



# Chumir Ethics Forum

Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership



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## Thinking About Ethical Leadership:

### Obama in Cairo on Religious Freedom and Gender Equality

By Janet Keeping, President



Reactions to President Obama's recent speech in Cairo to "the Muslim world" have been varied. While he was widely praised for his now legendary eloquence, many were disappointed by the speech. For reasons related to advancement of human rights, I was too.

First, there is no such thing as "the" Muslim world. There is enormous variety in the countries where Islam predominates, and there are Muslims in most other countries. To use language that accentuates differences, rather than builds on commonalities, further polarizes us along narrow identity lines.

Second, the speech was treacherously shallow on the meaning and scope of religious freedom, for his remarks were premised on the false assumption that everyone is a believer of one religious faith or another.

Religious freedom, according to Obama in Cairo, means "People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind, heart, and soul." But what about those who have no faith?

Obama has sophisticated legal training. Whatever his own religious commitments, he knows that religious freedom includes freedom *from* religion, as well as the freedom *to* believe what you choose. But his speech pandered to Middle Eastern religious authoritarianism. In so doing, he abandoned those who lie dangerously outside their societies' mainstream belief systems, who need their leaders to hear the American President endorse genuine freedom of conscience and religion. He also contradicted the truth-telling principle he laid down earlier in the speech – we should "say in public what we say in private."

Third, his remarks on women's right to equality were cowardly and counter-productive. This is arguably more harmful than his superficial treatment of religious freedom. After all, there are probably many more women than non-believers in his intended audience.

True, Obama did not sell Muslim women *all* the way down the river. But through sloppy thinking or bad strategy, he undermined rather than strengthened Western support for Muslim women's rights.

He endorsed the universal desire for dignity, but employed gendered stereotypes which have limited women forever. Why does he say it is wrong to "blow up old women on a bus" and not old men? Nitpicking, you say. But there is more: "All of us have a responsibility to work for the day when the mothers of Israelis and Palestinians can see their children grow up without fear." Right – it's the mothers' and not the fathers' responsibility to worry about the kids.

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Worse, he states the intention to work with Muslim governments to advance literacy programs for girls, but still manages to support the view that gender



Photo Credit: Shawn Baldwin, The New York Times

equality is not an incontrovertible right of Muslim women – not the bedrock principle that it has become in the West – but rather a means to a socially desirable end. “And it is no coincidence,” he says, “that countries where women are well-educated are far more likely to be prosperous.” It’s true that women’s development contributes significantly to their society’s development. But that isn’t why women are entitled to equality: they are due equality because all human beings are morally equal. Period.

Women’s equality rights are integral to democratic ethics, but Obama’s speech sacrificed “the rights of women on the altar of culture.”<sup>1</sup> We should all look forward to the time when no world leader, let alone the President of the US, will do any such thing.

Obama let Muslim women down in another way. After acknowledging their equal rights to education, Obama notes – fairly – that women’s equality is not “simply an issue for Islam” and lists some Muslim countries where women have enjoyed significant political power. So far, so good, but then he says, “Meanwhile, the struggle for women’s equality continues in many aspects of American life, and in countries around the world.” Commentators have been right to hammer him on this point. Licia Corbella, for example, says:

<sup>1</sup> Licia Corbella, “Obama’s speech filled with dangerous equivocations,” *Calgary Herald*, June 6, 2009.

“That sentence was a shameful example of appeasement to the medieval-minded men who rule the Islamic world.” And – although we might quarrel with Corbella’s assumption of one Muslim world – so it was. The point, as she notes, is “To equate women’s equality issues in the US with those in the Muslim world is an abomination. The brutal dictators of the Muslim world will trot out that statement every time brave women in those countries cry out for equality.”

It is right and necessary to acknowledge that all is not perfect on the human rights front in the West. Sheema Khan is right that “Here [in Canada], we pride ourselves in the opportunities and choices afforded women. Yet, judging from recent public sentiment, ‘women in Muslim dress’ are the new WMDs who threaten the very fabric of our society.”<sup>2</sup> But it is still desperately wrong even to appear to equate the seriousness of human rights imperfections in the democratic West with those in the rest of the world.

