

The Dress Code without a Yashmak

By Xhavit Shala

The debates surrounding religious issues will continue to be present more and more in the daily discussion among the public and the Albanian society.¹ Naturally there will be debates about surrounding Islam as the religion of a considerable number of Albanians as there may well be tomorrow debates about the Orthodox and Catholic faith.² We should not be surprised about this happening, but rather be prepared for it. The current debate surrounding the use of the Yashmak, in spite of the abuse in terms calls for a clarification. What is being discussed is not the Jashmak but the head covering.

There has been pointless attention focused on the yashmak which has been removed since 80 years now from the wardrobe of Albanian Muslim women. The Yashmak is no longer part of the tradition of Islam in Albania. It can also be said that the attempts of Wahabi groups to encourage, even financially, the introduction of yashmak in the dress code have failed. The yashmak is not used even in schools with a notable religious profile, such as the madrasa. The Chairman of the Muslim Community, Mr. Selim Muça, has officially stated his position against the yashmak.³

The whole public debate on the issue has been built on a misunderstanding, and in the worst case, in a deliberate miss-information of public opinion aimed at inciting tension and unnecessary reactions. These intentions may include also the attempt to incite demonstrations, like the ones undertaken by women in France, and create the image of an illumination of the Albanian society. As it can be seen in the abuse with the terms, those who initiated this debate or misinforming the public and the media can play a very important role in clarifying the issue. The media should be careful and prepared not to become a prey to and a medium for the distribution of disinformation. "The disinformation of public opinion is a powerful instrument that can create domestic instability. Inaccurate information may intentionally or accidentally create situations of insecurity and tension that can lead to public reactions and incorrect decision making"-the National Security Document of the Republic of Albania says.

The laicity is one of the sacred principles of our schools. It is a principle established in our constitution and laws and reflected in the content of our curricula and religious

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² The article was published in daily "Shqip", October 21, 2006, and weekly "MAPO", October 28, 2006

³ The Chairman of the Muslim Community, Haxhi Selim Muça, in a media interview given on October 20, 2006 has said that he is against the wearing of the yashmak in public institutions. He said that he supports the wearing of head coverings by women believers and said that there is misunderstanding created between the head covering and a yashmak. He said that the yashmak means the covering of the whole face which is something that isn't mandatory for women to do.

indoctrination in schools is strictly forbidden. With regard to the debate in question, it is important that the law provide a definition for religious symbols. In my opinion, the head covering or a cross necklace should not be included in the category of religious symbols that undermine the secular nature of our school. These elements only demonstrate personal respect for religious creeds. When the Muslim head covering is acceptable to Blair in the UK, or Prodi in Italy or even Mr. Berisha in Albania, why should it scare some others in Durres? All of these elements, should however, be regulated by law and regulations.

The student from Durres insists on wearing the head covering in the class room not as a Muslim missionary but as her personal choice. If the school had a regulation and uniform approved the student would then have been faced with the choice of either accepting it or choosing to study elsewhere.

The head scarf is not used only by Muslim women. I would not like to think that the Durres University officials want to follow in the footsteps of the leaders of the Naim Frashëri high school who in February, 1967, rose with the sharp sword of the Communist Party ideology to fight the religious ideology and prejudices and backward traditions”,⁴ becoming at that time the initiator of the lynching campaign against religious institutions in our country.

Atheism, that could be an individual choice, should not be allowed to become a movement against religion, which was a feature of the communist state. In our today's democratic society where the freedom of religion is considered sacred, anti-religious actions are considered criminal. Atheism should also never be confused with Laïcité because the latter is not a personal choice but a legal obligation that respects the fundamental freedoms and rights of man.

The wearing of the head covering or other religious signs is personal choice of an individual. This choice should be respected as long as it does not violate the law, the regulations or other people's freedoms. In my personal opinion, the wearing of religiously significant symbols should not be encouraged but neither should the persons

⁴ On February 8, 1967, “Zëri i popullit”, the official paper of the Albanian Labour (Communist) Party, ran on its first page: “A Revolutionary Initiative of the students and teachers of the High School “Naim Frashëri” Durres”: With the sharp sword of the Party's ideology against the religious ideology, prejudices and backward customs, and went on reporting about how the students and teachers of this high school had undertaken action against manifestations of religious activity. The school had created working groups that engaged in atheist propaganda, distributed posters and opened bookshops that contained atheist literature. Soon this campaign moved beyond the walls of one school and spread to other schools. These actions were soon followed by violent actions against religious institutions. In the coming months the frenzy affected all religious institutions across the country. The party organized meetings everywhere talking against the practice of religion and the movement was taking the shape of a Chinese Cultural Revolution in miniature. According to the State Archives (Dossier 20, page 36) by May of 1967, 2035 religious centers were closed. 1270 of them were mosques, 157 Catholic Churches and Monasteries and 608 Orthodox Churches and Monasteries.

who wear them be lynched. Let this remain an individual choice of the individuals regulated the relations that they will establish with the surrounding environment.

The respect for the individual freedoms demonstrates the level of emancipation of a society. Time has come for the society to consider also the introduction of religious education into public schools as is the case in many democratic western countries. These classes should undoubtedly remain secular in nature and aim at equipping the students with respect and understanding about other religions and the values of life.

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