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Boston University

Jews, Jesus, and the problem of postcolonial French identity
Kimberly A. Arkin

In late 2004, the *Union des Etudiants Juifs de France* (UEJF), the largest French Jewish university students' union, organized a public relations campaign targeting the resurgence of anti-Semitism that began in the early 2000s. The campaign—which was scheduled to run in major French publications—consisted of images of Jesus and Mary “tagged” with the words “sale juif” or “sale juive” [dirty Jew] and subtitled: “l’antisémitisme: et si c’était l’affaire de tous?” [anti-Semitism, what if it were everyone’s concern?] (figures 1 and 2). Immediately, the LICRA, the *Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l’antisémitisme* [International League Against Anti-Semitism and Racism], an anti-racist organization created at the turn of the century to fight Eastern European pogroms, pronounced the campaign “shocking,” noting that the association of religious images with anti-Semitic language would “have a counter productive effect and fuel already existing tensions in French society” (Le Nouvel Observateur 2004a). The LICRA demanded that the UEJF cancel or amend the campaign immediately (Chabert 2004). Shortly thereafter, the UEJF’s then president, Yonathan Arfi, announced that the media campaign had “already obtained its objective” and would be cancelled (Le Nouvel Observateur 2004b).

Insert Figures 1 and 2.

Certainly, the UEJF’s choice of imagery was provocative and surprising. The use of Jesus and Mary seemed to highlight the irony of *Christian* anti-Semitism at a time when scholars and political observers insisted that contemporary French anti-Semitism was “new,” no longer the work of Catholics or ethno-nationalists, but of Muslims and recent immigrants (cf. Brenner 2002; Finkielkraut 2003; Taguieff 2002). More surprising still was the reaction the images provoked. The Catholic Church offered no official condemnation, refusing to say anything since the ad was never formally launched. Instead, the LICRA, a group with close ties to French Jewish institutions, objected to images Arfi called “fundamentally Christian” (Chabert 2004). Why would a group affiliated with *Jewish* interests work to stop the UEJF’s campaign? What might the LICRA have seen that so alarmed it? And why pay any attention to this seeming tempest in a teapot? What, if anything, can these unseen and un-seeable pictures of Jesus and Mary tell us about the relationship between the fight against anti-Semitism and national identity in pluralist France?

Following a long anthropological tradition (e.g. Gluckman 2014; Gluckman 1940; Scott 1987; Turner 1996), I use this conflict over representation to explore what some groups thought should neither be seen nor said about the relationship between France and its constituent religious groups. However, I do not and cannot offer a positivistic analysis of this conflict.¹ As we will see below, Arfi may never have fully understood the LICRA’s objections; and the LICRA itself was both contradictory and opaque about its concerns. Furthermore, none but a handful of *militants* [active organization members] ever engaged the images. Nevertheless, I suggest that understanding why the campaign could not be seen offers insights into the limits of

I would like to thank the men and women of the UEJF in the mid-2000s, and most particularly Yonathan Arfi, for taking the time to teach me about their organization, interests, and concerns. This article has benefited enormously from the time, care, and critical sensibilities of a number of colleagues and mentors, particularly John Comaroff, Joanna Davidson, Naomi Davidson, and Robert Weller. I also would like to thank Public Culture’s two anonymous reviewers, who helped me figure out what this article could and could not do. All translations are mine, as are all inaccuracies and analytical defects.

national belonging in France. So instead of straightforward sociological analysis,² I offer several culturally and contextually informed interpretations. These interpretations are grounded in participant observation with the UEJF and other Jewish institutions in the mid-2000s, as well as in interviews with some of the campaign's producers. My analysis emphasizes the impossibility of one definitive interpretation, an impossibility that destabilized the idea that there is a "core" (however constituted) to French identity. And therein lay the principal problem. I argue that while the UEJF intended the campaign to be provocative for what it suggested about anti-Semitism, it may ultimately have been most problematic to the LICRA for what it implied about "Frenchness." Making Jesus a victim of anti-Semitism jeopardized mainstream Jewish institutional strategies that relied on a stable French national core to produce Jewish belonging in France.

The "Jewish Question"

Discussions of anti-Semitism in France are almost always also conversations about the limits of national belonging. The LICRA's condemnation of the campaign suggests that it irritated French Jewish institutional approaches to belonging in some way. But why pay attention to this irritation? In comparison with Muslim belonging, Jewish "Frenchness" is hardly a major public preoccupation for anybody in France today, except of course for Jews themselves.³ So why focus on constructions of national identity tied to Jewish belonging? I here plead for a certain analytical rehabilitation of the "Jewish question." Social science inquiry in the 19th century was tied, at least in part, to the Jewish question. From the late 18th century to the early 20th century, at a time when European states and elites wrestled with changes in their political and social worlds, Jews and Jewishness were, to borrow Levi-Strauss' phrase, "good to think with." And this was true regardless of the (often odious) political or theoretical engagements of the authors in question.⁴ This is no longer the case. Over a decade ago, anthropologist Matti Bunzl (2004:5) noted how little social science was being done on contemporary European Jews. When such work appeared, Bunzl argued that it was often in a nostalgic vein, thereby echoing Zionist discourse about the impossibility of a Jewish future in Europe. Bunzl's observation continues to hold. With some exceptions,⁵ European Jews seldom feature as a group whose self-presentation and practices are key to understanding contemporary permutations of nationalism or European identity. Instead, Jews appear as victims of a "new" (read Muslim) anti-Semitism (Bunzl 2007; Brenner 2004; Taguieff 2002; Trigano 2003b; Trigano 2003a). In this framework, Muslims have become *the* minority that scholars are using to analyze the promises, paradoxes, and problems associated European national communities, including France (Asad 2003; Bowen 2007; Bowen 2009; Fernando 2014; Laurence 2012; Laurence and Vaisse 2005).