The gains made in recognition and protection of human rights, including gender equality and respect for difference in sexual orientation, have been profound. Opportunities that my daughters take for granted – for example, to become lawyers if they want – were denied to my mother from Quebec which was slower than other provinces to allow women to practice law. To pretend significant progress has not been made is to denigrate the sacrifices of those who fought for those advances and to undermine those brave souls engaged in similar struggles outside the democratic West. They are, for the most part, seeking the very freedom my daughters take for granted and to deny them the inspiration of our success is cruel.

Barack Obama does not walk on water. For all his talent and intelligence, he too has his limitations. In Cairo he let women – all of us – down.

Notwithstanding the good he may have accomplished on other fronts in Cairo, Obama missed an important moment to lead on both religious freedom and gender equality.

<sup>2</sup> Sheema Khan, “Obama’s call to action in Cairo reminds us of bridge-building here,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 9, 2009.

## Letter from Leer, South Sudan

I have returned to South Sudan to try to improve the lives of those devastated by a 22 year long civil war that killed 2.5 million people, displaced more than 5 million, and destroyed the region's infrastructure. It is a place where children have little access to education despite the UN's millennium goal of achieving universal primary education for every child by 2010, with lucky children only able to attend classes under the shade of trees. Worse yet, it is a place where villages have no access to clean drinking water and healthcare.

Despite such trying circumstances, there are individuals working hard to assist the people of South Sudan to improve their quality of life. I intend to be one of them.

I understand the origins of the difficulties in South Sudan, because I am one of the "Lost Boys of Sudan." I endured unspeakable conditions in Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya, burying friends at the age of seven, feeding on leaves, witnessing friends collapse and then fall prey to wild animals when none of us had the strength to protect them. At one point I even had to drink my own urine to survive.

I lived alone for twenty years without knowing whether any of my family were alive. In 2005, I learned my mother had survived. I was able at last to meet her in 2007, but was dismayed to discover that she was going blind from trachoma, a disease that can be prevented by having access to clean drinking water. I tried everything I could to provide medical

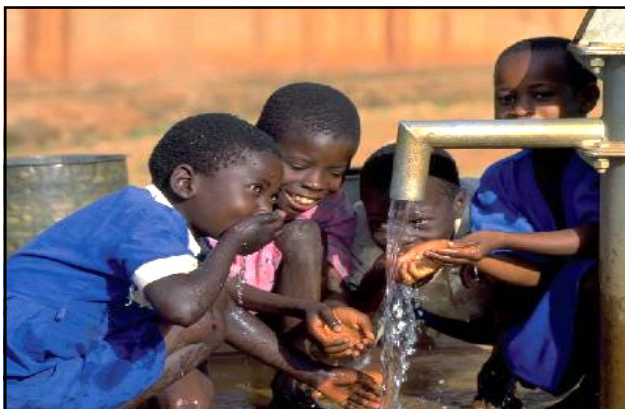


Photo Credit: Constance Lewanika

care for her, but unfortunately was told that my mother's eye condition was too advanced and she would not be able to see again.

This event represented a crossroads for me. I eventually resolved to help others before they became blind like my mother by improving access to clean drinking water. Through drilling wells in remote villages in South Sudan, my objective is to prevent trachoma from spreading or affecting more people.

I have launched an awareness campaign in southern Alberta by making presentations in schools, social clubs, churches, associations and teachers' conventions. I share my traumatic past with students to help them gain perspective on the difficulties people face in regions such as South Sudan. Through my talks, I managed to raise \$10,400 Canadian dollars for development projects in that part of Africa.

I left for Leer, South Sudan on May 21st, 2009, to drill the first water well in my mother's village, a town of about 650 who have no access to safe drinking water. After the project's completion, I will return to Canada to raise funds to drill more wells in other villages and also build schools for children who currently have no access to education.

