

French Identity, Muslim Identity:
Universalism, *Laïcité*, and the Islamic Challenge

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Abstract

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Europe is currently embroiled in a debate over the challenges Muslim immigration poses to national identity and cultural cohesion. As nations seek the best way to accommodate the values of the mainstream while respecting the rights and beliefs of Muslim minorities, they must make decisions about what tolerance really means, and the extent to which it requires secularism. The uniquely French value of *laïcité*, created from universalist ideals as a French solution to what was originally a French problem, is not incompatible with strong religious identity, but it is incompatible with the public expression of faith—an expression that many Muslims believe Islam requires. This essay will explore the reasons why the concept of French identity as universal and secular challenges France’s Muslim minority (and vice versa) and why the application of *laïcité* within a universalist framework is still the best way to foster the creation of a truly French Islam.

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It was at the expense of their culture that European individuals gained, one by one, all their rights. In the end, it is the critique of tradition that constitutes the spiritual foundation of Europe. —Alain Finkielkraut

The Continental Context: In Search of a European Identity

Over the past few decades, globalization has melted borders and brought different peoples, groups, cultures, and nations into ever closer contact with each other at an accelerated pace that shows no signs of reversing or even slowing down. This dynamic process encourages innovation, but also creates pressure and conflict as different ideas and beliefs mix and clash. In an ironic reversal of a previous tendency to view the rest of the world as its “playground,” Europe has emerged as a key region in this period of transition, as an immigration destination rather than a set of emigration nations (Bauman 2004:14). The European continent is now struggling to come to terms with new challenges created by its increased proximity to the rest of the world, so to speak, and it is being transformed in ways that will test the cohesion of our nascent global society.

There are a number of factors contributing to Europe’s confusion. Globalization has created new economic opportunities for many, while forcing others into conditions of precarity and uncertainty. The European Union’s integration policies have dissolved physical, political, and economic borders between European countries, encouraging people, with mixed results, to subsume their national identities and to think of themselves as European rather than as Greek, Polish, German, or Swedish. Meanwhile, Europe’s immigrant population has continued to grow exponentially. New multicultural hubs, of which London is perhaps the most dazzling example, are teeming with people from all over the world, boasting a rich spectrum of cultures, languages, and faces, as well as a staggering variety of delicious ethnic foods (which is where my particular

attention usually wanders). Yet as stimulating as diversity can be, recent events remind us that anxiety and prejudice are seldom far below the surface in even the most diverse societies. The erosion of national identities coupled with economic uncertainty and the simultaneous influx of ever-larger numbers of immigrants has made Europeans feel insecure and confused, and terrorist attacks in Madrid, London, and elsewhere both exacerbate the situation and make it clear that it is not just Europeans who are having trouble adjusting to global pluralism.

This internal upheaval has propelled Europe into a heated discussion about the nature of European identity. Questions about Europe's physical and cultural boundaries in turn raise questions about who is or is not European, creating multiple spheres of belonging and exclusion. Attempts to consolidate Western space and identity have caused pressure to build along cultural fault lines. Fractured societies are emerging, where ethnic and cultural groups both native and non-native settle, congregate and interact in discrete territorialized blocs in an attempt to carve out zones of familiarity and comfort in the midst of difference, marginalization, and rejection. Étienne Balibar (2003:172) argues that "this differential inclusion of European apartheid in the process of globalization no doubt explains why, more and more, the traditional figure of the external enemy is being replaced by that of the internal enemy." The subsequent climate of insecurity has crystallized in the current debate over the presence of Muslim immigrants, in light of their failure to integrate into wider European society to the degree desired by native Europeans.

In many ways, France can be considered a microcosm of this situation. For several reasons, notably the 2004 ban on the *hijab* (headscarf) in public schools and the 2005 riots in the *banlieues* (projects), France finds itself in the eye of the storm raging over Muslim integration, and thus it is easy to view France as a sort of barometer for similar issues brewing elsewhere in Europe. Meanwhile, France's universalist approach to its residents, Muslim or otherwise, creates unique advantages and disadvantages that deserve to be assessed. Europe's cultural clash with Islam can be examined usefully in the context of the ongoing debate in France between the

French conception of identity as universal and secular, and the assertion of a specific Muslim identity as a quest for recognition in the public space.

Multiculturalism or Assimilation: Different Approaches to Integration

From the Canadian “mosaic” and the Norwegian *fargerik fellesskap* (“colorful community”) to the American “melting pot” and the German *leitkultur* (“core culture”), every country has its own approach to integration. The merits of the British, Dutch, and French models have been among the most widely debated, and they are good examples of the variation to be found among European standards.

The British approach to integration is a pragmatic multiculturalism that emerged from the historical Anglo-Saxon tradition of individual rights. This rights-based system emphasizes the value of individual and collective choice, and seeks to ensure the protection of minority rights from the tyranny of the majority. The British public space is a free space, and individuals and groups operating within that free space are allowed a fair amount of influence over the establishment of rules and regulations that affect them. By way of an example in the context of Islamic interests, the Muslim Council of Britain is arguably the most powerful Muslim organization active in national European politics today. Generally speaking, the pragmatic approach also allows for the negotiation of rights and preferences as circumstances require. For example, individual public schools are permitted to decide whether or in what form the *hijab* can be adapted to the dress code.

The Dutch approach also emphasizes multiculturalism as a way to secure individual rights, but relies upon a system known as *verzuiling*, or pillarization, which encourages the division of society into ethnic and religious subgroups in a sort of “separate but equal” approach (Bawer 2006:13). The pillarization system creates a division of society such that many people have little contact with members of other groups—although after the historical violence that divided the Netherlands for centuries, the confrontation-shy Dutch view this as an acceptable

alternative to conflict. The Dutch public space is also a free space where freedom and tolerance are the rule, but due to the pillarization system, there are (so to speak) multiple spheres of freedom without much overlap. The traditional pillars of Catholic, Protestant, liberal, and social-democratic—each with separate schools, hospitals, political parties, and even newspapers and television channels—were able to achieve an equilibrium, but the addition of more pillars has increasingly strained the system, as more diversity makes it more difficult to ensure “separate but equal” conditions for everyone (Bawer 2006:13).