There are obviously good empirical and theoretical reasons for this shift. But, as my analysis of the UEJF campaign will suggest, there are also drawbacks. The shift implies a "supersessionist" story in which Muslims replace Jews as problem "minorities," thus signaling Jewish normalization in "post-modern" or pluricultural European societies, (e.g. Benbassa 2004; Bunzl 2007; Lehrer 2013).⁶ It also presumes that European nation-states now legally and publicly embrace (some) pluricultural practices in unprecedented ways, thus signaling the end of homogenizing nationalist aspirations (e.g. Bunzl 2004; Geschiere 2009; Holmes 2000). Thus, given time, European Muslims may become like Jews, just another component of pluralist European landscapes (Benbassa 2004; Bowen 2009; Laurence and Vaisse 2005).

All of this ignores the overdetermined ways in which many Jewish institutions, as well as everyday Jews, must continuously negotiate their (provisional) inclusion into French national imaginaries. In other words, understanding Muslim exclusion in contemporary France and elsewhere may require coming to terms with the continued (if transformed) liminality of European Jews. Instead of celebrating Jewish inclusion as a triumph of pluralism, I use the silenced UEJF ad to probe Jewish institutional anxieties about the conditions of that inclusion, anxieties that may in fact help shore-up narrow, homogenous imaginaries of the nation.

The Nation in Crisis

Before analyzing the Jesus campaign, it must be placed in the political context of early 2000s France and the sociological context of the UEJF as an organization. Living in France between 2003 and 2005, I experienced first hand the crisis around French national identity. Both Republican and ethno-nationalist models of French identity seemed disconnected from everyday concerns about identity-driven dissent and violence, raising questions about whether any kind of French “core” might (be made to) hold. In 2004, recorded acts of anti-Semitism reached an almost 20 year high, with other forms of racism not far behind (Commission nationale consultative des droits de l’homme 2015). In March 2005, high school students demonstrating against proposed education reforms were violently attacked by *casseurs*, youth who beat protestors and stole their valuables while apparently maligning “whites” and “French people” (Bronner 2005). The violence led a Jewish group—with the backing of a number of Jewish intellectuals—to launch a petition against “anti-white” and “anti-French” racism (Agence France Press 2005). And in November of the same year, after two adolescents hiding from the police were electrocuted in a transformer, young people rioted in *banlieues* all across France, burning cars and destroying schools, police and fire stations, and community centers. For some public intellectuals and government officials, the nightly destruction in neighborhoods closely associated with the brown, black, and Muslim bodies of “immigrants” was further proof—if any were needed—of France’s descent into *communautarisme*, or ethnicized fracture (e.g. Bensimon 2005; Cypel 2005).

The more “civil” parts of French society were simultaneously headed into their own forms of identitarian mobilization. From 2003 to 2005, French civil society groups were engaged in a *concurrence des victimes*, a seemingly zero sum war among victims for public and government recognition (Benbassa 2006; Chaumont 2010; Trigano 2003b; Trigano 2006). As scholars like Maud Mandel (2014) have documented, this was the moment when the multiethnic anti-racist organizations forged in the 1980s splintered along ethno-religious lines. French Jewish organizations and their anti-racist allies—e.g. SOS-Racisme and the LICRA—stopped fighting anti-Semitism and racism together, arguing that anti-Semitism had a distinctive genealogy and etiology; furthermore, these groups argued, Muslim and/or North African victims of racism were guilty of anti-Semitism, making it impossible to fight both problems simultaneously (Bernard 2004a; Bernard 2004b; Cicurel 2004; Zappi 2004). Antiracist groups more closely associated with recent immigrants—e.g. the *Mouvement contre le racism et pour l’amitié entre les peuples* [MRAP, Movement against racism and for friendship among peoples] and the *Ligue des droits de l’homme* [LDH, League for Human Rights]—made just the opposite argument, refusing to fight anti-Semitism without invoking Islamophobia and racism. At the same time, social groups that had never before been “represented” in the public sphere by national associations were organizing. After decades of failed attempts, the French government created a Muslim consistory, the *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman* [CFCM], a religious

umbrella organization designed to provide a hierarchical interface between the government and French “Muslims” (c.f. Bowen 2009). And independently, French blacks created their own representative council, the *Conseil Représentatif des associations noires* [CRAN], taking as their model the secular Jewish *Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France* [CRIF] (Gabizon 2005; c.f. Boulègue et al. 2007).

