

Cover Clash

by Theodore Dalrymple

What happens when two or more fundamental political principles clash—for example, when the right to the free exercise of religious belief seems to contradict the legal equality of the sexes? An argument starts, of course, and tempers flare.

A private swimming pool just north of Marseille has been hired for a day by an association of Muslim women so that it can be used by Muslim women, their entire bodies covered, for water sport. Children may attend, but no boys over the age of 10.

Unsurprisingly, a controversy has arisen. The left-wing mayor of the fifteenth and sixteenth *arrondissement* (borough) of Marseille, herself a Muslim woman, said: “This is a private place and a private affair between the owner and the association. To rent out a private place is not against the law, to swim while covered up is not against the law, and therefore I cannot see how one can forbid an event which poses no threat to public order.”

No one, I think, could deny cogency to this argument. But the mayor of the borough in which the event was to take place, also left-wing, said that he would have no hesitation in forbidding the event because it *did* pose a threat to public order. “I consider this event,” he said, “a provocation which we do not need in the current context,” adding that he also considered the event a manifestation of “communitarianism, pure and simple.” Interestingly, he was at one with the mayor of the thirteenth and fourteenth *arrondissements* of the city, who belongs to the far-right Front National and who said that the event was “an Islamic day” that “demonstrated that a certain number of Muslims . . . cut themselves off voluntarily from our republican model and lace themselves at the margin of our society.”

Two female members of the French parliament expressed different opinions. Valérie Boyer said, "To accept this so-called fashion [known as the *burkini*] is to reinforce communitarianism in our country, but it is also a question of the dignity of women." She might have added, also of men: for the assumption behind the necessity for extreme modesty is the uncontrollable concupiscence of men. But a member of the ruling *Parti Socialiste* said that it would be "dangerous if every time a part of the Muslim community moves a little finger there is a controversy." Interestingly, none of the comments was completely without reason or foundation, though they were different in emphasis and some were very much opposed to each other in their conclusion.

Here, it seems to me, is an illustration of a general principle articulated by Edmund Burke: that political questions cannot be reduced to abstract reasoning. In another context, for example, the argument that private associations may do as they please so long as what they please is not against the law would be unanswerable. But in politics, context counts.

Perhaps the most interesting, though not altogether reassuring, thing about the event is that 1,000 women are said to have signed up for it.

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