

In knots over headscarves

Antwerp's cautionary tale about the complexities of educating Europe's Muslim children.



Illustration by Peter Schrank

For all its grand central squares and lively cultural scene, the Belgian port of Antwerp is not always a happy town. Flemish old-timers share its gritty streets with Arabs, Africans, Asians and, in the diamond district, Hasidic Jews. Race relations are not easy: in the latest local elections, a third of the vote went to Vlaams Belang, an anti-immigrant, far-right Flemish nationalist party. The handsome stone bulk of the Royal Atheneum, a once-elite state school with a 200-year history, has produced legendary free-thinkers and radicals in its day. Now, however, it is enjoying unhappy fame: as the centre of an experiment in multiculturalism wrecked by intolerance. The story defies neat conclusions.

In September 2001 Karin Heremans became headmistress of the Atheneum, which has students of 45 nationalities. The September 11th attacks on America came ten days after she took charge, and her schoolyard became the scene of "very intense" arguments. Ms Heremans responded by working hard to turn her school into a place of "active pluralism". A project about Darwin was led by science teachers but backed by a dialogue among the school's religious instructors. A local composer wrote a work with Christian, Jewish and Muslim passages for pupils to sing. There were debates on sexuality and elections. A fashion show saw girls invited to wear Muslim headscarves, or not: one teenager wore half a scarf to symbolise indecision.

In France Muslim headscarves, along with all ostentatious religious symbols, have been banned at state schools since 2004. It helps that France has a record of separating religion from the state going back more than a century (even a Christmas nativity play would be unthinkable at a French state school).

By contrast Belgium has muddled through. Most schools in Flanders are state-funded but church-run (and pretty secular in outlook). All schools have been left to craft their own rules on headscarves and, in recent years, Antwerp's schools began banning religious clothing, leaving just three that allow scarves—among them the Atheneum. Ms Heremans soon noticed Muslim girls moving to her college. Between 2006 and 2008 the proportion of Muslim pupils at the Atheneum rose from half to 80%.

"At the beginning, I didn't see a problem," she explains. But then, a number of "very conservative" families moved their daughters to the school. By 2007 about 15 girls came to school wearing all-concealing robes and gloves, with only their faces showing. Ms Heremans confronted them. "I said: 'You're stigmatising yourselves. You're breaking with society by wearing those clothes.'" The girls replied that she was stigmatising them. Pupils began donning longer scarves. Others started covering up at school, even though teachers saw the same girls walking in the streets unveiled. When questioned, such girls said they felt uncomfortable at school without head coverings. In 2007 it proved impossible to organise a two-day school trip to Paris—a longstanding annual treat for 15-year-old pupils. "Suddenly it was a problem for girls to stay overnight. Their older brothers had to come too," Ms Heremans says. Most of all, an oppressive, "heavy" atmosphere hung over the schoolyard.

On September 1st Ms Heremans reluctantly reversed herself and banned headscarves at her school. This triggered some nasty protests, including threats from a small clutch of hardliners. The results have been serious: about 100 of the school's 580 pupils have left. Local politicians have raised fears that some may not get an education at all. On September 11th the Flemish education board banned religious symbols in all 700 secular state schools under its control, including the Atheneum. (Religious schools remain free to set dress codes.) It was the opposite of what Ms Heremans once sought, she admits. "But now I feel supported." Some older girls quietly thanked her, saying: "You've no idea of the pressure we were under."

Yet it is not just fiery conservatives who have condemned Ms Heremans. "Boss of my own head", or BOEH in the Dutch acronym, is a feminist group with a mixed Muslim and non-Muslim membership. Its members protested outside the school with whimsy, turning up with sieves and toys on their heads. A spokesman for BOEH, Samira Azabar, says that schools are making it harder for Muslim girls to be "emancipated" through education. She is probably right. Other Antwerp schools banned scarves on the ground of equality but in reality, says Ms Azabar, they wanted to repel pupils from poor backgrounds who might pull them down academic league tables. Ms Azabar dislikes the idea of all-Muslim schools, thinking them bad for integration in the community. But barring scarves "doesn't help girls"; in her view, Ms Heremans has "given up the battle".

The paradox of liberalism

In short, the story of the Atheneum is complicated. Unintended consequences abound. There are people of goodwill on both sides, and actors with murkier motives. The row will probably lead to the establishment of Muslim state schools in Antwerp: the city already has Catholic and Jewish schools. Patrick Janssens, the city's mayor, regrets this, saying he is "not particularly in favour" of single-faith schools. He puts his trust in long-term development: as more Muslims go to university, or feel that society offers them equal opportunities, they will be "liberated" and "realise that religion is not dominant over all other values."

The story of the Antwerp Atheneum is the latest example of a paradox: how should liberal, tolerant Europeans protect their values, even as they protect the rights of less liberal minorities in their midst? Blanket laws banning headscarves are hardly a liberal solution. But Belgium's piecemeal approach left Karin Heremans running something approaching a ghetto-school. Distrust anyone with a simple answer.

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