The French approach to integration, by contrast, is aggressively and unapologetically assimilationist, in that the particularities of individuals and groups are always subjugated to the larger idea of the universal. Assimilation is simply viewed as the best way to protect what are viewed as universal rights from the “tyranny of the minority.” According to Republican thought, “living together in a society requires agreement on basic values” such that “citizens must all subscribe to the same values in the public sphere” (Bowen 2007:11,157). Public space, therefore, is first and foremost *shared space*, where general interests and common ideals are valued over and above individual interests and diversity—an interpretation that places clear constraints on acceptable conduct and expression within that space (Bowen 2007:11). One such constraint is *laïcité*, the French conception of secularism.

The French Ideal: Universalism and *Laïcité*

The rationale behind the assimilationist approach to integration is undeniably traceable to the historical concept of universalism. Naomi Schor (2001:43) defines French universalism as the converse of particularism—ethnic, religious, national, or otherwise. “Universalism,” writes Schor, “was grounded in the belief that human nature—that is, rational human nature—was a universal, impervious to cultural and historical differences. Transcultural, transhistorical human nature was posited as identical, beyond particularisms” (Schor 2001:46). Inspired by enlightenment thinkers and the Revolutionary values of 1789, French universalism emphasizes the “universal human liberty, equality, and reason” that supersede “specific languages, ethnicity, and particularist culture”; to develop the former values, public expression of the latter is strongly discouraged (Bader 1997:779). The neutrality of the public space is considered absolutely essential to the correct functioning of this model, where “citizens, regardless of their regional, ethnic, or religious origin, are entitled, even required, to come together as equals to enact secular rituals and to reinforce the shared values of the social order” (Terrio 1999:441). Ironically, it was French colonialism’s later pursuit of the application of this universalism, which sought to extend the ideals of 1789 to other parts of the world, that Schor argues largely discredited the concept of universalism (Schor 2001:46). And yet, says Schor, “access to the universal ... stubbornly remains a key phrase in France’s discourse of national self-representation and identity” (Schor 2001:48).

The practical application of access to the universal is provided in the form of French citizenship and the rights and responsibilities it entails. France has a relatively long history of immigration, and the early presence of immigrants in France prompted the state to establish and develop the boundaries of French citizenship, the conception of which has had a significant

impact on the social integration of immigrants (Collomp 1999:65). Rogers Brubaker contrasts the *jus sanguinis* (“blood right”) conception of citizenship, where citizenship is granted on the basis of ethnic descent, with the *jus soli* (“territory right”) conception, where citizenship is awarded to anyone born within state borders. Whereas *jus sanguinis* is a closed or resistant form of citizenship that enforces a particular collective identity based on national ethnicity, *jus soli* permits the assimilation of citizens by birth, by ritual conversion, or by naturalization (Koopmans and Statham 1999:659-660). France allows access to citizenship based on a combination of *jus soli* and *jus sanguinis*. Universalism supports the idea that anyone who accepts the values of the state can become French; immigrants are thus encouraged to become citizens on the condition that they recognize the dominant cultural and political values of France. This approach stresses that what binds people are universally shared values rather than racial or ethnic characteristics.

The French assimilationist approach thus differs markedly from British or Dutch multiculturalism, which “strives to call attention to differences,” in that “French immigration policies have tended to assimilate difference in the name of a single nation” (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007:5; Schor 2001:50). Therefore, private identity has no right to claim a recognized place in public space, and the state denies public relevance to private identity. “As a historical entity, neither the French state nor any other state is absolutely neutral, nor can it be,” writes Anna Elisabetta Galeotti (1993:592). “For instance, it is not neutral about nationality: the public sphere in France is French, and the members of the public are French citizens, itself a historical concept.” Universality is thus paradoxical, in that achieving universal French identity requires the repudiation of specific individual identity in the form of any public cultural particularism. Tolerance is seen as something of a non-issue; if citizens adhere to common republican ideals in public and keep divisive personal beliefs properly tucked away in private life, then there are no differences that need to be tolerated, in the sense that there is never an opportunity for the contradictory private beliefs of citizens to meet head-on. “Assimilation does not signify tolerance,” according to Schor. “Indeed, it may be viewed as merely the most common

form of intolerance of otherness, or rather of the otherness of the other. In this critical perspective it is but another form of false universalism” (Schor 2001:50). Universalism is not so much a matter of excluding the Other, “but of including it to the extent that one renders it like oneself” (Schor 2001:50).

Insofar as French universalism is an idea based around a particular understanding of the nature of citizenship and belonging, civic identity is forged in the great equalizing machine that is the French school system. Schools have historically been entrusted with the task of solidly grounding students in universalism and infusing them with the principles of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* (Bowen 2007:12). As such, “the public school is meant to produce French citizens, and not the citizens of a multiethnic polity” (Galeotti 1993:592). In order to accomplish this goal, schools are expected to be a neutral space in much the same way as the state is, and for this reason adherence to the principle of *laïcité*, or secularism, is considered vital. Jules Ferry, the French pioneer of secular education, referred to the “*école sanctuaire*,” or the “schoolroom sanctuary,” as a place free from divisive exceptionalism (Kramer 2004:60). Far from being viewed as oppressive or restrictive, the principle of *laïcité* is considered essential to the successful integration of all members of society. The civic life of the state that awaits French students is seen as an extension of the same principles ingrained at school. Thus public life in general, and certainly civic life in particular, is not considered an appropriate forum for the overt expression of difference, and good French citizens are duly reared in accordance with this principle.

French universalism takes a particularly hard line on religious expression, because it is seen to pose a more serious problem than any secular expression of difference. The significance of *laïcité* as a hard-won principle should not be underestimated here. The passion and fury of religious conviction fueled many of the wars that plagued France and much of Europe throughout history. The development of the policy of *laïcité* was the direct result of the state’s final triumph over the church and religion as “alternative sources of power and truth” (Bowen 2007:12). *Laïcité* is the symbol of state subjugation of religion and the banishment of belief from public space. All

of this should not be understood to indicate an incompatibility of *laïcité* and strong religious identity. On the contrary, *laïcité* in the public sphere is meant to safeguard the right to practice any religious faith of any strength—in the private sphere.

