

## ***The headscarf in Turkey: from religious symbol to political tool***

Istanbul - With Abdullah Gül just elected as President of Turkey, the headscarf debate has yet again been brought to the forefront. Although the ban on wearing headscarves in public places took effect in 1998, the discussion has never stopped and has even gained new momentum with the possibility of a First Lady who covers her head. However, renewed attention does not necessarily bring new insights. The headscarf debate in Turkey is therefore not only alive but also deadlocked.

Turkey is not the only country where the headscarf issue is going in circles. A few weeks ago, newspapers reported that a German Muslim teacher wanted to wear her headscarf while teaching in 'the style of Grace Kelly'. This meant wearing a headscarf while showing hair in the front. The court decided that a Grace Kelly scene from a movie had nothing to do with her religious reasons to wear the scarf, and thus did not allow her to wear the veil.

Both legally and religiously, her proposal was questionable. The purpose of the veil is that it should cover the hair in an effort to hide those parts of the female body that carry sexual significance, or that show their 'ornaments' as the Qur'an states (Surah 24:31). The Qur'an does not explicitly mention that the hair should be fully covered. But through scholarly interpretation of Qur'an, *hadith* (oral traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) that developed in Muslim societies over the years, the verse was interpreted as such.

Secular-minded people tend to argue that the headscarf should be banned because it is a symbol of women's oppression. They believe that women wearing a *hijab*, *niqab* or *burqa* are forced to do so by their husbands or societal norms to prevent them from displaying too much of their feminine sensuality.

According to secularists, women should be allowed to wear what they want and express themselves freely. But what about those women who freely choose to wear a headscarf? And what about the ones who combine individual expression and religious tradition by wearing a headscarf?

The wife of Turkey's new president, for example, shows it can all go together perfectly. After a heated debate about whether the wife of the symbolic leader of a secular country should wear a headscarf in public, a compromise was proposed: Gül's wife is to have a trendy and 'new' type of headscarf designed by a good personal friend and fashion designer from New York.

It isn't such a novel idea though. On the streets of Istanbul, one sees fashionable headscarves everywhere. Many veiled women wear their bright scarves in a way that certainly would not upset any Versace. Like many women they simply try to look as good as they can, and their veil is certainly not ruining those efforts.

But of course, many say that wearing the headscarf in such a manner is hypocritical. An item traditionally used to make a woman less of a sexual object has now become an extension of their attractiveness. Once again then, people have found something objectionable to their attire.

Unfortunately, women just cannot seem to win. In whatever way they wear – or don't wear – the headscarf, the whole discussion leads to a dead end.

In fact, it is not a discussion. It is a trap, set by men to trap other men. And the bait is women.

Secular men say: "The way you force your women to look is oppressive and intolerable." Religious men say: "The way you do not allow our women to look is undemocratic and intolerable." Yet the only thing that is truly intolerable is that the debate is using women as a ping-pong ball between the

two sides.

Both sides use a symbol with variable meanings for personal and political purposes. The headscarf, which can be worn for many different reasons, is not a problem in itself. But acting as if the headscarf has a singular meaning is a problem. Only then does it become a debate between forcing women to wear it and protesting against it.

Yet the gravest problem is not reducing the headscarf to a political tool. Doing the same to the women who wear them is worse. It doesn't matter whether one makes them into "sexual objects", "religious objects" or "political objects", human beings should not be seen as objects in any discussion.

Author: Jonas Slaats

Source: Yunus News & Common Ground News - 28/08/07

Jonas Slaats is a Belgian theologian living in Turkey and editor of Yunus News, a website dedicated to collecting, filtering and analyzing religious news. This article was a joint piece by the Common Ground News Service (CGNews) and Yunus News and can be accessed at [www.commongroundnews.org](http://www.commongroundnews.org) and [www.yunusnews.com](http://www.yunusnews.com).