SECULAR AND INDIVISIBLE?: LAICITÉ, ISLAM
AND THE FRENCH STATE

By

Julie M. Clare

Submitted to the
Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
of American University
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

In
Public Anthropology

Chair:

David Vine

Rachel Watkins

Dean of the College

Date

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France has Western Europe's largest Muslim population, and has attracted attention for its attempts to assimilate and secularize Muslims. The state’s view of Islam is shaped by laïcité, or secularism, and by France’s history of North African colonialism. Many French citizens oppose attempts by French Muslims to assert a group identity based on their religious and cultural background; at the same time, the historical diversity of France is often forgotten.

This thesis explains how laïcité, which can be described as state control of religion, shapes the French government’s policies toward Muslims. In addition, I argue that secularism, nationalism and colonialism in France are interconnected, with France’s responses to current issues shaped by past events. As a result, secularism and Islamophobia in France have different roots than elsewhere in the West, but the consequences for the country’s Muslims are similar to those in the United States and across Europe.
PREFACE

As a student of public anthropology, my objective with this thesis is to appeal to the general public. With that goal in mind, I have attempted to keep jargon and academic theory to a minimum. A wide range of anthropologists and other social scientists has influenced my work, but many of the sources listed can be read and enjoyed by people without social science degrees. Most people in the United States and Europe still know little about Islam and Muslims. The information in the media is often biased, misleading or sensationalist. In the years since September 11, 2001, interest in Islam has dramatically increased, but the public discourse tends to revolve more around yelling and arguing than engaging in productive dialogue.

Although I am primarily writing about France, I also approach the topic from my own cultural perspective. For the benefit of American readers, I frequently include comparisons between France and the United States. I believe that in anthropology, learning about another culture ultimately causes us to learn about ourselves. I find that referring to the United States emphasizes similarities that are often overlooked. From the time of Thomas Jefferson and Alexis de Tocqueville to today, Americans have always been fascinated by France, and vice versa. My goal is to demonstrate how the American concept of secularism is somewhat different from French laïcité, but that despite this, both countries are
currently wrestling with questions about Islam, nationalism, citizenship, immigration and identity.

In anthropological writing, it can be difficult to find the correct terms to describe very diverse groups of people such as “Muslims” and “the French.” As I am interested in keeping my thesis easy for a non-academic audience to read, I will generally err on the side of simplicity. Allow me to note here, therefore, that when I write “Muslims” or “North Africans,” for example, I am not implying that these groups are monolithic or unchanging. In France, someone might be identified as Muslim based on any of several factors, including skin color, style of dress, having an Arabic name, living in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood, or choosing not to drink alcohol or eat pork. In France, the term “français de souche” is generally used to refer to people who are “ethnically French.” I will generally use the term “French non-Muslims.”

French citizens of North African Muslim origin face discrimination and on average are poorer and less educated than French non-Muslims. While racism and colonial attitudes are certainly factors, the French view that secularization is a requirement of assimilation is also an issue. I will therefore discuss the historical and contemporary factors that negatively affect French Muslims as a group. I believe that it is important to study not only what Muslims think and believe, but also what French non-Muslims (as the more powerful group) think about their fellow citizens.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2005, I was a college sophomore spending a semester abroad in Grenoble, France. One morning on my way to class, I walked into the political science building and noticed a six-foot tall poster set up conspicuously in the lobby. The phrase “loi de 1905,” or “1905 Law,” could be read from across the room. Up close, I noticed the poster was noting the centennial of this law, as well as advertising several on-campus lectures devoted to the anniversary. What, I wondered, was the importance of this hundred-year-old law? Interested, but not really understanding what the fuss was about, I rushed off to make it to class on time.

This was my first run-in with the 1905 Law, although it didn’t make a huge impression on me at the time. After I returned to the United States, I started reading about secularism and religion in France; I learned that the 1905 Law established legal secularism in France and is very influential to this day. Since 2005, issues relating to secularism (particularly the bans on headscarves in schools and face veils in public) have gained media attention in Europe and the United States. Gradually, I realized how central laïcité, or secularism, is to French history and government, and how that affects France’s large Muslim population.
French and Muslim

France has the largest Muslim population in the European Union, around ten percent (Pew Forum 2011).¹ According to the French government’s Haut Conseil à l’Intégration (2010), twenty percent of people living in France are either immigrants or the children of immigrants; the majority, though not all, are Muslims of North African descent. As in many developed countries, the minority population is expected to grow in the near future, as the non-minority population declines due to falling birthrates. Therefore, issues related to French Muslims are likely to become even more relevant in the years to come. Muslims in France face a number of challenges, such as high unemployment, that have both political and economic causes.

French Muslims can in many ways be compared to Hispanic immigrants in the United States: they are an ethnic minority, they (often) speak a different language, and in general, they emigrated in order find jobs in a more developed country. French Muslims also face the additional difficulties shared by Muslims around the world, particularly since September 11, 2001; Islamophobia, the fear of terrorism, and criticism of Islamic beliefs and practices make being a Muslim in the West particularly challenging. The French Muslim community, therefore, faces xenophobia as well as Islamophobia, in addition to a variety of other

¹ Exact figures are difficult to determine, since some French Muslims are non-citizens, and also because the French census does not ask about religious affiliation.
prejudices that have emerged from France’s experiences with secularism and colonialism.

This is not to say that French Muslims feel that there is no positive side to their multicultural\(^2\) existence. Most Muslims in France today were born there, and both academic and everyday Muslims in Europe have begun to discuss how a new type of “Islam de France” or “Euro-Islam” is forming. While I am not able to discuss every issue related to Islam and immigration in contemporary France, I intend to explain how French secularism has combined with Islamophobia to create a situation that is changing French politics and society.

**The Development of Secular France**

While the French term *laïcité* is generally translated as secularism, many French thinkers have argued that this translation is inaccurate or insufficient to explain what *laïcité* means for the French. It is certainly true that in the past as well as today, people in France and in the United States tend to view secularism differently. Based on my experience as an American, I would translate secularism as the separation of church and state to ensure freedom of religion.

The American myth\(^3\) of secularism, in a nutshell, goes like this: the Pilgrims and other early American colonists were persecuted in England for their

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2. The term “multiculturalism” has long been unpopular with French politicians and academics, who use it as a reference to “American-style” segregation and inequality. However, in my view, “multiculturalism” can also refer to what has always existed in France—people of different backgrounds forming one nation.

3. I am referring to “myth” in the sense of a created narrative, not as a complete fabrication.
religious beliefs. They came to the New World to worship freely, and after independence, set up a government that allowed everyone that freedom. The Founding Fathers believed in freedom of conscience and incorporated it into the Constitution, particularly with the First Amendment. Later, immigrants came from all over Europe, and eventually from all over the world, bringing different religious traditions with them. Everyone was allowed to practice their religion without government interference, and the government didn’t favor one religion over another. This government neutrality toward religions allowed people of different backgrounds the opportunity to succeed in America regardless of whether they were Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, of another faith, or not religious. Of course, this story leaves out a lot of what really took place, especially with regards to ethnic and religious minorities. However, it is this myth of American secularism that continues to shape public opinion today.

Meanwhile, there is the French secularism myth, which arguably starts in 1789 with the French Revolution. While the United States has a more clear-cut founding date, the French nation evolved over centuries, with people from Ile-de-France, Bretagne, Provence, Burgundy and other areas gradually coming to see themselves as French; eventually country was united under the rule of Bourbon kings and tied to the Roman Catholic Church (one old saying, “France, elder daughter of the Church,” expresses this connection).

However, as the bourgeoisie began to gain more influence and the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau and Voltaire spread, people started
to challenge the authority of the Church, the monarchy, and the close relationship between religious and state authority. Opposition to Louis XVI culminated with the storming of the Bastille, the guillotine, la Marseillaise, and a Revolution based around a fervent anti-clericalism and the values of “liberté, égalité, fraternité.” The ensuing years were a power struggle between Republicans, supporting democracy and secularism, and the alliance of Church and aristocracy. While there were setbacks (the Reign of Terror, the restoration of monarchy, Napoleon’s empire) eventually the side of laïcité and democracy won out and France became a model for the modern, secular nation-state.

Like the American secularism myth, this story contains omissions and inaccuracies (deliberate or otherwise). But the myth of an idealized secular system is even more influential for the French than it is for Americans. Laïcité is discussed in newspapers and books, on television and in cafés across the country. And just as the First Amendment is a founding text of American secularism that affects contemporary debate, the 1905 Law is a crucial part of France’s view of secularism.

In 1905, France was geographically and demographically changing. The recent Franco-Prussian War had resulted in the loss of the eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. The government was shaken by this military defeat; it was

4. France can be seen as having two major “parties” that have struggled for power: the party of secularism and the party of the Church.

5. There are actually two major laws relating to secularism and state control of religion, one passed in 1901 and the other from 1905. While the 1901 law is still relevant, the 1905 law is more influential and much more frequently referenced by the media and government.
also threatened, in its view, by the continued influence of the Church, which did
not hide its support for more conservative, even monarchist, political elements.
The 1905 law had a dual purpose: to assert the secular state’s control over public
space, and to control the revenue sources of the Catholic, as well as Protestant,
faith. Through this takeover, the Republic hoped to not only reduce the risk of an
overthrow in the short run, but also to replace religious identity with secular and
nationalist values, thereby increasing its authority over French citizens who often
still connected more with sub-national or super-national identities that with that of
France.

Early modern France, and contemporary France as well, was a mix of
groups from different areas, many of which were at one point independent states.
Outside of Paris, one finds Bretons, Basques, Burgundians, Alsatians,
Provençals, Savoyards, Corsicans and people of other “nations.” While the
national school system had progressed by 1905 so that nearly all schoolchildren
were educated in French, regional languages were still spoken at home; local
languages and culture lived on through literature, dress and traditions.

In addition to geographic diversity, France has always had minority
religious groups. Various sects of Protestantism have flourished there; while
many French Protestants, or Huguenots, were encouraged to migrate to New
France (Canada), many remained. Before the Protestant Reformation, Avignon
was the seat of the French pope in a schism with Rome that was later resolved.
The influence of John Calvin in neighboring Geneva was strongly felt. When the
wars of religion broke out in Europe after the Reformation, France (or the various territories that were later incorporated into France) was a battlefield.

This history of religious wars, with armies battling for the souls of the people with devastating results, is seen as the beginning of the ideas of both secularism and nationalism in Europe. After the fighting died down, the concept of a government that united a group of people but allowed some degree of religious freedom was born—secularism and nationalism, therefore, have their origins in the same great events in French history. As I will argue later, the interconnection between secularism and nationalism in France is significant for contemporary critics of the government’s handling of issues related to Islam.

Criticizing of the 1905 Law, wearing headscarves in school or “burqas” in public, or other behaviors seen as contrary to the established view of secularism is seen as threatening, because criticism of secularism is seen as criticism of the state and national identity.

In addition to the role of French Protestants in shaping laïcité, French Jews

6. For more on the origins of secularism and nationalism in Europe, see Anderson (1991).

7. What is referred to, particularly in Europe, as a burqa, is called niqab in Arabic or a face veil in English. The term “veil” in English or “voile” in French is used to refer to covering entire head and face, or simply to covering the head/hair. The use of burqa in place of other, more accurate terms points to the way that global issues concerning Muslims, such as Afghan women and the Taliban, influences the French general public’s view of (non-Afghan) Muslims in France.

8. Although I do not feel that French secularism is simply a disguise for a religious state, it is important to note that displays of religion by Muslims are treated differently than Catholic or Christian religious expression. Given France’s history, Christian religious signs such as churches or people wearing crosses are seen as less out of place and make less of a “statement” than Islamic signs such as women in headscarves or the construction of mosques.
have also had a significant impact in areas such as government, business and academia. The French media often compares (and more often, contrasts) the Jewish and Muslim communities in France (Shefler 2010). Prior to the Second World War, French Jews were often thought of as a separate ethnic group and criticized for their perceived loyalty to the “Jewish nation” over that of the French nation. The Dreyfus affair at the turn of the century is often seen as the beginning of a movement to put a stop to discrimination against Jews in France; famous intellectuals, most notably the novelist Emile Zola, called for justice for Dreyfus.

In post-war France, anti-Semitism, while not completely eradicated, became much less tolerated in public, with the state attempting to distance itself from the Vichy past. Today, many French intellectuals point to Jews in France as a successfully assimilated religious group, who followed the path originally created for turning Catholics and Protestants into secular French citizens. According to a recent article, about half of French Jews today are non-practicing (Shefler 2010); unlike most French Muslims, they are generally not seen as immigrants or non-European. One prominent French Jewish leader has stated that, in his view, many French Jews are too assimilated and no longer have any connection to their Jewish identity (Shefler 2010).

Frequently, French politicians point to prominent secular French Jews, including Léon Blum, Raymond Aron, Bernard-Henri Lévy and Jacques Derrida, as well as the successes of other white European immigrants who have
assimilated into the country\textsuperscript{9}, as proof that the French integration model is working. The problems faced by Muslims in France, the government therefore argues, result not from poverty or racism but from Muslims’ refusal to embrace laïcité and go along with the established model for success.

Therefore, France today is experiencing a debate over immigration and identity that is in many ways similar to issues being addressed in the United States. In both countries, many people who consider themselves to be “native” French or American citizens have become concerned about the growing non-white immigrant population. This xenophobic reaction is not surprising, and many optimists would say that in time, both countries would adjust to the changing demographics, much as they adjusted to previous waves of immigration. However, the French debate over immigration and Islam is complex, and is not guaranteed to simply improve over time. Part of the issue deals with the policy of assimilation or integration, as the French debate to what extent immigrants should be required to adapt to the dominant cultural and political values of their adopted country. The French view of nationalism is shaped around the idea of shared values, including that of laïcité. The fact that most so-called immigrants are now second- and third-generation French citizens further complicates the issue; French Muslims ask if the French state should have the right to demand

\footnotesize{9. These include Belgians and Germans in the North, Italians in the South, as well as people from Spain, Portugal and Central/Eastern Europe. Some “non-French” people became French through shifting borders, as in Alsace-Lorraine; others immigrated for political or economic reasons. As in many other parts of Europe, Roma (or Gypsies) continue to face discrimination. Current French President Nicolas Sarkozy is the son of a Hungarian immigrant.}
further assimilation of French-speaking, French-educated citizens of North African descent, without providing the economic resources that would put French Muslims on a more equal footing with their non-Muslim counterparts.

