



# Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space

*John R. Bowen*

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The French government's 2004 decision to ban Islamic headscarves and other religious signs from public schools puzzled many observers, both because it seemed to infringe needlessly on religious freedom, and because it was hailed by many in France as an answer to a surprisingly wide range of social ills, from violence against females in poor suburbs to anti-Semitism. *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves* explains why headscarves on schoolgirls caused such a furor, and why the furor yielded this law. Making sense of the dramatic debate from his perspective as an American anthropologist in France at the time, John Bowen writes about everyday life and public events while also presenting interviews with officials and intellectuals, and analyzing French television programs and other media.

Bowen argues that the focus on headscarves came from a century-old sensitivity to the public presence of religion in schools, feared links between public expressions of Islamic identity and radical Islam, and a media-driven frenzy that built support for a headscarf ban during 2003-2004. Although the defense of *laïcité* (secularity) was cited as the law's major justification, politicians, intellectuals, and the media linked the scarves to more concrete social anxieties--about "communalism," political Islam, and violence toward women.

Written in engaging, jargon-free prose, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves* is the first comprehensive and objective analysis of this subject, in any language, and it speaks to tensions between assimilation and diversity that extend well beyond France's borders.

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