Romantic Liberalism

The role of individuality and autonomy in the opposition to Muslim veils among self-professed ‘enlightenment liberals’

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Abstract
This paper questions the theoretical coherence and empirical fruitfulness of ‘enlightenment liberalism’. In recent years, this concept has established itself outside of political theory and in the empirical literature on immigration, ethnicity and citizenship. This literature tends to single out enlightenment liberalism as the main culprit behind recent instances of intolerance in the name of liberty. The paradigmatic case of this is taken to be the legal prohibitions against the Muslim veil that have recently been adopted by several European countries. The present paper, however, tries to show that the focus on enlightenment liberalism has in fact led to an unsatisfactory account of the opposition to the Muslim veil in previous research. In what follows, I first examine the theoretical roots of ‘enlightenment liberalism’, which results in the conclusion that the concept contains two very different strands: one rooted in the ideal of Kantian autonomy and another rooted in Millian and Emersonian individuality. This latter strand, I suggest, should be called ‘romantic liberalism’. It is this strand, I then show in the empirical analysis, that seems to have inspired some of the most vehement critics of the Muslim veil. Although they have been pitched as typical ‘enlightenment liberals’, I argue that they are in fact ‘romantic liberals’.
Introduction

In recent years, the concept of ‘enlightenment liberalism’ has travelled beyond the literature on political theory and history of political thought, establishing itself, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, at the heart of empirical research on immigration, citizenship and ethnicity. There is widespread agreement in this literature that we are witnessing a crucial shift on both the level of policy and discourse in several European countries: a turn away from tolerance and even multiculturalism as the main perspective on immigration, in exchange for a more suspicious, excluding and even punishing stance. The examples that are typically brought to fore are increasing demands for mandatory integration tests and citizenship contracts, and, above all, the heated European debates on the Muslim veil over the past two decades, which have resulted in veil bans across several countries. What is especially insidious about this shift, as many point out, is that it is not just spawned by racism or nationalism, but by liberalism itself. From having seen liberalism as the ally of diversity and tolerance, more and more scholars of ethnic relations and migration now in fact suggest that there is an ‘illiberal liberalism’, one that harks back to the Enlightenment, with the problematic notion of ‘forcing people to be free’ in the name of reason.¹

In sum, ‘enlightenment liberalism’ is increasingly singled out as the root cause of a spiralling public debate that pits Muslim immigrants as the dangerous ‘other’ who must be controlled and contained in the name of liberty – the paradigmatic case of which is taken to be the staunch opposition to the Muslim veil.

Yet, this paper suggests that enlightenment liberalism may not be the main culprit after all. In what follows, I will offer a closer theoretical scrutiny of the category of enlightenment liberalism than we can currently find in political theory. I will also empirically examine the purported influence of enlightenment liberalism on some of the most vehement critics of the Muslim veil in contemporary debates. This exercise will reveal that the notion of enlightenment liberalism is both theoretically questionable and empirically misleading. As we will see, it certainly hampers rather than aids us in understanding the veil controversy.

The reason the veil provokes so much animosity among purported ‘enlightenment liberals’, this paper argues, is not that they perceive it as inimical to any ideal of reflective autonomy, but that they believe it to clash with their ideal of self-expressive individuality. This, I argue, makes them ‘romantic liberals’ rather than ‘enlightenment liberals’. My point is not of course to deny that many of the most vigorous critics of the Muslim veil, such as the Somaliborn feminist Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the French nouveau philosophe Pascal Bruckner, explicitly call themselves ‘enlightenment liberals’. Nor is it to accuse them of being insincere in their attachment to the values they invoke. I will not in fact question their intentions but only look at their explicit arguments against the veil. My point is instead to show that the values they do invoke are not typical of what we can rightly refer to as enlightenment liberalism, but of what I suggest we call romantic liberalism.

By combining political theory with sociological findings, this paper takes take seriously the need for empirically and normatively oriented research to enrich each other, and

¹ Cf. Triadafilopoulos. 2011, p.874; Adamson et al. 2011; Fekete 2006, p.10; Joppke 2007; King 1999; Rostbøll 2010; Wallach-Scott 2007. Some admittedly prefer to speak of identity liberalism, hard liberalism or even Schmittian liberalism, but as we will see in the following pages, the idea that Enlightenment values play an important role here is nevertheless seldom far away (Cf. Tebble 2006).
especially so on the topic of immigration and integration, where this has seldom been the case.\(^2\) My conclusions thus contribute to two literatures. First, they suggest that political theorists have neglected what I suggest we call ‘romantic liberalism’. In contrast to a previous paper on the Muhammad cartoon controversy, where I first sketched the contours of romantic liberalism, this paper tries delves deeper into its historical roots in the work of John Stuart Mill and Ralph Waldo Emerson, comparing it more thoroughly with the Enlightenment liberalism of Immanuel Kant.\(^3\)

Secondly, this paper contributes to the empirical literature on immigration. My focus on public intellectuals as the object of study is in fact in line with the recent suggestion that immigration scholars need to go beyond policy analysis and start paying closer attention to the influence of the media and ‘opinion-makers’ on issues such as the veil.\(^4\) Admittedly, I here only manage to examine a few of the many voices in these debates. However, the persons whose arguments I do look at here are often taken to be enlightenment liberals \textit{par excellence}, so they might be seen as the most difficult test for my theory.\(^5\)

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section suggests that, because of its focus on enlightenment liberalism, previous research has failed to give a satisfactory account of why self-expression and the public revealing of one’s individuality are repeatedly invoked in favour of veil bans. I then turn to consider the theoretical and historical roots of ‘enlightenment liberalism’, suggesting that it implodes into two very different forms of liberalism: one inspired by Kant and what we may truly call enlightenment values, and another inspired by Mill and Emerson and what we should rather call romantic values. The subsequent section returns to the empirical debate on the Muslim veil, suggesting that it was the latter form of liberalism rather than the former that was widespread among several of those debaters who have been previously understood as typical enlightenment liberals. In the concluding discussion (still unfinished in this version, sorry!), I summarise my main findings and ponder why the overlap between romantic and liberal thought has received so little attention in previous research.

**Critics of the Muslim veil: in favor of or against self-expression?**

In 1989, 1994 and 2003, the public debate in France was shaken by \textit{des affaires des foulards}. This resulted in the so-called head scarf ban in 2004, which prohibited the wearing of any conspicuous religious signs in public schools, although it was clearly directed at Muslim headscarves specifically. In 2011, another French law was passed, this time against covering one’s face in public. Again, the target was but clearly not wedding veils or biker helmets but the Muslim burka and niqab, the first of which covers the entire face and the second of which leaves a narrow slit for the eyes. Many intellectuals in other countries are also now proposing similar bans, and in recent years both Belgium, Italy and Kosovo, as well as parts of the

\(^2\) Adamson et al. 2011, p.855. Also see Saharso 2007, p.514.
\(^3\) Gustavsson 2013.
\(^4\) Adamson et al. 2011, p.254.
\(^5\) This paper in fact builds on a longer analysis that I undertake in a book that I am currently writing on romantic liberalism. In the book chapter on the Muslim veil, I shall also include data on public opinion, including new data that I have gathered on opposition to face-covering veils among Swedish university students.
Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland have all taken legal measures against the Muslim veil.  