As response and provocation in this new climate, the center-right government launched two public debates, the first about *laïcité*, often translated as secularism, and the second about national identity. Both of these debates unleashed sparring among those with different visions of what France was and should be. Should France return to Jacobin forms of Republicanism, reinforcing a single, homogenous legal and political framework that would serve as a common foundation for national belonging? Was France instead a cultural collectivity rooted in ethnic, religious, and linguistic particularities? Could France find ways of accommodating public pluralism without jeopardizing a commitment to living together? If so, how? On the heels of these debates, the government drafted legislation designed to shore up Republican legal principles as a foundation for “Frenchness.” In early 2004, the government banned “ostentatious religious symbols” from public schools as a way of fighting a host of social ills associated with *visible* religious difference, including anti-Semitism, sexism, Islamism, and communautarisme (Stasi 2003). In mid-2006, the government introduced new residency requirements for immigrants, including a mandatory *contrat d’accueil et d’intégration* [welcome and integration contract] that signaled signatories’ commitment to “Republican integration” while authorizing the government to deny visa renewals to contract breakers (Assemblée nationale 2006). But, as theorists have repeatedly shown, contractual frameworks for thinking the nation almost always imply an ethno-cultural content (Silverman 1992; Silverstein 2004; Wilder 2005). It is therefore hardly surprising that the 2004 law was instantly known as “the law against the veil,” signaling the public’s particular discomfort with Muslim—not Jewish or Christian—forms of religiosity. It was also not surprising that during the same period the government passed legislation that contributed to the *concurrence des victimes*; a 2005 bill “recognized” and encouraged the teaching of France’s “positive role” in its former overseas colonies, particularly North Africa, thus reinforcing the presumption that “France” was isomorphic with white, ostensibly Christian colonizers (Assemblée nationale 2005). In this explosive context the UEJF, along with the LICRA and other organizations, worked to fight anti-Semitism while articulating what it might mean to be a good French national.

Enter Jesus

How did the UEJF understand anti-Semitism and its relationship to French belonging? The answer is complicated. The UEJF is the largest Jewish university student union in France. It has a constantly changing, young membership and is not focused on a single issue or aspect of Jewishness. The organization works to ensure that religious Jews can combine study at public universities with observance of Jewish law, fighting, for example, university administrations for dispensation from Saturday exams and attending to the problem of kosher food on campus. It is also dedicated to elaborating cultural and ethnic conceptions of Jewishness, organizing talks on the Holocaust as well as “Jewish” vacations to New York and the Alps. Because of this eclecticism, it attracts a broad swath of the young French Jewish population: “traditionalists”⁷ and the militantly secular, leftists and right-wing sympathizers, the children of North African immigrants as well as (in smaller numbers) those of long-established Ashkenazi families.⁸ It may be one of the few French Jewish institutions that not only attracts a diverse membership but

also embraces its internal incoherence. In the past, the UEJF has used promotional materials that ask: “Jewish student, are you a leftist? Are you a rightist? So come join the UEJF!”

The demographic and ideological diversity within the UEJF’s ranks combined with the age and stage of its membership have translated into considerable political risk-taking. In 1993, for example, the UEJF organized a series of talks entitled “the star [of David] has a date with the moon [crescent of Islam].” One of those talks focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and included official spokespeople for the Palestinian cause, among them Hanan Ashrawi, the spokeswoman from the Palestinian delegation to the Middle East peace talks, and Afif Safieh, the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s (PLO) representative in London. Including official Palestinian voices was scandalous at the time. For at least the previous decade, the CRIF had lobbied the French government to ban representatives of the PLO from French territory; in addition, most French Jewish organizations were wary of, if not hostile to, the peace process that would be crowned by the Oslo Accords (Trano 1995). And indeed, the *Fonds Social Juif Unifié*, a Jewish fund-raising and social service organization, rebuked the UEJF for creating an environment hostile to the Israeli speakers.⁹

But this tendency for political audacity was often mitigated by another factor. The UEJF is a training ground for future leaders of the institutionalized Jewish community. Yonathan Arfi, for example, is now vice president of the CRIF. And he is in good company. Of the ten men who have been President of the CRIF, three were previously UEJF presidents.¹⁰ The UEJF’s relationship with adult Jewish organizations has sometimes translated into quick retreats from iconoclastic positions. This was true in 1993 when the UEJF was rebuked for allowing Palestinians to “silence” Israeli perspectives; the organization both defended its commitment to “hearing” all view points and denied its intention of letting members of the PLO speak.¹¹ The point is that the UEJF is structurally positioned both to challenge establishment orthodoxy and to be disciplined by adult organizations.

This certainly seems to be true with respect to the explicit positions the UEJF has taken in relation to anti-Semitism. In early 2004, when mainstream Jewish organizations were defining anti-Semitism as an incommensurable form of racism (see above), the UEJF agreed (Bernard 2004b).¹² But then in October, it broke ranks with the CRIF and the LICRA by publicly entertaining (if not endorsing) the idea of a general anti-racist demonstration (Zappi 2004). Similarly, in the same year, the UEJF was playing with non-Jacobin understandings of national community while nonetheless embracing concerns about communautarisme. In a 2004 book, Arfi queried whether there might be a way to think about distinctive “communities” within the French Republic without necessarily falling into or being taxed with communautarisme (UEJF 2004:8–11). In particular, he hoped that seeing people as tied to multiple communities, whether religious, cultural, and/or professional, would help mitigate the idea that communal identity meant mutually exclusive and oppositional allegiance (ibid.). But at the same time, Arfi identified himself in interviews as a staunch Republican who feared “communities,” both Jewish and non-Jewish. He worried about Jews responding to anti-Semitism through “communautarisme” and feared the public’s reduction of Jews to their ethno-religious identity, a reduction that he thought allowed the French public to see Jews and Muslims as “foreign” groups fighting an alien war on French soil. And in 2005, Arfi also seemed to support ethnicized conceptions of the Republic, siding with the Jewish youth group that launched the petition accusing racialized minorities of “anti-white” and “anti-French” racism (Agence France Press 2005).

