

The Tangled Tale of the Head Scarf Debate

Islam has had its share of media attention over the past half century. Recently, the discussion has made its way into the soccer field and other sports arenas. Occasions of teary-eyed young girls being removed from soccer games or other sports because they wear the hijab, or religious head covering, during play have prompted many discussions about the nature of Canadian tolerance and respect for minorities, with a specific focus on Muslim women.

In February of 2007, an 11-year old girl was removed from a soccer tournament in Quebec for wearing her hijab; in November, 2007, a player was ejected from an under-16 soccer match in Calgary for the same reason; in the same month, a Winnipeg girl was banned from a judo tournament also for wearing the head covering. The sports associations maintain that their primary concern is the safety of the players, and that it is not a religious issue. In any case, religious sentiments remain the central issue for the athletes involved.

In Quebec, the question of religious garb expanded past the sports arena when, on December 11, 2007, a large trade union federation called for a "charter of secularism" that would ban the head scarf for teachers and court judges. At the same time, Gilles Duceppe of the Bloc Quebecois commented that "reasonable accommodations of religious minorities become unreasonable if they prevent integration." He suggested that the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms respects the secularity of the state as a basic principle. Any accommodation of cultural variance must be consistent with this basic principle. The potential tension with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is clear, considering the expansive interpretation that the courts have given to the freedom of religion. (See Freedom of Religion.)

Sources:

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Chameleons" Edmonton Journal (December 12, 2007).