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Religious Symbols and the Making of Contemporary Religious Identities

Sylvie Bacquet[1]

Introduction

Symbols, religious or otherwise, play a large part in the life of individuals as they are closely linked to their cultural heritage and often contribute to the making of a person's identity. A symbol may be a piece of jewellery such as a wedding ring, a kara bangle[2] a cross or a string[3] or it may be a particular form of dress (jilbab,[4] niqab,[5]saari[6]) or head cover (Jewish skullcap, Muslim hijab, Sikh turban). Alternatively, it may take the shape of statues displayed in the home or carried by an individual. Symbols may be more or less visible, depending on their nature and on whether they are confined to the private sphere or carried into the public domain. Once in the public sphere, religious symbols are subject to a certain degree of scrutiny, often fuelled by curiosity, fear and sometimes ignorance. When associated with a particular ideology, symbols can indeed send negative messages - skin heads and swastikas for instance are often associated with far Right movements which promote racism and hatred. Religious symbols can be used to dissimulate terrorist plots, for example, Islamic dress can be used to disguise a suicide bomber (Haider, 2010).

State interference with such symbols therefore must be an integral part of modern democracies for the purpose of protection of citizens. However, in seeking to protect the majority, States must not encroach on fundamental human rights such as

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[2]Part of the 5Ks worn by followers of the Sikh Faith.
[3]E.g. Red string worn by Kaballahbelievers.
[4]Long garment worn by Muslim female.
[5]Full body garment, usually black that covers the entire body, leaving only a space for the eyes.
[6]Garment worn by women from India and Pakistan.

the right to freedom of religion and freedom of expression enshrined in Article 9 and 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). This balancing exercise is one that has caused much debate and controversy amongst judges, policy makers and legal academics. While some states like the UK have been fairly liberal in their tolerance to symbols, others like France have adopted a more radical secularist approach, banning those symbols from the public sphere (Bacquet, 2012).

This chapter will present findings from an empirical study on the relationship between, the State, individuals and religious symbols. It starts from the premise that laws and policies concerning manifestation of belief are typically made at Government level and therefore remote from those for whom it matters. To date, there have been few documented efforts by governments to attempt to gain an understanding of the role that these types of symbols really play in the life of some individuals (Hunter-Henin, 2012).[7] Only with the full understanding of what symbols mean for individuals can we assess the real impact of State interference with religious symbols. Such interference may be prescribed by law as in France where, for instance, religious symbols are banned from State schools or upheld by the courts as in the UK where judges have often acted as 'arbiters of faith' and upheld schools' exclusions of pupils for wearing a religious symbol.[8]

This study sought to elucidate the nature of the relationship between individuals and their religious symbols as well as their general perception of religious symbols in the public sphere. The research questions explored the importance that individuals give to religious symbols and the extent to which they are prepared to tolerate some degree of interference by the State. While the empirical study was

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[7] On this lack of empirical research in relation to the French Parliament and the full face cover legislation see further (Hunter-Henin, 2012).
[8] See further (Bacquet 2009 and 2012).

carried out in England, the findings form the basis of a criticism of the approaches in both England and France.

These research questions are of great contemporary significance. The need to pay attention to the impact of the law on cultural, ethnic and religious minorities has been widely acknowledged by European monitoring bodies (European Commission 2011).[9] This has coincided with rising religious restrictions being adopted across the world.[10] However, recent legal empirical research has tended to concentrate on religion and belief in public life rather than symbols as such. It focused on accommodation of religious, cultural and ethnic diversity (European Commission 2011) as well as religious discrimination (Weller, 2011). The theme of religious symbols in the public sphere has attracted much academic attention across disciplines. The literature therefore is at the crossroad of law, sociology, anthropology, theology, psychology and philosophy.[11] State regulation of religious symbols both in the UK and in other European jurisdictions has been examined extensively by legal academics,[12] with the main emphasis being put on laws, policies and judicial approaches while individuals' relationships with religious symbols have received less attention and tended to concentrate on the issues facing Muslim women and the hijab rather than other symbols.[13] This project therefore aimed to contribute to knowledge and understanding of individuals' relationship with religious symbols and religion in general and also to examine the impact of State regulation/restrictions of religious symbols on individuals. Before discussing the findings of the research project, there

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[9] See for instance, (European Commission, 2011).