This economic inequality is another factor in the debate. French Muslims, who as a whole are less educated and less prosperous than French non-Muslims, originally came to France to work as unskilled laborers in factories when demand for workers was high.¹⁰ Now with the economy weaker than it once was, many French non-Muslims see Muslims as taking “their” jobs. However, this viewpoint overlooks the reasons why North Africans chose to leave their homes and families in the first place. France’s colonial history in the Maghreb has caused lasting political and economic difficulties in Algeria and Morocco (and to a lesser extent, Tunisia). While France is not to blame for all the problems North African countries face, I would argue that France has done little to remedy or even acknowledge its role in the creation of generations of impoverished, unemployed people who came to France in search of jobs and a stable life.

Finally, French concern over immigration has dovetailed with the post-September 11th “war on terror” and the rise of Islamophobia. Concern over Islamic extremism existed in France prior to 2001. Events such as the Islamic

¹⁰ In addition to North Africans who came to France specifically for work, many Algerians became French citizens and chose to move after Algerian independence. As Weil (2008) notes, Algerians born before independence and their children were given the option of becoming French citizens. During the period of civil war in the 1990s, many additional Algerians took this opportunity to escape the violence and instability. Silverstein (2004) also discusses the complexities of Algerian migration to France.
Revolution in Iran, conflicts in places from Palestine to Afghanistan, and violence and instability in Algeria\textsuperscript{11}, meant that many French non-Muslims saw Islam and Muslims in a negative light. While many excellent scholars, such as Aslan (2009) and Armstrong (2006) have written accessible books to dispel the myth that Islam is a violent and backward religion, their arguments are often overshadowed by alarmist books, articles and news reports.

As Deeb writes, “although a constructed opposition between an ‘anti-modern’ Islam and a ‘modern’ West existed long before September 11, 2001, the attacks that took place on that day only served to solidify it” (2006: 230). Although my focus here is not on terrorism, it is important to note the extent to which French Muslims’ lives are affected by this view of Muslims as “anti-modern” and potential terrorists. Despite the fact that virtually no French Muslims have been involved in terrorist plots or otherwise justify or support terrorism, the association of Islam with political violence is used to justify France’s system of laïcité by claiming that Muslims are a “threat.”

In the next section, I will go into further detail about laïcité: whether it is the same as secularism; how it differs from American secularism; how social scientists have recently begun to study secularism; and how the French state has tried (successfully or unsuccessfully) to adapt laïcité to the current reality. In the following chapter, I will discuss the issue of Islamophobia: its relationship to

\textsuperscript{11} The Algerian war for independence from France has been compared to the Vietnam War and remains an emotional topic. France’s colonial experience in Algeria since 1830 has shaped the country’s view of Islam for generations, and Algeria’s civil war in the 1990s continued the trend of associating Islam with violence and terrorism in the minds of many French citizens.
immigration and citizenship; defining Islam and Muslims; the history of Muslims in France; anti-Semitism and the Dreyfus affair as a historic parallel; and how the Enlightenment and liberal values are often contrasted with Islamic traditions. In the final chapter, I will look at a specific institution, the French Council of the Muslim Faith, and address the ways that this organization has not satisfied the demands of French Muslims for greater political and economic rights. Overall, I argue that laïcité, which can be described as state control of religion, shapes the French government’s and general public’s attitudes toward French Muslims. In addition, I argue that secularism, nationalism and colonialism in France are interconnected, with France’s responses to current issues influenced by past events. As a result, secularism and Islamophobia in France have different roots than elsewhere in the West, but the consequences for the country’s Muslims are similar to those in the United States and across Europe.
CHAPTER 2
WHAT IS LAÏCITÉ?

In his book “Laïcité confronts Islam,” the French sociologist\textsuperscript{12} Olivier Roy argues that laïcité and secularism are not one and the same. While most translators simply substitute the English word “secularism” for the French “laïcité,” Roy is not alone in insisting that the concept of laïcité is related to, but not interchangeable with, the term secularism. What is laïcité, and how is it different from the American concept of secularism?

Defining Laïc\[\textit{it}\]

While I agree that there is a difference in connotation, I prefer to use secularism, for one because it is widely understood among English speakers. In addition, I feel that the use of the term “laïcité” tends to imply a French exceptionalism when it comes to historical and current circumstances, which has a negative affect on French Muslims. No two countries are identical in the ways in which society and the state address issues of religion; however, there are common themes that can be found throughout Western European and North American cultures. The argument, popular with French intellectuals, that laïcité is unique to France comes across as defensive, a response to the perceived

\textsuperscript{12} Contemporary American anthropologists have much more in common with French sociologists than French anthropologists, as most anthropologists (with some exceptions) in France today focus on indigenous cultures and the like and are much less active in politics and domestic issues.
threats of (1) globalization or Americanization and (2) Muslim immigration, which undermine the “traditional” French way of life. By insisting on the particularity and necessity of laïcité, French academics and politicians defend their views against two challengers. The first is the American and British model of integration (referred to as multiculturalism) that is connected to the Anglo-American view of secularism, and the second is Islamic identity (whether politically Islamist or not) that questions the entire Enlightenment concept of the decline of religion.

The concept of laïcité is at the heart of the French national myth. Much has already been written about the relationship between the Protestant Reformation and the Wars of Religion, and the development of the modern nation-state in Europe. Every freshman International Relations major in the United States learns a brief history of early modern Europe based around the Reformation, the Wars of Religion and the Enlightenment (I should know because I was one). In France, this history is familiar to nearly everyone, regardless of academic background: it is taught in the national school curriculum and reinforced in everyday life.

For Americans, 1776 is the year of the official birth of the nation, but in the national mythology, the idea of the nation goes back to the Mayflower and the first Thanksgiving. In France, the Republic was proclaimed in 1789, but the French nation, as opposed to the various sub-national regional identities or the super-national religious identity, comes into being with the Enlightenment. While secularism and nationalism are in theory two distinct concepts, in practice it becomes difficult to separate the two. As the medieval loyalties to both Church and local lord began to break down, it was replaced with a single loyalty to the
secular nation-state.

How is the French concept of laïcité different from the general historical concept of secularism? The difference is one of degree, as well as the historical relationship between the institutions of Church and State. In France, the government is more centralized than in the United States; there is no national school system as in France.

As Roy (2007) writes in *Secularism Confronts Islam*, there are three types of secularism: a secular state, a secular society, and a combination of the two. Roy calls the third case “laïcité,” the French system. In the first case, the government is officially secular but the population tends to be religious and religious groups play a role in public life (this is the American model). The second model, where the government is still officially connected to a State Church but where most people do not see themselves as religious, is common in much of historically-Protestant Europe, including Britain, Germany and Scandinavia. However, these categories are not set in stone, and any country or culture can go from one type of secularism to another over time. The concept of laïcité is informative for Americans trying to understand how the French view issues of religion and religious minorities.

Despite the efforts of many French intellectuals to depict laïcité as a unique phenomenon, Roy and others struggle to define it. Later in his book, Roy goes on to define laïcité not as one of three categories of secularism as he did earlier, but as “a characteristically French phenomenon” that is “not the same thing” as secularization (Roy 2007: 13). Here, Roy creates two categories: secularization,
“whereby a society emancipates itself from a sense of the sacred that it does not necessarily deny” and laïcité, “whereby a state expels religious life beyond a border that the state itself has defined by law” (Roy 2007: 13). While one can see how Roy’s two definitions of laïcité are connected, the multiple definitions serve to further complicate the issue and make the definition of laïcité more elusive.

Roy’s second definition points to the ideological nature and state-centric view of secularism in France, an important distinction. Ultimately, Roy does not convince me that laïcité is not secularism. Some of this confusion comes from the problem of translation—if laïcité is not secularism, then what is the French word for this non-French secularism? While I do not want to be overly focused on semantics, it is true that language shapes our view of abstract concepts like secularism, and it is possible that any discussion on secularism translated from French to English suffers from a cultural disagreement over what qualifies as secularism (in fact, the original title of Roy’s book in French is Laïcité face à l’islam). I think of laïcité as a branch of secularism, much like how French and other Romance languages share the same roots. French secularism, then, has some differences from secularism in other areas. However, I think it is important to not focus so much on the differences of “French secularism” that the similarities become obscured.
Various Views on Secularism

Roy and a number of other French authors\textsuperscript{13} writing about laïcité tend to support the mainstream French view of secularism (although they are often critical of particular politicians or policies). Thus in their writings on laïcité, there is a sense of defensiveness; a common refrain among French academics and the general public is that the United States simply does not understand France’s history and its sense of laïcité as a national value. This feeling of difference between French and non-French secularism, as mentioned above, can lead to confusion for people trying to understand the phenomenon. Other academics and researchers, fortunately, have begun to study secularism and offer some insights.

Moving past Roy, other authors have written about secularism not just in France, but also across Europe and North America (also known as “The West”) and from the Middle Ages to the present. If Roy’s approach leaves the reader (or at least, the non-French reader) with unanswered questions, perhaps it is necessary to examine secularism more broadly. Talal Asad (2003), an anthropologist and the son of the scholar Muhammad Asad, tackles the issue of secularism, its origins and its meanings in Formations of the Secular. Asad writes of the difference

\textsuperscript{13} Patrick Weil, who served on the Stasi Commission that recommended the school headscarf ban, is one prominent supporter of the government’s view of laïcité, if not all of its methods; Bernard-Henri Lévy is another well-known writer who has supported laïcité and criticized French Muslims in books and public appearances.
between the historical process of secularism and the ideological concept of secularization. He describes a process that begins with the concept of the secular in medieval Europe, which gradually developed into today’s concept of secularism.

As Asad writes, secularism is more than separating religious and governmental institution, but rather is a larger system that changes the way society thinks about concepts such as religion and government. Asad both builds upon and challenges the existing view on secularism by prominent thinkers such as Charles Taylor, Benedict Anderson, Jose Casanova and William Connelly. After addressing the way that secularism developed in relation to the interconnected topics of nationalism, colonialism and modernity, Asad specifically addresses the subject of Muslims living as minorities in contemporary Europe. Asad’s work developing “an anthropology of secularism” offers a new perspective on a phenomenon that Western academics often ignore or take for granted.

In another study of secularism, William Connelly, a political scientist, offers a critique of secularism from an American perspective. In Why I Am Not A Secularist (1999), Connolly traces secularism from its origins in Europe and offers a critique that takes into account secularism’s connections to liberalism and nationalism. He reflects on Toqueville’s observations of religion in early American life, noting that “separation of church and state functions to soften sectarian divisions between Christian sects while retaining the civilizational

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14. Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities (1991) also discusses the connection between nationalism and secularism.
hegemony of Christianity in a larger sense” (1999: 24). Other critics of secularism share the view that secularism is simply a disguised or “light” form of traditional Christian dominance, and many of the laws in France favoring the Catholic Church support this.¹⁵

Connolly also makes the observation that today, “the word ‘religion’ now becomes treated as a universal term,” separated from the historical and other differences that exist among religions (1999: 23). Thus in France, politicians and academics argue in support of laïcité to defend the Republic from the influence of religion. While “religion” is presented as a universal, abstract concept, the target is generally Islam, while the historical basis for France’s laïcité is another religion, Christianity or specifically Roman Catholicism. This blurring of distinctions between two religions with different histories and practices leads to conflict, as French non-Muslims feel threatened by the “religious” resurgence and French Muslims feel that they are taking the heat for historical disputes that they were not a part of.

Referencing Talal Asad, Connolly refers to Asad’s study of ritual in the West; Connolly notes that the significance of ritual is “underappreciated in secular discourse” and that public ritual generally remains only in the areas of “education and training in citizenship” (1999: 25). Indeed, the French view of public education, as a way of transforming children of diverse backgrounds into

¹⁵ I do not wish to overstate the argument that France is not as secular as it pretends to be, but even the perception that France supports Catholicism over Islam is significant. As Asad (2003) writes, the distinction between “religious” and “secular” is not as clear as many believe.
French citizens, is reflected in this approach to ritual. Religious rites were replaced with educational rites in order to shift the public’s loyalty from the church to the state. Therefore, French public schools have been the site of battles over laïcité (such as whether students should be allowed to wear headscarves, or whether they could request lunches made with halal-certified meat or simply without pork).\(^{16}\)

It is also significant to note that the role of ritual varies greatly between Christianity and Islam. As religious scholars such as Karen Armstrong (2006) note, Islam is a religion based around orthopraxy, or “right practice,” while Christianity is based around orthodoxy, or “right belief.” While Islam certainly places emphasis on beliefs, such as the oneness of God (called tawhid) or acknowledging Muhammad’s status as a prophet, most of the duties required for one to be considered “a good Muslim” are based around actions, not beliefs. Thus out of the five pillars of Islam, four are actions (prayer, fasting, giving to charity and pilgrimage). Most historical debate in the Islamic world also dealt with determining which actions were correct; schools and scholars of Islamic law have had a central role in shaping the religion for centuries. Deeb (2006: 105) notes that Islam does care about orthodoxy as well; however, the important point here is that for many Muslims, the Christian emphasis on inward belief as opposed to outward practice has caused difficulties, as I will detail below.