Why, we might ask, are the prominent and self-avowedly liberal intellectuals and philosophers who take part in these debates, especially in France but elsewhere as well, often so vigorously opposed to the veil that they propagate laws that, at least on the face of it, seem to infringe upon the liberal right to freedom of religion?

When it comes to the original debate, the one regarding Muslim headscarves in French schools, the most straight-forward explanation is that the defenders of the ban saw themselves as expanding the negative freedom of girls who were otherwise forced – by family, peers or religious fundamentalists – to wear the veil, as the headscarf quickly came to be called. This, for example, is how Patrick Weil, member of the French laïcité commission that ended up recommending the ban, argued for it.  

Yet, most scholars agree that this is not the full story. It seems that the ban was not only meant to track their explicit wishes, because ‘the voices of the girls themselves were strikingly absent from the debates’, as Joan Wallach-Scott puts it. ‘Although there was evidence to the contrary – that many girls had chosen the headscarf on their own initiative, indeed against the wishes of their parents – the commission members could not accept this as an exercise of free choice’, she in fact concludes. Why, then, was this?

Previous research and its focus on enlightenment values

The existing scholarly literature, which has often focused on the specific case of France, offers a number of explanations, ranging from secularism, post-colonial arrogance, the quest to impose unity over cultural difference, and the Western self-image as a beacon of female emancipation, to specifically French traditions of laïcité, republicanism or even sexual openness. Yet, although they differ internally, they are nevertheless strikingly similar in one crucial aspect: they all connect the ideals that the supporters of a veil ban were trying to safeguard to the values of the Enlightenment.

In her neo-republican reading of French antagonism to the veil, Eoin Daly for example interprets it against the French history of open hostility towards religion, rooted in the idea that it is an obstacle ‘to the advance of reason and enlightenment amongst citizens’. The veil ban, on her account then, represents a contemporary example of a centuries old ‘teleological commitment to science, reason and epistemic positivism’ in France. It is thus yet another outlet for the ‘perfectionist spirit’ that already in the late 19th Century ‘sought to turn France away from the ignorance and servility of its past and promote a conception of the good life based on the flowering of human reason’.

In another account of the debate that draws on secularism, Cécile Laborde traces French opposition to the veil back to Kantian spiritualism and ‘the Enlightenment search for natural

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6 In other countries, such as the UK, Denmark and Sweden, no veil bans of any kind have been passed, but Muslim veils of different kinds have been vigorously discussed in the public debate, and a majority of the population favours some form of ban (Nussbaum 2012, p.3-6).
7 Wallach-Scott, p.16. Because of the, admittedly problematic, ubiquity of the notion of the ‘veil’ in these debates, this paper uses it as a generic term, including headscarves as well as actual veils covering the face.
8 Joppke 2010, p.49.
religion’. These, she suggests, based partly on the reasoning of Marcel Gauchet, gave in France rise to the influential notion of ‘laïcité as an ethic independent of religion, based on reason and conscience’, one which ‘strongly rejected the “heteronomy” involved in subjecting political authority to religious institutions, transcendental foundations and revealed truth’. Again, then, opposition to the veil is portrayed as an attempt to safeguard ‘autonomy’, ‘reason’ and the heritage of the ‘Enlightenment’.12

Other scholars take a more postcolonial perspective on the whole controversy, but Enlightenment values remain central to their story. Liz Fekete for example suggests that throughout Europe, veil bans are welcomed as the way for immigrants to ‘cast off their “backward culture” and ‘assimilate into the modern, secular values of the Enlightenment’.13 Forcing girls to unveil, and restricting their access to education and the public space if they did not, was according to Fekete an expression of a fundamentalist commitment to the Enlightenment value of ‘personal autonomy’, leading to the elitist belief that Western intellectuals are surely able to know ‘the inner state and thought processes of any Muslim girl better than she does herself’.14

In a similar vein, Monica Mookherjee concludes that the stern opposition to the veil on the part of Elisabeth Badinter, the doyenne of French feminism, stems from her ‘Millian view that a person cannot freely submit to slavery, nor prefer a slothful life to one of Socratic questioning’. Banning the veil, in other words, was purportedly an act of safeguarding reason and reflection over the supposed laziness of uncivilized Muslims.15

Joan Wallach-Scott offers a similar reading, connecting French hostility against the veil to the old idea that by lifting the veil of Muslim women, the French liberators in fact ‘stripped them, as it were, of the protective power of superstition and so exposed them to the “light”’.16 Banning the veil, she argues, was yet another attempt at the French civilizing mission, rooted in colonial ideas of Arabs as ‘excessively and unacceptably sexual’, even ‘perverse’, and thus in need of containment and control.17

The Enlightenment in fact returns, albeit in a slightly different manner, in Wallach-Scott’s discussion of secularism as another important factor behind the French antagonism to the veil. Some supporters of the veil ban, she argues, were driven by their concern that the French school, once a bastion of undivided citizenry and shared enlightened values (the French motto being ‘the nation, on and indivisible’18), had been tragically weakened by the individualistic currents of 1968, in the aftermath of which there was an increasing emphasis on individuals expressing their differences in clothing and hairstyles. In banning the veil, she suggests, some elderly statesmen were thus trying to achieve a rebirth of the undivided school where the self that was cultivated was not that of particular persons but of universal citizens, united by their equal commitment to impersonal reason. Here, then, Wallach-Scott invites us

14 Fekete 2006, p.17.
16 Wallach-Scott 2007, p.63.
17 Wallach-Scott 2007, p.51-52. Also see her account of how, in the 1980’s, the French concern with its Muslim populations was fuelled by a return of these ‘old portrayals of the Arab men, violent and out of control’ (p.71), and Muslims were connected to ‘propensities to crime and sexual excess, religious zealotry and laziness, “traditional” customs and beliefs’ (p.83).
18 Wallach-Scott 2007, p.80.
to understand opposition to the veil as opposition to yet another symbol of excessive demands for self-expression, individuality and the recognition of one’s particularity, akin to long hippie hair, punk piercings, and rebellious miniskirts.  

The puzzle
Admittedly, these accounts all mention Enlightenment values in different ways. Yet, in one way or another, they all paint a picture in which the supporters of the veil ban side with values such as unity, autonomy, reason, self-restraint and self-discipline, against the excessive expression of difference, individuality, and divisive private commitments, as well as the lack of sexual, emotional and religious self-discipline that they purportedly took the veil to represent.

In doing so, however, they all present us with a puzzling portrayal of the debate. For it was in fact the supporters of the veil, rather than its critics, who invoked the value of self-restraint and self-discipline. This, moreover, seems to have been well known to the critics of the ban, such as Elisabeth Badinter, who in fact vigorously criticised the veil for precisely this reason, as a symbol of modesty and self-restraint. Rather than portraying a veil ban as an attempt to instil self-discipline over excessive sexuality, many of its most forceful defenders built their entire case against the veil on the view that the veil symbolises an attempt to control sexuality, a deprivation of rightful sexual liberation for women. Many others also opposed the veil because it stifled individuality, rather than symbolised the excessive expression of it; while others similarly condemned it not because it signalled too much difference, self-expression or emotion but because it signalled the suppression of these very things.