[10] According to Pew Research Center, religious attire and other symbols were regulated in 57 countries as opposed to 21 in mid-2007(Pew Research Centre, 2012).

[11] See for instance (Durkheim, 1912); (Eliade, 1991); (Sherman Grant, 2001); (Dundes Renteln, 2004); (Hill and Whistler, 2013); (van Ooijen, 2013); (Weisbuch-Remington et al, 2005).

[12] See for instance (Bacquet, 2008 and 2009); (Cumper and Lewis, 2012); (Doe, 2011);(Hill et al.,2011); (Hunter-Henin, 2012); (Sandberg, 2011).

[13] See for instance (Cole and Ahmadi, 2003);(Hunter-Henin, 2012) but see, e.g., (Jaspal, 2013); (Gereluk, 2008).

are some preliminary remarks that need to be made about the research methodology employed and the legal background.

Methodology

The research project consisted of qualitative research, which was conducted using 23 face to face interviews with 25 students and staff at the University of Westminster in London (two were group interviews). This chapter examines the views of those who responded to an invitation to take part in the project. The respondents were drawn mainly from the Law School but not exclusively as the use of snowballing sampling techniques targeted respondents from other Schools as well. Participants initially self-selected by replying to a call to take part in the project, then existing participants were able to recruit additional participants from among their acquaintances, some of which were outside the Law School. A robust sample was produced comprising a range of religious[14] ethnic[15] and age groups[16] which reflected the University of Westminster's multicultural environment. In keeping with qualitative methodology, there was no requirement for the sample to be representative of the entire student population.[17] Moreover, given that the University of Westminster does not currently keep data on religion and ethnicity, it would not have been possible to test the representativeness of the current sample against the entire student population. As pointed by Weller (2011), this lack of monitoring of religion and belief

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[14] Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism are amongst the main religions represented as well as Atheism, Agnosticism and Humanism. Judaism is the only religion that is not represented in the study. This can be attributed to the fact that the University does not have a high Jewish student population (there are 50 students within the University Jewish Society out of a student population of 20,000 students). The sample also comprised eight converts.

[15] 19 out of the 25 participants were women. Out of the total sample seven were classed as 'white', one as 'black', 12 as 'Asian' and four as 'other' which included Arab and Persian.

[16] Respondents were 18 to 35 and over with the majority of them in the 18-25 group.

[17] On the role of qualitative research see further (Webley, 2010).

in Higher Education institutions is an area that will need improving if we are to obtain clear balanced data even though this is more applicable to quantitative studies.

Those who took part in the study did not necessarily display their faith by way of a religious symbol but those who did, displayed or carried crosses, fish pins, stones, tattoos, strings, hijabs, niqabs, kara bangles, turbans, ceremonial dagger (the 5Ks). Some carried multiple symbols such as three crosses. Others reported having symbols within their homes.[18] For the purpose of this project, the terms 'religion' and 'belief' were taken as being self-defining and therefore given a broad meaning depending on the participants. It was felt that any attempt to define those terms would constitute a researcher's bias which may influence the participants. As pointed by Weller, this approach is widely adopted by scholars of religion (Weller, 2011).

Finally, a thematic coding system was developed and the analysis was carried out using NVivo 9, a common software used for qualitative analysis. The codes emerged from designing the topic guides and reading through the literature.