Christianity has historically focused more on proper beliefs—thus the

\(^{16}\) Teachers, who are considered public servants, have never been permitted to wear headscarves in French public schools.
persecution of heretics by the Catholic Church in the Inquisition, for example, or debates in the early years of Christianity about the nature of Jesus or the Trinity. This view of religion, which is more focused on the internal than the external, has shaped the concept of individual freedoms and human rights. As Fernando (2010) notes, European law states that citizens have the right to conscience, but not necessarily the right to act on those beliefs. This interpretation has allowed the French law banning headscarves in schools to be affirmed in court, as the students were still given the right to believe that they should wear headscarves, even though they could not act on that belief. For Muslims who feel that being Muslim cannot be separated from behaving in Islamic ways, this difference of opinion that Connolly addresses is more than simply an interesting scholarly fact. Armstrong (2006) also notes the greater emphasis on orthopraxy in Islam.

If a social scientist wants to study issues of secularism and Islam, the works mentioned above would all be good options. However, for those outside of academia who wish to learn more about important issues but lack the time to seek out and read numerous books and journal articles, the options are more limited. Of course, there are hundreds of books available in Europe and North America discussing Islam and particularly the European Muslim population. Yet the alarmists often drown out the impartial or open-minded authors; from Hirsi Ali to Jean Marie le Pen, many today excitedly insist that bearded men and burqa-

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17. While additional arguments were given by the government and pundits to support the ban, this ruling on the meaning of freedom of conscience was the most significant from the perspective of the law’s legality. In the view of the state, underage French students needed to be taught Republican values and did not have the right to freedom of (religious) expression in an educational and governmental setting.
wearing women are intent on replacing Western governments with fundamentalist Islamic states.

Also, as Calhoun (2010) notes, social science is itself “secular almost by its very definition.” Social scientists, therefore, have historically not paid much attention to secularization and issues of religion in the West. While there are, for example, many anthropological studies of religion in non-Western societies, as a whole it is only recently that social scientists have begun to devote significant amounts of study to secularism. For non-specialist readers, the field is unfortunately still dominated by what the German journalist Patrick Bahners calls “scaremongers” (Spiegel Online 2011). The history of secularism, its role in present-day Europe, and the beliefs and interests of Muslims in France and throughout the West need to be better understood.

**History of Laïcité**

While there are some people who consider themselves to be Muslim and also adhere to extremist and violent views, the same can be said of numerous religious or ideological groups. Obviously, the vast majority of Muslims, in Europe and around the world, consider themselves to be in favor of, and in fact often the product of, a meeting of cultures, not a clash. Despite the efforts of a few extremists on both sides, most French Muslims consider themselves to be just that—French and Muslim.

Over the years, there have been gains and setbacks for French Muslims in their attempts to adapt to the French way of life without giving up their core
values. Seemingly small things, like the growing popularity of North African food and the 1998 World Cup victory by a team with Muslim stars, show that non-Muslim French citizens are gradually accepting some of the changes that are taking place. However, in matters of laïcité, the French state and the majority of French non-Muslims are refusing to budge. It seems that while many in France may tolerate some superficial changes, they are unwilling to alter the status quo of a strongly secular state and society. Crepe stands and couscous may be able to exist side by side, but the general view among many in France is that laïcité and Islam do not mix so easily.

While today the issue is generally presented as that of Islam versus secularism, the history of laïcité in France is primarily the story of the Republic versus the Catholic Church. The Church opposed the French Revolution and for decades refused to recognize the democratic state and supported the restoration of the monarchy. Anti-clericalism evolved out of the Enlightenment and the Revolutionary struggle for “liberté, égalité, fraternité” and historically, laïcité improved the status of France’s Protestants and Jews by reducing the power of the Catholic Church in favor of a government that was more tolerant toward minorities. While secularism takes many forms in different countries and cultures, French laïcité grew out of a policy of government-led secularization. As Casanova (1994: 13) defines it, secularization is “the appropriation, whether forcible or by default, by secular institutions of functions that traditionally had been in the hands of ecclesiastical institutions.” Laïcité, therefore, is primarily about government control over religion, rather than the concepts of “separation of
church and state” or “freedom of religion.”

Over time, laïcité in France expanded from being focused on the political role of the Church to being an ideology concerned with restricting and reducing religious belief in general. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Church lost power and the number of people from Catholic backgrounds who considered themselves to be practicing or believers declined significantly. Meanwhile, Muslim immigration to France began in the colonial era and took off in the postwar era of economic boom known as les Trentes Glorieuses (the Glorious Thirty Years). Thus, the number of people in France who considered themselves practicing Christians declined as the number of Muslims increased. By the end of the twentieth century, the new focus of laïcité was not priests and nuns but foreign-born imams and teenage girls in headscarves. The ongoing push for secularism in France shows the degree to which the state has replaced the Church as the dominant authority in the country.

Anti-Muslim sentiment in France (as well as in many other places) thus has two overlapping but distinct origins: a dislike or distrust of more openly religious people in what is otherwise a non-religious, even anti-religious, society; and again a dislike or distrust of people who are seen as foreign and essentially different in terms of culture, race, ethnicity or nationality, and who are thought to

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18. Today “croyant non pratiquant” is used to describe someone who is “believing but not practicing,” notes John Bowen (2007), and generally refers to what in the UK and other areas is known as “cultural Muslims.” For non-Muslims in France, this phrase signifies someone that Olivier Roy (2004) might call a “liberal” Muslim who blends in with the general public in terms of dress, eating habits and other outward signifiers, as opposed to “practicing” Muslims, who are seen as outside mainstream French culture by their adherence to religious practice, regardless of how they would categorize themselves.
negatively impact “traditional” French culture, French politics, and the French economy. Religion, unlike race or ethnic background, is seen as a matter of choice; people who choose to be (practicing) Muslims, argue many French non-Muslims, are deliberately selecting their “communitarian” identity over national identity. Despite the popular perception (particularly in the United States) of France as being particularly ethnocentric, xenophobia is of course not exclusive to French society. The historical relationship between secularism and the nation in France, however, leads many in France to feel that loyalty to religion in general, but primarily to Islam, comes at the expense of loyalty to the state.

In the past several decades, scholars have begun to critique this traditional view of secularism. Academics of Muslim background, such as Tariq Ramadan and Fatima Mernissi, have been very influential in showing how Muslims can be both religious and modern.\textsuperscript{19} However, many French writers, such as Olivier Roy (2007), Gilles Kepel (1997), and Bernard Henri-Levy (2009), still support (to varying degrees) the state view of secularism. The 1905 Law in particular has broad public support, as I will discuss below.

\textbf{Le Loi de 1905}

The history of French secularism is closely connected to the French Revolution and the subsequent years of conflict between the Republic and

\textsuperscript{19} While Mernissi lives in Morocco, her works, such as Islam and Democracy (1992) and Beyond the Veil (1987a), discuss Islam in the context of a Westernized, modern world and can be applied to Muslims living in the West. Similarly, Ramadan has written extensively about Muslims in the West in works such as To be A European Muslim (2003) and Western Muslims and the Future of Islam (2004). Mernissi and Ramadan both write in French (their books have also been translated into many languages), giving French Muslims access to their ideas.
royalist religious authorities. Thus French secularism can be described as state control of religion, in contrast to the American idea of religion’s freedom from government. Anti-clericalism in France is possibly best represented by the law passed on December 9, 1905. One hundred years later, the French government commemorated the centennial of the 1905 Law with lectures and speeches. Although the law itself does not actually use the term laïcité, the law (and corresponding law passed around the same time) shaped the popular view of secularism that still exists today. Also significantly, the law established certain institutional policies for government control of religion that affects the relationship between French Muslims and the government today.

The president of the French National Assembly at that time, Jean-Louis Debré, calls the 1905 Law “the keystone of our model of laïcité” (Debré 2005). Debré connects the passage of the 1905 Law with the 2004 Law that prohibited students from wearing headscarves in public schools. Despite the century of history between the two pieces of legislation, Debré argues that the two laws demonstrate the effectiveness of laïcité in adapting to changes in French society. In Debré’s view, which is shared by many academics and government officials, the concept of laïcité, and the laws passed in support of it, do not restrict the religious freedom of Muslim citizens but rather guarantees national unity and protects the country from the poison of communitarianism (Debré 2005).

Many French Muslims disagree with Debré’s strong support of laïcité, as well with his conclusion that changing the existing system would lead to the destruction of national unity. Despite protests, the 2004 Law was enacted and
later upheld by the European Union’s human rights court (Fernando 2010). In addition, the 1905 Law established a system of councils for religious groups; these councils allow for state control over religious funding and other activities. After creating councils for Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism, the State Council of the Muslim Religion was established in 2003. As discussed below, this council has been generally ineffective in addressing the concerns of French Muslims, but effective in forming an “official” Muslim body for the state to interact with, as well as politically useful for President Sarkozy.

**Autre Temps, Autre Mœurs**

There is a simple French saying, “autre temps, autre mœurs,” which in English means “different times (or eras), different values.” Certainly, the French are not oblivious to the fact that times change, even within the same culture. What worked for the generation of one’s parents or grandparents may not make sense today. The values of laïcité may have been understandable in the political and social context of 1789 or 1905, but what about now? Many social scientists and other observers have discussed the so-called resurgence of religion since the 1970s. While Christianity, Judaism, and other religions have all experienced some degree of religious revivalism in recent years, much of the attention has fallen on Islam. This return of religion has challenged secularist predictions that the modernization of society would cause religious practice and belief to die out.

Simply put, the historical circumstances that shaped the French state’s view of secularism are quite different from the issues of today. In the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, France struggled to maintain a democratic government. Presidents and prime ministers were overthrown and replaced by kings and emperors; the instability and uncertainty did not come to an end until after World War II. One of the major opponents of the Republic was the Catholic Church, which for generations openly supported a return to monarchy. Wealthy and influential, the Church and its leaders were a threat to Enlightenment freedoms and national stability. A very strong commitment to laïcité makes sense in this context, where the state felt under siege.

Despite what a growing number of right-wing and xenophobic thinkers would have people believe, French Muslims, unlike the Catholic Church years ago, do not pose an existential threat to the French state. The vast majority of Muslims oppose Jihadist or extremist forms of Islam. Most today were born in France, speak French, and intend to spend their whole lives in the country. Many are neither particularly religious nor particularly interested in politics or activism. Ethnic and class distinctions, not religious ones, are often the biggest difference between French citizens of Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds. Access to quality education, employment and housing are the main concerns of most French Muslims; establishing traditional Islamic law is far from most people’s minds. French Muslims have neither the political power, nor the desire, to overthrow the French government or initiate major changes in society. Although it should go without saying, Muslims who support terrorism or violence are an extremely small minority in France. Unlike the Catholic Church in years past, French Muslims are not counter-revolutionaries.
Insistence on a strict interpretation of laïcité in this context is not a means to protect the state from revolt; on the contrary, it breeds resentment among French Muslims, making them feel excluded from their own country. Expelling teenage girls in headscarves from school does not help them integrate. While Debré (2005) aims that the passage of the 2004 Law prohibiting headscarves greatly reduced the number of cases of girls showing up at school in headscarves, Bowen (2010) points to the fact that these students have simply gone to private Catholic schools or elsewhere for their education. In addition, prohibiting the use of public funds for Islamic groups, while “grandfathering” in funding for Catholic properties and organizations, emphasizes the inequality written into the laïcité system.

Laïcité is not equipped to handle the problems that have developed in contemporary France. Now is another era, and it is time for France to begin a serious dialogue that questions the usefulness of laïcité today, and challenges its underlying assumptions. Many have noted the way in which religious authority in France was replaced with state authority, and religious dogma with national secularist dogma. The system of laïcité, developed for another era with different concerns, should not be treated as holy. Reform is needed, but change is unlikely to take place soon. Laïcité is a nearly untouchable principle of French government, popular with both state officials and the general public.

In addition to France’s history of government distrust of religion, the suspicion surrounding Muslims since September 11 only makes it more difficult for French Muslims and non-Muslims to engage in real dialogue. Many French
Muslims feel that the current French assimilationist policy needs to be amended in favor of a plan that addresses economic, social, and political inequality. However, it seems unlikely that any current French politician would be willing to enact such a policy. As things currently stand, many French non-Muslims distrust Muslims, as many feel that Islam and democracy are incompatible. For this to change, a better understanding of the relationship between Islam and secularism is needed.

**Secular Liberal Democracy**

Before discussing the role of Islam in government and society, a short background on liberal democracy and the state is needed. The international order today is based around the concept of liberal democracy, which is itself intertwined with secularism. This system evolved out of European history, from the Napoleonic Wars and the Treaty of Westphalia to the creation of the United Nations and the Bretton Woods economic system following the Second World War. Today, the norm for any legitimate state is to adopt these values of liberal democracy, secularism, and capitalism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the elimination of communist ideology as a serious challenge to American-led hegemony, the connection among liberal democracy, secularism and capitalism seemed even more to be the obvious, if not only, choice of government.

Beginning in the 1990s, scholars discussed the merits of globalization and "the end of history," meaning the supposed victory of the U.S. capitalist model.
The result was that academics in Western countries, as well as political leaders, the media and the public, saw liberal democracy as the ideal form of government, and were also convinced that secularism was a necessary component of this. A state that wished to be recognized as legitimate needed to be secular, along with holding fair elections and supporting free trade. As the former soviet republics joined the former colonies as independent states at the United Nations, the newer states were held to the standards created by the established, powerful nations. Since these “new” nations were economically weak, they needed to accept the international system of legitimacy in order to receive vital financial assistance from wealthy Western governments and organizations.

Legitimate states today participate in a range of international organizations, ranging from the World Trade Organization and NAFTA to UNESCO and FIFA. Of course, not all (in fact, one could argue that hardly any) of the countries in the world actually are as close to the ideal as they claim to be, or at least claim to aspire to be. However, even the most undemocratic states pretend to admire political and economic freedoms—note the number of dictators worldwide who go by the title of President and hold elections where they win by a comfortable margin of at least 90 percent!

