

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees the protection of the citizens' right to freedom of religion, as well as freedom of expression and from government interference in such acts. Freedom of expression involves the rights to freedom of speech, press, assembly and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. It also includes the implied rights of association and belief.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed in the two clauses in the First Amendment. The clause on establishment bars the government from passing laws that would establish an official religion or indicate preference of one religion over another. In essence it upholds the separation of church and state. It is interpreted to mean that just as how the Church should not meddle in the affairs of the State, so too the State should not interfere in the affairs of any religion.

Aside from freedom of religion, the right of people to follow customs of their religion is embodied in the freedom of expression, as long as it does not pose security threat.

In Netherlands, France, UK, and other parts of Europe, this freedom of religion is generally respected. People, even those who are not yet citizens, are given rights to practice their religion and assemble together as a religious group. However, because of some preceding events, such as the 2004 murder of a filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist, the government had to make drastic moves to prevent the same situation from happening.

One such move that the governments devised is the prohibition of wearing burqa, or a Muslim woman's headdress that bars her face from being seen. In some instances, even the hijab, a headscarf worn to protect the heads of Muslim girls and women, and jilbab, a loose gown that extends to the ankle, are banned from being used.

According to authorities, they are banning the burqa because it is a threat to security. Terrorists and other anti-government elements may use the burqa to hide their identities, as well

as any other gadgets that may be threats to security. The government has a point in its argument. This is because reckless individuals may hide behind these garments to sow terror.

What makes it confusing is that these garments are outward expressions of people's (women's) religious beliefs, which is guaranteed in the First Amendment. But in the face of the law, banning such garments is not against the law. It is completely legal. The Dutch government, in particular, does not believe that banning such garments would violate any laws in the Netherlands or in any of the European Union regarding freedom of religion.

The Muslims in the Netherlands though think that this is "ridiculous." They say that there are only a few women wearing the burqa, about 50 to 100. In fact, the sight of the burqa is the only visible sign that there are Muslims in the area, as only six percent of the Dutch population is Muslim.

But while the government is mulling over the proposal of banning such garments to address security issues, nobody among the Muslim community raised an issue on its religious implications, as far as the article is concerned. Those interviewed were only concerned with the burqa as a "referendum on their very existence here" and that the proponent of the proposal "should find something better to do with her time." The issue on religious encroachment was not even touched nor mentioned in passing. Perhaps it can be assumed that the burqa is no longer such a big deal as far as the Muslim religion is concerned. In fact, in other Muslim countries, women have been liberated from wearing the burqa and now find freedom in wearing contemporary clothings.

What the article implies is that a nation's security is a priority over freedom of religious expressions. Moreover, the First Amendment does not have much relation to the issue in Europe because it only covers the United States. Its equivalent in the Netherlands (or France, or UK)

Constitution should have been a more appropriate reading to equate the article of Gregory Crouch.