The Legal Background

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) approach in dealing with tolerance of religious symbols by the various member states of the Council of Europe has been one of deference on the assumption that sovereign States are generally in a better position to deal with such a sensitive area. As a result, there are few cases in which States have been found in breach of their obligations (Rorive, 2008-09). While the importance of religion in the making of one's identity has been acknowledged by the Court,[19] bans on religious symbols have generally been upheld[20] on the ground

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[18]Out of the 25 participants, 18 wore a religious symbol. This includes all but one of the Muslims, seven out of the nine Christians, all of the Sikhs and Buddhists and only one in the Atheist, Agnostics, Non-believers groups. The Atheist (self-defined 'non-believer') referred to her wedding ring (a Celtic ring) as her symbol.
[19]See *Kokinakkis v Greece*, ECHR, 25 May 1993 (Application No. 14307/88).

that interference was justified in accordance with Article 9(2) ECHR.[21] This has been particularly controversial in relation to the Muslim headscarf, especially since the ECtHR has sometimes associated the headscarf ban with the advancement of equality between men and woman[22] (Evans, 2008). Both Evans and Rorive have argued that this approach amounts to a 'distrust' of the ECtHR towards the Islamic headscarf, accusing the court of relying on stereotypes and populist images which portray Muslim women as victims of an oppressive religion at the expense of using a more rigorous legal approach (Rorive 2008-09). It can be argued that this extends to law makers, as shown by the French Parliament's famous assumption that wearing a niqab is against women's dignity despite the lack of empirical evidence to support this assumption (Hunter-Henin, 2012).

The ECtHR approach has a resounding influence in both England and France which are the focus of this study. English Courts have tended to uphold decisions made by public authorities notably in cases involving religious symbols at school.[23] Under the Human Rights Act 1998, schools as public authorities have a duty to respect Article 9 of the ECHR on freedom of religion and belief. While England, unlike France does not ban the display of religious symbols in public by law, some schools ban certain symbols as part of their uniform policies. Similarly, French courts have been reluctant to interfere with law makers and have upheld religious symbols bans on the basis of Article 9(2). In the case of France, the justification is not uniform

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[20] See for instance *Leyla Sahin v. Turkey*, ECHR, 10 November 2005,(Application no. 44774/98), *Dahlab v. Switzerland*, 15 January 2001, (Application no.42393/98)

[21] Article 9 of the ECHR provides that:
1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
2. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

[22] See in particular Judge Tulkens dissenting with the majority in *Dahlab v. Switzerland*, 15 January 2001, (Application no.42393/98) at para 11.

[23] See for instance *R (on the application of Begum (by her litigation friend, Rahman)) (Respondent) v. Headteacher and Governors of Denbigh High School*, [2006] UKHL 15 and *R (on the application of Playfoot) v Governing Body of Millais School*, [2007] EWHC 1698 (Admin).

policies but the constitutional imperative of 'laïcité' which implies a complete separation between the state and religion. As such, religious symbols have been banned from state schools since 2004.[24]

Findings from the Empirical Study

The empirical study focused on the meaning and significance of religious symbols and their place in the lives of individuals. The study entailed questioning the role and significance of religion in the making of individual and collective identity. Five main findings emerged from the data, namely that the way symbols are perceived is based on individuals' personal experience with religion and culture; that religiosity is ascribed by birth through ancestors' history but evolves and crystallises via family upbringing, education and spiritual journey of an individual; that the reasons why people wear religious symbols are therefore highly intimate; that one's relationship with symbols is ultimately dependent on one's relationship with religion and that given the special nature of one's relationship with symbols, State interference with any religious symbol (either through Parliament or the courts) should be kept to the minimum necessary to protect other citizens. The following will examine each of these findings in turn.

Perception of religious symbols is very personal in nature

As argued by Durkheim, an object is intrinsically neither sacred nor profane (Durkheim 1912); it becomes one or the other when individuals choose to consider it as such. Coser used the example of the wine in Church that is considered by believers as the blood of Christ rather than a beverage (Coser, 1977). This accords with the findings of the present study which clearly point to two radically different perceptions

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[24] See further (Bacquet, 2011).

of religious symbols according to whether or not an individual wears one. For those who wear symbols, they can be considered as sacred and form an intrinsic characteristic of their personality, whereas for most of those who do not wear them,[25] symbols are mostly insignificant: they do not matter.