The Enlightenment

Americans trace these political values to the Founding Fathers and early patriots like Thomas Paine. These leaders were in turn influenced by the thinkers of the Enlightenment, which occurred in various parts of Europe beginning in the
century before the American Revolution. Some Enlightenment writers popular in the American colonies were the Scottish thinkers John Locke, Adam Smith and David Hume. The most influential Enlightenment figures, however, were French (or French-speaking)—Voltaire, Rousseau, and before them Montesquieu. The French Enlightenment, not surprisingly, had a huge impact in France as well as in the United States. French citizens today view the Enlightenment as the inspiration for the French Revolution and the originator of liberal, democratic values.

Since Enlightenment thinkers were generally opposed to the traditional Catholic religious beliefs and influence, the Revolutionaries they inspired, as well as following generations of French leaders, believed that secularism was a necessary component of a liberal democracy. While the Catholic Church today no longer has a fraction of the influence it once had, many in France still look to the era of the Enlightenment when discussing laïcité today.

French citizens today often speak of “Enlightenment values” as “French values,” a combination of secularism, nationalism and democracy. Many Enlightenment thinkers assumed that with the rise of science and “reason,” combined with restrictions on the Catholic Church’s power, religious belief would fade away European society. While scholars of secularism today acknowledge that this has not been the case (Casanova 1995), many French non-Muslims still feel that religion should be excluded from the public sphere. This view is connected to the French educational system, which will be discussed below.
Laïcité, Education and Feminism

Here, I would like to discuss one particular criticism of Islam made by secularists, that of feminism, and show how this issue is tied to France’s educational system and history of colonialism. As the sections above have noted, it is difficult to separate issues of laïcité from those of immigration and national identity in France. The history of the country from the early modern period onward has been one of secularization, and laïcité is now seen as part of the national character. Left-wing and right-wing governments, from Blum and Mitterrand to de Gaulle and Chirac, have all supported the 1905 Law and the dominant view of secularism. A Communist major in the Red Belt outside Paris and a Front National supporter in a small town in Provence will generally agree about laïcité while disagreeing about almost everything else.\(^\text{20}\) The myth of laïcité, rich with details from the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, and other historic events, has been used for generations to unify French citizens from different regions and social classes. Yet laïcité is also connected to the history of feminism in France, and was often used to exclude women from public life.

To understand laïcité, it is also necessary to understand the role that education has played in shaping France’s national identity. The French educational system is national; the country is divided into three regional zones, but the curriculum comes from the government in Paris. The concept of the state

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\(^{20}\) The Red Belt (le cordon rouge) refers to the towns surrounding Paris, which generally elected socialist and communist mayors and officials; these working-class neighborhoods are now better known for their large Muslim population than for radical politics and are also referred to as les banlieues.
using public education to develop children from various backgrounds into citizens of a unified, if not completely homogeneous, nation is not unique to France. Anderson (1991) discusses the role of education in shaping “imagined communities.”

Even today, the French government sees the school as a place where students leave their “communal” identities behind in order to become French. Thus, the path of a student being educated in school is similar to that of an immigrant being assimilated or integrated into mainstream French culture. Teachers, as civil servants, are required to uphold the principles of laïcité, and many take this task very seriously. French teachers were often the first to demand that girls remove their headscarves in school, forcing the school administration and eventually the French government to get involved.

This view of schools as the cradle of laïcité and citizenship is why the French government and a majority of French citizens argue that students wearing headscarves in school is unacceptable. Rather than seeing a preteen or teenage girl in a headscarf as expressing religious freedom or even youthful rebellion, many non-Muslims in France see girls in headscarves as bringing dangerous religious signs into secular schools, threatening to divide the unity of the student body and, by extension, the nation. Unfortunately, the consequence of expelling girls who refuse to remove their headscarves for school is that it becomes very difficult for these girls to continue their education. Only a handful of Islamic private schools exist in France, as Bowen (2010) notes. Some Muslim girls choose to attend Catholic private schools, while others attend online schools or
even return to their parents’ home countries for their education. If the French educational system is intended to create good secular citizens, excluding the students who, in the state’s view, need the most help integrating makes little sense.

There is another historical factor to consider in regards to French schools, laïcité, and female students. Up until the mid-twentieth century, it was common for French girls to attend private Catholic schools, not public schools. As Taylor (2007) observes, women in nineteenth and early-twentieth century France were generally more religious than men. Revolutionary ideas of equality aside, many in French society saw religion as a helpful way of controlling women. While the world of politics, laïcité and the public sphere was suitable for men, many argued that women were better off with a religious education that was more compatible with staying home and raising children. While not everyone in France shared these views, it was common enough that French women did not receive the right to vote until 1945 (Scott 2007). Many were concerned that women, educated by the Church, would support monarchist, anti-republican politicians. While the French government prides itself on égalité, the historical reality for French women is more complicated.

Colonial Feminism Versus Islamic Feminism

In all discussions of Islam in the West, the issue of feminism and women’s rights generally provokes the most argument. The debate on headscarves in schools has attracted extensive media attention in France and abroad. While it is
certainly a serious issue, the focus on the affaire des foulards, or “headscarf affair,” has drawn attention away from other issues relating to laïcité and feminism in contemporary France. France’s history as a colonial power in the Muslim world affects the government’s view of Islam and women today. In the past few decades, the concept of Islamic feminism has come into existence. Muslim women such as Fatima Mernissi, Asma Berlas and Amina Wadud have challenged traditional, patriarchal traditions in Islam by looking to the egalitarian spirit of the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad. While the Iranian Revolution is often credited with prompting discussions of Islam, modernity and feminism (Mir-Husseini 1999), the situation of Muslim women living in the West has also inspired academics and ordinary Muslims to rethink their cultural views about women’s rights. The Islamic revival in places like Egypt (Mahmood 2004) and Lebanon (Deeb 2006) has also affected Muslims in the West. One of the results of this movement has been greater involvement of women in mosque affairs and religious life. Many Western Muslim women are now reading the Qur’an for themselves and finding Islam to be a religion that supports equality and women’s rights.

Of course, many non-Muslims disagree, arguing that feminism and secularism go hand in hand. The French group Ni putes ni soumises falls into this category; the group, whose name means “neither whores nor submissives,” supported the respective bans on headscarves in schools and burqas in public (Ni putes ni soumises 2011). In France, the concept of mixité (social interaction between men and women) is said to be vital toward creating social unity; the
recent French “burqa ban” has been justified by the government on these grounds (Government of France 2011). However, as discussed above, France has been secular in the past while still treating women unequally. Many Islamic feminists criticize Western feminism for its excessive focus on sexuality. The sexual revolution, many Muslims argue, has had the negative consequence of further objectifying women, treating them as something to be consumed by men and appreciated only for their appearance.

While I do not wish to list all the arguments for and against headscarves and modest dress here (this is a debate that will likely never end, both within and outside the Muslim community), I will make two points. First, French Muslim women who wear hijab often explain that they do so out of faith, not oppression, and find that dressing modestly allows them to be appreciated for their intelligence and personality (Fernando 2010). Second, critics of the headscarf law and burqa ban argue that French male politicians legislating what women can or cannot wear is simply another form of oppression, reflective of France’s colonial obsession with women and veiling (Abu-Lughod 2002). French non-Muslims argue that girls are forced or pressured by their community to wear headscarves; however, the number of people who actually wear headscarves against their will is a small minority (Bowen 2007).

In addition, this argument overlooks the ways in which women from various societies are culturally pressured to dress or behave in a certain way. Of course, men are not free from social constraints either; my point here is simply to emphasize the difficulties of determining whether sartorial decisions are ever
independent of culture. Many Western women, after all, wear uncomfortable shoes and revealing clothes for the sake of fashion. If some French Muslim women choose to dress in a way that benefits them spiritually or socially, Muslims argue that the government should not have the right to prevent them from doing so.21

In her influential essay “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” (2002), anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod criticizes the colonial attitude that claimed to be helping Muslim women, while imposing foreign, anti-democratic rule. France’s rule of Algeria for over a century, as well as its indirect control of Morocco and Tunisia, affects how French non-Muslims relate to their fellow citizens of North African descent. Many French Muslims certainly feel that France’s ethnocentric attitude regarding laïcité makes it difficult for them to question assumptions regarding feminism and religion without being painted as unpatriotic or communalist. The era of “colonial feminism” is over—French Muslim women, fluent in French and educated in the West, should not be treated as colonial subjects who are too ignorant to know what’s best for themselves. Many French Muslim women are using blogs and websites, along with traditional media, to make their voices heard; Hijab in the City (2011) is just one popular site. French non-Muslims would also benefit from reading books by Muslim academics like Ramadan and Mernissi, who show that Muslims can be Western and religious, feminist and Islamic.

22. I do not mean to imply that Muslim women wear hijab for purely selfish reasons; rather, that as others have noted, modest dress can be a means to assert Muslim identity while living and participating in Western society.
CHAPTER 3
ISLAMOPHOBIA

In the past several decades, but most significantly since September 11, 2001, the topic of Islam has become one of the most hotly debated issues, both in the United States and Europe. Questions about Islamophobia, immigration, discrimination, terrorism and more are discussed in the media, by government and among citizens; however rational answers and dialogue are frequently drowned out by extremists from all sides. While I cannot attempt to address, let alone solve, all the issues being discussed today, I am attempting to take my familiarity with French issues and explain them to an American audience.

Histories of Immigration

Tension over immigration is nothing new in the United States—groups from every part of the world have come to America (some willingly, others by force) and faced issues of discrimination. Irish, Italian, Jewish, Asian and Hispanic are just a few of the ethnicities, races or cultures to gradually adapt to American life. This is not to imply that the “American melting pot” is a perfect system, or that minorities in the United States today do not continue to struggle with discrimination. But the concept of America as a “nation of immigrants” has in some ways encouraged less-recent American immigrants to welcome more-recent immigrants. Muslim Americans are generally one of the more recent
immigrant groups, coming from a range of traditionally Islamic countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (and also including a large number of African-American Muslims who have been American for many generations). While there has certainly been a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment following September 11, for most Muslim-Americans, fitting into American society has not been as difficult as for Muslims in Europe.\(^{22}\)

In contrast, the history of immigration in France is fairly different, and is perceived differently. Without noting at this point all the details of immigration prior to World War II, the dominant way that native French read about, discussed and perceived Muslims until the postwar immigration boom was through colonialism, Orientalism and the long-standing view in Europe of the Islamic world as the perpetual Other. While immigrants and cultural diversity have always been a part of France, the general trend encouraged by the French state throughout the years has been that of assimilation to the dominant model. French historian Patrick Weil, for example, describes in *How To Be French* (2008) the recent and historical ways in which France has absorbed immigrants of various backgrounds. Muslims today are expected to adapt in the same way as European immigrants in the past, regardless of their different situations.

For the French, the American model of “multiculturalism,” as the French call it, leads to the division of society along ethnic or identity-based lines. This fear of “communalism” has caused the French state to insist on the assimilation

\(^{22}\) One reason for this difference is that Muslim immigrants in the United States are largely middle class professionals, while Muslims who immigrated to Europe generally came from less-educated and less-affluent backgrounds.
of French Muslims. While some assimilation policies have been positive or benign, such as reuniting families and educating the children of immigrants in French. Yet other policies often seem discriminatory or strange, particularly to Americans who are not familiar with French views on immigration and secularism. It is difficult to compare the practices of two countries without resorting to stereotypes or generalizations, and as an American, I acknowledge that I view events in France from a certain perspective. As Judt (1998) writes, the French government has long contrasted its government and culture with that of the United States. However, as the assimilationist model in France has met with more and more criticism, it has been interesting to see other European leaders announce the failure of multiculturalism. Is it possible that France will develop a third way of dealing with immigration and Islam, or will the country continue to push for assimilation?

Who Are Muslims?

As discussed above, defining “French” and “European” is more difficult than it initially seems. I do not intend to dwell on theological topics here, but rather to investigate what makes someone a Muslim in the eyes of the French state or French non-Muslims. Also, I intend to suggest some ways in which Islam can be discussed by the state and in the media (and perhaps most importantly, by

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23. During the early years of immigration, the children of immigrants attended special schools that taught in Arabic, not French. The intention was to prepare the children for their eventual return to their countries of origin.

24. British Prime Minister David Cameron and several German officials have expressed their belief that “multiculturalism” has led to greater marginalization and radicalization of Muslims in their respective countries.
Muslims themselves) without implying that all Muslims have the same beliefs or opinions.

Most Muslims in France are from North Africa, also known as the Maghreb (from the Arabic *al igharb*, meaning “the west”). The three countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia began sending significant numbers of Muslim migrants to France nearly one hundred years ago; immigration reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. North Africa, while considered part of the Arab world, also contains many people of Berber descent. Berbers are the indigenous peoples of North Africa, who occupied the area before the arrival of the Arabs and Islam. While certain parts of North Africa, particularly more remote mountainous areas, are still largely Berber, most North Africans have both Arab and Berber ancestry. Silverstein (2004) discusses the complexities of Algerian identity, especially for people of Berber background who are seen as simply “Arabs” by French non-Muslims.

Despite the complexities of Maghrebi ethnicity, many non-Muslims in France still use the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” interchangeably. This practice, along with other factors, has led to the perception of Islam as both a religion and an ethnicity. As discussed above with the experiences of French Jews, this classification of Muslims can cause problems. First, it causes non-Muslims to equate the actions of one or a few extremist Muslims with all Muslims. In France, North African Muslims are linked in the media with other, unrelated world

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25 Like Christianity, Islam is considered to be a universal religion, meaning that Muslims consider Islam to be open to anyone regardless of ethnicity. In practice, however, distinctions between religion, ethnicity and culture become difficult to maintain.
conflicts that involve Muslims, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The start of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and subsequent issues involving Iran are also discussed in the French media and compared to other events involving Muslims.

