

The Niqab/Veil Debate: Old Prejudices, Same Concerns

The Muslim Council of Britain today expressed its concern at the direction of the national conversation currently taking place on the *niqab*, the veil that covers the entire face. This follows last week's move by Birmingham's Metropolitan College to reverse a ban on this attire and today's decision by a judge to require a defendant to remove her niqab. This has also led to a government minister to call for a national debate on this issue.

Mrs. Talat Ahmed, chair of the Muslim Council of Britain's Social and Family Affairs Committee said: "The recent events will once again generate controversy when in fact what we really need is sensible, non-hysterical conversation. The Minister Jeremy Browne calls for a national debate on the niqab, yet we have been debating this for over ten years now -- if not more. And every time we discuss the niqab, it usually comes with a diet of bigoted commentary about our faith and the place of Islam in Britain."

"There are few people who wear the niqab, and they should be allowed to wear this veil if they freely decide to do so. All Islamic jurisdictions make provision for necessity and exceptional circumstances"

"Nevertheless, this is a personal choice. In Britain, we cherish our right to freedom of religion. I would like to remind those who call for a ban to heed the warning of minister Damian Green who said that introducing such a ban would be 'un-British'. To do so would involve embarking on a slippery slope where the freedom to wear religious attire of all faiths would be at risk."

Comparing the experience of other countries, Talat Ahmed added: "In Canada, the state of Quebec is attempting to follow France by introducing the ban as well. But the higher virtues of freedom are being demonstrated in Anglophone Canada where a hospital has bravely taken out a recruitment ad featuring a smiling hijabi young woman captioned: "We don't care what's on your head, we care what's in it."

On the question of whether the niqab is an Islamic requirement, Talat Ahmed said: "We recognise that there are different theological approaches to the niqab. Some consider this to be an essential part of their faith, while others do not.

Even amongst those who do consider the niqab to be an ultimate expression of their faith, there are some who emphasise the need to be practical when there is an essential need to show one's face -- for example, for reasons of security.

Even amongst members of the Muslim Council of Britain, there are different views on the niqab, and how Muslim women who wear such attire, can make a positive contribution to society. Islamic practices allow for certain exceptions, and in the spirit of being reasonable. That debate will continue, but it must be done and led by Muslim women, who freely decide to wear, or not wear the niqab or hijab."