As a former Lost Boy myself, who once fought for survival, I am on the verge of making a difference in villagers' lives in the South Sudan. In a region devastated by war and conflict, I want to show how one person with a vision and commitment to helping others can effect positive change and bring hope to others in need.

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**James Nguen** studies international development at the University of Calgary. He is the founder of the Biluany Literacy and Water Project, co-founder of the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan Association of Calgary, and the subject of the award-winning documentary *The Long Journey Home of James Nguen*. Mr. Nguen entered Canada as a refugee on September 26, 2001, 15 years after he was forced to leave Sudan at the age of seven, when Sudanese government troops and Arab militias attacked his village in Leer, South Sudan. He escaped, but later discovered his father, stepmother and four siblings had been killed in the attack.

If you would like to contribute to James' work in South Sudan, please get in touch with him at [jnnguen@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jnnguen@ucalgary.ca)

## **The Wild Rose Foundation: De-funding shakes Alberta's foundations**



The recent Alberta government decision to cancel the \$8.5 million in grants given by the Wild Rose Foundation seems like a small act, but it creates unintended consequences for the both the government and Not-for Profit (NFP) sector. In both cases, the community loses. A tiny sum of money was saved by the de-funding, yet it signals a huge loss of important infrastruc-

ture, particularly for small Alberta communities. Unfortunately, Albertans were not consulted in this move.

The Wild Rose Foundation was established out of the \$1.5 billion in annual Alberta lottery funds to distribute quarterly grants to “increase the capacity of volunteer non-profit organizations to develop and achieve self-reliance.” The matching grants were small—no larger than \$50,000 to any organization in a 3-year period—but the Foundation’s reputation was huge. Run by a citizen board with deep knowledge of the volunteer sector, it targeted initiatives focused on local need, rather than political interest.

The Foundation was enormously supportive of NFPs during a period of core funding elimination and simultaneous government downloading of social service responsibilities to the NFP sector .

Most NFPs are small. So, when tiny budgets have significant portions of money taken away, it places the very existence of NFPs at risk.

The provincial government has argued that NFPs can apply for funds from other programs. But these funding programs are managed directly by the Ministry of Culture and Community Spirit, and allocated based on electoral boundaries, and thus far more open to direct political involvement.

The announcement also did not point out that the alternative programs do not fund core services (they are project-based), are notoriously slow in giving out funds, and already over-subscribed. Some critics question whether the decision was designed to control NFPs rather than increase efficiency.

Unfortunately, Alberta’s non-profit sector lost not just funding but also the oversight of an unbiased citizen board directed to address local community need.

Ironically, there may be a strange side-benefit for the community with less funding and the loss of the Wild Rose Foundation.

As NFPs become less reliant on government funding, they become less influenced by government and more able to speak freely. Without governmental funding, NFPs may make decisions without the fear of reprisal from loss of further funding. They can support new thinking and activities and even become free to pursue ideals and programs that may run counter to government policies. They can even create movements that connect with and enlist more citizens toward public engagement. In this way, perhaps the NFP community’s loss is Alberta’s gain.

So should the government rethink its decision to de-fund hundreds of Alberta not-for-profit groups? Perhaps, but even if it does, it is doubtful a new Wild Rose Foundation, complete with citizen oversight and direct community involvement, will arise.

A critical question emerges concerning how vocal the NFP community will be in the wake of its loss. “Freedom to Create” is part of the new provincial slogan; time will tell to what degree the not-for-profit community uses this newfound freedom.

Kelly Ernst  
Senior Program Director

## Religious Symbols in Canada: What the hijab means and what it has become



Photo credit: Christina Ryan,  
Calgary Herald

My comments come from two perspectives: one, as a national board member of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW), a very much on-the-ground NGO, and two, as a second-generation Canadian Muslim woman.<sup>1</sup> Some of my observations stem from a year-long CCMW study *In My Own Skin: Canadian Muslim women creating our own identity*. In this study seven

young women (I was one) spent a year going across Canada interviewing second-generation Muslim women to gather their experiences and opinions.