The implication in the media (which is sometimes even stated directly) is that the presence of Muslims in France involves the country in these foreign conflicts; the fact that Iranians and Afghans are not Arab, or that North Africa has traditionally been known for Sufism and other tolerant forms of Islam, does not seem to matter. Although many people in France are certainly well informed and understand the distinctions between different groups, many such as the far-right politician Jean-Marie Le Pen of the Front National (as well as his daughter Marine Le Pen, who in 2011 replaced him as head of the party) exploit people’s confusion and use Muslim immigrants as scapegoats for France’s economic problems. In 2002, Le Pen finished second in the presidential election, stunning experts by beating veteran Socialist politician Lionel Jospin in the first round of voting (the top two candidates enter into a runoff to decide the election; President Chirac was reelected). While Le Pen’s xenophobic political platform raised widespread concern, he and the Front National party retain a great deal of popularity, particularly in the more conservative and Catholic areas of France.26

Therefore to counter xenophobia and fear-mongering, it is important to

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26. The FN’s political base has typically been in the more rural, more religious areas of southern France; for example, the city of Orange was the first to elect a FN mayor. However, in elections in 2011, the FN saw a growth in support in other parts of France due to falling support for both the ruling center-right UMP party and the center-left Socialist Party. The growth of the FN and its role as a protest party will be discussed in Chapter 3.
emphasize that French Muslims, while sharing certain religious beliefs or a
general cultural background, are a far from homogenous group. One’s national
origin also matters, as Bowen (2007) points out; Algerians and Moroccans, the
two largest groups, often fight for control of Islamic organizations and mosque
leadership. Even more significantly, people are generally categorized as Muslim
regardless of the level of their personal beliefs. Since Islam is treated as both a
religion and an ethnicity, both a self-described atheist and a very observant
Muslim can fall into the same category. This isn’t entirely negative; a person’s
religious beliefs may change over time, for example, and members of one family
can differ in their views but share a sense of coming from an “Islamic culture” or
“Muslim background.”

Additionally, a non-Muslim in France may discriminate against someone
whom he or she perceives to be Muslim, regardless of that person’s actual
beliefs. Having a “Muslim” name or appearance can be enough for a job or
apartment application to be denied. Referring to people as “Muslims” can
sometimes be inaccurate, but if the limitations of the term are mentioned, it is a
sometimes a better choice than the more precise but awkwardly long phrase
“people of Muslim background or descent.” Some surveys count only self-
described “practicing” Muslims as French Muslims, instead of all people assumed
to be of Muslim descent based on factors such as place of birth. While it is
certainly beneficial to find out how Muslims define themselves, instead of having
researchers speak for them, surveys like this one can also be manipulated to
undercount to French Muslim population for political reasons. Since all French
Muslims, regardless of individual beliefs, can face some of the same prejudices and difficulties, having accurate and detailed information about French Muslims is useful for determining what policy changes could be made, as well as for providing French Muslims with the political strength in (correctly calculated and publicized) numbers.

As the Muslim population of France has grown over the past several decades, more researchers have attempted to learn about the beliefs of French Muslims and difficulties they face. However, this research is hampered in several ways. First and most significantly is the fact that the French state, due to its view of the country as secular and unified, does not ask about religion or even ethnicity on the census.

The French Constitution of 1958 states that France is a secular and indivisible republic (Debré 2005). While in my view this phrase was initially meant as a rather benign statement of national unity, the French government has interpreted the term “indivisible” to mean that acknowledging diversity would lead to division. The indivisibility clause even resulted in the government’s rather mind-boggling claim that there are no minorities in France. Regardless of the egalitarian sentiments behind this statement, the French state’s political objective is to avoid granting what would in the United States be derogatively referred to as “special rights” to the French Muslim community based on their status as an

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27. The original statement, “La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale” translates to “France is an indivisible, secular, democratic and socialist Republic.” The term sociale implies New Deal-style social programs rather than Socialist (in the sense of Marxist, etc.) politics.
This lack of demographic data about French Muslims makes research even more difficult, as it is almost impossible to precisely determine the number of Muslims living in France. Whether or not a particular person might be Muslim in generally determined through his or her name (whether it is an Arabic- or Berber-language name instead of French-language) and place of birth. This likely leads to an undercount, as more and more French Muslims are born in France to immigrant parents. This method also misses most French-born converts with French-language names, who make up a small but growing percentage of French Muslims. Most research estimates the number of French Muslims as between five and six million; France currently has more Muslim residents than any other Western European country (Pew Forum 2011).

**What Is Islamophobia?**

In *The Future of Islam*, John Esposito credits the think tank Runnymede Trust with coinining the term “Islamophobia” in 1997. As he notes, “‘Islamophobia’ is a new term for a now widespread phenomenon. We are all very familiar with ‘anti-Semitism’ or ‘racism’ but there was no comparable term to describe the hostility, prejudice, and discrimination directed toward Islam and the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world” until recently (Esposito 2010: 12). Esposito’s observation that anti-Semitism and racism were already familiar concepts at the time when Islamophobia entered the lexicon is noteworthy, as it points to the ways in which Islamophobia evokes both religious and ethnic
discrimination, and also hints at the way the concept of Islamophobia has been shaped by previous social movements against discrimination. While the existence of a term that can be used to describe the “hostility, prejudice, and discrimination” that Muslims frequently face is, in my view, generally helpful, the term “Islamophobia” is sometimes problematic.

Islamophobia in France is in many ways similar to xenophobia toward immigrants, in the sense that some people feel that the growing presence of a group of “foreigners” threatens the cultural norm. While the use of the term Islamophobia is growing, others criticize the way it which it treats prejudice and discrimination as a psychological “phobia” (Rehman 2011). Perhaps expressions such as “anti-Muslim sentiment” or “discrimination toward Muslims” are more accurate. However, it seems as if the expression, and the phenomenon it describes, likely to remain in France for the foreseeable future.

While the term Islamophobia is a new one, mistrust of Muslims is unfortunately not a new development in Europe and the United States. Since the beginning of large-scale migration of Muslims to the West in the postwar years, Muslims have been subjected to a double scrutiny by “native” citizens of their new homes, on the basis of both their (real or perceived) ethnicity as well as their religious background. Since September 11, 2001 and related events in the “war on terror,” Muslims have faced even more criticism in the media, by politicians and among the general public. Profiling at airports and on public transportation, controversies over the building of mosques, and proposed bans on the wearing of various forms of Islamic dress are just some of the policies that are seen as
targeting Muslim communities. Meanwhile, issues such as the controversy surrounding political cartoons that depicted the prophet Muhammad, as well as ongoing conflicts and instability in Palestine, Iran and other traditionally Islamic societies, perpetuate the feeling among non-Muslims that Muslims are too dangerous, unassimilated or just “different” to really become part of French (or American, British, etc.) society.

Muslim immigrants arrived in France primarily during the postwar period of the 1950s to the 1970s, when a growing economy created demand for foreign workers, mostly male, to work in France’s factories. When recession hit in the 1970s, the French government restricted immigration; however family reunification programs, which allowed immigrants to bring their wives and children to legally stay with them in France, increased the Muslim population despite the drop in new immigrants. Today, Islam is the second-largest religion in France, and continues to grow. Yet many French non-Muslims know little about Islam as a religion, or about the broader culture of the immigrants and French-born descendants of immigrants of Muslim background. The assimilation policies of successive French governments have not succeeded at economically integrating French Muslims, who are much more likely than non-Muslims to live in public housing, attend under-funded schools or be unemployed.

While racial or ethnic discrimination persists, it is technically banned by the government. SOS Racisme, the most influential anti-racist organization in France, has been relatively successful in fighting ethnic discrimination and violence (SOS Racisme 2011).
On the other hand, religious-based discrimination in France, rooted in the French history of secularism, is much more accepted. In the view of many French non-Muslims, religious identity, unlike skin color or gender, is a choice. France’s strict secularism has furthered the feeling among many French Muslims of being alienated from their country. This sense of alienation, as many have noted, pushes some Western Muslims toward extremism, or toward anti-Western interpretations of Islam (Laurence and Vaisse 2006: 247). Ironically, this “clash of civilization” worldview is presented by extremists in the West as well, from far-right politicians like Jean-Marie Le Pen of the Front National to ex-Muslim activists such as Hirsi Ali. What, then, is the European, and specifically the French, view of Muslims today and in the past? How accurate is it, and what can be done to correct misconceptions?

Islam or Islams?

In discussing the nature of Islam and its place in Europe, many academics and journalists have suggested using the expression “Islams” instead of the standard “Islam.” There are some advantages and disadvantages to this proposal; while I understand the reasoning behind some of these points, overall I think that the singular “Islam” is the better option.

Those who argue in favor of “Islams” do so primarily because they believe that it better reflects the diversity of Islamic cultures. After all, what is considered “Islamic civilization” or society varies from one location to the next; Islam has also changed over time. Can seventh-century Arabia, medieval Spain or Iraq,
nineteenth-century Egypt or India, and contemporary Algeria, Iran, Indonesia and Nigeria all be considered part of “Islam?” And for that matter, are Muslim minorities in the West also part of the same tradition and faith? In The Future of Islam (2010), John Esposito suggests that “Islams” may more accurately reflect this geographic and historical diversity. One advantage of “Islams” is that it conveys this diversity to people who are not already familiar with it. As the title of Vartan Gregorian’s popular book on Islam puts it, Islam is “a mosaic, not a monolith.” It can be argued that “Islams” is a convenient short term that is understandable to a non-academic audience. It avoids presenting Islam and Muslims as monolithic, an advantage when politicians and journalists frequently equate moderate Muslims with extremists and the public is generally unfamiliar with the nuances of the faith.

While Esposito presents an argument in favor of “Islams,” he also acknowledges some of the points against it. Quoting the Bosnian Muslim scholar and religious leader Mustapha Ceric, Esposito writes: “Historically, Islam, like Christianity, was synthesized with indigenous cultures and in that way developed its unique traditions: ‘Just as differences can be found between Catholics in Poland, Austria or France, or between them and other Christian churches, there are different forms of Islam’ (Esposito 2010: 112).

When discussing the use of the term “Islams,” it makes sense to ask if the terms “Christianities” or “Judaisms” might also be used in the same way. Certainly, as Ceric recognizes, both Christianity and Islam developed different traditions and adapted to different conditions across a variety of times and
places. To single out Islam in this case can seem strange. If diversity in Christianity is taken for granted, does the use of the term “Islams” signal that Westerners still know little about Islam and continue to view it as the Other? Every religion, not just Islam and Christianity, is diverse and changes. Saying “Islams” implies a limited understanding of the meaning of Islam, and also can lead to confusing religious beliefs with cultural practices.

What do Muslims have to say about the use of the term “Islams,” and about diversity among Muslims? To begin with, there are numerous examples in favor of diversity in the Quran, the hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and in the history of Islamic civilization. Perhaps the most well known Quranic ayat about diversity, verse 49:13, states that God has “made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another” (Asad 2003: 904). While the media in the West often focuses on verses or historical events out of context in order to present a negative view of Islam, numerous scholars have demonstrated that Islamic civilizations have often been more progressive and tolerant than the West: Muslim Spain is a frequently-cited example.

Muslim scholars, such as Tariq Ramadan, often refer to the concept of the umma, the global Muslim community. Because tawhid, or belief in the oneness of God, is an essential belief in Islam, Muslims is also tend to highly value the concept of the oneness of the Muslim community. This unity of Muslims is not necessarily meant as a political statement, but rather as a theological one. While a few extremist Muslims today violently attempt to impose a uniform type of puritanical Islam on others, many more Muslims see the diversity of their
community as not only acceptable, but a blessing that is supported by scripture and tradition.

Therefore, instead of speaking of “Islams,” other terms that recognize variations within the Muslim world might be used. Regional descriptions are frequently used in this manner: Ramadan writes of “European Muslims” or “Western Muslims,” and calls for the development of Euro-Islam.\textsuperscript{28} Similarly, Tibi writes about his experience in Senegal, and how it showed him how Islamic and local customs can merge into a particular regional variety of Islam (2008: 77). To support the concept of regional diversity in Islam, Muslims can look to verses 2:142-143 in the Quran: “God’s is the East and the West” and “thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way” (Asad 2003: 39). Similarly, verse 24:35 again speaks of a message that is “neither of the east nor of the west” (Asad 2003: 603).

Since only about one in five Muslims today is Arab, paying attention to diversity is necessary. “The West” and “Islam,” so often seen as cultural opposites, are united through terms such as “Euro-Islam.” While some might suggest that making this distinction merely emphasizes the cultural dominance of traditional “Arab Islam,” I find that the use of Euro-Islam is helpful for Westerners, both Muslim and non-Muslim, in recognizing that Islam is (and in fact has long been) a part of Western cultures. As more and more Muslims in France are born

\textsuperscript{28} Tariq Ramadan’s books To Be A European Muslim (2003) and Western Muslims and the Future of Islam (2004) deal specifically with this topic; in Radical Reform (2009a), Ramadan discusses how Islamic law and practice can be adapted to life in Western or Westernized societies.
in the country, the “Islamic culture” will change from one rooted in North African traditions to one based on the realities of European life.

Two other types of distinctions can also be made as alternatives to the term “Islams.” Time-based or historical distinctions recognize the fact that Islamic cultures have changed over time. Therefore, Ottoman-era Islam was different from Islam in present-day Turkey; Islam in the period during the life of Muhammad differed significantly from Islam centuries later. Additionally, theological distinctions are often used to differentiate types of Islam, particularly the major branches of Sunni, Shia, and Sufi Islam. Other terms already in use include political Islam, feminist Islam, progressive or reformist Islam, and conservative or traditional Islam.