Those who did not wear symbols questioned their relevance and emphasised the importance of belief as opposed to wearing a symbol. Some described them as 'a political statement' or 'a way to be seen' whereas most of those who wore a religious symbol linked it to practicing their religion and viewed religion and symbols as a very important part of their lives.

> *'I'll never say what religion do you belong to? I just say do you believe in God? Belief is more important. … wearing any symbol doesn't make you religious ….'* (SF10-11)[26]
> *'You are meant to consider them like another body part – like your hand, you should never part from them (the 5Ks).'*(SM1-1)

Whether symbols matter therefore is tightly linked to whether individuals choose to consider them as sacred. Once they have entered the realm of the sacred, those symbols take a very personal and intimate significance, often linked to childhood, family history, tradition and one's spiritual journey. Ultimately, they are part of an individual's identity while at the same time reinforcing belonging in a particular group or culture.

Religiosity of the individual is a result of upbringing and family history

Religiosity of an individual is both acquired through birth status (ascribed) and developed throughout upbringing and family history (acquired), therefore, it can be argued that in some cases, religion and any associated symbols are to be considered as

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[25] Some of the non-symbol wearers nonetheless acknowledged the importance of symbols for other.

[26] These references were generates to preserve the anonymity of the participants. S refers to a student, A refers to Academic. F is for female, M is for male and FG is for focus group. The numbers refer to the various interviews and transcripts. So for example: SF10-11 means student female – interviewee 10 and transcript 11.

intrinsic characteristics of individuals as opposed to extrinsic values or 'labels' that could be added on, gained from the external environment. Religion is often not something that people choose – what they choose is whether to embrace or reject the faith they were brought up in. So someone could be intrinsically Muslim but extrinsically secular or agnostic. In other words, a person may have been born in a Muslim family and have grown up surrounded by Muslim culture, tradition and religious practice but over the years, they might have decided to abandon the faith – they would no longer class themselves as religiously Muslim but Islam would still inevitably be a part of their identity. This fits with the REDCo project[27] findings where personal religious history was portrayed as a journey where the increased understanding of the faith by the participants meant that they would either embrace it or reject it (Thorsten *et al*, 2008 at 396).Therefore, one can argue that an individual may reject his/her faith but religion remains nonetheless part of his/her cultural and family heritage, somewhere down the line it relates to who they are and where they have come from. What makes them embrace or reject their faith is a matter of belief. This became evident in this study amongst participants who had either converted, stopped practicing their religion or became non-believers. These findings also confirm Day's (2011) thesis that belief is a social phenomenon allowing people to express their collective sense of belonging. She argues that belief plays a role in shaping identities which individuals create to fit in social situations. Religion, she argues, is a subset of belief.

The influence of the family unit on religion has further been recognised in research (Thorsten et al, 2008 at 378-381) and is also evident from the present

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[27] Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries (REDCo) – a project sponsored by the European Commission which focused on how European citizens of different religious and cultural background can live together. See further □http://www.redco.uni-hamburg.de/web/3480/3481/index.html□ [1.04.14].

findings. Indeed most participants in this study could trace their religious affiliation back to their family history and tradition.

> '*A religion is more like land that you inherit because my dad was Muslim so I was born Muslim.*' (SF15-18)
>
> '*…it's true that in Islam if someone is a Muslim, they remain a Muslim…*' (FG2-17)
>
> '*I don't think religion is a choice.*' (SF11-12)
>
> '*…because in Asian families, family is central, you go by the religion of your parents and often that of your father.*' (SM8-9)

When it came to symbols, they often had a sentimental as well as a religious significance and were also linked to the family unit.

