



On November 14, 2011, Henry Steiner, Emeritus Jeremiah Smith, Jr. Professor of Law at Harvard University, spoke at the Human Rights Happy Hour. The talk, entitled “Muslims in Europe: Multiculturalism, Cultural Clash, Human Rights,” examined the tremendous growth in the number of Muslims who have immigrated to Europe and how European countries have responded.

Steiner focused primarily on France and some of its more draconian measures against Muslims. In particular, Steiner discussed the significance of French Law 204, which banned the use of the headscarves in public schools and another law, which banned the use of any and all head coverings in public, including, amongst other things, the burqa. “The headscarf became a trigger, and the question is why?” stated Steiner.

For Steiner, there are two primary impetuses behind these bans. First, the French Republic was founded on the idea of a secular society. “There are laws dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century law that prohibited any displays of religion in public spaces.” The secularization of the public is, then, part and parcel to the French Republic. The second impetus is a bit more disturbing. To Steiner, the anxiety surrounding the headscarf suggests a larger fear about Muslims and their growing cultural influence on French culture.

Steiner contends that France’s colonial past cannot be ignored. To the French, the Muslims were people whom the French had colonized, whom they had civilized. The wearing of the headscarf then seems like an affront to France’s civilizing mission; the attitude is that they should be grateful to be French. “In France, you are either French or Muslim; you are not both. In the US, we allow people to be hyphenated: you are Irish-American, Mexican-American. There is no space for this in France.”

Steiner was quick to question his own assumptions, asking the audience to consider if the US is that different from France and, if so, how?

Kamran Ali, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of the South Asia Institute at the University of Texas at Austin, served as respondent. Ali agreed with Steiner’s observations

and attempted to develop the conversation even further. In particular, Ali highlighted the inherent tension between Europe's belief in Enlightenment values and its very violent past. "Sixty years ago Europe was a landscape of concentration camps," said Ali. "Europe seems to forget this and to insist on its own tolerance and other such enlightenment values."

According to Ali, Europe's tolerance is still quite limited. "They say, let's coexist, but that still makes the Muslims 'the other,'" said Ali. "You don't need to coexist with your own, you only coexist with 'the other.' In many ways, Muslim is still alien to Europeans."