Muslims recognize that there are disagreements within the faith, but the use of “Islams” risks implying that a schism of some sort has separated the religion. Many Muslims may consider the use of “Islams” as an example of fitna, a concept meaning disorder or conflict, that the Prophet spoke out against and that Islamic tradition discouraged. Muslims also look to verses in the Quran that emphasize unity, such as 3:103, “And cleave firmly to the rope of God altogether and be not split up” (Bakhtiar 2007: 52).29 Scholars using the term “Islams” are generally trying to explain and praise the diversity that exists within Islam, but I suggest that using other, more specific terms is a better option. These

29. Other verses of the Quran restate the importance of unity, such as 6:65, 8:45-46 and 42:13; the Quran and Islamic tradition assert that regardless of ethnic or other differences, anyone who follows the major Islamic practices (known as the Five Pillars) is considered a Muslim.
geographic, historical and ideological distinctions recognize and legitimize cultural differences, while still emphasizing the things that all Muslim cultures have in common.

**Islamophobias?**

While the term “Islamophobia” has been in use for over a decade and the phenomenon goes back centuries, Islamophobia and other issues relating to Muslims have been the subject of greater attention in the media and politics since September 11, 2001. The attacks on the United States, as well as the numerous additional successful and attempted terrorist attacks on other Western targets has led to a staggering increase in the amount of attention paid to Islam.  

While certainly unfortunate, it is easy to see how these terrorist activities have led to an increase in feelings of Islamophobia and expressions of anti-Muslim sentiment throughout the United States and Europe.

Islamophobia in France, however, is somewhat different from that of other Western countries. This is due to two main factors: France’s dedication to laïcité, and its history as a colonial power in North Africa. These factors predate the emergence of Al-Qaeda, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and contemporary Islamic terrorism. The most recent outbreak of Islamophobia in the United States can be traced to the 9/11 attacks and related fears of terrorism; however, anti-

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30. To date, there has not been a successful Al-Qaeda or Jihadist terrorist attack on French soil. Despite this, the French were certainly horrified by the London and Madrid train bombings, and the kidnapping of French citizens in Iraq in 2005 also caused alarm. The fortunate absence of any event that could be described as “France’s 9/11” does not indicate a lack of apprehension by the French about the threat of terrorism.
Muslim and anti-Arab sentiments in the United States go back much further. With each additional (fortunately often unsuccessful) terrorist attempt, many Americans grew more and more distrustful of Muslims.

The reasons for the lull in Islamophobia during the Bush administration and its spike after Barack Obama’s election are complex enough to be the topic of another thesis. However, it is sufficient to note that American Islamophobia is generally due to fears of terrorism and a more general view of Muslims as The Other. French Islamophobia has deeper roots tied to laïcité and colonialism (and to earlier European history of The Crusades and relations with Islamic powers), but it is also due to this general sense of Muslims as different and threatening.

**Anti-Semitism and the Dreyfus Affair**

While there is a strong connection between Islamophobia and other types of prejudice and discrimination such as racism, Islamophobia is perhaps closest to anti-Semitism in several ways. In both cases, a religious group is discriminated against not only for its beliefs, but also for its real or perceived ethnicity; thus as Jews in nineteenth and twentieth century France were considered a “race” and discriminated against regardless of their level of religiosity, Muslims in contemporary France are also racialized and seen as a threat to the dominant white and secular French culture. The most obvious and horrific example of anti-Semitism in France is that of World War II, when the collaborationist Vichy government cooperated with Nazi Germany in deporting French Jews to concentration camps. However, a famous earlier example of anti-Semitism in
France is perhaps the most useful to study in order to understand the history of French Jews and French anti-Semitism and the parallels to Islamophobia today.

The Dreyfus case began with Alfred Dreyfus’ arrest in 1894 and lasted until Dreyfus was officially cleared of wrongdoing in 1906. The trial and scandal divided France into Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards (Dreyfus’ respective supporters and opponents) and turned the Jewish army captain into “one of the best-known men in Europe, if not the world” (Begley 2009: 2). Many Americans may be familiar with the basics of the case: Dreyfus, a Jewish officer, was wrongly accused of espionage. Though the army found no motive, Dreyfus was convicted, suffered a humiliating degradation ceremony, and was sentenced to life imprisonment on the isolated and dangerously inhospitable Devil’s Island. Although Dreyfus was eventually cleared and the true spy discovered, the army’s rush to convict Dreyfus revealed the disturbing level of anti-Semitism that existed in Belle Époque France, a democratic state that took pride in the progressive Revolutionary values of “liberté, égalité, fraternité.”

What many outside of France may not realize about l’affaire Dreyfus was the extent to which it polarized the country, revealed the insecure position of French Jews and raised questions about state authority that are still being argued today. Taking place around the same time as the passage of the 1905 law on secularism, the Dreyfus Affair grew to be larger than just the question of Alfred Dreyfus’ guilt or innocence, and became wrapped up in the larger debate about France’s future.

At the end of the nineteenth century, France was still trying to recover from
its humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. The country had been under-prepared and overconfident; the defeat meant a blow to national pride, and well as the loss of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine and the payment of a fortune in reparations to the newly formed state of Germany.\textsuperscript{31} Therefore at the time when the Dreyfus Affair took place, nationalistic sentiment was high, and the recently reformed French Army was venerated and seen as the key to reclaiming the country’s glory.

As the Dreyfus Affair grew into a national scandal, two sides formed. The Dreyfusards believed that Dreyfus was innocent and had been falsely accused due to anti-Semitism; additionally, they felt that the case was representative of the dangerous influence of anti-Semitic, right-wing forces in society. The anti-Dreyfusards believed that the honor of the army must be upheld at all costs. While some anti-Dreyfusards felt that Dreyfus was in fact innocent, they had little sympathy for him as a Jew. Anti-Dreyfusards wanted to increase the power of the army and decrease the influence of leftists and of the prominent Jews in French society. What began as a military espionage case turned into a debate over who should be considered French, how much authority should belong to the state, and what role intellectuals such as writers and poets should play in French politics.

\textsuperscript{31} In addition to the destruction of the Franco-Prussian War, the country was also recovering from the rise and brutal suppression of the Paris Commune in 1870. In the chaos following the end of the war, a group of Parisians attempted to form the world’s first communist government. Over 30,000 people were killed or later executed in the Army’s recapture of the city. Intense debate raged over the ideology of the Commune and the government’s response. The communards are still lauded by the French Left and are commemorated in the famous Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.
France’s history of anti-Semitism is often compared to present-day Islamophobia (Rehman 2011). Certainly, Islamophobia today is not nearly as bad as World War Two-era anti-Semitism. However, many European Muslims feel that the history of European Jews indicates that even assimilated, secular minorities can still end up persecuted and treated as outsiders. Many French Muslims feel that assimilating, and therefore giving up much of their cultural and religious heritage, is too high a price to pay for an uncertain reward.\footnote{32. For more on the topic of anti-Semitism among French Muslims, see Laurence and Vaisse (2006: 222-243).}

**Secularism and Democracy**

“Islamism is a vague and imperfect term,” writes Max Fisher in The Atlantic, “but generally means the use of Islam in politics, ranging from Saudi Arabia’s monarchy to Pakistan’s sharia-seeking extremists to Turkey’s democratically elected Justice and Development (AK) Party. However, conflating all such groups as scary-sounding ‘Islamists’ misses the important point that not all Islamic governments are bad (2010).”

As is the case with many controversial topics, the term “Islamism” is used differently depending on the viewpoint of the user. Thus, for many in the West, the phrase “the use of Islam in politics” sounds threatening, while for many Muslims it is normal because generally, Islamic societies did not experience secularism in the same way that Christian or Western societies did. When Islamic countries did secularize, this change was most often forced upon the population
by autocratic rulers such as Ataturk in Turkey, the Shah in Iran, and Baathist leaders such as Saddam Hussein.

As discussed above, the norm in the international system is for countries to be more or less secular. For many countries, such as the United States, it is considered acceptable for the government to be secular while the people are generally religious. In addition, the view of secularism in the United States is one where the government is neutral toward religious groups and people are guaranteed the freedom of religion. As discussed in part one, this viewpoint grew out of the history of religion in America, with various (primarily Protestant) Christian sects escaping persecution from European governments and competing against one another. In this setting, secularism was seen as a way to ensure everyone’s freedom while still existing within a broader Christian (later referred to as Judeo-Christian) framework.

France’s historical experience was quite different, revolving around the anti-clerical views of the French Revolution and the sense of the Catholic Church as a threat to the State’s authority. As the number of practicing Catholics in France has been falling for generations, Catholicism is no longer seen as the threat to the Republic it once was. For French secularists, the new religion to worry about is Islam. Like Catholics in the eighteenth century, some Muslims advocate a greater role for religion in politics and society. How many French Muslims share this view, broadly known as Islamism? What are its causes, and how has it been represented, or misrepresented, in the West? These questions must be addressed in order to understand if Islamism is a threat to Western liberal
democracy, as well as to understand some of the flaws that may exist in the Western system.

Media reports and politicians in France generally depict two opposing points of view: secular non-Muslims on one side versus non-secular Muslims on the other. This “us versus them” mentality suffers from two major flaws. First, it oversimplifies the situation, turning a variety of economic, social, political, ethnic and religious issues into an up or down vote on secularism. Second, it overlooks the large number of people who do not fit into either category, such as secular Muslims (including non-religious people of Muslim background, as well as people who identify as Muslim but support laïcité) and a range of non-Muslim French citizens who oppose at least some of the more extreme secularist actions taken over the years by the French government.

While secular liberal democracy is one option, many cultures argue that it isn’t the only option. For countries that did not experience a European-style Enlightenment and secularization process, a less adamantly secular democracy that ensures respect for minorities and human rights may be a better option. Europeans and Americans often point to Turkey as a secular model for other Muslim countries to emulate. However, Turkey was secularized by force, beginning with Ataturk and continuing through military control that often interfered with democratic rule. The lack of grassroots support for Ataturk’s strongly secular form of government, which was in fact based on the French model, has led in recent years to the rise of the so-called moderate Islamist government of Tayip Erdogan and his AK Party. In Turkey, citizens have become more confident in
calling for democracy while also expressing their Islamic identity.

The French state, which opposes Turkey’s bid to join the European Union, closely follows the political situation in that country. For the French government, developments in Turkey, particularly with popular opposition to the Turkish ban on headscarves in schools and universities that is very similar to the French ban, represent the growing threat of Islam to secularism. However for French Muslims, the example of Turkey can be seen as a guide for how Muslims can adopt Western values of democracy and liberalism, and still retain their faith and culture. Of course, the main difference between France and Turkey is that France is primarily non-Muslim; despite this, the Turkish example is still useful because it suggests that France could conceivably allow for more religious expression without causing the country to head toward the opposite extreme.

**Economic Inequality**

While many non-Muslims in the West are preoccupied with terrorism, the vast majority of Muslims in France are not extremists. Most French Muslims are concerned with economic issues of such as unemployment, poor schools and poor housing, which disproportionately affect the Muslim community. Laurence and Vaisse (2006) persuasively address how economic inequality contributes to the problems of integration. As they observe, many French-born Muslims resent being told that they need to integrate by abandoning their religious and cultural traditions. In addition, they write, “because of racism and discrimination many
have also been denied the very opportunities—in terms of good jobs and well-
situated housing, for example—that would help them integrate” (2006: 30).

One strong example of the economic difficulties faced by French Muslims
is that of housing. The topic of *les banlieues*, or the suburbs, has attracted
extensive media attention in recent years.33 French writers such as Gilles Kepel
have used these areas of public housing (called *HLM*, for the French acronym for
“low-rent housing”) as a metaphor for the social exclusion of Muslims from
mainstream French society (Kepel 1987). Many French non-Muslims criticize
Muslims for being communitarian, or self-segregating. What many observers in
the media fail to note, however, is how Muslim immigrants moved into the
banlieues when they arrived in France, and for the most part have remained
there due to economic reasons. While many French Muslims certainly enjoy, to
some extent, socializing with other French Muslims, the segregation of the
Muslim community is primarily tied to poverty and discrimination.

The term *les banlieues* is usually translated as “suburbs,” but the concept
is more closely related to the expression “inner-city” or “ghetto” in the sense of
poverty and isolation. Not all of France’s suburban towns are low-income; many,
such as Versailles outside of Paris are similar to American-style suburbs.
However, in the media the term is generally used to refer to minority-majority
areas perceived to be full of gangs and violence. The problems faced by people

33. *Les banlieues* exist around most major French cities; many were originally built by
companies as housing for immigrant workers. Paris, Marseilles, and Lyon have France’s largest
Muslim populations—not surprisingly, since they are also France’s largest cities in general.
living in the banlieues, and particularly those living in HLM housing, are not unique to France: gangs and drugs are one concern, but also under-funded and underachieving schools, as well as continued concern over police brutality. The 2005 riots originated from clashes with police, and Silverstein (2004) details the distrust of the police among many in the banlieues. Even the Franco-Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun (1991) writes about immigrants’ fear of police raids in Yeux baissés. While not all French Muslims live in les banlieues, those who do struggle with these problems, and the poor education opportunities and high unemployment rate in these areas makes life difficult.

The French government has started to realize that these economic problems are leading to social unrest. As Laurence and Vaisse again note, the 2005 riots were “an indirect result of the creation of a vicious cycle in which because these young people have little hope of getting a good job in the future, they have no real incentive to succeed at school and therefore become less employable” (2006: 32). While President Sarkozy has pushed to reform the French job market, little progress has been made. It is still customary in France, for example, for resumes to be sent out with photographs. This obviously makes it easier for employers to avoid hiring women in headscarves, or anyone with a darker skin tone. In addition, names and addresses on resumes also contribute to hiring discrimination. French Muslims are more likely to be unemployed than

34. Media coverage of the riots focused on the image of young Arab rioters burning cars and otherwise behaving in a violent, intimidating manner. While it is outside of the scope of this discussion, it is interesting to note the way in which young Muslim males are portrayed as rioters, as opposed to young Muslim females who had their own media to-do with the headscarf affair.
non-Muslims, even at similar education and skill levels (Laurence and Vaise 2006: 33). These issues of economic disadvantages and social marginalization contribute to the sense of alienation from French society that many French Muslims feel.
CHAPTER 4

LE CONSEIL FRANCAIS DU CULTE MUSULMAN

By the late 1990s, the concept of a French-Muslim identity was increasingly recognized by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The first generation of Muslims in France saw themselves primarily as Arab, and relatively few were religiously observant. The next generation, who called themselves *beurs*, felt neither fully French nor fully North African. As more French Muslims were born and educated in France instead of coming from abroad like their parents, they no longer identified as Arab or *magrébin*. The second and third generations underwent a shift in identity from Arab to Muslim.  