> '*This cross was a present from my father to my mum when they were engaged…she gave it to me as an encouragement to pass my exam.*' (SM9-10)
>
> '*I have worn this for about 20 years [a cross]. My husband gave it to me for my birthday soon after we got married.*' (AF1-6)
>
> '*It [a cross] became more like something that's there. If it wasn't a cross I would still wear it.*' (SF7-8)

This is what Day (2011) refers to as 'believing in belonging'. She develops the concept of 'performative belief' to describe a phenomenon whereby people who would not otherwise be religious can have a collective religious identity. Symbols play an important role in the shaping of this collective identity.

Despite the direct relationship between the religion of an individual and his/her family upbringing, very few participants (one did) complained of pressure to follow the religion of their parents. On the contrary, many young Muslim women revealed that they had taken up their headscarf against the will of their parents. This goes contrary to the frequent assumption that Muslim women are forced into wearing

a headscarf. The French full face cover ban, for instance, is based on the assumption that women are oppressed into wearing a niqab.[28]

> '*My best friend doesn't wear hijab at all. She wants to but because of family restrictions she can't. … My other friend who started wearing the niqab, her mum stopped speaking to her.*' (SF16-21)
>
> '*I was so scared I didn't want to tell her [mother] because I knew she wouldn't like it (niqab) so one day I said I want to wear it and she said no.*' (SF18-23)

Female Muslims admitted to being inspired but not pressurised by seeing others wear the hijab:

> '*I have always wanted to wear a jilbab and headscarf but I was kind of embarrassed or ashamed …I didn't feel comfortable because my friends didn't wear it at secondary school but when I left secondary school and went to a different environment where we all mixed … loads of girls wore jilbab and headscarf so I felt more comfortable and I started wearing it.*' (SF3-3)

However, it is interesting that when it came to how the participants would raise their children,[29] many admitted that they would not force their own religion onto them but would somehow be disappointed if they converted or did not follow their religion and practices. A Muslim participant described the feelings she would have with any of her future children should they decide to remove their headscarf once they reach the age of 20:

> '*Disappointed. I would persuade them again, take them to classes, lectures … I'll do what I can to make them understand the importance of wearing it and if they still don't wear it I don't know what I would do then.*' (SF3-3)

Some (a minority amongst the most practicing individuals) were keen to let their (future) children decide when they become the right age[30].

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[28]See further Garraud, 2010.
[29] Out of the 25 participants, 5 had one or more children.
[30] Even though they did not specify what age they had in mind.

This desire from parents to transmit what they see as basic values is a further testimony to the direct relationship between religiosity and upbringing. It is clear therefore that religion and symbols are deeply rooted in family history and form an integral part of an individual's personal history. It is the interplay between what can be considered as ascribed religion and what can be termed achieved religion that shapes contemporary[31] religious identities.[32]

Similarly, religiosity is tightly linked to cultural background and some religious practices are imbued with cultural practices. However there were some disagreements amongst the participants as to whether certain symbols or rituals were of religious or cultural significance but generally the more or less religious respondents (those at the far end of the spectrum) were keen to separate culture and religion. One practicing Muslim said:

'The culture is good but it's nothing that I would hold in my heart at all ...' (SF16-21)

For the above participant, religion was so paramount that she was keen to draw a line between the two while emphasising the primacy of one over the other. On the contrary, some participants expressed being close to their cultural heritage but not to their religion- they were also keen to distinguish the two, while a third category of participants were comfortable with the overlap between culture and religion.

The reasons for wearing a religious symbol are highly intimate

Participants who wore a religious symbol did so for the following reasons: because they believed that is a requirement of their faith; as a sign of respect for their religion; as part of religious tradition; as a statement/reminder of their faith; for

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[31] Contemporary in this context is taken to mean broadly post September 11th with an emphasis on the globalised city.
[32] On the role of ascription and choice in the construction of religious identities see further (Cadge and Davidman 2006).

practical reasons; for protection; to please their Lord; or to show that they are proud of who they are and of their religion.