This seems somewhat confusing. How could the veil be supported for the very same reason that it was opposed? How could the critics of the veil be understood as both for and against ostentatious self-expression and individuality? Surely they must have seen the ban either as a way of imposing discipline and restraint over excessively physical or even ‘slothful’ immigrants, or as a means to fight the very same restraint and discipline?

Yet, previous research has not tried to solve this confusion. Instead, to the extent it acknowledges it at all, previous research has tended to assume that the critics of the veil are indeed remarkably inconsistent, and that this is in fact part of a larger inconsistence in the very history of female emancipation in France. In her book The Politics of the Veil, Joan Wallach-Scott for example makes the following argument. Gender equality in France has historically been linked to libertinism and frivolity, to welcoming, rather than curbing, sexual desire. Some even go as far as arguing that a certain type of voyeurism and exhibitionism is encouraged. Thus, for many French feminists, female emancipation is not only seen as compatible with the female body being sexualised in the public space, in advertising or in the media more generally; in fact, the visibility of bodies and ‘sexual self-expression’ is taken to be the hallmark of liberal society itself.

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19 Wallach-Scott 2007, p.111.
20 Cf. Wallech-Scott’s own account of them on p.144.
22 Insert references.
23 A similar line of argument can be found in Benelli et al. in NQF Vol 25, no 1, 2006, p.8; and their source Guenif-Souilamas, 2000: Des ‘beurettes’ aux descendants d’immigrants nord-africains. Insert more.
Yet, this individualistic strand, Wallach-Scott suggests, stands in conflict with the republican heritage of French history, according to which the hallmark of liberal society is not at all the visibility of bodies, but disembodied non-difference and sameness. There is thus an unresolved tension within the French project of emancipation, between the libertine and individualistic heritage of celebrating female sexuality, and the republican heritage that requires women to be similar to men in order to be taken as equals. Wallach-Scott then goes on to suggest that the French try to suppress this inner tension – that women must be both different and the same, which is impossible – by telling themselves it is natural, and thus any diverging views of sexuality, such as the one that was attributed to those who wore the headscarf, are seen as impermissible, unnatural and even perverse. In other words, one of the main reason why the Muslim singling out of women by a visible sign such as the veil evoked so much hostility in France is supposedly that it drew attention to an inconsistency within French female emancipation, a shortcoming on their own side that French intellectuals would rather deny than acknowledge.

This explanation, however, suffers from a range of problems. First of all, it only applies to France, and yet elsewhere as well we see that scholars describe veil bans as symbols of self-restraint, while those who support these bans rather describe them as the very opposite, as means of fighting what they perceive as a Muslim demand for harmful self-restraint. With her story on specifically French views on sexuality and gender relations, Wallach-Scott cannot explain this. Nor can her focus on French gallantry and sexual mores explain why so many also invoked self-expression and the joy of being visible beyond the realm of sexuality and gender relations, applying it instead to human existence in general. In the following we will see that far from all the voices who were against self-restraint were talking about self-restraint in sexual terms; rather than talking about what it means to be a woman, or a man for that matter, they believed themselves at least to be talking of what it means to be human.

Impressive as it may be in terms of imaginative power, it also strikes me as a rather hazardous project to submit an entire culture to a therapeutic analysis; and even more so to do this with the considerably simplistic distinction between a culture of recognition and a culture of denial as one’s only theoretical tools. Looking for explanations in the supposed denial of the problems of French feminism is certainly creative, but in this context it appears as a somewhat roundabout way of trying to explain why those who supposedly resisted the veil because of their commitment to unity and restraint nevertheless expressed hostility to the veil for the very reason that it supposedly suppressed these very things. When our empirical material turns out to differ from our theoretical preconceptions, surely the first thing to do is question our theory and adjust it to empirical reality. Thus, if the opponents of the veil turn out to invoke values that seem to be in conflict with what we expect them to hold, then perhaps, rather than assume that they are driven by urges to deny and repress their own implicit inconsistencies, we may instead ask whether we as scholars were perhaps wrong to begin with.

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28 For example, the Iranian feminist Chahdortt Djavann did not only portray the veil as a sexual but also a psychological mutilation, and, interestingly, as an insurmountable obstacle to ‘becoming a human being’ (note 8 in Wallach-Scott 2007, ch 5). Also see Bruckner 2010.
Perhaps the critics of the veil were never really in favour of restraint, order and unity over the expression of difference and individuality? Perhaps, after all, their animosity to the veil did not build on enlightenment liberalism but on something else?

**Enlightenment liberalism under scrutiny**

By now, the reader might rightfully start to think that, before we can go any further, we should establish what is meant by ‘enlightenment liberalism’. I shall therefore here briefly recapitulate the background of this notion in political theory.

In *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls famously concluded that, given the pluralism of reasonable and yet mutually oppositional religions and moral outlooks on life that seems to arise in any free society, the basic structure of a just liberal society must be formulated independently of any such ‘conception of the good’, or else it fails to respect the freedom and equality of all citizens. This means that a just liberal regime must be presented as freestanding from any comprehensive ideal, so that citizens with different comprehensive ideals can nevertheless endorse it. That is what makes his liberalism ‘political’ as opposed to ‘ethical’.29

The main alternative to political liberalism according to Rawls is ‘Enlightenment liberalism, that is, a comprehensive liberal and often secular doctrine founded on reason and viewed as suitable for the modern age now that the religious authority of Christian ages is said to be no longer dominant’.30 He repeatedly links Enlightenment liberalism to Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, and more specifically to the position that ‘Kant’s ideal of autonomy and Mill’s idea of individuality’ should be the goal of liberal institutions.31 His concern is clearly that enlightenment liberalism will fail to justify liberal institutions for the many citizens who do not embrace the comprehensive ideal of the Enlightenment, namely moral autonomy:

*While autonomy as a moral value has had an important place in the history of democratic thought, it fails to satisfy the criterion of reciprocity required of reasonable political principles and cannot be part of a political conception of justice. Many citizens of faith reject moral autonomy as part of their way of life.*32

Although they do not always share Rawls’s enthusiasm for political liberalism, other prominent liberal theorists have expressed similar concerns regarding what they call ‘enlightenment liberalism’. Chandran Kukathas for example argues that we must steer clear of the liberalism that came ‘out of the Enlightenment—from Kant in particular—and from its nineteenth-century inheritors, Wilhelm von Humboldt and John Stuart Mill’. This liberalism, which he believes ‘has dominated liberal thinking’ is characterised by the belief that a good society must protect ‘individual liberty and, especially, the individual's freedom to develop and flourish to his or her full potential as a human being’.33

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29 Rawls 1996.
33 Kukathas 2003, p.264.
William Galston similarly argues against the ‘enlightenment liberalism’ that places ‘the Socratic/Millian/Kantian impulse of critical awareness’ at the heart of the liberal project, and thus tends to interfere with choices that are seen not as the result of rational self-reflection, but rather of unswerving faith or tradition.\(^3^4\) The core ideal of enlightenment liberalism, in Galston’s view, is autonomy:

*By ‘autonomy’, I mean individual self-direction in at least one of the many senses explored by John Locke, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and Americans writing in an Emersonian vein. Liberal autonomy is frequently linked with the commitment to sustained rational examination of self, others, and social practices – whence Mill’s invocation of Socrates as liberal hero.*\(^3^5\)

In short, it seems that the predominant description of enlightenment liberalism can be summarised as follows. Enlightenment liberalism is not, as it is nevertheless somewhat sloppily used in the empirical literature, merely a particular position on what political institutions we should have; rather, it is a particular ethical position on how individuals should live their lives, in combination with the idea that this requires certain political institutions, namely liberal ones. In other words, it is not enough to favour institutions that are often connected to the Enlightenment, such as freedom of speech or of religion, in order to qualify as an enlightenment liberal. One must also promote these very institutions in a specific way, by recourse to the ultimate ethical ideal of the Enlightenment. It is this ethical commitment that places enlightenment liberalism into conflict with tradition and religion. In fact, enlightenment liberalism is believed to alienate those citizens whose lives are guided by tradition or faith or even emotions and passions, rather than by calm and reasoned self-reflection. The reason for this is that enlightenment liberalism strives towards the Kantian ideal of moral autonomy, and the Millian (and Emersonian, and Humboldtian) ideal of individuality and human flourishing.

In what follows, however, I will question whether this notion of a unitary enlightenment liberalism that alienates deeply religious citizens in one and the same way really holds up for scrutiny. For while there is no denying that both Kant, on the one hand, and Mill and Emerson, on the other, attacked ‘orthodox Christianity’, their attacks were utterly different both in content and purpose. This was not the result of mere differences in character or circumstances, but more profoundly rooted in their distinct and sometimes colliding notions of the good life. Kantian autonomy, as we will see in the following section, differs significantly from Millian or Emersonian individuality, and thus their critiques of organised religion also differ from one another. Recognising this, we will see, leads to the disintegration of ‘Enlightenment liberalism’.

**Kantian autonomy**

Moses Mendelssohn once famously referred to Immanuel Kant as ‘der Alles-Zermalmende’: the great pulverisor, or the great destroyer. What Kant pulverised was above all the assumption that we can ever have pure knowledge of *das Ding an sich*, that we could ever perceive the things in themselves such as they actually are in the noumenal world. But what Mendelssohn was referring to more specifically was that Kant also destroyed the idea that we


may ever find any theoretical proof of God’s existence. He simply denied the possibility of any such proof. He also voiced strong opinions against organised religion and religious establishment, as well as of more popular faiths such as Pietism, in which he himself had been brought up. In *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason*, he vigorously criticised ecclesiastic authority, religious dogma and the ‘counterfeit service’ of religious rituals that he believed to express ‘a pretension of honoring God through which we operate directly counter to the true service required by him’, namely to act morally in a principled manner. It is thus perhaps not very surprising that, whenever attendance of religious services was required by him when he served as rector of the University of Konigsberg, he became peculiarly ‘indisposed’.

In order to see the roots of Kant’s critique of religion, however, we need to understand his ideal of moral autonomy (which I shall henceforth simply refer to as autonomy, since this is the only kind of autonomy we will discuss).

Autonomy in the Kantian sense is the capacity to impose upon oneself the dictates of universal reason, which for Kant is the only way to conduct a virtuous life. This may sound more authoritarian than it is, however, for by imposing on oneself the laws of reason, one does in fact only submit to laws that one makes for oneself, laws that one *wills* freely. Yet, there is still an element of responsibility and obedience in Kant’s notion of autonomy, albeit obedience to one’s own self, for one cannot be autonomous if one does not submit to one’s *authoring self*, as it were, but instead submits to emotion or desire, for example, no matter how much they form part of one’s sense of self. To be autonomous in the Kantian sense, then, is to be the author of one’s own actions, to be the subject only of one’s own will, and this is taken to mean not only to be free in regards to others, but also to act independently of, often indeed against, one’s own desires.

When Kant famously admonished us never to treat persons only as means but always as ends in themselves, the element in them that he wanted us to respect was their ‘humanity’. This ‘humanity’, which lent human beings their dignity and thus made them valuable ‘beyond price’, consisted for Kant in what we might call our potential to do good, which is nothing else than the potential of each of us to impose upon ourselves the duties of universal reason. That which makes human beings worthy of respect for Kant, then, is not really our particularity, our specific personality. On the contrary, that which makes us close to sacred is our shared ‘humanity’, the universal capacity to act as moral lawgivers.

Kant of course also used the term ‘humanity’ in a very different sense: ‘Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made’, he famously remarked. Here, ‘humanity’ refers not to our universal potential, but to our private and actual selves, in Kant’s view more filled with depravity and radical evil than the disposition to do good. Thus, despite his scathing critique of organised religion, Kant nevertheless insisted that the moral community of the church was a necessary vehicle for the moral development of humanity. In fact, ‘the great pulverisor’ did not celebrate *societal* upheaval at all. Progress in politics as

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36 Kant 1793, 6:168.
37 Wood 2001, pp.xii-xv.
38 Insert reference from *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.
39 Same as above and other references.
40 Kant 1784, Proposition 6.
41 Wood 2001, p.xxxiv, look at more references.
As in religion was to be made slowly, through the use of critical reflection. Contemptuous as he was of it, he thus did not want to abolish organised religion, because he believed that religious thought would progress better by gradual steps and peaceful reflection rather than through radical disruptions.

Moreover, Kant’s critique was certainly not fuelled by hostility of religious belief as such. Although he famously denied that there is any proof of God on theoretical grounds, he clearly adhered to the rationalist notion of God and to the idea that the essential message of Jesus was to publically spread a ‘pure rational faith’ in the very same moral law that we find by our use of reason. It even seems that Kant saw his own ethical project as nothing short of completing ‘the thoroughgoing revolution in doctrines of faith’ that Christianity set in motion by its discovery of ‘the moral law’.

In sum, Kant criticised organised religion because he wanted to safeguard God and Christian morality, not because he wanted to abolish them. The reason he opposed popular religion and mysticism, as well as ecclesiastical authority with its ceremonies and false promises of salvation in return for obedience, was that he believed them to be false, quite simply. For Kant, any focus on religious intuition, sentiment and mystics was a delusion that diverts attention from what matters, namely to act according to the dictates of reason (xii). For example, he dismissed the Pietistic notion of rebirth, of divine grace sometimes working from within humans to accomplish a conversion of the sentiment, as anti-intellectual schwärmerei. He saw prayer ‘conceived as an inner ritual service of God’ as ‘superstitious delusion’, and any religious rituals aimed at conjuring up divine grace and power in this world, whether performed by pagan shamans or Puritan priests, as ‘fetischism’. Because they all tried to serve God by something ‘which cannot by itself constitute a better human being’, Kant condemned all these practices and beliefs as counterproductive, for they created the illusion that we could be deemed morally good without acting as autonomous moral agents, without having to think for ourselves and imposing on ourselves the universals laws of reason.

**Millian and Emersonian individuality**

Let us now turn to individuality, ‘the full development of the individual faculties, the achievement of originality through self-creation and expression’ as Alex Zakaras refers to it in a recent book on its centrality in the political thought of John Stuart Mill and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Individuality was first formulated by the early German romantics, most notably the Jena Romanics, who were certainly inspired by Kant, through Fichte, but also differed greatly from him in their ideas. From them, the concept eventually travelled into the vocabulary of

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42 Even in his otherwise most radical (and romatic?) moments, most notably in What is Enlightenment?, he recommends the slow and gradual pace of peaceful change over revolutions.