Lead-up to the CFCM

Today, most French-born people of North African ancestry are accustomed to the European way of life and speak little Arabic (especially not the local dialects spoken in Algeria or Morocco, as French Muslims who essentially learn Arabic as a second language tend to study the formal dialect used in the Qur’an). It became apparent to the French government that the older models of dealing with Muslims were outdated. The original approach assumed that the North African workers in France would eventually return to their countries of origin.  

35. At around the same time, global politics was undergoing a similar transformation: pan-Arabism as an ideological alternative to Westernization was failing (see the break-up of the United Arab Republic), while Islamist and other political Islamic groups were becoming prominent. The main example of this shift is the Iranian Revolution.
Eventually, this approach was abandoned and the government began its assimilationist policy, which held that immigrants needed to adapt to “the French way of life” in all areas, especially laïcité.

Under the socialist government of Francois Mitterrand in the 1980s, the assimilationist approach was relaxed in favor of “integrationism” and “the right to difference.” This concept was not limited to French Muslims, but rather was an informal policy that emphasized the diversity of France, and allowed for more localism as an alternative to France’s historical state-centric style of government. Charles de Gaulle famously noted the difficulty of governing a country with hundreds of types of cheese; this humorous observation reveals the reality of France’s diversity, despite the attempts by Paris to homogenize the country. Under Mitterrand, there was an initial attempt at “multiculturalism,” but growing unemployment and economic downturn led to disenchantment and political gains for right-wing parties (Bowen 2007: 82). In response to the first “affaire du foulard” in 1989, Mitterrand created what would eventually be called le Haut Conseil à l’Intégration, or the High Council on Integration (2007: 86).

The High Council on Integration’s main functions have been to issue reports about the status of French Muslims, as well as to work with the Conseil d’Etat (State Council, the court that decides administrative issues) throughout the 1990s and early 2000s to resolve cases of girls wearing headscarves to school. The issue of women and girls wearing headscarves in public, particularly in schools, has attracted considerable attention in France. Many government and school officials feel that Muslims wear le voile or le foulard as a sign of their
decision not to integrate into mainstream French culture, although the women themselves often feel very differently. Unfortunately the headscarf debate has overshadowed almost all other issues relating to French Muslims, including much broader concerns about economic inequality, discrimination and racism.

“Muslims are clearly present in a secular Europe and yet in an important sense absent from it,” writes Talal Asad (2003: 158). Asad argues that although Muslims currently live in Europe, and in fact have for centuries, both liberal and conservative Europeans tend to exclude Muslims and their contributions from the ideological concept of Europe (2003: 160). For those on the far right, opposition to Islam is rooted in xenophobia or fears about the adulteration of traditional culture.

Meanwhile, those on the left see Muslims as refusing to adopt Republican values of secularism, or laïcité; and also opposing equality of the sexes, particularly mixed-gender public interaction (such as in education) referred to as mixité. The headscarf affair is symbolic of these concerns, as French non-Muslims saw girls in headscarves as either representing an anti-secular ideology that oppresses women, or symbolizing the growing presence of foreign people and customs in contemporary France.

While the French government is certainly aware of the variety of problems faced by French Muslims and the concerns expressed by non-Muslims, solving these problems is of course very difficult. Successfully tackling just one of the major issues faced by French Muslims, such as dilapidated housing in les banlieues, would take more money and political capital than most politicians
would be willing to spend. However, by the early 2000s, the question of Muslims in France had evolved into a major political issue. In order to “do something,” in 2003 the Chirac administration officially established the Conseil français du culte musulman, frequently referred to as the CFCM. Chirac’s successor, Nicolas Sarkozy, has put even more time and effort into shaping the CFCM as a way to assert state control over religion, and also to convince the (non-Muslim) public that his administration is willing to “get tough” with the Muslim community for the sake of the nation’s secular values.

**Lead-up to the CFCM**

The creation of the CFCM can be seen as part of a tendency by French leaders to use government-appointed commissions and legislation to address broader problems. Along with the formation of the CFCM, the early 2000s also saw the appointment of the Stasi Commission and the passage of the 2004 law banning “religious signs” in public schools. The existing High Council of Integration provided research that was used to form the CFCM. The Stasi Commission was headed by former government official Bernard Stasi and made up of numerous academic and political figures, including the historian Patrick Weil. The commission was instructed to study the topic of laïcité, and its final report recommended changes in a wide range of political, economic and social areas in order to better integrate French Muslims. However, virtually the only part of the commission’s report that attracted attention from the media and the government was its recommendation that a law should be passed prohibiting
students from wearing headscarves.

After issuing its report, the Stasi commission disbanded. In 2004, the headscarf ban was implemented and in 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy was elected president. Meanwhile, the Conseil français du culte musulman has now been in existence for over seven years. While the headscarf law has received much attention in the French and international media, the CFCM is still largely unknown. Why was this group formed, and what are its objectives?

The French government had already formed councils for the other major religions in France, and forming a Muslim council had been a goal since the 1990s. The earlier religious councils are for Protestants, Orthodox and Reform Jews and Catholic Bishops; the councils were originally established under the 1901 Law on religious issues that is seen as the companion to the 1905 Law. The members of these councils were selected from existing religious leadership (most notably in the case of Catholicism). The less hierarchical nature of Islam, as well as the fact that the major French Muslim organizations are comparatively new, has caused difficulties in forming the CFCM and establishing it as a truly representative and legitimate body.

President Sarkozy has made relations with Islam a priority for his administration. The son of an immigrant father, Sarkozy began dealing with the French Muslim community during his term as the Interior Minister under Chirac. As Interior Minister, Sarkozy was in charge of religious issues; he spoke out

36. The 1901 Law deals with state funding of religious organizations. Thus, government funds can go to maintaining historic religious buildings, which benefits Catholicism. The law also allows religious groups to create cultural organizations with special tax and legal status.
strongly in favor of the creation of the CFCM and, more broadly, the creation of what is termed “Islam de France,” or Islam of France, as opposed to “Islam en France,” Islam in France. As Bowen (2010) notes, when used by government officials this term refers to Islam that has been influenced by French norms and in effect secularized, as opposed to “Islam in France” where traditional practices continue without much change. Sarkozy supported the development of a domestic form of Islam; this consisted of building new mosques, training French-speaking imams, and other plans. The CFCM would serve as an institution that would interact with the government on behalf of all French Muslims.

Unlike most previous government officials, Sarkozy seemed willing to go against the status quo in order to improve the status of French Muslims; his proposal to adopt a type of affirmative action in hiring, for example, reflected this new approach. While some French Muslims saw Sarkozy’s professed interest in their community as positive, other were skeptical of his true intentions or opposed to his specific plans. One particular event in 2003 sheds light on Sarkozy’s views about Islam in France, as well as the reasons behind these views and the response of French Muslims.

As Bowen (2004) recounts, in April 2003, Sarkozy gave a surprising speech at an annual gathering of Muslims held in Le Bourget, near Paris. The gathering was organized by the Union of Islamic Organizations in France, or UOIF, one of the major Muslim groups in France and generally the farthest politically from the

37. As Interior Minister, Sarkozy was also in charge of the police; during the 2005 riots, Sarkozy was criticized for calling rioters “scum” while failing to address the underlying causes of the unrest.
state doctrine of laïcité. Sarkozy began his speech with comments that were generally well received. Bowen, who attended the event, writes, “he received mild or strong applause for many of his remarks on the need for equal treatment of all religions” but that “suddenly, he changed his tone” (2004: 49). Sarkozy used his previous statement, that all religions should be treated equally before the law, to argue that Muslim women should not be allowed to wear headscarves in state identity card photos (the existing law required the hairline to be visible but was generally not enforced).

The crowd reacted angrily, as expected, and the subsequent media coverage showed the Minister being booed by threatening-looking Muslims. Sarkozy’s show of toughness toward Muslims was a strategic way of courting right-wing voters and attracting national attention. In 2007, Sarkozy defeated the Socialist candidate Segolène Royal to become president. His new party, the UMP, attracted enough center-right and far-right votes to neutralize Jean-Marie Le Pen, who had shocked the country by placing second in the 2002 presidential election.

Sarkozy’s argument that all religions should be treated equally was clearly popular; however, Muslims and non-Muslims in France seem to have differing views as to what this equality means in practice. Sarkozy’s speech can be seen as a generally successful attempt to use the issue of French Muslims for his political advantage. While this cynicism does not seem too misplaced when discussing the motivations of politicians, I find that the equality debate offers additional insights into Sarkozy’s reasoning and the broader view of laïcité within
the French government. When Sarkozy initially said that religions are equal, most French Muslims attending his speech probably assumed that he meant that the government would not prevent any French citizen from acting (within reason) in ways that were compatible with their religious beliefs. Thus for French Muslims, everyone should be able to dress as they wished for identity card photos; wearing a scarf that covered the hair but showed the face would neither prevent the woman pictured from being properly identified, nor would it somehow interfere with the rights of others.

Assessing the CFCM

However, for Sarkozy, the notion of equality means something different. Under the concept of what Bowen (2004) calls “social laïcité,” treating religions or people equally means treating them the same. Therefore, allowing Muslims to dress differently from non-Muslims for a government-issued photo meant that the government was treating some people differently, and therefore violating laïcité’s requirement that the state not recognize or endorse any religion. This view of equality also connects to the French state’s views on national unity; if France is “indivisible” as the Constitution says, citizens must be alike. This concept of equality as sameness also comes into play regarding the formation and goals of the CFCM.

For Sarkozy and others in the French government, having a government council for Islam makes sense, since there are already councils for Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. In France, the dominant view of laïcité asserts that the
government is neutral toward all religions, in the sense that France no longer declares itself to be a Catholic or Christian state. However, government control over, and interaction with, religious groups is considered acceptable. The French statist model places the government as the ultimate authority, much more so than in the United States, for example. Thus, the councils for each religious group fall under the government’s control; having councils for each religion facilitates interaction between religion and government, but it also allows for greater government control over religion, which is essential to the French view of secularism.

Despite these broad underlying goals, the official duties of the CFCM are relatively limited. It serves as the representative of French Muslims in dealing with the government; the main issues it addresses are those relating to the construction of mosques, regulations concerning cemeteries and ritual animal sacrifice, and the training of imams and appointment of chaplains. The government, not the council members or the public, determines its areas of operation (details about how council members are chosen will be discussed below). Because the government has already decided how to handle many of these issues, there is in effect little action that the CFCM can undertake beyond extending its approval to government proposals. For example, the Sarkozy administration appointed the Stasi commission, and created the 2004 law prohibiting headscarves in school; the Council’s only involvement was to offer its rubber-stamp approval after the fact.

On other matters, such as relating to Islamic burial practices and ritual
sacrifice, the government has declined to adapt existing laws to suit the wishes of many French Muslims. The Council’s website offers general information about Islam for Muslims and non-Muslims, such as articles explaining the pilgrimage to Mecca or listing mosques and prayer times. Much of the front page is taken up by short statements of “condemnation,” where the Council expresses its strong disapproval of cases of Islamophobia and intolerance directed toward Muslims (graffiti on mosques, anonymous threats against prominent French Muslims), as well as its denunciation of terrorism and other negative acts committed by Muslims around the world.

In this regard, the CFCM resembles the American group CAIR (the Council on American-Islamic Relations), which frequently makes similar statements to the media and the public. Yet CAIR is not run through the U.S. government, and does not claim to represent all American Muslims or their views. In addition, the existing Islamic organizations in France, such as the UOIF, offer nearly identical information and statements on their websites. Therefore, much of what the CFCM does is redundant, as nongovernmental groups are already handling the issues it claims to address.

Opposition to the CFCM within the French Muslim community generally results from this top-down, even undemocratic, approach; from its inability to address economic and social issues of concern to French Muslims; and from the problems arising from the CFCM’s claim to represent all French Muslims. In addition to the national council, there are regional councils organized throughout the country. The leaders of the CFCM are elected by a group of around 4,000
voters selected by mosque leaders.

The French government established the composition of the Council and determined how representatives would be elected; the leaders of the largest French mosques are well represented, as well as the leaders of France’s several major nongovernmental Islamic organizations. The High Council on Integration prepared a report that called for elections to be run through mosques. The French government backed the construction of large “cathedral mosques” in a number of French cities, offering political support and sometimes arranging for the foreign funding needed to complete the structures. As opposed to smaller, unofficial prayer rooms in apartment buildings and shopping centers, the government sees these “grand mosques” as easier to control through undercover surveillance and interaction with mosque officials.

As a result, the membership of the CFCM favors those involved with major mosques, while marginalizing French Muslims who are not influential mosque leaders, particularly women (who traditionally are less likely than men to attend a mosque) and Muslims who do not belong to one of the major federations. The CFCM’s inner circle of leadership consists of twenty people: representatives of the seven major Islamic federations and of the five “grand mosques,” along with ten other representatives, five of whom must be women (Porteil Réligion 2011).

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38. The 1901 Law prohibits government money from going to the construction of new houses of worship, although existing (i.e. Catholic) religious buildings can be maintained through government funds. In another ironic twist, while the French government states its desire to remove foreign influence from the French Muslim community through greater government control, at the same time it solicits money from Saudi Arabia, Algeria and other foreign countries for mosque construction.
However, the first two presidents, as well the vice-presidents and other officers, have all been men.

