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Australia's burqa fallacy

RELIGION

David Tittensor

Given recent media coverage, one could be excused for thinking the Taliban had set up shop in Australia.

Last month alone there were *Today Tonight* promos exclaiming 'burqa rage'; an episode of Channel 7's panel discussion program *Can of Worms* which featured debate about whether the burqa has a place in Australia; a report about a group of Geelong men who created a 'Ban the Burqa' [protest](#) on Facebook; and a brief and less than satisfactory discussion of Islamic dress on ABC1's *Q&A*.

The burqa it seems is *du jour*. Yet there seems to be not pertinent reason for this.

There was the recent Carnita Matthews court case, wherein footage caught by a dashboard camera proved she had wrongfully accused a police officer of trying to forcibly remove her niqab (face veil, not burqa). But this one incident, which occurred last year, surely cannot be grounds for debate.

Perhaps the debate is not really about Islamic dress or even Muslims. It is about Australians.

Not once in any of the recent coverage has there been any information about the composition of the Muslim population in Australia or about how many Muslims actually wear the garment in question. It is more about whether or not we can handle it, irrespective of the actual lay of the land. We debate it because we can, and because we live in a liberal democracy and have the freedom to do so.

But just because we can debate whatever we so choose, doesn't mean we should. As with any right there is the responsibility to exercise it judiciously. In the discussion about burqas this seems to have fallen by wayside.

The aforementioned *Q&A* episode illustrates this. The show began by discussing the Rupert Murdoch *News of the World* scandal and a lack of ethical reporting. This was followed later by a discussion about Islamic dress. In fairness the question was raised by an audience member. But rather than shut the question down as unjustified, on account of the fact that very few women wear the *niqab* (often confused with the burqa), the discussion gave oxygen to those who are ill informed.

A quick survey of the Muslim population in Australia highlights the absurdity of discussing whether there is a place for the burqa or niqab in our society.

According to the 2006 [census](#) only one third of the Muslim population in Australia are from

Arabic speaking backgrounds. Many of them wear the hijab (headscarf) rather than the burqa or niqab.

For example, 8.9 per cent of Arabic speaking Muslims migrated from Lebanon where the hijab or chador (a loose head-cover similar to the hijab) is preferred. The next largest population hails from Turkey (14.6 per cent), where once again the hijab is favored.

The countries where the burqa is worn are comparatively poorly represented in Australia. Afghan migrants, for example, represent only 4.7 per cent, and not all Afghan women wear the burqa. Immigration figures from the Horn of Africa are also [low](#).

In fact, the likelihood of seeing someone in a burqa or niqab in Australia is probably less than what it would be in France, where it was [estimated](#) that only around 1900 women wear the niqab (less than 0.00003 per cent of the French population).

The upshot of this is that those debating whether the burqa has a place in Australia are not dealing with reality, and are in fact just a little self indulgent. Yes, we live in a liberal democracy. We have freedom of speech. But debate for the sake of debate is pointless and vain.

I'm not suggesting there shouldn't be healthy debate around Islam. Debate about what Islam is and what it means for the many different groups that comprise the 'house(s) of Islam' is essential. But debate needs to focus on developing understanding rather than fostering division and difference.

The kind of 'Mickey Mouse' journalism we have seen regarding this issue functions as grist for the mill of bigots and should have no place in Australia. It strengthens unwanted stereotypes and cultural rifts. Things that a truly free and open society should seek to avoid.