43 Indeed, when confronted with the accusation of ‘misusing’ his philosophy in order to ‘distort’ the Holy Scriptures and Christianity, and the threat that ‘continuing obstinacy’ would lead to certain ‘unpleasant measures’ in a letter from the Prussian predecessor of Frederick the Great, Kant did not choose to rebel or ignore the demand, although it seems this need not have cost him very much given his reputation and status. Instead, he obeyed and promised not to publish anymore on the topic (which he later did, however, when the king died and he could argue that he had no promise to break, because he had made it to an individual who no longer existed on earth). See Wood 2001, p. xxiii-xxiv, and also Lestition 1993.

One might of course object here that independently of what Kant did, perhaps followers of autonomy nevertheless should celebrate societal upheaval… (more).

44 Kant 1793, see Devigne 2006, p.24.

45 Kant 1793, 6: 96-178 (insert more specific references, also see Wood 2001, p.xiv).

46 See Gustavsson 2013 for an overview of these early German Romantics.
the English romantics, including Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle, all of whom raged against the tyranny of custom and conformity. And from these poets, finally, individuality made the leap into the political philosophy of Mill and Emerson, who tamed some of its most elitist aspects and tried to wed individuality to the ideal of liberal democracy.47

Although Mill at times seems very keen on distinguishing between lower and higher, more reasoned, forms of human existence, ‘the great gamble in his political philosophy’, as Robert Devigne puts it, is his later ‘shift to a more expressive conception of excellence and individuality’.48 There is thus reason to speak of a turn to ‘romantic expressivism’ in Mill’s philosophy, a position that resists the distinction between forms of life that are inherently higher or lower, after all.49 Indeed, the chapter he devotes to individuality in On Liberty contains the famous declaration that ‘If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode’.50 From this and other similar excerpts, Devigne draws the following conclusion:

‘With the new emphasis on self-creation and self-expression, Mill’s goal is not humanity at its highest, but distinctiveness and individuality. Eccentricity is valuable because our self is unique and unrepeatable. Mill’s new excellent individual is not to rest and conform to an established standard but to move, on ceaseless journeys courageous and innovative, celebrating the value of new experiences, with a desire for deeper self-discovery. Here the immediate purpose is to produce an individual, a unique or authentic personality, rather than a perfectly developed human nature.51

This is of course not to deny the centrality of reason in Mill’s thought, but rather to suggest that he wanted to put human reason to a different use than did Kant. For Mill, the goal of reason was not primarily to discover the universal morality that Kant believed is the ultimate good. Rather, Mill urged us to use reason for our own self-development, in order to find out who we deep down want to be. The importance lies not so much with the contents of this self that we want to develop, but with the fact that we engage in developing it with a ‘fresh and living conviction’.52

In other words, while the requirement to bring oneself in line with one’s highest self is certainly essential to both the Kantian ideal of autonomy and the Millian ideal of individuality, the two differ crucially in that the latter leaves it open for the individual to decide which self to heed. While autonomy demands that we obey our voice of reason, individuality does not tell us which of our voices to pursue, but only that we must pursue whichever voice that we believe will allow our particular personality to flourish the most.53

47 For a good overview, see Zakaras 2009, p.25. While the conclusion that R.W. Emerson was greatly inspired by the Romantics and that individuality took centre stage in his political thought is not really contested, it is admittedly more difficult, if not altogether impossible, to pin down J.S. Mill in any one category in the same manner. He is notorious for trying to bridge utilitarianism with a strong support for individual rights, and ideals of the Enlightenment with ideals more close to the Romantics. Neither of the two, and Mill especially, can of course be satisfactorily described in the short space available in this paper. Nor is this my aim, however. Instead, it suffices to argue, as I shall do here, that one of Mill’s defences of liberal democracy — and indeed one of his most recurrent ones — drew heavily on what he himself calls individuality, an ideal that differs in important respects from Kantian autonomy.

48 Devigne 2006a, p.190.
49 Devigne 2006a, p.220-221.
50 Mill 1977.
51 Devigne 2006a, p.188-189. I realize I must incorporate others here too, and more directly from Mill.
52 Thorlby 1973, p.343. Also see Devigne 2006a, p.75.
Because we are ultimately different, ‘different persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development’, Mill insists.\(^{54}\) It is thus up to each person to get to know his inner depth and to create a coherent and flourishing person from it. Each of us is to be the architect of his soul.\(^{55}\)

Because of their ideal of individuality, Mill and Emerson also differed crucially from Kant by welcoming a certain amount of struggle and forceful clashes of opinion – in Emerson’s case there is even, somewhat disconcertingly, a belief in the salutary effects of violence in the American Civil War. This is because individuality, as George Kateb puts it, crucially involves having ‘the courage not to hide oneself from oneself or from others’.\(^{56}\) In contrast to autonomy, it thus emphasises that we must go beyond reflection and reasoning, that we must also engage in courageous and dedicated action. Emerson for example clearly emphasised that individuality commands us not only to hold on to our commitments in private, but to express and act on them in public.\(^{57}\) Mill similarly insisted that in his age, ‘the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend knee to custom, is itself a service’, and that excellent individuals must also ‘act upon their opinions’.\(^{58}\) Thus, while the arch enemy of autonomy is heteronomy, failing to be the master of oneself, the main enemies of individuality are docility and conformity, representing not only the triumph of the non-reflective but specifically the triumph of non-reflective custom and cowardice over the deliberate project of self-creation.

Influenced as they were by the Romantics, both Emerson and Mill also seem to have believed that individuality begins with disruption, since before we can even embark on the deliberate project of creating our selves, they believed that we must first obliterate the common and damaging assumption that whatever way other people live and have tended to live is the only natural path for us as well; the implicit assumption, in other words, that human beings are not that different from one another after all, and that one mould, that of custom, fits all equally well.\(^{59}\) In order to make us see that there is more than one natural way of living, and in order to see that we are not doomed to one given life, but free to create our own, Mill and Emerson thus welcomed clashes of views and conflicts between different perspectives as ways of widening our imagination and showing the supreme authority of man over tradition.\(^{60}\)

Thus, when Mill and Emerson invoke Socrates or Plato as liberal heroes it is not primarily, as Galston seems to assume, because they share with Kant the Socratic belief that moral truth can be found by the use of reason and the rules of logical consistency. In fact, Mill exalts Socrates not as a bearer of truth but a breaker of the illusion we can have truth at all.\(^{61}\) Emerson similarly invokes Plato as a hero next to Moses and Milton because they all had the courage to speak their ‘latent conviction’, as he believes all men should do, independently of

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\(^{54}\) Mill 1997, p.?
\(^{55}\) Kateb 1992, p.90.
\(^{57}\) Zakaras 2009, p.29.
\(^{58}\) Mill 1997, p.?
\(^{60}\) For a longer overview of the German Romantics and their notion of conflict as necessary for this reason, see Gustavsson 2013. Also see Devigne 2006a, p.6, on Coleridge’s influence on Mill’s view of the necessity of struggle and conflict.
\(^{61}\) Devigne 2006a, p.84-85 (insert Mill directly instead).
whether it is consistent or not. ‘Foolish consistency’, as he famously declares in the very same paragraph, is in fact ‘the hobgoblin of little minds’.62