CCMW advocates on behalf of women who wear the veil by choice, but does not focus solely on the hijab. We think there is much more to our identity as Muslims. We are particularly concerned about the focus on the veil to the detriment of Muslim women's civic, political and economic engagement. We note that the obsession with the veil extends to both non-Muslim and Muslim communities. *In My own Skin* shows there is a big gap between the two dominant understandings of the hijab. One sees it as a symbol of Muslim women's oppression, the other, as a positive force for the women who choose to wear it.

The hijab may proudly confirm their Muslim identities or provide Muslim women a chance to take control of their lives by making them respectable in their cultures. For a number of young women we interviewed, the hijab is a device to negotiate space within the Muslim community, as well as in the dominant Western culture.

<sup>1</sup>CCMW is a national, non-profit organization of believing Muslim women committed to their equality, equity and empowerment. CCMW promotes Muslim women's identity in the Canadian context and encourages mutual understanding between Canadian Muslim women and women of other faiths. [www.ccmw.com](http://www.ccmw.com)

We found that most women wear it by choice, not coercion, as it provides a source of power in cultures that are otherwise patriarchal. As second-generation Canadian Muslim women, we have constantly to negotiate our identities. We strive to balance our faith and cultural backgrounds with being Canadian, as well as with being women, which brings its own considerations. And we have to do this in a context where our immigrant parents are afraid of losing their cultures in a western world and therefore have to make an especially strong effort to maintain their spiritual space.

As a result, in addition to the usual issues every girl faces with her parents – in terms of curfew, whether they can date, opportunities for higher education, and the like – there is this added religious, or cultural, layer. For the young women we spoke to, adopting the hijab is often a signal to their families that they respect religious values, but will pursue their lives as they see fit.

The hijab empowers these young women, allowing them to step out of traditional cultural precepts. As one girl put it, “the old fashioned headgear is a license to become modern.” This is in line with the observation in *The Politics of the Veil* that “wearing a headscarf allowed girls to attend coeducational schools who otherwise would have been unable to.”<sup>2</sup>

A recent article in Time Magazine, “A Quiet Revolution Grows in the Muslim World,” notes “The veil gives women more power in a man's world.”<sup>3</sup>

CCMW does not deny there are women who are coerced to wear the hijab. But our study suggests that the position taken by some in France – that “the veil represented the subordination of women, their humiliation, and their inequality. It must not be sanctioned by those who believe in the republican principles of liberty and equality” – is over-simplistic.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup>Robin Wright, “A Quiet Revolution Grows in the Muslim World,” Time Magazine, March 19, 2009.

<sup>4</sup>Scott, p. 153.

It doesn't begin to capture the gender and power issues associated with the veil. Moreover, it ignores the fact that some women are just more comfortable wearing the hijab, just as some women are more comfortable wearing pants versus skirts or a t-shirt over their bathing suits at the beach.

What does the debate about ostentatious religious symbols in France's schools have to do with Canada? Well, we have had this conversation in Canada. It started back in September 1994 with Emilie Ouimet, a 13-year-old high school student in Quebec, who was sent home from school for wearing the hijab. The principal justified this saying the school strictly forbade wearing caps or attire that would distinguish students from their peers.

The incident provoked a debate which raged for months in Quebec.

The issues in the Quebec debate were very similar to those in France: how to deal with religious belief in a secular education system; the fear of religious fundamentalism; the hijab as a symbol of oppression versus liberation; and integration of "immigrants" into Quebec society. It emerged that there had been other expulsions of young Hijabis from school. In some cases, parents of girls wearing the hijab were interrogated about whether they forced their daughters to wear it. A few school principals questioned the right of Muslim students to fast during Ramadan.

The issue finally came to a head when the parents of Dania Bali, a straight-A student who was asked to remove her hijab, filed a complaint with the Quebec Human Rights Commission.