Laïcité is idealized as a principle that protects state (and hence public) neutrality, but examining the details of its historical development reveals cracks in its façade of impartiality. Although *laïcité* revolves around secularism, the concept was developed as the result of hundreds of years of religious struggle among Christian groups in France, and is therefore a particular response to the Christian religious tradition and political concepts that were forged in the same fire. Put another way, *laïcité* has more to do with Christianity than is apparent at first glance.

Despite a marked decline in active Christian practice among Europeans in modern times, recent polls indicate that there is still a relatively high level of belief, indicating that Europeans are still “passively Christian” in large numbers (Klausen 2005:138). However, whether one is passionately or passively Christian tends to make little difference under *laïcité*, simply because the Christian assumption is that “faith is a matter of ‘belief’ and therefore about ‘thought’” (Klausen 2005:155). In the indigenous Christian tradition of Europe, strong belief does not require the public expression of faith, and so secularism has worked well to neutralize tensions between religious and secular forces in society. *Laïcité*, therefore, is compatible with Christian forms of organized religion precisely because they do not require public expression of faith. Not necessarily so for the imported faiths of immigrants, notably Islam and Sikhism, which to varying degrees of interpretation encourage or require public rituals and outward symbols of faith.

Much like Orthodox Jews (who were once persecuted in Europe for precisely the same religious abnormalities), Muslims generally believe that faith demands not only thought, but specific action as well, and therein lies the major conflict between *laïcité* and Islam. “Europeans are generally willing to grant people the right to practice religion in private,” Jyette Klausen (2005:155) notes, “but are less comfortable with public displays of faith” of the sort found in Islam. Four of the five pillars of Islam—*shahada* (profession of faith), *salah* (ritual prayer), *sawm*

(fasting during Ramadan), and *hajj* (ritual pilgrimage to Mecca)—along with other “public ritual practices” such as the animal sacrifice of the *Eid al-Adha* holiday, give Islam an observable quality that Europeans are wary of (Bowen 2007:20). Such visible expressions of faith simply fall “outside the template” of organized Christian religion, in its comfortably contained form, “performed inside a familiar sacred place once a week, with teachings intended to guide private life” (Bowen 2007:20). Unusual clothing, beards, and veils increase the sensation that Islam is strange and exotic. “The headscarf and the mosque are not objectively more visible than the nun’s habit and the cathedral,” writes John Bowen (2007:20), “but they are subjectively shocking because they are new, foreign.” The French, who are even more sensitive to overt religious expression because of their history and tradition of *laïcité*, have a strong reaction when Muslims insist on asserting a different public religious identity. The tug-of-war between the public faith of Islam and the private faith of *laïcité* is symbolic of what it means to be Muslim in France today, where the complex subtleties of personal belief are influenced by a wide range of factors that are sometimes distant from purely spiritual concerns.

The French Reality: *Nous et les Autres*

Over the past few decades, globalization has wrought swift and significant political, social, and economic changes in France. The shock of these changes has caused much anxiety, and prompted concerns about the survival of France as a country and as a culture. In such a situation, “to the extent that members of the majority attach importance to their national identity, the more likely they will be to perceive their cultural identity to be threatened. In turn, perceiving minorities as threatening, they reject them” (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007:6). The French have very strong attachments to their culture indeed, and immigrants are now bearing the brunt of their anxiety, as evidenced by the political resonance of right-wing politician Jean Marie Le Pen and his anti-immigration rhetoric, which blames immigrants for everything from unemployment to cultural disintegration (Amara 2006:21).

It is easy to see that diversity challenges universalism and *laïcité* in its insistence on the relevance of the particular and different. Many have protested that the universalist approach to assimilation can be said to support “a very thick ethnic notion of political culture” that favors only the state-sanctioned “official version” of French identity (Bader 1997:779; Ravitch 1997:523). The same critics also note “French ambivalence toward immigrants who assert a non-French cultural identity and maintain citizenship ties with their countries of origin while demanding political rights within France” (Terrio 1999:441). It is one thing to impose neutrality in the name of a universal ideal, but it is quite another when it is imposed out of simple discomfort. Over and above the lofty ideals of universalism and secularism, the French response to Islam has been directed by the much more mundane influence of culture in several key areas.

One example of this phenomenon is, again, based on religion, but in a different way. As previously discussed, *laïcité* is not as neutral as it appears, but when religion intersects with

history, it makes explicit “the contradictions already in place between French ideas about religion’s private character and the still-public role of France’s Catholic heritage” (Bowen 2007:20). For example, in 1996, the state initiated preparations to celebrate the anniversary of the baptism of Clovis at Reims 1,500 years previously, marking the conversion of France to Catholicism (Terrio 1999:439). Many critics questioned the legitimacy of the ceremony because it blurred the usually very stark line between church and state, and thus the event could be viewed as an affirmation of France’s Christian past. Supporters argued that both the baptism of Clovis and France’s Christian traditions were legitimate parts of the national culture shared by all French people by virtue of their participation in the state, as acknowledged in an interview by Cardinal Lustiger, the Archbishop of Paris, in which he advocates the acceptance of a “master historical narrative” encompassing “all of French history, from its glorious memories to its dark ones” (Terrio 1999:448):

They [French Muslims] need, on the contrary, to accept all that precedes [their arrival in France]: Charles Martel [celebrated as the vanquisher of the Muslim *Sarracins*] and the Crusades, the conquest of Algeria as well as decolonization, the Christian matrix of French culture and the separation of the church and the state. To accept is not to approve. They must be persuaded that, while remaining Muslims, they can not only enter into this history of France, but also legitimately adopt as theirs the entire history of the nation, because she adopts them legitimately as her children without asking them to forget or to deny their historical roots. Therein lies the paradoxical uniqueness of France and the integrative power of her culture.

The fact stands, however, that the ceremony commemorated an event that, even if not celebrated *qua* Christian, was still a Christian event, while the state’s official position of *laïcité* affords no similar affirmation to religious minorities (Terrio 1999:442).

