

Last week, I wrote about the cultural chasm in the United States that gave rise to election results that surprised many of us. This time, I am looking at the global culture wars.

Along with cultural differences of class and ethnicity, there are cultural differences in religions: most of these benign, but some really divisive. No one cares about different dietary laws, for example, unless one culture forces the rest to practice them. Orthodox Jews have dietary issues: no pork or shellfish permitted; no mixing in a meal of dairy products and meat. But nobody else is affected. Most Jews no longer practice these restrictions, choosing instead to practice the norms of their neighbors.

Muslim immigrant communities living in Britain see this differently. They not only forbid pork, but even bring pressure to ban such shop names as "Pig & Whistle" or ban "the Three Little Pigs" from nursery schools in Muslim-majority towns. This crosses the line into cultural intolerance.

The most contentious cultural conflict arises from how women are regarded. In Muslim-majority countries awakening from their 500 year sleep a century ago, the status of women is one of their most volatile issues. Some Muslim women from western-educated families throw off their veils to celebrate emancipation. Others (still among us in western universities) defiantly wear headscarves to show their support for their religion and devotion to "modesty."

Some men, even in the Western world, are threatened and offended by the notion that women are equal citizens. Islalmists brand western-dressed women as whores. However, these defenders of female modesty show their hypocrisy when, as in the streets of Cairo, any woman, veiled or not, is subject to groping and worse. This nasty custom has accompanied many young Muslim male immigrants to Europe, where they regard any female as fair game. But Muslims are not the only abusers. Women in India (and elsewhere) require segregated transit to protect them from gropers.

Unfortunately, one of the oldest human cultural fantasies is that men and women are not partners, but are masters and subjects, or, in the case of war, the spoils due to the victor. We saw the most blatant throwback of this cultural given when ISIS conquered a peaceful sect in Iraq, Yazidis, who practice an ancient religion. Isis, citing Islamic texts, raped Yazidi girls and women sanctifying these rapes with prayers before and after. They divided them up as property and sold them in their newly reopened slave markets. Yes, Culture Matters. There is no way to consider this a benign cultural or religious obligation that should be tolerated.

Cultural anthropologists have muddied the waters by preaching cultural relativity, in which all cultures are equal and should not be judged. People who have taken up this view practice it selectively. They are critical of France's ban on headscarves and absolute ban of burqas in public (a female cloak used by male terrorists and bank robbers and female terrorists to hide weapons). They never protest the obnoxious demand by the Saudis, for example, that even foreign women must cover up. Tolerance should only be western, in their view, not reciprocal.

They selectively praise the culture of "resistance to occupation" practiced by Palestinians against Israelis, but do not supporting a resistance movement by Muslims to take back Spain (once a Muslim conquest) or India (also once conquered by Muslims).

The Israel haters among these cultural relativists never comment on the status of women in the "occupied" West Bank of Israel. Western women activists, who should know better, are quick to call critics of the worst Muslim practices, particularly against women, "Islamophobia." To them, protecting Islam is more important than protecting women.

Pity the Palestinian woman divorce lawyer, Reema Shamasneh, who must wear hijab to argue a case in the Islamic "family court" in Ramallah, where a man's testimony is worth twice a woman's (Koranic law). A battered woman seeking divorce (only men can initiate divorce) must give up her alimony, bribing her husband to release her. This is the best her lawyer can do for her. Some cultures are just poisonous.

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