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Abp of Canterbury criticizes Euro burqa bans

by Anto Akkara by Religion News Service

NAGPUR, India -- Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams deplored attempts by European governments to prohibit Muslim women from wearing body-covering burqas in public.

"Governments should have better things to do than ban the burqa," Williams, the leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, told an interfaith meeting at the National Council of Churches of India's headquarters in Nagpur.

France's constitutional court on Oct. 7 approved a law banning full-face veils in public, which would prevent women wearing garments such as the burqa.

Belgian lawmakers voted to approve a similar measure in March to ban the wearing of clothes or veils that do not allow the wearer to be fully identified. The newly-formed government in the Netherlands has also announced plans to introduce measures to ban face-covering veils.

"I believe that the state ought not to be addressing issues like these. Instead, it should leave such concerns to the religious communities," Williams said Oct. 14, describing the French ban as "a sign of being overanxious".

More than 100 church leaders attended the meeting alongside Muslim, Sikh and Hindu leaders.

"We are glad that the archbishop spoke out clearly on the burqa controversy. He is very objective and respects other faiths," A. Majid Parekh, a Muslim leader in Nagpur, told ENInews after the speech.

Williams told ENInews the controversy generated by bans on the burqa, the Sikh turban and the Christian cross in some European countries, "shows the extension of secularism too far." Williams had protested

when a British Airways employee was told she should not wear her cross necklace while at work.

"This ought to be resisted. The communities should have the right to decide on such issues," he said.

He told the meeting attacks against migrants in Europe were not the result of Christian prejudice against non-Christians but a "crude nationalist prejudice against migrants and outsiders."

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