So where did the Jesus campaign fit among these positions? Again, the answer is complicated. In some ways, the UEJF's campaign troubled Republican framings of French national identity. If Republican imaginaries are rooted in the erasure of religious and ethnic particularities, the Jesus and Mary campaign foregrounded French religiosity. It addressed the French public entirely through religious imagery, pairing a phrase meant to interpellate everyone—what if anti-Semitism were everyone's concern?—with images that would most clearly have spoken to certain Christians, particularly Catholics. As a result, instead of figuring the French public as an abstract collectivity united through adherence to a legal framework, the image conjured a French public motivated first and foremost by religiously-driven outrage at an attack on the Holy Family. In addition, rather than make French Jews as an indistinguishable part of Republican France, the campaign introduced a split between the Jews authoring and “starring” in the ad, on the one hand, and the general “French” public to whom the campaign was supposed to speak, on the other. Using Jesus and Mary as everyday victims of anti-Semitism operated as a proprietary claim, highlighting the continuity between the identity of the Holy Family and contemporary Jews. At the same time, the treatment of Jesus and Mary as banal celebrities foregrounded the disconnect between Jewish sensibilities—in which Mary and Jesus play no sacred role—and those of the French public presumed to be reading the ad. The campaign thus could be read as a Jewish plea for a non-Jewish “French” audience to accept a distinctively “Jewish” issue as its own concern.

But if the campaign juxtaposed Jews with the wider French public, it also undermined that juxtaposition. How? This is particularly evident when imagining those *not* pictured in the ad, those who were supposed to have “tagged” Mary and Jesus. Who were these invisible “*taguers*”? Was the UEJF implying that Muslims had defaced images of Jesus and Mary, thereby offending the sensibilities of Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and even post-Catholics? Once again, there is no straightforward answer. As I will explain below, it is not clear that the UEJF intended the campaign to reduce Muslims to taguers. But whoever filled that role, it collapsed the distance between Jewish “authors” and presumed French “readers,” rolling Jews back into a French body politic being attacked from an unseen outside. Furthermore, imagining “Muslims” as that outside may have been overdetermined. In 2004, the year of the UEJF campaign, politicians and the wider public were in a heated debate over whether and/or how the preamble to the European constitution should deal with Europe's “Christian” or “Judeo-Christian” heritage (Associated Press 2004; Bossuat 2005). At the same time, dominant discourses widely conflated anti-Semitism with Islam, Muslims, and Arabo-Muslim anti-Zionism (Finkelkraut 2003; Taguieff 2002; Brenner 2004). When I asked an author of the ad campaign whether Jews felt “rejected by France,” she replied: “No. There is a part of the Arab population¹³ that doesn't like Jews [and] that says and does unacceptable things.”

In a reading where Arabo-Muslims figure as invisible taguers, simultaneously attacking living Jews who both are and are not the same as sacrosanct Christian figures, the idea of a French Republican center is thoroughly transformed. Rather than appear as a neutral legal framework into which Jews have been “integrated,” it appears as an ethno-religious community. This ethno-religious community partially excludes Jews in relation to the larger “French” reading public; but it also includes Jews in ways impossible for the invisible Muslim taguer. It does so by using Jesus and Mary as ambiguous figures; figures who conjure up images of self-identified practicing Jews *and* serve as central symbols of and as a synecdoche for Christianity. As a result, attacking Jews seems equivalent to attacking Christians or, at the very least, central symbols of Christian and Western civilization. The invisibility of Islam in this semiotic

hologram of Jewishness and Christianity seemingly results in its definitive exclusion. France is thus Christian and, to a certain extent, Jewish; it is not and cannot be Muslim.

If one culturally informed reading of the campaign collapsed Republican and ethno-national understandings of national community, the UEJF leadership also embraced a more radical alternative interpretation. Here I return again to the campaign's central if implicit question: who tagged Jesus and Mary? When asked whether they intended to accuse Muslims of defacing Jesus and Mary, campaign designers said no. Arfi told the press that Jesus and Mary were "Christian as well as Muslim figures that touched every French person" (Chabert 2004). Aubrey, a member of the design team, told a similar story. During the planning stages, she consulted with a Muslim friend who claimed that the images touched her because of the importance of Mary in the Qur'an. Would a wider-range of self-identified French Muslims have responded similarly? It is impossible to know because of the campaign's limited circulation. Some French Muslims certainly would have had trouble connecting Christian imagery with Islam. But, as Aubrey's informant suggested, Jesus and Mary do play a significant role in the Qu'ran, and they are viewed as consummate Muslims in some important oral traditions (c.f. Craigg 1985; Robinson 1991; Siddiqui 2013). So it is possible that Aubrey's token informant would not have been alone, particularly given the recent rise in Islamic education among French Muslims (see further Gray 2006). The ad therefore could have positioned young French Muslims "returning" to religious practice as part of the religious hologram I described earlier. Rather than function as invisible taguers, Muslims might, like Christians, see themselves as like and unlike the campaign's Jewish/Christian/Muslim Jesus and Mary and therefore as part of the wider "French" public to which the ad appealed.

