized understanding of specific domestic and foreign factors contributing to societal tensions."--Marjo Buitelaar, *Social Anthropology*"Why the French Don't Like Headscarves is a fascinating synthesis of the elements that make up modern France, and as Bowen demonstrates, the debate is much more than a discussion or apprehensions about the rise of (radical) Islam in the postcolonial era; rather, the debate over les voiles is representative of the increasing fragmentation of French society, highlighting issues that are much more grave than a simple scarf."--Alexandra Jerome, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*"[T]his book presents an accessible analysis of public discourse in France. For geographers, the book provides an excellent example of the ways that different social actors idealize and actively construct public space, and that certain bodies and bodily practices--in this case, Muslim schoolgirls and their headscarves--become the focal point of struggles to define the nature of public space. . . . [H]is analysis clearly contributes to a conceptualization of public space as ambiguous and contested, and it invites us to view conflicts over belonging and social membership through a spatial lens."--Caroline R. Nagel, *Cultural Geographies*"John R. Bowen's work as presented here poses many significant questions and gives valuable suggestions for further

research projects in this area."--Safiye Yildiz, H-Net Reviews"I would like to strongly recommend Bowen's book because through the lenses of one specific issue, readers can learn a lot about the history of laïcité, the colonial legacy of France in countries such as Morocco and Algeria, the constitution of the French Muslim community, the interplay between French institutions, and that between different interest groups within and outside France."--Elena Vesselinov, Women's Studies Quarterly"[T]he longer-duree history of France's ambiguous relationship with Islam (and headscarves) merits fuller integration into this debate. Bowen's book points usefully in this direction. While remaining grounded in the more recent history of the republic, to which he brings fresh perspective and illuminating analysis."--Mary Dewhurst Lewis, French Politics, Culture & Society

"This book casts a great deal of light on the events leading up to the French law banning Muslim headscarves in schools. Bowen takes us through the strange and often distorted debate that culminated in the decision to pass a new law. He shows the roots of this decision in French history and politics, with a marvelous eye for nuance and a sensitivity to the many positions which clashed in the debate. The result is a work that not only is tremendously important for an understanding of France today, but that also has relevance for similar debates that are now in train in many other Western societies."--Charles Taylor, Northwestern University"This book, ostensibly an account of the French debates on Muslim headscarves in public schools, is a thoughtful and deep probe into French political culture, the legacy of colonialism, and the difficulty for a state that refuses to recognize communal differences in the public sphere to accommodate millions of Muslim immigrants. It is a timely, learned, and provocative work."--Stanley Hoffmann, Harvard University"France's decision to ban religious signs in public schools was quite puzzling, if not downright crazy, to many outsiders. In *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves*, John Bowen manages to make sense of the apparent madness by carefully tracing the disparate threads of the issue, in particular by replacing the debate within the specific French context of the long, complicated relationship between Church and State. This book should be read by all those who seek a fair and comprehensive analysis of the headscarves decision and of the broader question of the place of Muslims in contemporary French society."--Sophie Meunier, Princeton University, author of *The French Challenge: Adapting to Globalization*"This extremely important book brings us a fresh and innovative analysis of its subject. What is new is that it is not by a French scholar--who would be immersed in the heated passions of the issue--but by an American anthropologist who decodes for us the chronology and the political and philosophical foundations of this particular debate."--Malika Zeghal, University of Chicago Divinity School, author of *Les islamistes marocains*

