

Unsecular America: Religious freedom does not demand a privatized faith

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Christians in the U.S. often worry about the nation's "secularism" and the attendant privatizing of religion. While it's true that the U.S. is not officially religious, and there are many forces that lead people to treat faith as merely a private matter, the country's political tradition and constitutional framework do not demand such a result. That is clear when one considers the counterexample of France. In the current French debate over whether to allow public school students to wear religious garb and to display religious symbols, "secularism" is invoked as a political ideal in a way that does not occur in the U.S.

For the sake of secularism—and with a worried eye on the increasing visibility of Muslims—President Jacques Chirac has proposed a ban on conspicuous religious attire such as Muslim head scarves, Jewish yarmulkes and Christian crosses in public schools. Polls suggest that most French regard such a law as necessary for preserving the nation's identity as a secular republic.

In the U.S., students' right to wear religious garb falls naturally under the First Amendment guarantee of the "free expression" of religion. A law like the one being considered in France would not get off the ground. In the American model, public space is cherished not as an arena free of religious expression but as an arena open to it. The government's role is not to enforce "secularism" (or to enforce a religious point of view), but to accommodate religious and nonreligious expression in a neutral manner.

In 1995 President Clinton spelled this out in an advisory statement on "religious expression in public schools." He noted that "nothing in the First Amendment converts our public schools into religion-free zones, or requires all religious expression to be left behind at the schoolhouse door." The statement went on to

address the issue of student dress: "Students may display religious messages on items of clothing to the same extent that they are permitted to display other comparable messages," it said, and schools may not prohibit attire that is "a part of students' religious practice."

A revealing account of the French perspective appeared in an editorial in the *International Herald Tribune* (February 2) by Guy Coq. Defending the French mode of secularism, Coq traced the "intrusion" of religious symbols in French schools to "an excess of individualism, that philosophy so revered by Americans." In Coq's view, Muslims girls who wear the hijab are heedlessly putting private wishes over public responsibilities. Those who truly respect and understand the meaning of being a French citizen, he suggests, shed such private attachments when they enter the public sphere.

The American model of religious freedom does not demand such a privatized faith. And despite Coq's claim to the contrary, the American framework is actually more communitarian than individualistic: it regards attachment to a religious tradition as constitutive of individual identity. That's why people should not be asked to shed their religious identities in the public sphere—and why religious expression is a necessary dimension of freedom.