But even for those ignorant of the role Jesus and Mary play in Islamic tradition, the image chosen for Mary further complicates exclusionary ethno-nationalist and Republican discourses about Islam and France.¹⁴ In the picture, Mary is veiled. Although she is veiled according to the conventions of Western religious art, a veiled Jewish/Christian woman could be read as a challenge to the conflation of veiling with non-Western, non-French dispositions and practices (see further Baubérot 2004). The mid-2000s "debate" about *laïcité* often placed Republicans and ethno-nationalists on the same side of seemingly anti-Muslim legislation. From both perspectives, veiled women figured as too heteronomous (they submitted to male patriarchal norms and irrational religious demands) and/or too assertive (they intentionally challenged French cultural/political norms) to be appropriately French (Fernando 2014). The UEJF campaign, however, suggested a very different role for a veiled woman, turning her from an aggressor into a symbol of those unjustly attacked in France.

At the same time, a veiled Mary blurred the boundaries between the supposedly self-evidently dichotomous categories Muslim and Jew. With some exceptions, mainstream Jewish organizations, including religious institutions and newspapers, worked to maintain this dichotomy. They supported restrictions on visible forms of Muslim practice (e.g. Meyer, Benattar, and Derai 1989; Gaulmyn 2003) despite the rapid increase in Jewish orthopraxy, which has gendered and behavioral norms that mirror those of observant Islam. This paradoxical position worked to assert Jews' relative proximity to "core" French identity whether figured as Republican or ethno-nationalist. As one irate (non-Jewish?) reader of the Jewish press noted during the first headscarf affair in 1989: "Let's be clear: prohibiting the kippa or the Jewish star in school, even in secular schools, would be an intolerable attack on human rights... Christians AND JEWS are at home here... Islam is waging a systematic offensive against our tolerant, Judeo-Christian society. We cannot accept the wearing of the chador [sic] in class..." (Charrier

1990, emphasis in original). Such arguments about the self-evident difference between Jewish and Muslim practice might be harder to maintain in the face of the continuity between the veil worn by Mary—here a symbol of observant Jewish womanhood—and those worn by contemporary Muslim women. In other words, in much the same way that Mary and Jesus played with the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity, Mary’s veil might have disrupted distinctions between observant Jews and Muslims. Far from being on opposite sides of a civilizational divide instantiated through Muslim anti-Semitism, the ad might suggest that religious Jews and Muslims shared as much as Jews and Christians.

This reading of the Jesus and Mary campaign thus pulls viewers into a post-“Andersonian” vision of the nation. If Benedict Anderson (2006) rooted nationalism in horizontal fraternity and the ability to (at least) *imagine* core traits shared with fellow nationals, this particular reading of the UEJF campaign offers no such core. Instead, it pictured France as a set of distinctive, internally fractured, and yet interconnected communities. Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims were not positioned in identical ways vis-à-vis Jesus and Mary; but at the same time, religious groups were not hermetically sealed, internally undifferentiated communities. Images of Jesus and Mary might alienate some traditionalist Muslims; but they also might alienate Protestants while speaking to youth newly interested in Islam. Mary was not veiled like a contemporary Muslim woman; but some observant Jewish and Christian women also veil.¹⁵ Jesus was Jewish; but he was also a consummate Christian and Muslim. And clearly although “secular” French sensibilities are different from those of observant Muslims, religious sensibilities haunt, shape, and even divide the entirety of the French public, not just its putatively religious “minorities.” In other words, instead of posing French belonging as a question of identity, the Jesus campaign’s hologram-like images produced a French public rooted in fleeting moments of shared identification within and across religious boundaries. Everyone reacting to the poster was pragmatically presumed to be French *and* a member of a religious community of some kind.

And indeed, this is precisely what Arfi had said—in certain contexts—about French belonging. His introduction to the edited volume mentioned above (UEJF 2004) normatively calls for the kind of national community just described; a national community peopled by distinctive and yet interconnected “communities” that can be interpellated in similar ways by similar kinds of concerns. According to Arfi: “Everyone belongs to multiple communities. Religious, cultural, and even professional belonging define as many communities as there are reasons to get together to share, defend, or perpetuate a tradition or a culture... (ibid.:11). Similarly, he told me in 2005: “First, everyone lives in a community today... Even the *français de souche* [a term used for unmarked French nationals]... lives in his own community... Are there places of diversity and exchange? At one time I had the impression that there were fewer, but I think they are now being reconstructed.” If everyone, not only ethno-religious minorities, belongs to distinctive yet overlapping “communities,” it becomes hard to imagine visually depicting an embodied French cultural center. From this perspective, the UEJF’s Jesus and Mary are not representatives of either “Christian” or “Judeo-Christian” France, but are simultaneously and alternately Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and French.