It is perhaps not very surprising, then, that whereas Kant’s critique of organised religion was aimed at anti-intellectualism, mysticism, religious sentiment and magic, Mill and Emerson rather directed their critique at what they saw as its unhealthy teachings of self-denial and self-abnegation. Emerson in fact welcomed intuition over tradition and theological arguments. In his famous and at the time shocking Divinity school address, which was deeply influential for the development of transcendentalism, he insisted that a religion based on science and thought is not enough, we also need religious sentiment (one of the things that Kant opposed the most). The goal of sermons and rituals, for Emerson, was to stimulate such sentiment, and to lift us up and motivate us to believe in ourselves and our close to divine powers. Religion should teach men not to be ashamed of themselves but to take pride in their own inner light, for in fact man contains in him a divine authority of sorts.63 In Nature, he in fact referred to humans as gods ‘in ruins’.64 In a similar vein, although less radically, Mill insisted that religions should not teach people to obey but to be heroic. He also complained that organised religion among his contemporaries involved a focus on avoiding the bad rather than positively engaging in the good, a ‘horror of sensuality’ that had made asceticism into an ideal.65

In contrast to Kant, then, who believed that human beings needed religious establishment because of their wicked nature, and who dismissed religious sentiment as anti-intellectual delusions, Mill and Emerson both emphasised that religion should rely on sentiment, not reason alone, and that it should foster our inherent creativity, cultivating strong desires to do good as opposed to the mere knowledge of what is good. We might even say that, while Kant criticised religious authorities and rituals to the extent that they ‘let us off the hook’, by allowing us to think that we could achieve salvation through other things than moral actions alone, Mill and Emerson castigated religious authorities to the extent that they dwarfed our creativity and inculcated us with shame, self-denial and excessive humility.66

Romantic liberalism

The upshot of the above is that ‘enlightenment liberalism’ as it is usually defined in the literature seems to incorporate two very different strands: one rooted in Kantian autonomy, and another rooted in Millian and Emersonian individuality. The latter could, with the terminology I have used in a forthcoming paper, be called ‘romantic liberalism’.67 Both are sectarian in that they place a conception of the good life at the heart of liberalism, and a conception that is specifically secular, thus alienating ‘citizens of faith’ as Rawls would have it. Yet, the two liberalisms differ in their views on both what the ideal is, and how it is to be pursued. While Kantian enlightenment liberalism places the commitment to Kantian autonomy at the centre of the liberal project, romantic liberalism justifies liberal institutions

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62 Emerson, Self-Reliance. In Representative Men, Emerson places Plato as a hero next to other ‘great men’, such as Napoleon, Goethe, Swedenborg and Shakespeare.
63 Emerson, Divinity School Address.
64 Emerson, Nature.
65 Mill 1977, p.242-43. Also see Mill 1969d, p.416. Also see Devigne 2006b for Mill’s critique of Enlightenment’s natural religion.
66 The difference between Kant and Mill is nicely described in Devigne 2006b, p.24.
67 Gustavsson 2013.
with recourse to their salutary effects on what Mill and Emerson refer to as individuality, which is perhaps best operationalized as the life of authentic and dedicated self-expression and self-realisation. This, furthermore, leads romantic liberalism to celebrate a certain amount of disruption and struggle, while enlightenment liberalism shuns conflict and strives for unity. Finally, I have also tried to show that the two positions criticise religion in different ways and on different grounds. While enlightenment liberalism criticises mysticism, religious feeling and religious rituals for diverting our gaze from the supreme goal, namely to act virtuously, romantic liberalism rather celebrates mysticism, religious feeling and rituals to the extent that it helps us in our projects of self-realization, and criticizes religious dogma to the extent that it condemns us to shame and self-abnegation.

In the following section, we shall return to the contemporary debate regarding the Muslim veil, and examine whether the novel theoretical apparatus that I have developed in this section is able to bring more clarity to our understanding of the most vehement critics of the Muslim veil.

**Romantic liberalism in the rejection of the Muslim veil**

Consider Marianne, the symbol of the French republic and of liberty. In *Liberty Leading the People*, the famous painting of the July Revolution in 1830 by Eugène Delacroix, Marianne takes centre stage on the barricades, revealing not only her face but also her naked chest while fighting for what she believes in. Now picture a woman in a burka, a niqab or even a headscarf, for your inner eye. It is perhaps not altogether surprising that anyone who idolises Marianne could see the two figures as representative of the two opposite ends of a scale. The question, however, is: what scale? What aspect of Marianne was the veiled Muslim woman taken to oppose?

Clearly, the answer has something to do with nudity and the lack thereof. Yet, I think we can gain something important by going beyond the sexual meaning of nudity, and the particular meaning of female nudity, both of which take centre stage in Wallach-Scott’s gendered analysis of the veil controversy. Nudity, after all, is not always about the body or the face, it’s not only about what is literally bare. It is also a symbol for revealing one’s inner self, one’s emotions and convictions. Ever since the Paradisiacal existence of Adam and Eve before the Fall of Man, nudity has served as the perfect image of honesty and childlike sincerity. Since the romantics, it is also the ultimate image of the human being stripped free of all pretence and hypocrisy, expressing nothing but her true convictions. Perhaps, then, the veil was resisted also because it was seen as inimical to this kind of symbolical nudity, to expressing one’s individuality in the world, rather than just inimical to the way the French female is supposed to reveal her body?

**The French debate: hiding in shame vs. fighting topless**

I would suggest that the idea of the veil as a refusal to show who one is to others, a refusal to communicate, was definitely important in the French debate. Psychoanalyst Elisabeth Roudinesco for example stated that the veil is a ‘curtain’, making her not only blind and deaf...
to the world, but also shrouding her in silence. Her worry, it seems, is that the veil hinders one from communicating with the rest of the world. In fact, it is not only listening and seeing that is hampered, but also self-expression – the first crime of the veil that she mentions is not ignorance or narrow-mindedness, but silence.

A similar concern was brought up by Pascal Bruckner, the *nouveau philosophe* who together with Alain Finkielkraut calls French public space ‘the visual marketplace of seduction’, as Wallach-Scott notes in her account of French sexual mores. Bruckner clearly sees himself as a supporter of Enlightenment liberalism. Yet, this is how he describes the main problem with the burka:

*The problem for society is that a person who goes into the streets hidden in this way becomes invisible and erased, denied individual singularity. The Carmelite nun, cloistered in her convent, must present her face uncovered when she appears in civil society. But not the Muslim woman who covers herself. She is nothing, merely a shadow that does not have the right to a minimal social existence, and while walking in the free air remains imprisoned behind her great wall of clothing. This is an invitation for a population of ghosts to wander French streets; no-legged zombies, like so many extras in horror films; a collection of clones denied the most fundamental right of existence—the right of recognition.*

The idea of a disembodied liberal individual whose dignity comes from the universal reason that she shares with all humanity, and that she is able to impose upon herself, is here entirely absent. Instead, the most important victim of the Muslim veil is presented as a self in considerably romantic terms, a self that can only be called human or even existing if it is shown to others and recognised in its uniqueness by them. Bruckner’s account of the veil amounts to no less than the claim that, unless we show our faces to our fellow human beings, we cannot become proper human beings ourselves; we remain ‘nothing’, mere shadows. The ultimate horror is to be a clone, a copy, a person deprived of ‘individual singularity’.