Thus the question of state neutrality is still a concern. But how neutral can a state be when its ethnic and religious history is inscribed into its political and social institutions—even into the calendar of religious and national holidays (Bader 1997:793)? How inclusive *should* the state try to be when “the elimination of all ideological and religious references would not neutralize the existing ideological tensions and conflicts,” but would only serve to “literally strip

people and institutions of all cultural particularities, histories, religious traditions, and practices” (Bader 2003:267)? Veit Bader (1997:793) writes that “no society can therefore totally avoid being biased against some of the practices of, and thus discriminating against, its cultural minorities. Its identity limits its capacity for fairness, and to ask it to be indiscriminately tolerant in the name of fairness to minorities is to be unfair to it. If our concept of fairness does not take into account the demands of communal identity, it becomes abstract, impracticable, politically irrelevant, and a source of much avoidable guilt.” This, in turn, raises the question of “whether dominant religious majorities are then simply free to impose their preferences on minorities” (Bader 1997:794). These are not easy questions to answer. Some sort of collective identity is necessary for cultural cohesion, but it is not easy to determine at what point such an identity can be said to become (or cease to be) “French.” Of course, while in theory the French conception of identity makes an effort to emphasize the universal, in practice it invariably extends only as far as the national. French identity, perhaps like any other national identity, is “not based solely on an abstract, ideological conception derived from the eighteenth century; there is also something deeper and at once more spiritual and more concrete involved. It is probably religion which sustains that deeper core of national identity, but certainly not without creating new dilemmas and new controversies” (Ravitch 1997:526). Clearly, the secular French approach has not succeeded in establishing a model that fully separates the political from the religious, or that eliminates the friction resulting from challenges to a fixed national identity.

Thus many religious Muslims find themselves shut out of French culture. It is true that some aspects of traditional Islam present several particular challenges to French identity and conceptions of the good life. Roland Barthes (1993:58-59) provides one example, unexpected yet pertinent, in his discussion of the importance of wine—a drink that is prohibited in Islam, along with all other alcohol. Barthes refers to wine as a “totem-drink” for the French, universally valued and possessing a deeply held sense of cultural significance:

... Universality implies a kind of conformism: to believe in wine is a coercive collective act. A Frenchman who kept this myth at arm's length would expose himself to minor but definite problems of integration, the first of which, precisely, would be that of having to explain his attitude. The universality principle fully applies here, inasmuch as society calls anyone who does not believe in wine by names such as sick, disabled, or depraved: it does not comprehend him (in both senses, intellectual and spatial, of the word). Conversely, an award of good integration is given to whoever is a practicing wine-drinker: knowing how to drink is a national technique which serves to qualify the Frenchman, to demonstrate at once his performance, his control, and his sociability. Wine gives thus a foundation for a collective morality, within which everything is redeemed.

It could even be argued that the importance of pork in the place of French cooking, and many Muslims' desire to eat only *halal* (permissible) foods or *zabiha* (ritually slaughtered) meats, presents a similar obstacle to French acceptance of Muslims into the fabric of their society, insofar as the French take a particular pride in their cuisine.

Clothing is similarly important to the French. There is a "connection between the correct physical appearance in public and personal dignity," which is so strong that comments about clothing choices will even seep into academic writing and political news. Bowen (2007:214) cites the example of a French principal describing two different Muslim women. One was "not very religious," wore casual clothes that were stylish and a bit revealing, and was described using very expressive gestures, as "the principal throws out her hands in an expansive manner, giving a sense of liberty and movement" (Bowen 2007:213). The other was more devout, veiled, described as "very strict, very closed," and the principal's body language reflected the rigidity that was her impression of the second woman. Bowen notes that something significant is seen in "the relative sexually open or closed quality" of clothing (Bowen 2007:213). Strange or "closed" clothing is actually seen as an aggression of sorts. "It is an assault," pronounced one French woman, describing her reaction to another woman in the subway dressed all in black, forcing herself upon the world, "with her expression all frozen" (Bowen 2007:211). Describing her reaction to Muslims in particular, the same woman said, "it was that they were throwing their difference right at me, that they had these principles, and were making me notice them" (Bowen 2007:212).

A different woman remarked, “they are showing off their Islam; that shocks me” (Bowen 2007:212).

The concept of French identity, for all its universal claims, remains rooted deep in custom and culture, and a significant portion of the population has yet to accept the increasingly multiethnic makeup of the nation. “Put simply,” as Craig Smith notes, “being French, for many people, remains a baguette-and-beret affair” (Smith, 11 November 2005). And Muslims do not necessarily wish to be included in this identity either, as one Muslim girl from the *banlieues* illustrates (Bowen 2007:204):

French people think that “to integrate”—and how I hate that word—you must drink wine and be like them, you have to lose your traditions, your religion, your values, and take on theirs. Either you assimilate ... or you are perpetually an immigrant and an *intégriste* [fundamentalist]. But excuse me, I have never drunk wine, it is not in my culture, and I am not about to! I am in-between, *moit-moit* [half-and-half]. I do not feel French...

The Battle for the *Banlieues*: Economics and *Intégrisme*

Although the universalist ideal precludes the French state from gathering statistics on the different religions practiced by its inhabitants, there are an estimated four to five million Muslims living in France. Nearly all are immigrants or their children (Bowen 2007:51). They live largely in the housing projects of the *banlieues*, the suburbs around large cities, with other immigrants, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The “material manifestation of [immigrants’] claims for permanent residence,” public housing blocs are typically inhabited by immigrant families and young single male workers (Hein 1991:593-594). While everyone, not just immigrants, can live in these buildings, fully 25 percent of all immigrant households are in public housing, which suggests a moderately high degree of segregation (Hein 1991:594). Public housing structures typically contain a small grocery store and offices for the distribution of social services, contributing to the ghettoization of residents, many of whom participate in social life outside their residences at a much lower rate than do non-residents (Hein 1991:599). These “highly politicized symbols of immigrants’ presence in France” came under widespread scrutiny in the fall of 2005, when immigrant riots in the *banlieues* of many cities across France flared up into violence (Hein 1991:606).

The *banlieues* are overwhelmingly poor. Typically, immigrants are found more in unskilled manual and non-manual employment than other workers. Male immigrants are heavily concentrated in construction and the automotive industry, and female immigrants work in personal services. They participate in more temporary and part-time work than other workers, with the result that the wage level of immigrants is often relatively low (INSEE 2000). Although unemployment threatens large segments of French society, certain groups are much more likely to be jobless; youth, immigrants, and women are disproportionately affected (Kesselman 2006:244).