Ambiguity and Danger

I have argued that the Jesus and Mary campaign was ambiguous, lending itself to very different culturally informed readings around what, if anything, constituted French national identity and belonging. The campaign’s hypothetical French viewers could have read the images

of Mary and Jesus as indicating a Christian or Judeo-Christian foundation for French identity, thereby substituting an ethno-religious framework for a supposedly “neutral” Republican imaginary. But French viewers equally could have seen a critique of the assumption that there is a clear “center,” whether ethno-religious or Republican, to French identity at all. As I noted above, both of these positions had been articulated, sometimes simultaneously, by UEJF leaders. And both seemed to be circulating, whether as ideal promise or terrible nightmare, in the mid-2000s French public sphere.

What I have yet to explain is why either or both of these possible readings were so alarming to the LICRA. What did the LICRA fear? And why call for the cancelation of the campaign? In print, the group worried about fanning the flames of anger and division rather than extinguishing them (see above). In private, the group apparently never fully told the UEJF what this meant. They did tell Arfi they were concerned about how traditional Catholics would react to the profanation of Jesus and Mary. They were also worried that Muslims would read the ad as accusation rather than invitation. Both of these concerns point to one of my arguments—the campaign’s reliance on aesthetics rather than text made any attempt to control its message virtually impossible. The ad could thus be offensive to Catholics and/or Muslims for mutually contradictory reasons. For Catholics it might have been too “secular” an appropriation of sacred figures; for Muslims it seemed to render French belonging an exclusive possession of two sacred communities.

But *either* of the readings may also have threatened mainstream Jewish institutional approaches to French national belonging and anti-Semitism. The LICRA—like many large French Jewish organizations—publicly embraced a Republican approach to thinking about national identity, linking the fight against anti-Semitism to the preservation of *laïcité* and the crushing of *communautarisme*. In 2003, the LICRA and the Masonic *Grand Orient* organized a protest that they called “a Republican gathering for *laïcité* and against ethnic communalism, racism, and anti-Semitism” (Weill 2003). Patrick Gaubert, then president of the LICRA, explained the protest:

Yes. We have to fight social fragmentation into ethno-religious communities and all of the racist and xenophobic currents that result from that fragmentation. Our approach is above all to reaffirm the principles of the Republican slogan: equality, liberty, fraternity, to which we would add *laïcité*. They are the four pillars of the Republic that everyone should have in mind (A. V. 2003).

Just a year later, the LICRA invoked both secularism and Republicanism when it refused to fight anti-Semitism along with other forms of racism, particularly Islamophobia. In debates over the scope and composition of protests against anti-Semitism, the LICRA made its position clear: it would not march with any anti-racist organizations that had refused to support the 2004 law banning veils in public schools, claiming that such groups were “avowed adversaries to the law for *laïcité*” and were therefore often “carriers of a violent anti-Semitism perpetrated in the name of anti-Zionism” (De Royer 2004). By 2004, the LICRA’s fight *for* *laïcité* had become a fight *against* anti-Semitism, which in turn had become a metonym for racism itself. At the same time, *laïcité* had become a dividing line distinguishing those with universalistic Republican values from those trying to impose *communautarisme* on the French public sphere. In other words, the LICRA imagined the fight against anti-Semitism as a battle for a particular kind of French public, one visibly unmarked by religious or ethnic differences or divisions.

This was hardly an anomalous position. Demonstrations against anti-Semitism throughout this period equated attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions with attacks on the

Republic itself, suggesting that Jews were a token, and sometimes even a synecdoche, for the French public. For example, at the May 16, 2004 demonstration, protestors—including those affiliated with the UEJF—chanted “*synagogues brûlées, République en danger*” [when synagogues burn, the Republic is in danger] and “*juifs agressés, République en danger*” [when Jews are attacked, the Republic is in danger].¹⁶ Roger Cukierman, at the time head of the CRIF, similarly linked the fight against anti-Semitism to the reinforcement of Republican legal frameworks. When asked in September 2004 what the “Jewish community needed” in contemporary France, he noted:

What we need is that anti-Semitic incidents cease. That’s is all we need, because we are citizens who are perfectly well integrated into this country, we have no problem with integration, Jews have lived in France for hundreds of years, we are an integral part of French society, the only problem that we have today is a wave of anti-Semitic acts that is unacceptable for Jews and unacceptable for France.

He further argued that “there [was] an enormous amount of work that has to be done by French society, that was always done for other immigrant groups from Europe, that has not been done for Muslims... [O]ne of the reasons for the wave of anti-Semitism that we are experiencing is [Muslims’] insufficient integration into French society.” In other words, Jews long ago joined the French Republican center as “integrated” citizens; Muslim anti-Semitism was thus one of the most important signs of Muslims’ failure to follow suit.

