

Dystopia:

The dark-eyed girl points at the baby's eyes, delighted to discover that they are blue like her brother's.

Stop that, her equally dark-eyed mother admonishes. It is very impolite to even notice, much less point out, other people's differences.

Dystopia:

In a busy beehive of a Ministry, workers in their identical offices perform identical, menial tasks. They dare not be anything different than their brothers in the next room; to do so is to destroy the harmony and efficiency their nation has finally achieved.

France:

Two students pass each other in a corridor. They are dressed very much alike. They are on their way to different homes, where they will eat very different food and say different prayers, but neither knows just from passing to whom they will pray.

Is France becoming a dystopia, now?

Increased contact and confrontation of different religions is the inevitable result of a world globalized. With its recent surge in immigration, France has become the theatre of much of this confrontation and has certainly seen its share of ethnic conflict, clashes of ideals that often result in violence. Adamantly secular since the Revolution—during which it purged its first religious symbol, the clergy—the nation has long embraced the absence of religious difference as effective prevention for the conflicts that result. It is to this idea—the paradigm of which is the banning of religious symbols in public schools—that France, confronted with religious differences among its newest citizens, has retreated with increasing frequency. The justification behind this new policy is to eliminate along with religious symbols open hostility between different religious groups and facilitate the assimilation of new immigrants into the national French culture.

Perhaps the brainchild of this new policy did not pause long enough in his work to consider the consequences of its actions. Perhaps he is a stumbling, bright-eyed idealist who believes that, with a sufficient amount of its determination and dedication, all obstacles it will transcend. Whatever the reason, it cannot be denied that France's new policy is hardly the product of sophisticated reasoning.

The accepted Western model of a successful civilization includes a diverse population that lead a harmonic existence—a characteristic for which nations that wish to label themselves as “progressive” all strive. Immigrants to whom France's high standard of living and sophisticated culture hold high appeal should make the nation's

attempt to become the ideally successful civilization a considerably simpler task, yet the nation paradoxically continues to try its utmost in eliminating this very same diversity. Religious symbols, according to lawmakers, cannot be worn because they offend—but it is not the absence, but the *tolerance*, of offensive ideas that “progressive” societies preach. It urges particular religious groups not react negatively, because all other religions must subscribe to this law as well—failing to realize that this is the very reason behind their dissatisfaction, that they are angered because their nation is effectively denying them a distinct identity of their own. The elimination of religious symbols, supporters of the law gush, reflect their nation’s respect for its potpourri of different religions—but making the assumption that every Muslim woman only wears her hijab out of coercion and a subservient attitude to men only displays cross-cultural ignorance. Neither is forcing an individual to remove from themselves items deemed mandatory for the practice of her religion is not in any way a sign of understanding and respect. It can easily become an outright denial of *personal* respect to this individual, as well: the removal of the religious symbol that she sports is the erasure of her personal identity, of her sense of belonging to a community, of what may be a new immigrant’s only link to her old, familiar country in the midst of a bewildering new culture. If she happens to subscribe to certain beliefs, she might even believe that by removing her religious garment, she is condemning herself to hell.

Resorting to such extreme measures to create religious harmony is hardly in accordance with the French ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Certainly there is no *liberté* involved in such a law as this—on the contrary, it takes away from all affected their personal liberty, the freedom to practice the religions they want to practice, to express themselves as individuals, to live life the way they would like to see it lived. Making assumptions about other religions out of ignorance and antipathy, attempting to force each to conform to an idealistic national standard is not by any means an effort to acknowledge their value to society, individual or collectively—a basic recognition that belongs equally to all human beings. To implement fellowship and goodwill along such a diverse spectrum of religious groups by force will not cultivate any genuine friendship among them; groups may even begin to blame one another for being the cause of such a diversity that has deprived them of their personal identity, that has caused them to question their own worth as individuals. A whitewashing of differences and blurring of undeniable distinctions between the groups becomes the cause of mutual antagonism, rather than a mutual acceptance and respect on the foundations of which the nation can build *fraternité*, the glorious brotherhood of man that they so desire.

France is still light-years away from becoming a totalitarian dystopia based on fear of differences and an intolerance of individuality; diversity is not yet the anathema that all public displays of religious affiliation have become. Still, it cannot be denied that the ban on religious articles in public schools is not only conceived of grievously flawed

reasoning, but is also in direct contradiction to the celebrated Western ideal of individual liberty, the inalienable right to be what one wants to be in pursuit of happiness— words penned by Thomas Jefferson, considered a friend of France by both the French and Americans alike. Western civilization is founded on such an ideal; neither is France exempt from it. In all subject matters other than religion, it admirably isn't.

Religion remains the eyesore of this staunchly democratic nation. It attempts to create religious tolerance and only errs, evidently, in its *approach*; this approach can be fixed by the repeal of this ban and a revolution of the thought process that created it. In lieu of penalizing students for sporting religious articles, it can dole out punishments to students that make derogatory remarks about a religious article sported by another. Rather than recoil in fear of a publicly displayed religious symbol, it can educate its students about the history and meaning behind each so they will not recoil similarly in the future. Instead of eliminating differences that exist between each student, it can teach all students to accept and understand the diversity that makes their nation as functional and diverse as it is—to appreciate differences of others, and to celebrate their own.

On another day the two students will walk towards one another in the corridor. One has hidden all her hair underneath her scarf and another has hers only tied loosely about her face. They smile and as they pass one another their two scarves will touch for an instant. The materials rise and fall and as they do every ripple and every swell will be one that says, I am different from you as you are from me as we are from everyone else. Yet we can still smile, occupy the same corridor and rejoice in it all the while.

It is then that the audience, whoever they are, of this theatre of diversity will grace the players with a standing ovation.