Three years after the facts, is it still worthwhile to revisit the French government's decision to ban Islamic headscarves and other religious signs from public schools? Should we not rather just let go, have time heal whatever wounds may have been caused, and move on to something else? If John Bower chose to dedicate a book to that decision and to the deliberations that led to it, it is not just because the law seems strange to outsiders and cannot be easily interpreted starting from a liberal viewpoint. It is, above all, because he felt that "its passage was one of those key moments in a country's life at which certain anxieties and assumptions come to the surface, when people take stock of who they are and of what kind of social life they wish to have." To be true, the French are adept at staging such debates about themselves. The nation that invented the salons philosophiques and the art of conversation has a passion for probing into its own identity and entertains the belief that all social ills may be amenable to abstract reasoning and enlightened lawmaking. This is not only a matter of belief, but of social organization: the author finds that "French politicians, writers about public affairs, television 'talking heads', and philosophers are much more likely to read one another's work, be related to one another, or indeed be the same person than is the case in most other countries." These literati tend to base their opinion about social trends on anecdotes and media commentary, not hard data or sociological evidence. In a strange twist of cartesian thinking, they believe that if a theory is refuted by facts, then you have to change the facts, not the theory. The theory here is that schools are a sanctuary of republican values, a sacred institution whose mission is to create a universal social morality in the minds of French pupils and to mold them into autonomous, rational and public-minded citizen. Philosophically, this conception is rooted in a certain brand of political philosophy originating with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one that emphasizes general interests and shared values over individual interests and pluralism. Historically, it is associated with the figure of the hussard noir de la République, the schoolteacher in rural districts who was the designated agent to turn "peasants into Frenchmen" and have the Catholic church abdicate its control over the minds of primary school pupils. The reality is that state schools in contemporary France have to integrate an increasingly diverse population, notably the children of immigrants from North Africa, and that they cannot really cope with all the social requests that are imposed upon them. It is in this context that wearing headscarves in state schools came to be seen as a threat to the central values of the Republic and a challenge to three hard-won battles: the fight to keep religion from controlling young minds, the struggle to forge a common French identity, and the promotion of gender equality in public and private life. The law banning headscarves in schools can therefore be seen as a product of a historical trajectory as well as a political response to the

perceived threats of Islamism, communalism and sexism. Explaining that law, as the author does, "requires unpacking a great deal about France, including France's very particular history of religion and the state, the great hopes placed in the public schools, ideas about citizens and integration (and the challenges posed by Muslims and by Islam to those ideas), the continued weight of the colonial past, the role of television in shaping opinion, and the tendency to think that passing a law will resolve a social problem." That the author does so without losing a sense of sympathy and understanding for the young girls most directly affected by this measure is a testimony to his humanity and to his skills as a storyteller.

Excellent discussion of the many reasons (legal, political, constitutional, social, historical) why this subject is so controversial in France. I thought it was interesting that some people cited or interviewed in the book felt that one of the reasons why there are tensions between Moslems and non-Moslems in France is that (page 157) "... Social and political problems found in France's poor neighborhoods are due in large part to French failures to welcome Muslim immigrants and their descendants." I find this view simply astounding. As far as I am concerned, a government or society is under no obligation at all to welcome or accommodate or do anything for immigrants. If you want to immigrate to another country, you must adapt its customs, values, and beliefs. My great-grandparents adapted to this country; they never expected anyone to adapt to them. My wife (I am a widower now) was an immigrant from a middle-eastern country. She adapted completely to the US. She studied English as a second language at the local community college. By the time we met, her English was flawless. The only thing she ever asked of me was to allow her to raise our son in her religion, to which I agreed. She routinely socialized with other immigrants of her nationality and I had no problem with that. But she never expected Americans to change their cultural values to accommodate her. In fact, she told me on numerous occasions that she appreciated that Americans were (for the most part) very tolerant people. In her native country, she had to endure significant legal and social discrimination both in her personal life and in her profession because she was a woman (and an architectural designer, which was predominantly a male profession in her native country).

You will find an excellent review and analysis of the controversial law passed in France in 2004 which banned clothing with clear religious affiliation from being worn in public schools. The creation of this law, which targeted the Islamic headscarf, has raised discussion in France and elsewhere about the definition and limits of "freedom of religion" in the public context. How did the policy come

to pass in French legislation? How did the particular school incidents escalate to national attention? This book will answer these questions informatively and engagingly. I read this for a class at Northern Arizona University, and from an anthropology undergrad's perspective, I rank this among the better books I've read.

This book eruditely and factually reports on the many sides of this issue and lets the reader draw his or her own conclusions.

Thanks!!

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