Immigrants are particularly susceptible to labor market fluctuations resulting from economic stagnation and depression. During the economic slowdown from 1975 to 1990, 40 percent of the industrial job positions employing foreigners were eliminated, affecting roughly 500,000 jobs held by foreign workers (Barbier and Th  ret 2006:127).

Popular fears and prejudice have also affected the job prospects of Muslim immigrants in France. For example, “in 2002, unemployment among immigrants of North African background was more than triple the average for native-born French. The most unfortunate are those caught in a double bind. Young Algerians (under twenty-four years old) are the holders of this distressing record: a whopping 56 percent were unemployed in 2002” (Kesselman 2006:244). In 2004 a French researcher named Jean-Fran  ois Amadi  u demonstrated the severity of this situation and its racial basis with an experiment. Amadi  u “sent out seven identical CVs, but under seven different names and with different demographic facts. One was a white male with a French name and the other six had ‘problem’ identities ranging from being a woman or a disabled person to having a ‘bad’ address. The white male received seventy-five offers of an interview and ten rejections. The applicant with the *Maghrebin* [North African] name was by far the least successful and received fourteen offers and twenty rejections” (Klausen 2005:61).

Caught in a cycle of poverty, lacking access to employment and educational opportunities, and cynical about promises of French universalism that do nothing to alleviate persistent French discrimination, impoverished minorities are rejecting the identity that rejects them and replacing it with one of their choosing. For those of Muslim heritage, especially from the younger demographic, this has increasingly meant a return to their Islamic roots as another source of identity. Jocelyne Cesari, an expert on French Islam, argues that French Muslims have responded to rejection by inverting it. By further disassociating from the dominant French culture and reclaiming and reasserting the stigmatized Islamic identity, Muslims convert the stigmatization into a positive attribute and thereby diffuse its negative effects (Cesari 2005). In this way, the concentration of Muslim populations in urban areas becomes a community instead

of a slum, and thus in many cases, argues Cesari, “the imposed ghettoization is accepted and even desired. In other words, self-identification as a Muslim is in many cases a consequence of an ethnic solidarity maintained or preserved by the socio-economic conditions of segregation” (Cesari 2005). The newfound strength of this Muslim identity and its perceived radicalism causes much uneasiness in France.

Part of the concern is due to the different conceptions of Islam competing for the allegiance of Muslims. Moderate and progressive interpretations of Islam are pitted against resurgent fundamentalist Islam, alternately called Islamism, Wahhabism, and Salafism (or *intégrisme* in French). Moderate Muslims both in the West and in the Muslim world increasingly find themselves at odds with this ultra-orthodox conception of Islam, yet fundamentalism is a powerful force that continues to gain ground among the disenfranchised (Klausen 2005:156). Kemal Karpat offers an example of the difference between the fundamentalist and moderate discourses in his discussion of the two major schools of thought behind the issue of Muslim migration to non-Muslim countries. Muslims living in the West who are concerned with the preservation of their religious and cultural heritage might turn either to the fundamentalist discourse, which urges Muslims to hold to a strict interpretation of and adherence to ultra-orthodox Islam, or to the moderate/progressive discourse, which centers on a more individualistic concept of Muslim identity that accounts realistically for immigrants’ conditions of life, encouraging them to strike roots in their new countries and adapt themselves to new lifestyles that may diverge somewhat from the traditional path (Karpat 1996:82-83). Moderate Muslims generally feel that “one should decide personally and freely that one is a Muslim regardless of whether he/she fulfills all or part of the requirements, the ‘works of the faith.’ From the vantage of Orthodox Islam, this view borders on heresy” (Karpat 1996:83). Further, moderate Islam urges adaptation to socio-cultural norms and pleads the case for harmonious coexistence with other religious groups, arguing that “there can and should be, for example, an American, a French and a German Islam” (Karpat 1996:83).

But the moderate discourse sometimes goes unheard or unheeded amid the crumbling public housing complexes clustered in the *banlieues*, where poverty and violence are rampant. In these areas, fundamentalist recruiters with political goals provide an alternative to drugs, crime, and delinquency. For young Muslims who feel increasingly alienated by French society, fundamentalism can be a persuasive ideology that is compatible with their feelings of rejection and marginalization. Cesari (2005) argues that fundamentalism is pervasive and undermines efforts to bridge differences between Muslim identity and Western norms:

The widespread diffusion of Salafi teachings means that even non-Salafi Muslims evaluate their Islamic practice by Wahhabi standards. In other words, even if most Muslims do not follow Wahhabi dress codes—white tunic, head covering, beard for men, *niqab* for women—the orthodox Salafi nonetheless often becomes the standard image of what a good Muslim ought to be. ... Thus, for those influenced by Wahhabism, the world is divided into Muslims and infidels, and the image of the West—automatically associated with moral depravity—is always a negative one: nothing good can come from the West, neither politics nor morality nor culture. Their perception of the West is as essentialized as their perception of the Islamic tradition.

The French government recognizes the risk posed by fundamentalism and has done quite a lot to “bring Islam out of the basement” and set it on equal footing with other French religions, in the hope of negating the need to seek funding and imams abroad (Bowen 2007:43). Islam is recognized as a state religion, which means that it is, in a sense, regulated by the state, through state-appointed representatives working in official institutions, such as the *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman* (French Council for the Muslim Religion) and regional councils (Bowen 2007:48). As Islam is an official religion, Muslims can receive public funds to build and maintain community centers and cemeteries (and mosques, but as “religious buildings” the state will only authorize their construction if the mosque is attached to community buildings).

In the economic dimension, the government has created a number of special programs and expenditures specifically designed to combat the “problems of the suburbs,” which supplement the welfare benefits already available to both citizens and immigrants (Fetzer and Soper 2005:68). The primary social expenditure for immigrants is issued in the form of housing

and family benefits that supplement the *Caisses d'Allocations Familiales* (Family Allocation Funds), which are open to all French residents. These extra housing benefits were created because immigrants tend to have larger families (Hein 1991:593). Public schools where more than 30 percent of the students are immigrants, or schools that are considered at risk for violence, receive extra money for better facilities and more teachers (Fetzer and Soper 2005:68). Finally, various *Fonds d'Action Sociale* (Social Action Funds) finance a number of social action and insertion programs intended to promote social integration into French society through vocational training, job placement, and especially language classes (Fetzer and Soper 2005:68).