Because the CFCM claims to represent all French Muslims, the French government seeks the Council’s approval in controversial matters, as it did for the 2004 law.\(^\text{39}\) Yet the CFCM has not been able to do more than rubber-stamp the government’s decisions. The 2004 law was quite unpopular with most French Muslims, who saw it as a violation of religious freedom and of the right to education (Bowen 2007). Yet because the CFCM approved the law, individual Muslims found themselves excluded from the debate. The effective exclusion of women is particularly ironic, given the French left’s frequent criticism of Islam as anti-feminist. Thus the CFCM provides opportunities for French Muslims who are more secular, willing to go along with the government’s decisions in order to gain some political influence. For French Muslims who wish to challenge some the assumptions of laïcité, however, the CFCM is unlikely to serve as a forum for their concerns and arguments.

In 2008, Mohammed Moussaoui, a French university professor born in Morocco, succeeded Dalil Boubakeur, the president of the CFCM for its first two terms. Boubakeur, the head of the Paris Mosque, is of Algerian descent. Tensions have long existed among French Muslims of different ethnicities and national origins, although the competition among groups is rarely hostile. Most leaders of French Muslim organizations are of the older generations, who place

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39. In a similar incident, former President Chirac received approval of the 2004 headscarf ban from Al-Ahzar in Cairo, one of the most prominent schools of Islamic law and studies in the world. French Muslims and non-Muslims alike criticized this foreign endorsement.
more emphasis on origin. Among French-born Muslims, the distinctions among Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians and other nationalities still exist but are less significant. Since Boubakeur is Algerian, Moroccans (and those of Moroccan descent) likely pushed for Moussaoui to succeed him.

While French Muslims of North African descent have much in common, history and politics sometimes cause divisions. During the colonial era, French officials heavily favored the ethnic Berber people from the Kabyle region of Algeria. The Berbers were seen as less religious than Algerian Arabs and more similar to Europeans in appearance and lifestyle; people from Kabylia were among the first North Africans to move to France and to this day, they are seen by other French Muslims as more westernized and supportive of laïcité (Silverstein 2004). Due to the French-influenced, strongly secular government in Tunisia, many religious or Islamist Tunisians left for France, giving French Tunisians the reputation of the most religious of the bunch. Obviously, French Muslims are not a homogeneous group. Instead of benefiting from this diversity, however, the CFCM has, in my view, been bogged down by internal divisions instead of focusing on more important matters.

**Challenging State Control of Religion**

Another round of CFCM elections are scheduled for 2011. Already, issues are popping up. Many French Muslims outside the Council continue to criticize it for its undemocratic election process, and for its failure to address issues beyond the narrow range of predetermined religious topics. For most French Muslims,
unemployment, Islamophobia, women’s rights and education are much more important than concerns about the sacrifice of sheep for Eid al-Adha.

In addition, the CFCM has done little to relieve concerns about government efforts to control Islam. While most French Muslims are in fact French speakers and would prefer a sermon in French to one in a form of Arabic that they do not understand, they are at the same time wary of accepting imams trained and monitored by the French state. Government efforts to deport imams who preach “radical Islam” or who are seen as merely communitarian or not integrated enough, contributes to these fears. The French model of government control over religion was developed during the Revolution as a way to protect citizens from religious tyranny. However, for French Muslims the relationship between government and the CFCM has only demonstrated the negative side of this statist approach. The CFCM, which was established by the government to have very little power of its own, has unsurprisingly had very little influence in French politics or in the lives of French Muslims.

Some steps have been made, however, by European Muslims attempting to challenge the status quo of laïcité. Lectures and debates, such as the dialogue between the Algerian Muslim leader Mustafa Cherif and Jacques Derrida, are encouraging signs. One event in 2003 attracted much attention but was widely misunderstood: the televised debate between Nicolas Sarkozy (then Interior Minister) and Tariq Ramadan.

40. French Muslims who do speak or understand Arabic generally know North African dialects. Foreign imams are more likely to come from Arab countries outside of North Africa, with different Arabic dialects that are difficult for North Africans to understand.
Ramadan is a frequent guest on European television shows (born in Switzerland of Egyptian descent, he speaks French and English in addition to Arabic). At the time of the show, people around the world were expressing opposition to the scheduled execution by stoning of a Nigerian woman. Sarkozy used this opportunity to ask Ramadan if he would condemn this sentence. Ramadan declined, saying he preferred to institute a moratorium on the death penalty under Islamic law (Google Videos 2003). Subsequently, Ramadan was strongly criticized by the French press for his statements.

As Baum (2009) correctly observes, however, there is more to the story. Ramadan’s motivation for proposing a moratorium was to allow Islamic scholars around the world to discuss the issue, with the eventual goal of prohibiting capital punishment through a group decision. This consultation of scholars is the traditional decision-making process in Islamic law; Ramadan, as a trained Islamic scholar himself, realized that a decision reached in this manner would be much more likely to be supported by both progressive and conservative Muslims than if he had simply expressed his own opinion.

Perhaps television, with its emphasis on sound bites, is the wrong medium for explaining Ramadan’s idea. However, Ramadan also addresses European Muslims and non-Muslims at conferences and in books and articles. Many French journalists distrust Ramadan, saying that he uses “double-speak” when he addresses a Muslim crowd one way and a non-Muslim crowd in another way (Ramadan 2010). But in my view, Ramadan’s willingness to address different audiences (especially those who are not always receptive to his views) is
commendable; the fact that he adapts his talks to his audience’s familiarity with Islam and its particular concerns should not be misinterpreted as evidence of duplicity. As France continues to struggle with questions surrounding laïcité and Islam, intelligent scholars like Ramadan who are willing to engage with both sides are highly valuable.

The CFCM and the 2012 Presidential Election

In this section, I have chosen to focus on the CFCM despite, or because of, its lack of success. I believe that the reasons for the CFCM’s continued lack of influence reveals a great deal about the French government’s intentions. The government’s control in forming the CFCM, and its ongoing influence over the group, reflects the government’s view that the state should have control over religion. French Muslims themselves, the relative powerlessness of the CFCM reflects the continued powerlessness and political cynicism of the Muslim community. Islam in France is already promising to be one of the major political issues in the 2012 presidential election. What effect will this election have on French Muslims and the CFCM?

While the French government has made numerous attempts at reforming the systems of immigration, citizenship and integration, these reforms have failed to achieve long-term success. The underlying issue, that of laïcité, has generally not been addressed in the context of political and legal reforms. Rather, these reforms are treated as one issue (how can the government improve the immigration situation?) while problems relating to laïcité (whether it is women in
headscarves, the construction of mosques, or the next controversy) are dealt with separately.

In the minds of the public, however, the issues of immigration, integration, secularism and Islam are constantly overlapping. As concerns over Islamic terrorism have grown, the French government has also begun to stress these connections. President Sarkozy, noted in De Royer (2011), and other political figures have recently claimed that the country missed an opportunity to address these issues in the past. While Presidents Mitterand and Chirac dealt with “headscarf affairs” and tried to address issues of secularism and immigration, their plans were not always successful (Weil 2008). In Sarkozy’s case, the president is most likely emphasizing his own role in order to 1) criticize the left, specifically, the Socialist Mitterrand government of the 1980s, but by extension his Socialist rivals today as well, and 2) to demonstrate that he is “tough on Islam” in the face of growing opposition from the far-right.

One strong indicator can be found in the recent “debate” on laïcité and Islam, launched in 2011 by Sarkozy and his political party (De Royer 2011). With the election only one year away, Sarkozy is starting to campaign for re-election. Recent polls show the far-right Front National (FN) Party gaining in popularity. The party recently chose Marine Le Pen to succeed her father as party leader, and Le Pen has used the issue of Islam and laïcité to attract support. Recently, Le Pen has declared that Islam is not compatible with a secular society (Islam in Europe 2011a), and has compared Muslims praying in the street to the Nazi occupation of France (Islam in Europe 2010a); Sarkozy has also criticized the
phenomenon (Islam in Europe 2010b).^41

Due to the structure of French presidential elections, if the FN attracts enough conservative voters, Sarkozy might even lose re-election if he places third in the first round of voting (Erlanger 2011). As the campaign season gets underway, Sarkozy will have to compete with Le Pen by defending his administration’s record. The debate on laïcité initiated by Sarkozy can be seen as one example of how the issue of French Muslims has become a major campaign issue. While it seems very unlikely that the CFCM would be disbanded or dissolved should Sarkozy lose his reelection campaign, it will certainly be interesting to see how future French presidents address the Council that was formed under Sarkozy.

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^41. Many Muslims end up praying in the road outside their local mosque due to lack of space. This occurrence has attracted considerable media attention; many commentators see it as an inappropriate use of secular public space.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Since I began researching the topic of French Muslims in 2005, the issue has steadily attracted more and more news coverage and attention from the public in the United States and Europe. While some believe that “Islam” and “the West” are two separate, incompatible civilizations, I disagree. In my view, Huntington was wrong; the divide between the Christian (and later secular) West and the Islamic world is an artificial one. These distinctions of “you versus me” go back to the time of Herodotus, and most likely even earlier. As Aslan (2009) states, the strongest supporters of the “clash of civilizations” theory are the Jihadists trying to engage the West in a cosmic war. In reality, Islam has always been a part of the West, particularly in places such as Spain and the Balkans, and through a long process of cultural exchange. The West has borrowed from Islamic cultures for centuries; the Renaissance was sparked by the “re-discovery” of Greek and Roman classics that had been preserved by the Muslim world.

Most French Muslims today consider themselves to be both fully French in nationality and fully Muslim in religion (Laurence and Vaisse 2006). Despite this, the term “French” still implies a secular and/or Catholic identity, with French Muslims excluded from “mainstream” French identity. While French non-Muslims often see religiosity as “backward” or anti-modern, pious Muslims around the world insist that religion and modernity are compatible. After several generations
in Europe, “Islam de France” is forming. Second- and third-generation French Muslims no longer see themselves as North African, but are critical of the racism and discrimination they have experienced. In response, they look to their Islamic identity as a way to belong to both worlds. In interviews and studies such as Fernando (2010) and Bowen (2007), French Muslims credit their experiences in France with developing their religious beliefs.

As discussed above, the French view of secularism, known as laïcité, frequently conflicts with the views and desires of France’s Muslim community. French Muslims see government restrictions of religion in general and Islam in particular as a violation of their human rights and religious freedom. However, the French government and many French non-Muslims still claim that state control over religion is necessary, even at the expense of individual rights. The 1905 Law on secularism, which is still highly respected today, is a strong example of this mindset. The 2004 law prohibiting headscarves from schools and the 2011 law that banned “the burqa” from public places, demonstrate the French state’s continued support for laïcité. The government, particularly under the current presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, has made occasional attempts to reform the immigration and integration system in order to address the political, economic and social difficulties that French Muslims face. However, the state still insists that French Muslims conform to the system of laïcité that was developed generations ago.

Laïcité originated in an era where the French Republic faced an existential threat from a wealthy, powerful religious establishment. Anti-clericalism and
secularism are still supported by liberals and conservatives in France, but the Catholic Church is no longer the dominant institution it was in the past. While the French government has made attempts from time to time to reform aspects of the system of integration and laïcité, these efforts have been largely unsuccessful. Thus far, the issues of economic and political inequality that French Muslims face seem unlikely to be resolved in the near future. With the Muslim population growing relative to the non-Muslim population, the issue is likely to become even more significant in the coming years.

Since September 11, 2001, Muslims in the West have faced increased scrutiny and prejudice from their governments and fellow citizens. In France, the history of laïcité along with fear of terrorism and religious extremism lead to the general mistrust of Muslims. While the majority of French Muslims today are French-born and citizens, most are ethnic Arabs and/or Berbers of North African descent. Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians left their home countries (former French colonies or protectorates) in search of better jobs and greater political stability.

The French history of colonialism in North Africa goes back to the early nineteenth century, and Algeria did not receive independence until 1962, after a brutal war that is seen as the French equivalent of the Vietnam War. It is still somewhat taboo in France to discuss the impact that colonial rule has had on North African political and economic life, as well as the ways that colonial attitudes affect how French non-Muslims view Muslims in their own country and abroad. Islamophobia in France, therefore, has many of the same causes as
American Islamophobia, but also causes that are closely related to French history and culture.

Currently, the French government finds itself in the position of trying to defend laïcité and mainstream French attitudes toward organized religion, while at the same time attempting to alleviate the political and economic difficulties faced by French Muslims. The state certainly recognizes that the poverty, unemployment and other problems experienced by many French Muslims, particularly those living in the banlieues, is leading to instability. The 2005 riots in Paris and other major cities is one example of the anti-government reactions that the state is hoping to avoid. In order to give the impression of concern and action, the French government created the French Council of the Muslim Religion, or CFCM. President Nicolas Sarkozy has been particularly involved with the CFCM and with other issues relating to laïcité.

While some could claim that the President’s concern represents a step forward for French Muslims, I feel that the end result will be one of little change to the status quo. The CFCM is unable to do much besides rubber-stamp state policies that have already been decided, and is primarily used by the government as a means to exercise greater control over Islam. While Sarkozy has used the issue of laïcité and Islam to gain political points in the face of growing opposition from the far-right Front National party, French Muslims themselves continue to struggle with limited political and economic power.

For Muslim immigrants in France, it is time to reclaim Islam’s place as part of Europe’s past, present and future. While some Europeans fear the perceived
The rise of Islam in Europe, French Muslims are not the terrorist or existential threat that they are often alleged to be. Improving the lives of French Muslims will benefit all of French society, but it will require Muslims and non-Muslims in France to question some of the assumptions that lead to discrimination against Islam. Laïcité should not be treated as sacred. French Muslims have learned French, attended French schools, and worked in French jobs for generations, yet they are still treated as foreigners by those who insist that French Muslims choose between religious identity and national identity. If the French can engage in dialogue about Islam and laïcité, as well as related issues of nationalism, colonialism and Islamophobia, perhaps someday the term “French Muslim” will not seem unusual.
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