'Not because I believe it's a must. It's a must [wearing the hijab]'. (SF14-15)

'if it's the law of God to wear this [niqab] then that's it.' (SF-16-21)

'because Islam is always on the media people want to show that they are proud of being Muslim…it's really important that we can show our God that in this temporary world we did what we can to display our religion' (SF3-3)

'As a Sikh I want my own identity' (SF2-2)

'It gives you a sense of cultural identity' (SM4-4)

'I don't see it as a requirement [cross] but it does help to remind me why I am a Christian.' (SM8-9)

They felt that their symbol gave them a sense of belonging to a group, a sense of comfort, support, protection and security. This has been recognised in research that shows religion as a coping resource, with symbols acting as a motivational factor during performance of goal relevant tasks (Weisbuch-Remington *et al*, 2005).

'When I am doing my exams I put it on the table [cross].' (SF13-14)

'It gives you a sense of cultural identity. …Most people believe it helps to protect against evils and unknown forces…' (SM4-4)

'sometimes when I can't do something and I am struggling then I can look at that [a frame with the name of God written on it] and just remember it's all up to God.' (FG2-17)

'It shows that there is someone watching me and even if things don't go how I think they should go there is a plan. … I think everyone should be allowed to show their faith it's a massive part of who people are how they think, their belief, their lifestyle and I don't see a reason why it should not be displayed.' (SF12-13)

The decision to display one's faith therefore is a deeply intimate one which is dependent on one's conception of religiosity. In some cases, it is part of one's identity as a religious being while in others it is a manifestation of being part of a group. For

all the participants, it is an expression of belief and is driven by their own interpretation and understanding of religious doctrines but it generally does not matter whether co-religionists share their beliefs. What came out of the findings is a general sense of respect for individuals and an acknowledgment that spiritual journeys are personal and cannot be imposed.

There was also a feeling amongst participants, especially those who valued symbols, that they were being abused by some, disrespected in a way that was devoid of their true meaning by being regarded, for example, as a fashion statement to please someone:

> *'wearing any symbol doesn't make you religious. ...These symbols don't really have value when people themselves take it on with no respect and just to wear it to please someone. It's very disturbing.'* (SF10-11)

This is interesting as it would suggest that for those who believe, display of faith alone is not enough but must be accompanied by belief. If we follow this line of argument, therefore, those who wear symbols have no proven interest in convincing others to wear them unless they also hold the same belief. In other words, wearing a symbol without the belief is seen as a disrespect of the symbol while having the belief but not wearing the symbol is generally seen as a matter for individuals to decide. So the common argument that symbol wearers will passively influence others to wear the same symbols would not stand unless of course others could also be convinced of sharing the same belief which arguably would require more engagement from symbol wearers than just passively displaying their faith. It can be argued that this is yet another misconception used by states as an argument for removing symbols from

public life. This misconception has been used by the French Parliament to justify the 2004 ban of religious symbols at school. [33]

One's definition of religion determines one's relationship with symbols

Most participants described religion as one of three categories: a relationship with God, a way of life or a set of rules. Those who fell into the first category were those who tended not to wear a symbol and gave priority to belief over manifestation (these were mostly Christians but not exclusively). Those in the second category generally displayed their faith but were less strict in their religious practice. Religion was described as 'a guide', 'part of who you are', 'part of your identity' while those in the third category saw their religion as the driving force behind their life and were usually more strict in their practice linking their symbols to 'full submission to God' or following 'what is in the teachings'.

There was also a minority amongst participants who did not value religion or symbols and described the former as: 'man made tradition', 'a shield for people to hide behind', some kind of dogma imposed by an institution. These people were keen to part with their ascribed religious background even if it involved a troubled relationship with their families.

In sum, participants placed religion on a very broad spectrum. This bears out with the findings of the REDCo project mentioned above where the various interpretations of religions by the participants included personal faith, spiritual experience, comfort and support, moral guidance, communal belonging, factual knowledge, philosophical theory, societal role and irrelevancy. (Thorsten at al, 2008 at 376-77).