But these efforts have not been enough. Beyond the familiar woes of drugs and crime, other disturbing things are happening in the *banlieues*. They include the physical abuse and intimidation of certain minorities, notably homosexuals and Jews, but the majority of the offenses involve the status and treatment of women (Amara 2006:26,66; Bawer 2006:110). These offenses are perpetrated by a small but vicious minority—which includes non-Muslims as well—and run the gamut to include misogyny, harassment, polygamy, forced isolation, domestic violence, forced marriage, genital excision, and rape. The latter often takes the form of what the French call *tournantes*, or gang rape, by young men who use physical violence to control the appearance and behavior of girls from “their neighborhood” in order to preserve their honor (Amara 2006:16,63). There have been several high-profile cases of violence against women in recent years, from an eighteen-year-old Muslim girl named Sohane Benziane, who was burned alive “for her rebellious behavior” in 2002, to another Muslim woman named Samira Bellil, who went public with her story as a victim in order to denounce “the violent gang rapes of young Muslim women for rebelling against the Islamic dress codes and gender-based behavior imposed by their older brothers” (Amara 2006:16). Bellil later went on to found the movement *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Neither Whore Nor Submissive) with Fadela Amara; the name of the organization is a reaction to the stereotyping of young women as “all whores except my mother,” according to the popular proverb (Amara 2006:2). Conditions in the *banlieues* are so threatening that many Muslim girls

begin wearing the *hijab* simply to avoid harassment; indeed, even some non-Muslims have chosen to veil in public or otherwise watch what they wear in certain neighborhoods (Amara 2006:81; Bawer 2006:39; Bowen 2007:80,126,224). In this environment, makeup has become “war paint” and tight or revealing clothes are a sign of resistance and rebellion (Amara 2006:75). Rightly or wrongly, whether or not they are supported by the tenets of the faith, the French associate these things with Islam, and in this way they infer a link from Islam to violence to veiling.

L’Affaire du Foulard: Women and the Burden of Multiculturalism

Norwegian sociologist Unni Wikan writes that “ethnic identity politics hinges on the behavior and demeanor of females: women and girls. ... As a rule, then, the defense of cultural practices is likely to have a much greater impact on the lives of women and girls than on those of men and boys. ... Females are asked to shoulder a disproportionate share of the costs of multiculturalism” (Wikan 2002:156). In multicultural societies, certain cultural practices, often as atrocious and criminal as the ones occurring in the *banlieues*, have been tolerated for immigrants where they would not have been for natives—even after those immigrants became citizens. This double standard of evaluation is intended to be charitable in its respect for different values, but it amounts to a “generous betrayal” of the rights of all those who fall outside of “Western culture,” when defense of their culture is allowed to trump all else; in Wikan’s words, “human welfare will have to go, for above it, Culture is enthroned” (Wikan 2002:145). French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut makes a similar point, arguing that “at the very moment the Other got his culture back, he lost his freedom. His personal name disappeared into the name of the community. ... He was trapped insidiously by his difference” within “the cult of time-honored beliefs” (Finkielkraut 1995:68,75). French universalism, in theory, denies a basis for the idea that specific culture trumps universal rights, and when religion is seen as the source of social injustice, *laïcité* is invoked as a protection, which is exactly what occurred when the *hijab* was banned in public schools in 2004.

Alongside the persecution of women, homosexuals, and Jews in the suburbs, it seemed to many French that the supposed problems behind it were beginning to affect the school system as well. Muslim students, both boys and girls, were challenging the school system and engaging in behavior that contradicted the policy of *laïcité*: pupils were praying in school, proselytizing, and

bringing religious books to class (Bowen 2007:104,122). There was also a “catalog of refusals” to engage in other school day activities: students would sometimes refuse to sing, dance, draw a face or study an illustration of a classical nude in art class, eat non-*halal* cafeteria food, listen to lessons on the Holocaust, participate in swimming classes, or play coed sports (Bowen 2007:32; Bawer 2006:209). Some refused to read “Enlightenment authors such as Voltaire and Rousseau because they’re antireligion, *Cyrano de Bergerac* because it’s too racy, *Madame Bovary* because it promotes women’s rights, and *Chrétien de Troyes* because it’s, well, *chrétien*” (Bawer 2006:209). They were, in short, asking for special treatment and special accommodation for a difference in belief that could not be acknowledged under *laïcité*.

More ominously for the girls especially, their abstention from *mixité* (social mixing, e.g. men mixing with women, or different elements of society mixing together) in school, whether voluntary or not, seemed to foreshadow their eventual withdrawal from French society entirely. This withdrawal or separateness is symbolized by the *hijab* itself. One young woman named Djamilia, who has chosen to “announce her identity” and wear the *niqab* (a full veil that covers the entire face, allowing only the eyes to show) speaks about how she lost her job as a teacher’s aide because of parental concerns about her suitability as a role model for young girls, how the only job she could get was in telemarketing, and how her desire to veil kept her from playing basketball or pursuing acting, two enjoyable hobbies from her life “before the veil.” When her interviewer asked her if she felt excluded, she replied indirectly, saying, “we are not the same as other people.” “But the truth,” in according to her interviewer, “is that, from the perspective of most other Frenchmen and Frenchwomen, she has excluded herself” (Kramer 2004:59-60).

Only a few ago, few Muslim women in France wore any sort of veil at all, let alone the *niqab*. Now it is a common sight to see young women wearing the *hijab*, which is known in French as the *voile* or the *foulard*, a scarf that covers the hair and neck but leaves the face uncovered. While for many (if not most) Muslims the veil is nothing more threatening than a symbol of personal piety and devotion, the resurgence of fundamentalist Islam has caused much

worry in France that tensions over national identity are being exorcised on the bodies of young girls. For the girls themselves, wearing the *hijab* “was the beginning of a series of small exemptions from Frenchness—no sports, no biology, no Voltaire—that in the end had nothing to do with diversity and everything to do with isolation” (Kramer 2004:66). The French fear is that, rather than expressing their modesty or virtue as a personal choice, girls and women are being forced to wear the veil by young, radicalized Muslim men, their brothers and fathers and husbands, who enforce the wearing of the *hijab* as a sort of extension of their control over their own identities. This is the stated reason for the concern over the veil: that girls were being turned into provocations, not always by their own choice. While forced veiling is certainly an issue, that focus excludes the possibility that girls might legitimately choose to wear the *hijab* of their own accord, as many in fact do.

