

## **Interrogating the frames of the Islamic dress debate**

What has Islamic dress come to represent in the current historical political moment? In short: lack of agency, gender oppression and Islamic radicalism threatening western secular values. To others, in contrast, it signifies a positive autonomous choice, women's empowerment and a legitimate exercise of one's freedom of religion. In both cases, there is a characteristically late modern set of frames at play: the preoccupation with (women's) autonomy and choice, the imperative of gender equality and a particular secular understanding of religion and religious subjectivity. With insignificant variation, these frames shape the positions of both the proponents and opponents of various bans of the wearing of Islamic dress as the debate is played out inside and outside the courtrooms. Rather than taking a position on one or the other side of the debate, the paper makes the case for interrogating the frames that contain it.

In particular, the paper highlights the extent to which (mainstream western) feminism has been successful in making gender equality an unconditional normative value against which all gender practices are to be assessed. Accordingly, Islamic dress can be approved of insofar as it is capable of being constructed as signifying Muslim women's emancipation (rather than oppression). Another prominent theme is 'remaking certain kinds of religious subjectivities ... so as to render them compliant with liberal political rule' (Mahmood 2006, p. 328). As religion has to be secularised as a system of signs and symbols not to be taken literally, the acceptability of Islamic dress depends on its ability to convincingly repudiate the charge of 'traditional', 'fundamentalist' or 'radical' Islam, which is threatening for western secular sensibilities.

While displacing these frames altogether may not be a realistic or even desirable option, the paper advocates a focus on cognitive projects that provide alternative frameworks for making sense of human experience. In so advocating, it draws on the critical thought of Wendy Brown, insights from postcolonial feminism and emerging critical religious studies.