THE SENTINEL GAZETTE

Opinion Column: Two Ways of Seeing

ISLAM IN THE WEST: LAÏCITÉ AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

By John News (Writing from Llançà, Catalonia)

THE ANCHOR

Walking through the coastal communities of Catalonia, one cannot help but notice a quiet, troubling transformation unfolding in certain urban neighbourhoods: the arrival of foreign-funded imams whose preachings reshape the behavioural norms of the local population. When a fundamentalist cleric takes over a pulpit, the immediate social pressure exerted on Muslim women—forcing them to adopt strict religious attire or retreat from public space—is not a matter of benign cultural diversity. It is an active regression of fundamental human rights.

The argument for uncompromising secularism and state oversight of religious institutions rests on the duty to protect individual freedom against group coercion. There is a critical difference between exercising personal faith in a free society and permitting foreign-financed fundamentalism to operate unchecked. When women who are full-fledged Catalan and European citizens are coerced into subservience or deemed inferior by radical doctrines, the democratic state cannot look the other way out of fear of causing offence. As Simone de Beauvoir argued in *The Second Sex*, true liberation is undermined whenever society tolerates micro-oppressions under the guise of respecting cultural traditions.

A mature democracy must maintain a sharp, non-negotiable distinction: one can—and must—stand resolutely against theocratic regimes and fundamentalist doctrines that treat women as second-class beings, without ever turning that critique against the Muslim population as individuals. Criticizing totalitarian religious ideologies is not bigotry; it is the essential defense of civic equality. Failing to protect vulnerable women from community enforcement within our own borders is not tolerance—it is a betrayal of the modern Western values.

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To address the challenge of religious fundamentalism exclusively through blanket bans, institutional suspicion, and anti-immigrant rhetoric risks destroying the very democratic cohesion we seek to protect. While the state must rigorously audit religious funding and prosecute any form of illegal coercion or hate speech, treating millions of peaceful citizens as a collective threat only deepens social alienation and fuels reactionary populism.

The perspective advocating for pluralism and anti-stigmatization emphasizes that defending civil rights requires a clear line between resisting theocratic ideologies and respecting Muslim citizens. Millions of Muslims living in Western Europe are law-abiding individuals who cherish their freedoms, reject extremism, and seek full participation in civic life. When public discourse conflates foreign-backed fundamentalism with the daily lives of peaceful neighbours in Catalonia, it creates a

toxic climate of systemic Islamophobia that alienates young generations and plays directly into the hands of radicals.

True social cohesion is achieved not by treating an entire religious community with permanent suspicion, but by guaranteeing equal rights, economic opportunity, and the strict enforcement of civil law against all forms of violence and discrimination. A self-confident democratic state demonstrates its strength not by dictating how its citizens dress or pray, but by ensuring that every woman, regardless of her background, has the legal backing, economic independence, and social support to chart her own destiny free from both clerical pressure and state authoritarianism.

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