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[33]See further the French Parliament proselytising argument (Stasi, 2003).

Symbols and religion therefore cannot be separated. Those who display their faith sometimes do so to satisfy what they see as an absolute religious requirement, (symbols are seen as ascribed) while others simply wish to express their faith freely. In both cases they are extremely important to those individuals who see them as sacred.

Having established the deeply intimate and personal nature of the relationship between individuals and their religious symbols, the research went on to explore the impact of State intervention with those symbols on individuals.

State intervention with manifestation of belief is necessary but must be limited

Most participants agreed that the State should be able to intervene with manifestation of belief where harm is being caused or when safety is at stake as in the case of extremism for instance, to prevent harm, when the rule of law is challenged and as a last resort.

> *'The only way that the State should intervene is if your belief or your faith is offensive'…* (SF12-13)

Christians felt that they would be prepared to take off their cross if required because they did not generally see it as a requirement of their faith:

> *'I wouldn't have a problem with it [taking her cross off in order to go to school] because it would not make me any less or more of a Christian.'* (SF10-11)

Whereas nearly all Muslims and Sikhs were not prepared to part from their symbols:

> *'that women would feel naked without the niqab.'* (FG2-17)
>
> *'religion is probably the most important thing in my life – I would not be able to live in a country that didn't allow me to follow it properly.'* (SM1-1)
>
> *'If I took my turban off I would be disrespecting my hair and my guru'* (SM1-1)

Whether one is prepared to remove his/her symbol therefore depends on one's view of the role of symbols and as described above, views of symbols are determined by one's

religiosity. If an individual wears a symbol as an absolute requirement of their faith then they are less likely to be prepared to remove such symbol than if they merely wear it as an expression of faith. This was apparent when participants commented on the French approach to manifestation of belief.

Most participants disagreed with the banning of religious symbols at school, although they were less critical and more understanding of banning the full face cover in the public domain.[34] Nonetheless, some found it oppressive for the State to decide how individuals should dress in the street and others found it dangerous as it could be the starting point to a more controlling state.

> '*You shouldn't force religion on anyone but you shouldn't take away someone's religion either.*' (FG2-17)
>
> '*I think it is a bit too extreme because it is a personal choice to display your faith ... it's different when it's health and safety, jewellery policies but when it's no symbols at all that's a bit too much.*' (SF6-7)

Many of the participants found the French approach extreme, discriminatory, unfair, disrespectful, oppressive and controlling.

> '*We are human beings, the culture, religion is just part of us. You can't take away these things. If you want to take those away you have to take our family away, you have to take our identity away*' (SF5-5)
>
> '*I think everyone should be allowed to show their faith it's a massive part of who people are, how they think, their belief, their lifestyle and I don't see a reason why it should not be displayed.*' (SF12-13)

While others, albeit a minority, agreed with the approach:

> '*It's a positive outlook because you are trying to make everyone equal – no religion should be overtaking or overpowering the other.*' (SF10-11)
>
> '*I do think it's a good thing because it gives the girls who don't want to wear it [hijab] to be free at school.*' (SF11-12)

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[34] For further details about the French approach see (Bacquet, 2011).

Again, those who agreed with the approach tended to be those participants who did not display their faith by way of religious symbol. By contrast, most participants felt at ease with the University of Westminster's multicultural environment which most described as: 'quite comfortable', 'perfectly normal', 'reassuring', 'really nice', 'great', 'welcoming' and 'interesting'. A minority admitted that they would feel uncomfortable sharing a classroom with fully veiled women:

> '*I wouldn't say I would feel totally safe in my class if there was a girl wearing a burqa.*'
> (SF2-2)

It appears therefore that the degree of interference an individual is prepared to take with his/her symbol is fully dependent on why they wear a symbol in the first place. If they consider it as a religious requirement then any unjustified request by the State that the individual in question should remove their symbol will be seen as a violation of the individual's identity. Given the special nature of the relationship between individuals and their symbols, they are not objects that can be merely taken on and off in the way that one removes a hat for instance or folds one's umbrella upon entering a building. This should certainly be the primary consideration for anyone attempting to interfere with one's religious symbols.