The veil is also interpreted as a symbol of rebellion, and France is responding to that challenge just as much as it is responding to worries over possible coercion. Some observers insist that “it’s clear to anyone, after a certain amount of time in France, that the veil involves a much broader politics than French domestic politics. It has to do with the Middle East and the war in Iraq and the Palestinian intifada” (Kramer 2004:70). As a provocative public assertion of membership in the Muslim community and culture, the *hijab* is interpreted as an attempt to undermine the ideal of secularism and universalism in favor of *communautarisme*, or communalism, a distasteful indulgence found in American and British society but not to be tolerated in France (Galeotti 1993:596). Galeotti (1993:596) argues that this is “a double rebellion” against both the “forced assimilation” required by the state as a condition for citizenship rights and the stigmatization suffered by the Muslim community for being different. The French thus interpret the veil as a symbol of primary allegiance to Islam rather than to France. They worry that the *hijab* is only the beginning of Muslim demands for exceptional status in the name of *communautarisme*, and that it reinforces a Muslim-French identity rather than a French-Muslim one. As the veil continued to be worn in French schools, the very core of French

identity formation, where students are expected to learn the value of universalism and *laïcité* in order to be able to behave correctly as citizens in the public sphere, such a rebellion could not be tolerated, lest *hijab*-clad women and bewhiskered men someday appear in the civil service as representatives of the secular French state (which would no doubt be considered a sign of the coming apocalypse). Interpreted in this way, the *hijab* ban is indeed very symbolic: a reassertion of Frenchness in response to an assertion of Muslimness, very much the most recent battle in the old war between church and state.

Previous conflicts over the *hijab* had prompted the state to take the official position that religious symbols were acceptable in the secular state “as long as they are not used as means of pressure or proselytizing or do not hinder security and teaching, that is to say, as long as their dimension is private and they can be disregarded as statements while being interpreted as tastes” (Galeotti 1993:594). But more and more, it had become impossible for the French state not to view the *hijab* either as a statement of religious exceptionalism, a symbol of rebellion against the state, or the result of coercion; all three interpretations were seen as unacceptable. In French eyes, Muslim girls (or through them their parents and brothers) were “demanding expression where there is no room for it” (Kramer 2004:60). In August 2003, then-president Jacques Chirac decided that it was time to make a strong statement about the seriousness of *laïcité*, in order to send the signal that France’s secular imperatives are not subject to negotiation and that discrimination against women in the name of culture would not be tolerated (Kramer 2004:64). In March 2004 the law was passed, and even though Jewish skullcap and Christian crosses are ostensibly affected, the new regulation is known popularly as *la loi contre la voile*—the anti-veil law (Amara 2006:21).

Today in France the *hijab* is nothing if not a claim to public visibility for a collective identity that has been marginalized and stigmatized. The fundamental issue at stake for Muslims is that the assertion of social difference involves an explicit public demand for equality, including equal respect for the right of Muslim women to say that “it is with these clothes and this religion

that they choose to abide by the rules of the republic and life together” (Bowen 2007:249). Galeotti (1993:597) points out that “the kind of equality at stake here is equality of respect. If a social difference is denied public visibility and legitimacy in the polity, the group associated with it inevitably bears social stigmata; hence its members lack the possibility of ‘appearing in public without shame’—a crucial condition ... for individual well-being and self-esteem.” Muslims fear that, by rejecting the *hijab*, the French are rejecting Muslim identity as incompatible with French identity; the French, meanwhile, fear that the Muslim rejection of *laïcité* is a rejection of French identity, as well as being evidence of oppressive elements that need to be stomped out. It is difficult for the French to know how to respond, not merely to an expression of difference, but to a *visible* expression of *religious* difference that is completely in opposition to many of their most fundamental ideals; it is just as difficult for Muslims to accept a total rejection of the identity that they so highly value. In the immediate future, France and its Muslims must walk a fine line together, in order to determine the extent to which they can each accommodate difference.

Islam en France, Islam de France: French Muslims and the Evolution of Identity

The apparent lack of integration among Muslim minorities is causing alarm all over the European continent, prompting a recent rise in multicultural skepticism. The fundamental issue, as Paul Sniderman and Louk Hagendoorn (2007:11) point out, is “not diversity but loyalty,” and multiculturalism is now viewed as “encouraging an ambiguity of commitment.” Ironically, this ambiguity was encouraged by European political and intellectual elites, who evaluated the dangers of prejudice in light of the horrors of the Holocaust. “Against this background, to oppose multiculturalism was to demonstrate a lack of humanity,” and thus political and intellectual elites “ruled out a declaration of identification with the larger society as inappropriate” for minorities (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007:11). In turn, Muslim immigrants, encouraged to retain their religious and cultural heritage, “have acted as though identification with the larger society was unnecessary,” leaving many Europeans wondering whether Muslims “continue to give their loyalty to the country they came from, not the country they have come to” (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2007:11).

The Netherlands, long considered one of the most open and tolerant nations in the world, has recently begun to acknowledge that the multicultural pillarization system of integration, which encourages people to maintain societal divisions in order to respect diversity and keep the peace, also makes it less likely that a divided society can identify together as Dutch and share Dutch values. Frits Bolkenstein, a former Dutch Liberal Party leader and EU Commissioner, made a speech in 2003 that was “widely regarded as an obituary on thirty years of Dutch policy and as marking a shift towards a ‘tough on Muslims’ approach” (Klausen 2005:69):

We live in a free country, where everyone can come and go as they please, pray to the god of their choice, switch from one god to the other, and exercise the right of free speech. ... That said, however, there have to be common standards respected by all.