In the account of romantic selfhood, we often also find the idea of the struggle as crucial to becoming someone, to separating oneself from others and becoming aware of oneself at the same time. Thus, it is perhaps not very surprising that Bruckner also presents the struggle as necessary and compromise as impossible:

*In this case, France, generally hostile to social groups who imprison individuals in iron collars of tradition or belief, seems to me more advanced than other European nations, more willing to be a frontline state in this struggle.*
In his book on what he calls the European culture of self-flagellation, Bruckner even goes as far as to suggest that the challenge from Islamist radicalism is welcome, since it forces us to sharpen our senses:

(...) let us agree that we now have an enemy and that this helps us remain vigilant, in a state of alert. Here we can truly say with Thucydides: ‘Your hostility does us less harm than your friendship.’ The adversary puts us in the contradictory position of wanting to defeat him and wanting to preserve him in order to retain the energy he instills in us. He is at once detestable and desirable.  

It seems, then, that the supposed clash of civilizations and the ensuing mode of combat that Bruckner envisions is a welcome way of achieving the sense of identity, of individual recognition, that Bruckner deems to be ‘the most fundamental right of existence’. Although he invokes reason and the Enlightenment, it is clear that his main ideals are romantic: sincerity, individuality, self-expression, disruption, and dedication.

Bruckner, moreover, was far from alone in his derision of compromise. The same intransigent spirit can be found in Profs, ne capitulons pas!, an open letter to minister of education Lionel Jospin, which was published in Le Nouvel Observateur in 1989 and which influenced the ensuing debate significantly. The letter was written by five influential French intellectuals, among whom we find Alain Finkielkraut, Bruckner’s co-author; Régis Debray, who was to be a future member of the laïcité commission under Bernard Stasi; and Elisabeth Badinter, whom we have already seen is the leading figure of contemporary French feminism and throughout the years one of the main opponents of the veil on the grounds that it symbolises modesty and restraint.

The letter argues that toleration of the head scarf is equal to giving in to those who demand our submission, and who want human beings, in this case young girls, to ‘kneel humbly’ (‘plier l’échine’, literally ‘bend their knees’). Recall here Mill’s praise for ‘the mere refusal to bend knee to custom’. The choice we are presented with is one of either giving up and losing our freedom or fighting for it with dedication and force: Neutrality is not passivity, nor is liberty simple tolerance. Laïcité has always been a constant struggle. Now that religions are again in a spirit of combat, is this really the moment to abandon what you call ‘la laïcité de combat’ for the sake of benevolent sentiments? Laïcité is and remains by principle a battle, as are the public school, the Republic and freedom itself. Their survival imposes on all of us discipline, sacrifices and a little bit of courage. No-one anywhere can defend citizenship by lowering their guard in goodwill.

In other words, freedom is not to enjoy one’s pleasures in peace. In fact, freedom is not even something we fight for. In the considerably romantic language of struggle and combat that we find here, freedom becomes synonymous to battle itself. This, I suggest, in fact brings us full circle back to Marianne, Delacroix’ symbol of liberty. For not only is she self-revealing and sincere, she is also up there on the barricades, engaged in combat, dedicated to her cause. The self that she expresses, and the self that the most vehement critics of the veil celebrate, is not just authentic and unique – it is also formed in fighting, in dedicating oneself to one’s

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76 Bruckner 2010a, p.138.
77 Bruckner 2010a, p.?
80 Profs, ne capitulons pas!, my translation.
principles. Such an idea of authentic individuality that needs to be expressed, perhaps even through struggle, is, I have argued, not so much an example of enlightenment values as of romantic ones.

Hirsi Ali: The veil as a tool of docility
At this point, however, perhaps some readers question whether my discussion of Marianne and individuality can in fact be transported outside of France. Perhaps these ideals are peculiar to the French case? Although I cannot do full justice to this question, I shall here try to show why I believe that the individuality of romantic liberalism helps us understand opposition to the veil beyond France as well. I shall therefore turn to consider Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who is often described as somewhat of a first lady of enlightenment liberalism and thus, we might say, a least likely case for finding romantic liberalism.  

Hirsi Ali questions the fruitfulness of veil bans, yet remains firm in her conviction that the veil is ‘a terrible thing’. The reason she does not support veil bans is pragmatic: she believes the discussion on the veil to be a cosmetic one, when we really should be discussing the clash of civilizations. Why, then, is the veil such ‘a terrible thing’? In her autobiography, Nomad: From Islam to America: A Personal Journey Through the Clash of Civilizations, Hirsi Ali gives the following answer:

The veil deliberately marks women as private and restricted property, nonpersons. The veil sets women apart from men and apart from the world; it restrains them, confines them, grooms them for docility. A mind can be cramped just as a body may be, and a Muslim veil blinkers both your vision and your destiny.

The veil, then, denies its wearer her personhood. Just as it literally confines the body and the vision of the woman beneath it, it also symbolises a larger confinement of mind and destiny. But is this confinement a problem for Hirsi Ali because it results in the lack of autonomy or because it rather leads to the lack of individuality? The fact that she opposes docility, as we also see in the quote above, seems to suggest the latter reading. Docility, we might recall, was the main enemy of individuality according to both Mill and Emerson. Hirsi Ali’s concerns over ‘nonpersons’ also seem to resonate with Bruckner’s horror at the prospect of what he sees as clones, copies and zombies robbed of their personal singularity.

However, we need to know more about what Hirsi Ali means by a cramped mind in order to know whether she is in fact more interested in individuality than autonomy. Perhaps her point, rather than being about how Muslim women lack the freedom to express their true self, is rather that they lack the freedom to decide for themselves what they believe is right, that they simply take orders from outside and do not stop to reflect on their own beliefs?

Yet, if this were the case, it is peculiar that when specifying in what sense the veil symbolises mental slavery, Hirsi Ali does not bring up moral reasoning or reflection at all, but instead the problem of shame and the suppression of desire:

The Muslim veil, the different sorts of masks and beaks and burkas, are all gradations of mental slavery. You must ask permission to leave the house, and when you do go out you must always hide

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83 Hirsi Ali 2010, p.16.
yourself behind thick drapery. Ashamed of your body, suppressing your desires – what small space in your life can you call your own?^{84}

This quote certainly suggests that the main problem with the veil is that it both literally and symbolically hinders the expression of one’s self. The mental slavery of the veil consists in not taking pride in oneself. The veil, as it is presented here, locks its wearer in feelings of shame and self-suppression, it hinders her from living her life from within. Its evil lies in the fact that it requires women to be something that they are not, as Hirsi Ali sees it. The implicit ideal beneath these allegations, then, the life that the veil is portrayed as hindering, is that of feeling whole, of not suppressing one’s innermost feelings but accepting them and incorporating them in a fuller sense of self, one to rejoice and take pride in.

