

## **A Game of Politics Anyone?**

In mid October British Airways suspended employee Miss Eweida for two weeks after she failed to follow company dress code when she insisted on wearing a crucifix. Miss Eweida argued that if people of different religious beliefs were allowed to wear religious or cultural pieces of clothing, such as a Sikh's Turban or a Muslim's headscarf, she should be allowed to wear what symbolized her faith. Around the same time a teacher at Headfield CE Junior School in Dewsbury, Miss Aishah Azmi, was suspended after refusing to take her veil off whilst teaching. The press have had a field day over both of those cases, not because of the importance of the cases themselves but because of a comment made by an MP which was not in relation to either case.

The Leader of the House of Commons, and former both Home and Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw wrote in his weekly column in a Blackburn newspaper that he would like to see the end of Muslim women wearing veils that covered their faces. Straw, who has been the MP for Blackburn since 1979, did not call for a law to ban wearing a veil; he did however express a desire that Muslim women voluntarily stopped wearing them. Straw has received a lot of criticism for his comments, and has also been accused of being a racist on account of it, despite a considerable part of his constituency being followers of Islam. On the other side he has had both Prime Minister Tony Blair and recognized author Salman Rushdie, who himself had caused controversy amongst Muslims when releasing the book *The Satanic Verses*, come out in support for him for raising a difficult subject. Straw has on several occasions insisted that his intentions are nothing but to help integration amongst Muslims in England and create equality. He has also pointed out that when asked no Muslim woman had ever refused to remove her veil for him. Is Jack Straw a racist? I do not believe he is, but he has however highlighted a problem that some would rather have been left alone.

England is a multicultural society, it has been for decades, yet some still struggle to accept people different from themselves. A lot of people mistake these fears for racism, a term which today is used widely and too often in the wrong sense. Xenophobia is a phobia for the unknown. The fears people have for someone with a different skin colour, religion or culture is often mistaken for racism which is not as much fear as pure hatred for someone with a specific skin colour different from your own. Some people, like Straw, think that by becoming more "British", people who are discriminated, an example being women wearing veils, can become more accepted in the English society. By removing an item of clothing that sets them apart from a "normal" English citizen it in theory should help them gain the acceptance by their fellow Brits. However, is it fair to expect a person to change their culture in order to fit in with the norm? Teachers and politicians along with other figures of authority are always encouraging children and youths to be their own person and develop their own identity, yet they are being hypocritical by saying that a person should put aside their culture and something that is an important part of their identity. All human beings live with a longing to be accepted, whether it be at school, at work or generally in society, one of the things most, if not all, people want is to fit in. The question is who decides what a person has to do in order to become accepted?

When teaching at a Junior School, you should do what it takes to be a good teacher. When Miss Azmi makes the decision of wearing a veil in class, something she is not religiously obligated to do, she hinders the children from learning under the best conditions. As a teacher your responsibility is first and foremost the children whose learning you are responsible for. If Miss Azmi does not ensure she does what she can to ensure that her responsibilities are fulfilled, that in my opinion makes her unfit to carry out her work. This has nothing to do with her religion or culture, nor is it xenophobia, but it is ensuring that our children get to learn under the best possible situations. When Miss Azmi makes the conscious decision to claim discrimination, despite members of the Muslim community publicly disagreeing with her reasoning, she is no longer just making her personal opinion known but she is becoming a piece in a game. A situation such as the one with Miss Azmi has easily turned into an argument for politicians, who do not want the veil to be a part of the English society and it has underlined the problem in communication that amongst others Jack Straw has suggested can take place.

The ordeal at British Airways and their suspension of an air hostess for wearing a crucifix on the outside of her uniform is a more complicated situation. Most things that are done in relation to colour or religion or even gender within companies today has to do with political correctness. It is politically correct for a company to allow someone to wear an item of clothing that to them is an important part of their identity. It is politically incorrect to allow someone to wear a crucifix which to them is important, despite the fact that a cross is less noticeable than an item of clothing. Miss Eweida had the option of wearing her cross underneath her clothing, where it would be visible to no one, but she does not think she should have to hide her faith. Whether she means for it or not, Miss Eweida, like Miss Azmi, now has become a piece in a game amongst politicians. Maybe the company's refusal for her to wear her crucifix is just, maybe is it unfair, whichever might be right does not matter, it makes the same argument. If English companies are to encourage their employees not to wear crucifixes to confirm what faith they have, then should not people who are not English integrate and make the same sacrifices, in this case by not wearing a veil.

When it comes down to it, it is about being English. A person who wears a veil, a turban or a Kippah cannot walk down a street in England and be assumed to be English, despite perhaps belonging to a family that have lived in the country for several generations. A person from Scandinavia, Southern or Eastern Europe however will automatically be assumed to be English as long as their skin is white and they are not wearing any clothing that will inform people they belong to a religion different from Christianity. This indicates that removing an item of clothing is not going to ensure integration. People are still going to have a different skin colour, or when they talk they might have an unfamiliar accent or when they pray they might do it in a Mosque rather than a church. Changing an item of clothing is not going to take away xenophobia or improve relations between people of different beliefs, it is simply going to take the focus off one aspect but at some point move it onto a different one.

So what makes the experiences of Miss Azmi or Miss Eweida important? To society in general, nothing, as in a few weeks the public will have forgotten about them until something else turns up and brings it back out again. It is not about Miss Azmi's wishes to wear a veil, nor is it about the right Miss Eweida means she has to carry her crucifix around her neck; it is and always will be about a game of politics. Politicians use examples such as the above to gain ground on new legislations they want in place, they use them to collect votes, and they use them to ensure that their interests receive attention. A politician can go through their life being quiet and never saying anything controversial, but that is not going to get them a good career. Had it not been for what happened after Jack Straw made his feelings known, people would have forgotten about it much sooner, but as a politician he knows how to use something to his advantage. So let go of the talk about racism, xenophobia and discrimination. Although important issues that need to be dealt with, they are not going to be solved by the so called integration created by someone no longer covering up their faces. If it is going to further promote someone's political career, it will remain in the spotlight. If next week there is going to be something bigger and better, it will be forgotten before long. In the end, it's all a game of politics.

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