These are anchored in our constitution and no amount of multiculturalism can be allowed to erode them. ... And that is why I also reject the slogan 'integration with retention of identity.' ... We should not always see ethnic minorities as victims. They are to be seen not as groups to be pitied but fully-fledged citizens. We must talk to them, in Dutch, about their responsibilities.

The British pragmatic approach, intended to safeguard individual and collective rights, is also being reconsidered as a tactic that may encourage the separation of different segments of society. In a controversial statement, British MP Jack Straw weighed in on the debate over the *niqab*, calling it "a visible statement of separation and difference," and former Prime Minister Tony Blair commented as well, saying that "it makes other people from outside the community feel uncomfortable. No one wants to say that people don't have the right to do it. That is to take it too far. But I think we need to confront this issue about how we integrate people properly into our society" (BBC News: 5 and 17 October 2006). At the launch of Britain's new Commission on Integration and Cohesion in August 2006, Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly indicated that a new approach to diversity is necessary, stating that "we have moved from a period of uniform consensus on the value of multiculturalism, to one where we can encourage that debate by questioning whether it is encouraging separateness. ... In our attempt to avoid imposing a single British identity and culture, have we ended up with some communities living in isolation of each other, with no common bonds between them? I think we face the clear possibility that we are experiencing diversity no longer as a country, but as a set of local communities" (Kelly 2006).

And what about France? Dramatic upheavals in the organization of French society and the deconstruction of identity have caused a twofold, self-reinforcing response. The French are forcefully reaffirming many of their long-held cultural values, including the universal nature of liberty and equality, the importance of *laïcité*, and the rejection of minority cultural and ethnic communities; meanwhile, Muslims with French expectations, and (perhaps as a result) not much patience for French intolerance, are asserting their religious identity ever more strongly in the hope of being recognized as both French and Muslim.

Despite the struggle, and whatever one thinks of enforced *laïcité*, it must be acknowledged that France is now seeing results where the rest of Europe is not. Out of the furor over the 2004 *hijab* ban and the backlash after the 2005 riots in the *banlieues*, France has emerged as “a bright light” standing out against “the general gloom” of pessimism over Islam in Europe (Bowen, 5 February 2007). A 2006 Pew Global Attitudes survey found that the French “are far more willing to get on with the task of building a multireligious society” than are the Dutch and British—or Americans, for that matter (Bowen, 5 February 2007). The survey also indicated a striking “French exception” with respect to identity (Bowen, 5 February 2007):

French Muslims are much more likely than other European Muslims to emphasize their French identity. When asked to choose between religion and nationality as their primary identity, 42 percent of them said, French first, Muslim second. By contrast, only 7 percent of British Muslims ... put nationality first. By the way, Pew reports that American Christians choose between religious and national identities in almost exactly the same proportion as do French Muslims. In other words, French Muslims balance their identities in about the same way as do American Christians.

In addition, French people generally think that Islam can be integrated into France. Seventy-four percent of all French people saw no conflict “between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society,” while “only about half as many other Europeans or Americans denies such a conflict” (Bowen, 5 February 2007). This also means that “French people are more positive about modern Islam than are people in Indonesia, Jordan, or Egypt,” a striking claim indeed (Bowen, 5 February 2007).

Many French Muslims have great hopes for Islamic life in France as well. Tariq Ramadan, a Swiss Muslim scholar with a large following among moderate European Muslims, argues that Europe could be the scene of an Islamic revival, “because European Muslims are free to develop an Islam that is a ‘pure faith,’ freed from the ethnicized doctrines and rituals that characterize practices in the Islamic world” (Klausen 2005:9). One result of secular democratic influence that has been somewhat controversial is the movement toward a renewed popularity of *ijtihad* (individual interpretation), which has realigned “the balance between religious law and

individual spiritualism” (Klausen 2005:158). “I became a practicing Muslim thanks to France,” claims one French Muslim woman. “I am glad to have come to know my religion, true Islam, because ‘back there’ it is too traditional and troublesome” (Bowen 2007:72). Another woman remarked that “we can practice the Islamic religion in the purest way, without all the cultural stuff of the first generation” (Klausen 2005:102). In this sense, *laïcité* can be said to safeguard a neutral space for the personal exploration of faith without coercion and away from the burden of tradition, culture, and ethnicity. And that is a sort of religiosity that the French *are* comfortable with: one that results from free inquiry and choice, and centers on life in France rather than life in Algeria or Turkey—a truly French Islam.

But French Islam is just that—*French* Islam. The extreme secularism of *laïcité* is not the historical inheritance of other European countries, but the French have determined that, for them, national identity is secular and tolerance requires a public neutrality that *laïcité* has proved to provide. Other European nations, some of which are moving away from the multicultural tradition and toward the assimilationist approach favored in France, will have to make the same decisions about what their own societies require in order to foster the development of a Swedish or an Italian Islam, and a European Islam as well.

Islam is not a monolith, and neither is Europe, although we often assume that they must be. The idea of Europe is large enough to absorb multiple identities—even *française d’origine algérienne musulmane non-practiquant*, or “French non-practicing Muslim of Algerian origin,” as one woman described herself—and indeed it must if it is to survive and flourish (Bawer 2007:202). Craig Calhoun has emphasized “the fallacy of treating European identity, culture, and politics as internal developments of Europe itself,” and to be sure, there are a number of legitimate claims that Islam can make about its influence on the formation of Europe, not least of which is the possibility that Europe’s beloved “café culture” is an Arab import; in the French context, Tahar Ben Jelloun has argued persuasively about the linguistic debt French owes to Arabic (Calhoun 2003:3; Delanty 1995:128; Ben Jelloun 2006). Simply by virtue of a long and

often contentious concurrent history, Islam haunts Europe in much the same way that Karen Till suggests that the Holocaust haunts Berlin (Till 2004). The place-making of an Islamic space within a concentric European space (and vice versa) will create a framework within which a discussion of Islam's ghostly place in Europe—past, present, and future—can be pursued as something more concrete. On the other hand, if Islam insists on being interpreted exactly as it sees itself, it will leave no historical room for this process to occur. To pursue the legitimacy of an Islamic understanding of and emplacement in Europe demands reciprocity: the consideration of a European understanding of and emplacement in Islam. In other words, Islam must learn to “be itself” in Europe, and Europe must learn to accept Islam as part of itself.

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