The Commission's landmark ruling turned the tide: Quebec schools did not have the right to prohibit any student from wearing religious attire (be it a Sikh turban, a Jewish yarmulke, a Christian cross, or Islamic hijab). The Quebec Charter of Rights guarantees religious freedom, and no school administrator or employer could take that right away. More importantly, Quebec society was asked to consider issues

of religious pluralism in the emerging "global village." In another case, the Commission ruled against a Muslim school that required non-Muslim teachers to wear the hijab. One cannot force one's beliefs on others – be it for, or against, the hijab.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, there have been fewer incidents of hijab discrimination in the schools. However, post-2001, we find a sharply increased backlash against females wearing the hijab. This has occurred in sports – for example, the girls forced out of their Tae Kwon Do tournament for refusal to remove their hijabs, and the girl kicked off a Quebec soccer field for the same. The backlash is also having an economic effect, as women who wear the hijab have much more difficulty finding a job. Consider the hijab-wearing student pharmacist who was refused work by 50 pharmacies before getting one with an Arab pharmacist.

Could a French-style hijab ban be enacted here in Canada? It seems, "yes." Recently it became known that the Quebec Council for the Status of Women was planning to examine whether the hijab should be prohibited in public buildings. If enacted, teachers, students, lawyers, judges, and so on could not wear a scarf to work or school. A campaign has been launched to galvanize opposition to this move. This proposal to ban the hijab is troubling. As a woman, to know that a Canadian government agency would spearhead this process is disturbing. Proponents may think such a ban liberates Muslim women but, almost assuredly, it would have the opposite effect by further marginalizing a group already sidelined from political, economic and civil engagement.

As a professional who works on economic and social issues, I think there are much more important things to work on. For example, Muslim women are the least likely of all faith-based groups in Canada to vote. They are one-third less likely to vote than Hindu and Sikh women with whom they share some key

<sup>5</sup>Interestingly, the Quebec Council for the Status of Women and the Canadian Jewish Congress came out in favor of the hijab. For the Council, it was an issue of freedom of choice and access to education. If the hijab were banned, many young Muslim girls would simply not attend school, and thus be penalized for their choice of belief. For the Congress, it was an issue of minority religious rights.

demographic characteristics. They are also less likely to run for politics. And if the example of Dr. Samira Laouni is any example, Muslim women, particularly those who veil, are targets of racism and Islamophobia when they do.<sup>6</sup>

At this point, only Quebec is considering a ban. Quebec, like France, was once dominated by the Catholic Church, and this history plays a part in the hijab debate there. I am from Alberta where the hijab issue is seldom raised. This could be because Alberta is a conservative province with a significant number of distinct religious communities, including a large Hutterite community, where the women wear a black, polka-dot-peppered head covering and girls between the ages of 3 to about 10 wear a bonnet-like head covering called a *mitz*. To my knowledge no one has suggested a ban against these females covering their hair.

The mood may also be different in Alberta for economic reasons. Until recently Alberta enjoyed good economic times and jobs were abundant. As a result, not getting a job due to wearing the hijab was not as much of a concern (although underemployment is), whereas in Quebec the situation is different. Whatever the reason, the hijab is much more controversial in Quebec than the rest of Canada.

In sum, I agree with those who say secularism must be recognized as a fundamental value of Canada, because it "liberates" public space and effects a separation between "worldly" and religious powers. I would also argue that secularism guarantees freedom of religion and religious expression. My concern, however, is that secularism must not be allowed to become a "radical position" transformed into "a religion to fight religion," as the Canadian Muslim Forum in Quebec notes.

There is a lot we can learn from France's hijab debates about what not to do, and I look forward to the day when Muslim women are seen as coming in all shapes, sizes and colors, with all sorts of perspectives

<sup>6</sup>Dr. Laouni ran for the NDP in the last federal election. During the campaign she was intensely questioned about her marriage, religious beliefs, and sexuality which revealed the interviewers' deeply Islamophobic and misogynist presuppositions.

on Islam, the world and their place in it. Some are outspoken and vocal while others are more retiring. Some veil and others do not. And that's OK. What's of concern is that discussions about Muslim women are often reduced to images and media clips of their dress and dichotomies of oppression and liberation. The arguments on both sides – whether it's Muslim women themselves or the broader society – focus on dress as a symbol of faith and freedom of religious expression on the one hand and lack of freedom and oppression on the other.