Conclusion

The necessity to control manifestation of belief in a pluralist society is both evident and undeniable but the degree of control that a State can exercise on such manifestation is a sensitive debate. In deciding where to draw the line, an understanding of religious symbols and their impact on individual's sense of self is paramount. This study began by asking whether religious symbols matter at all. Through the empirical research, it explored the relationship that individuals have with their religious symbols and the extent to which those symbols form part of an

individual or group identity. There is a sense that in the globalised world, individual's identities are increasingly being absorbed within the pluralist environment and individuals feel more and more detached from their religious and cultural identity. They turn to religious symbols in order to get the sense of belonging and comfort that they lack in an increasingly individualised world. The symbols are a link to their community and as such are part of who they are as both individuals and as part of a group. What comes out of the empirical study is the deeply intimate nature of one's relationship with religious symbols. What outsiders may perceive as a mere artefact is for the wearer an item charged with emotional and spiritual meaning. As this study demonstrated, contemporary religious identities are complex and the result of both ascribed and achieved components. Therefore, when a State attempts to interfere with religious symbols as is increasingly being witnessed in some parts of the world,[35] it runs the risk of overstepping into the private sphere of an individual. UK Courts have come close to this in their interpretation of Article 9 in cases such as *Begum* and *Playfoot*[36] while the French Parliament has adopted a blanket ban on religious symbols at schools and for those who provide a public service.[37] For many, symbols comfort, reassure, protect or simply are part of their being. Depriving an individual of his/her symbols therefore without any justification based on harm, health and safety or threat to the community amounts to depriving them of an identity. In a pluralist society, the State has a duty to respect both the religious and the secular, without trying to impose any ideology upon its citizens who must remain free to have their own identity based on their religious and cultural background. State interference must

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[35] See further Howard 2011.

[36] *R (on the application of Begum (by her litigation friend, Rahman)) (Respondent) v. Headteacher and Governors of Denbigh High School*, [2006] UKHL 15 and *R (on the application of Playfoot) v Governing Body of Millais School*, [2007] EWHC 1698 (Admin).

[37] See further (Bacquet, 2011).

be based on necessity and any restrictions must not be disproportionate to the aim being pursued.

Across Europe, laws and policies on manifestation of beliefs however seem to be constructed on a majoritarian approach. As argued by Bhandar,[38] human rights norms and values are defined by reference to Christian culture. Across Europe, the dominance of the Church is still evident, despite many countries adopting a secular model and officially separating Church and State. In this context, perceptions of symbols have tended to be based on the assumptions that they are not essential which is largely the case in Christianity where there is no particular requirement for members of the faith to display a particular symbol (belief-based). The absence of a requirement does not however mean that the wearer should be deprived of the freedom to manifest, should they wish to do so. This has been confirmed by the ECtHR in the *Eweida* case.[39] Most religious minorities across Europe belong to a faith where there tends to be a duty to manifest religion by way of religious symbols (Muslims, Jews, Sikh) these faith are not just based on belief but include a requirement of practice.

> '*they (belief and manifestation) go together because when you have a certain belief you follow it as it is. I don't think that any Government can interfere with your religion.*' (FG2-17)
>
> '*there are religions where you can have your belief but they won't be complete without the symbol.*' (SF2-2)

Ultimately, what is needed is an acknowledgment by States that symbols play a major role in the making of contemporary religious identities. This would suggest that religious minorities are engaged with laws and policies that directly affect them.

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[38] Bhandar (2009) in Hunter – Henin above n. 9 at 615.
[39] *Eweida and others v. the UK (Applications nos. 48420/10, 59842/10, 51671/10 and 36516/10)*, 27 May 2013.

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