In *The Caged Virgin*, Hirsi Ali in fact puts a name on this ideal, one that we recognise by now, namely individuality:

*The few Muslims who have gained their individuality can hold up a mirror to the community from which they have emerged to make them face their still-undeveloped individuality, to make them see the ‘I’ that is constantly being oppressed and curbed by dogma, prescriptions, and the stifling culture of gossip that rules in most Islamic cultures.*^{85}

Instead of allowing themselves to be crippled by guilt, ignorance, and fear, Hirsi Ali thus urges Muslims to ‘summon the courage to break through this wall of emotional resistance’ that hinders them from criticising and reflecting on their religion.^{86}

This juxtaposition of courage to guilt and fear is considerably romantic. Yet, here we also see ignorance being contrasted to reflection and self-criticism, concepts that might seem to qualify Hirsi Ali for the Kantian camp of liberalism after all. In fact, Hirsi Ali repeatedly expresses her admiration for Enlightenment philosophers and prescribes reason, reflection, and self-criticism for her contemporary Muslims. However, a closer look on what she argues reveals that she seldom extols self-reflection and self-criticism as valuable in and of themselves, or as means to become a more virtuous person. For Hirsi Ali, it is not that persons must reflect on and question themselves, but that Muslims must reflect on and question their beliefs. Nowhere does she urge Westerners to engage in self-reflection or self-criticism; if anything, they are encouraged to stand up for their ideals instead of wallowing in self-examination. It is only Muslims, then, who need to engage in reflection and criticism in regards to their own culture, because only Muslims are deemed to have a religion that is deeply objectionable.^{87}

What, then, separates benign and malign religions in the eyes of Hirsi Ali? The following quote is rather straightforward:

*I have nothing against religion as a source of comfort. Rituals and prayers can provide support, and I am not asking anyone to give those up. But I do reject religion as a moral gauge, a guideline for life.*^{88}

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^{84} Hirsi Ali 2010, p.16.

^{85} Hirsi Ali 2007, p.32 (also see p.152 on the denial of Muslim individuality, and p.99 on ‘the enjoyment of personal identity’).

^{86} Hirsi Ali 2007, p.xvi.

^{87} Hirsi Ali 2007, p.xvii (insert more page references). Indeed, Bruckner also sees self-reflection as a cultural rather than an individual project (2010a, p.33). Also see his critique of what he deems to be excessive self-examination and the guilt-prone nature of Christianity (p.2-3).

^{88} Hirsi Ali 2007, p.76.
The problem with Islam, then, is that ‘religion is not considered a tool with which the individual can add meaning to his life or not use at all’, but instead considered as ‘an absolute’, which the individual has only to obey.89

Islam thus asks too much, according to Hirsi Ali. It asks submission of the individual will to the dictates of God, and it requires the individual to restrain himself in different ways, to curb his intuitive feelings, desires, and wishes.'The God of the Christians and Jews’, in contrast, ‘has been tamed by reasonable people’. Its God, Hirsi Ali continues, is nowadays ‘referred to as “love” or as “energy”, and those who believe in Him have done away with the concept of hell’.90

Let us recall that, for a Kantian liberal, the main problem of organized religion is that it invites us to lean back and believe we can achieve salvation through mere obedience, when in fact we can never relax from our supreme duty to be autonomous, to will what is good and to impose it on ourselves. Organised religion is thus problematic for Kant to the extent that it asks too little, not too much, of the individual.

However, for Hirsi Ali, the problem seems to be the very opposite. Her judgment on a certain religious practice depends on whether it contributes to a person’s flourishing, or whether it rather fosters self-abnegation, self-denial and fear. The problem with Islam is not that it is false in any way, not that it relaxes our moral faculties, but that it leads to Muslims being ‘imprisoned in the fear of hell’ and thus fearing ‘the very natural pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness’.91

In sum, then, even on the topic of religion, Hirsi Ali’s position is much more reminiscent of Mill’s and Emerson’s than of Kant’s. In a considerably romantic way, she assumes that religion in a liberal state must never go beyond the role of therapy, it must always succumb to the individual and never demand the submission of the individual to a transcendent truth or power. This submission, furthermore, is believed to clash with the most important ideal: to rejoice in oneself and stand up for it without shame. Finally, the ideals she believes are threatened by the veil are not primarily self-reflection or autonomy, but individuality and courage. Her scorn for ‘underdeveloped individuality’, fear, guilt, and shame, and their crippling effects on us are in fact among the most recurrent themes in her work.92 It seems erroneous, then, to call her an Enlightenment fundamentalist or an enlightenment liberal.93 Rather, she is a romantic liberal, whose approach to ethics, politics and religion is centered on the development of individuality and self-expression.
Concluding discussion

(Very much unfinished)

This paper has tried to show that, at the centre of the veil controversy, we do not just find the naked and sexualised female body, nor do we find a disembodied, autonomous self, who struggles to obey the dictates of universal reason and to reflect on and question herself. At the centre of the veil controversy stands the romantic self, who lives by the principle of individuality, and who strives to be an entire, flourishing individual, one who rejoices in herself, shows it fearlessly to the world and refuses to compromise with what she believes in.

This conclusion gives us reason to question a common assumption in debates on immigration and liberalism, namely that Romantic demands for recognition and self-expression are intimately connected with a revolt against modern civilisation in general, and liberalism in particular. While some see romantic ideals as a lamentable threat to the liberal individualism that they themselves espouse, and others welcome them as an alternative to a liberalism that they see as cold and atomistic, there is namely widespread agreement on one thing: that Romanticism is to be seen as something inherently illiberal and anti-individualistic, for better or for worse. The romantic legacy, it is assumed, sides with diversity, community, and multiculturalism; in short, with whatever stands against the ethos of liberal individualism.

This paper has, in a way, turned this notion on its head. As I have tried to show, the romantic concept of showing oneself can also be individualistic and allied with the forces that condemn multiculturalism.

This paper is already too long, so I finish here for now, abrupt as it is.

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94 E.g.Wolin 2004; Berman 2004, ch.2.
95 Taylor 1991.
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Iberian romantic liberalism resembles in some respects German romantic political thought of the 1790s. While there were notable intersections between romanticism and liberalism, German romanticism was marked by a strong communitarian element as well as a critique of excessive individualism. See Beiser, Frederick C., Enlightenment, revolution and romanticism: the genesis of modern German political thought, 1790–1800 (Cambridge, MA, 1992), pp. 18–19, 223. Academic journal article Studies in Romanticism. Romantic Liberalism and the Juridical Comedy: Robert Bage's Hermsprong. By Nersessian, Anahid J. Read preview. It sands down the protuberant edges of what Samuel Johnson called "tale[s] of wild adventures" and molds them around the contours of the everyday and the ordinary. (1) This is a very general, slightly distended claim, but it bears entertaining alongside the emergence of another sort of realism and that is the political realism of the Romantic period. Romantic visual arts. Romanticism and music. Romanticism outside the arts. Romantic nationalism. Gallery. Romantic authors. Scholars of Romanticism. Romantic societies. Notes. References. Romanticism (also the Romantic era or the Romantic period) was an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and in most areas was at its peak in the approximate period from 1800 to 1850.