From a feminist perspective, the French law on conspicuous symbols has simply moved the issue of a woman's obedience to a man to that of her subservience to the state. Nowhere does the argument about the hijab touch upon her relationship to her God, or her religious conscience.

If the ultimate goal is to "liberate" Muslim women, I would argue that Canada, and other concerned countries, should focus on Muslim women's economic and civic participation and leave the hijab to its rightful place, namely as a matter of a woman's choice.

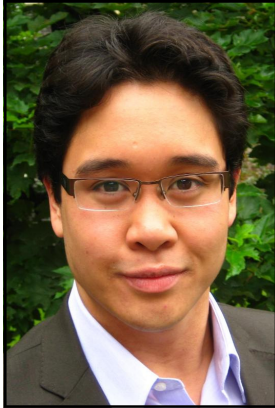


Photo Credit: National Post, John Mahoney, Canwest News Service

**Salima Ebrahim**, friend of the Foundation and formerly of Calgary, now of Toronto, spoke at a Chumir event on gender equity and secularism.

The talk was one of two events in March 2009 co-sponsored with the Centre for Values and Ethics (COVE) at Carleton University in Ottawa. Joan Wallach Scott was the keynote speaker. Dr. Scott, who teaches at Princeton, is author of *The Politics of the Veil*, which examines the politics surrounding France's law on "conspicuous religious symbols."

### Intern Announcement



We are happy to announce the appointment of **Justin Jalea** as the **2009 - 2010 Intern!**

Justin Jalea is currently completing his MA in Philosophy at the University of Alberta. His thesis concerns the role of intuitions in philosophical methodology, which has many implications for moral thinking. Mr. Jalea earned his BA (Hons) in Philosophy at the University of Toronto.

Justin is committed to “affecting positive change in the community and encouraging others to do the same.” He lives this belief through many volunteer activities with charitable organizations. An accomplished singer, Justin sings professionally in Edmonton with such groups as Pro Coro Canada.

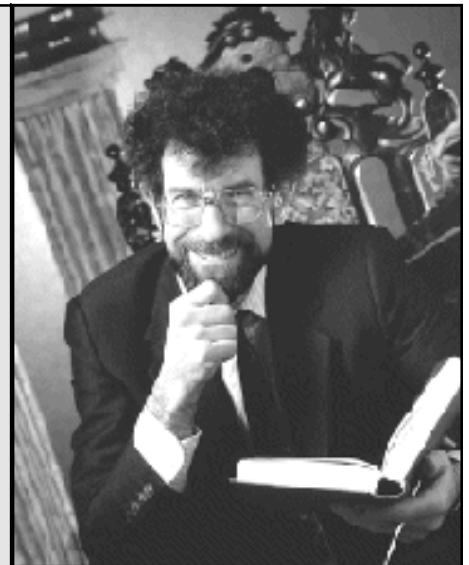
Justin has worked as a Teaching Assistant for philosophy courses and as a Research Assistant examining the moral character of people in leadership positions. He received a Graduate Student Scholarship at the University of Alberta and numerous University of Toronto awards in recognition of his leadership capabilities, service to the university and wider community, and academic achievement. Justin’s background in ethics, leadership and community involvement will be an asset to the Foundation in its efforts to nurture informed discussion and public demand for ethical leadership. Justin will be joining us in September.

### Stay tuned for upcoming events!

In September we are holding a forum on “**Right to Know**” – join others from the community to celebrate “Right to Know Week” September 28 – October 2, 2009. [www.righttoknow.ca](http://www.righttoknow.ca)

Later in the Fall join us for another public forum entitled, **Parental control, children’s rights and the public interest in a well-educated citizenry.** We will discuss some of the values that were overlooked in the debate on *Bill 44*.

**Dates and locations TBA**



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1940-1992

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