Note that in this logic, as in our first reading of the UEJF images, Jews are contrasted with Muslims and given considerably greater proximity to (if not complete identity with) a “core” French public. But not for the same reasons as those implied by the Jesus and Mary campaign. For the LICRA and CRIF, Jews are model minorities whose insider-outsider status testifies to the capacity of the Republic to integrate all willing to abide by its contractual principles (Fernando 2009). In such an imaginary, Muslims are not excluded on essentialized grounds, but because they cannot or will not adapt to French Republican rules, whether around sex equality, religious visibility, or tolerance. As an economics teacher who occasionally wrote thought pieces for the CRIF explained to me, saying anything else implied that the Republic was by nature exclusionary, and therefore an ethnonational institution. But the Jesus and Mary campaign disrupted the assumption that “the Republic” can be clearly distinguished from “the nation.” When a self-identified “Republican” Jewish group uses the bodies of Jesus and Mary to incarnate the French national community, it indirectly highlights how closely tied Republican and ethno-religious imaginaries often are. And this changes how one can think about Muslims’ supposed failure to integrate. The LICRA, like many mainstream Jewish organizations, has preferred to attribute such “failures” to non-Jewish minorities themselves and/or to French civil society rather than to the nature of French national identity. As a result, when the LICRA supported the petition against “anti-white” racism, a petition that argued that “Jews” and the “French” were equally and indistinguishably targets of dark-skinned, often Muslim, delinquents, it denied understanding the firestorm provoked by its position. Where outraged commentators understood the petition to imply that “France” was a white/Jewish/Christian ethno-nation (Agence France Press 2005), the LICRA insisted that there was “no source of polemic” in the appeal because “the facts speak for themselves;” the delinquents, not those who called attention to their “racism,” were the anti-Republican communitaristes (Agence France Presse 2005b). At that point, long after the LICRA’s condemnation of the Jesus and Mary campaign, the UEJF agreed (Agence France Press 2005).

Reading the Jesus and Mary campaign as a statement about France's fundamentally Judeo-Christian character undermined Jewish institutions' attempt to figure Jews as a model minority who proved the potential inclusiveness of the French Republic. But reading the campaign in a way that evacuated the "center" of Frenchness, *however* imagined, may have been even more unsettling to Jewish institutional strategies. In a period of seeming indifference to rising anti-Semitism, fear of transnational identities, distrust of embodied religiosity, and negative images of Israel, Jewish institutions used the fight against anti-Semitism to shore up Jewish claims to French national belonging, (see further Arkin 2014). In other words, although France's postcolonial discussion of pluralism very often revolves around Islam, French Jews do not feel the "Jewish question" has been resolved. To this postcolonial "Jewish question," many French Jewish institutions offer a postcolonial solution that rests on some of the shifting forms of triangulation involved in colonial constructions of difference (see further Katz 2015). French colonial practice opened and closed the possibility of assimilation by elaborating a set of ethno-racial distinctions within colonized populations, turning, for example, Algerian "Berbers" and "Jews" into groups with religious, political, and even racial characteristics imagined as more "French" than those associated with "Arabs" (Lorcin 2014; Shepard 2008; Shepard 2013; Silverstein 2004; for exceptions see, Stein 2014). This colonial logic produced Frenchness through distinctions worked out among excluded groups; a French "majority" and a series of differentially assimilable "minorities" were thus co-constructions. The continuous juxtaposition of Jews and Muslims, or Jews and Arabs, that haunts many Jewish responses to French anti-Semitism—whether those responses are "Republican," "ethnonationalist," or somewhere in between—reproduces this colonial logic, making Jewish inclusion in France contingent on Arab-Muslim exclusion. In other words, Jews and Muslims are juxtaposed as a way of arguing for the *difference* between Jews' (potentially troubling) religious practices, bodies, allegiances, and origins, and those of Arab-Muslims.

Given this postcolonial solution, a Jesus and Mary campaign that evacuates a national "core" troubles all attempts to negotiate Jewish belonging through Muslim exclusion. If Muslims, Jews, and Christians share the same kind of partial and fractal relationship with one another and with French identity, the postcolonial ground for Jewish inclusion disappears. In showing how Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims might be seen as the same and different, divided and yet potentially punctually unified, the UEJF inadvertently called attention to the essentialism that haunts how Jewish organizations cope with French Jewish liminality.

Conclusion

I began by pleading for an analytical return to the "Jewish question." I want to conclude in the same vein, highlighting how attention to certain forms of Jewish agency may help elucidate contemporary European nationalism. Over the last few decades, scholars exploring the challenges to national identity associated with contemporary capitalism and post-coloniality have asked whether nation-states have futures and whether those futures can resemble national pasts (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Bunzl 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Geschiere 2009; Hall 1991). In Europe, ethno-religious minorities are thought of as harbingers of new, post-"Andersonian" imaginaries, (unintentional) agents of the deconstruction and radical reconstruction of national communities, (e.g. Asad 2003; Erickson 2011; Bunzl 2004; Fernando 2014; Lehrer 2013). And yet, at the same time, social science about European nation-states, particularly France, often presumes that deep cultural and/or social continuities produce recognizably "national" publics with shared dispositions and practices; "national" publics that (still) struggle with the

“incorporation” of minorities—most notably Muslims—who challenge national cultures (Bowen 2007; Cesari 2014; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Laurence and Vaisse 2005; Roy 1999; Schnapper 1998; see Fernando 2014 for an account that substitutes secularity for culture).

Between these understandings—the nation-state is dead, long live the nation-state—we are left to conclude that “minorities” are either revolutionary vanguards of a new world order or abject bodies on which the Andersonian nation is built. But such an understanding obscures the investment that (some) minorities make in the homogenous nation over and against alternative visions that seem to offer greater possibilities for pluralism. Terry Turner (1995) has made this point from a materialist perspective in relation to the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in much of contemporary Europe. He has argued that ethno-nationalist claims are often made by dominated fractions of the dominant population, factions that are seeking “inclusion and integration on more favorable social, political and economic terms.” What Turner noted for disenfranchised whites may also be true for similarly positioned minority groups.¹⁷ The UEJF ad campaign (accidentally?) called attention to Jewish institutions’ reliance on and contributions to French ethno-nationalism in their fight against anti-Semitism (Arkin 2016), thus revealing the terrible structural limits on how French Jews *can* respond to the postcolonial “Jewish question.”

In other words, the French “Jewish question” highlights how contingent Jewish Frenchness may still be and therefore how shallow French pluralism really is, even for “minority” groups who are seemingly “integrated.” If Jewish “integration” partially relies on Muslim exclusion, neither an essentialist nor a successionist story can explain why Muslims cannot be of, and not just in, European nation-states like France. Instead, social scientists should pay attention to the fraught ways in which national centers are both contested and produced from variously constituted margins (Joskowitz 2014). An exclusive focus on Islam as post-national promise or national problem fails to show how important imagined relations between and among “minority” groups maybe to (re)thinking the nation.

¹ For a critique of how “positivistic” anthropological data is or should be, see further (Herzfeld 2015).

² This kind of analysis also has a long and storied history in some anthropological traditions, particularly structural and symbolic anthropology. Both of these approaches make explicit what was assumed to be mostly infra-conscious to natives themselves (e.g. Douglas 2004; Lévi-Strauss 1983; Turner 1970).

³ For accounts of the relative overdetermination of post-colonial Jewish Frenchness, see further (Katz 2015; Mandel 2014; Shepard 2013).

⁴ This argument has been made, indirectly, by Zygmunt Bauman (2001). For the most obvious examples, see further (Durkheim 1984; Durkheim 1995; Marx 1978; Simmel 1964).

⁵ For exceptions, see further (Arkin 2014; Boyarin 2009; Bunzl 2004; Brink-Danan 2012).

⁶ See (Boyarin 2009; Mandel 2008) for more complex takes on this issue.

⁷ “Traditionalist” refers to Jews who observe some aspects of Jewish Law, particularly those that help mark Jewish boundaries.

⁸ Between the 1950s and the 1980s, an estimated 55,000 Tunisian, 50,000 Moroccan, and 125,000 Algerian Jews immigrated to France (Bensimon 1971:2; Laskier 1983:342; Taieb 1989:57). In the 1980s, a major French Jewish organization estimated that about half of the French Jewish population was *Sephardi*, a term correlated with North African origins in France (Cohen 2002:12). By 2002, that number had reached 70%.

⁹ Fax with Agence Juive and Fonds Social Juif Unifié letterhead found in the informal UEJF archives. Dated May 26th, 1993.

¹⁰ Théo Klein, UEJF president from 1947-1951; CRIF president from 1983-1989.

Andy Steg, president of the Paris section of UEJF from 1947-1949, CRIF president from 1970-1974.

Jean Kahn, president of the Strasbourg section of UEJF from 1950-1952, CRIF president from 1989-1995.

¹¹ In the UEJF archives, I found a letter inviting Leila Shahid, the Palestinian Liberation Organization's official representative in Paris (dated April 29, 1993). But subsequent correspondence between the UEJF and other Jewish organizations denied the intention of having a PLO representative speak.

¹² Arfi explained to me in an interview: "We can't combat racism and anti-Semitism with the same methods because they are not the same thing... Racism is the hatred of the person we see, the black who we see, who we recognize as foreign. The hatred of Jews is that of those who we don't recognize, who we don't see. The difference is inside. It doesn't come from the same thing in the head... All of that makes that it's something of a completely different nature..."

¹³ It is interesting that this particular UEJF member used the term "Arab" rather than "Muslim;" both are potentially equally inappropriate descriptors of an extremely diverse, often but not always ex-colonial population, see further (Bowen 2009 Chapter 1). But note also that the campaign itself encouraged people to think about identity almost exclusively in religious (rather than ethnic or cultural) terms.

¹⁴ I have to thank Naomi Davidson for pointing this out to me.

¹⁵ Former Presidents Jacques Chirac and Nicholas Sarkozy sought to have (some) Catholic nuns exempted from laws that required them to remove their head coverings in certain contexts, like official identity photographs.

¹⁶ In 2004, the *Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme* [CNCDH, National advisory committee on human rights] documented a 50% increase in anti-Semitic acts and a 100% increase in anti-Maghrebin acts; but protesters marching with Jewish-affiliated groups did not mention burning mosques or attacking Muslims as evidence of an embattled Republic (Agence France Presse 2005a; CRIF 2005).

¹⁷ Ari Joskowitz (2014) has argued this in a different way in a compelling account of Jewish anti-Catholicism in France and Germany in the 19th century. Where Joskowitz sees center-periphery models as illusions created by particular historical approaches or theoretical proclivities, I see them as socially generated and maintained; historical actors themselves produce and mobilize simplified understandings of complicated social realities.

Kimberly Arkin is an assistant professor of Anthropology at Boston University. She is the author of *Rhinestones, Religion, and the Republic: Fashioning Jewishness in France* (2014).

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