

“You can’t forget our roots anyway”: French College Students’ views on a Racially and Religiously Pluralistic France

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ABSTRACT

Despite the longstanding presence of Islam in the territory of France, Muslim French must still claim and justify their belonging in the context of widespread public skepticism over Islam’s compatibility with “French” social and cultural values, such as *laïcité*, or secularism. The general public’s skepticism is also, in part, due to the historical and ongoing racialization of Muslim populations. Many French sub-populations, including those who are perceived as more “liberal” such as college students, are a part of this skeptical public. Therefore, how have these students specifically been shaped by contemporary French discourses and understandings of *laïcité*? There is a lack of scholarly research on French college students in particular and their understandings of French identity, *laïcité*, and Muslims in France. To fill this gap, I conducted nine semi-structured interviews and drew on informal participant observation. In this article, I discuss French college students’ opinions on French identity as well as the desire for widespread assimilation, specifically regarding Muslim women and their choice to wear a hijab in France. I examine these viewpoints within the framework of dominant French discourse, which often perpetuates the idea of a racialized Islam that is inherently incompatible with French culture. I argue that students on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum still reiterate opinions that fit within this dominant French discourse.

Keywords: secularism; Islam; France; *laïcité*; racism

At the end of our interview, Helene got into a heated debate with Paul, who was doing homework next to Helene and I, when he overheard Helene's solution to immigration and how to preserve French culture. In Helene's opinion, immigration should be completely stopped and the focus should shift onto developing the home countries of immigrants. Paul began to argue with Helene, asking her to explain her plan to "fix" the immigration crisis and questioning the validity and viability of this plan. Helene defended her idea by saying that direct intervention is needed in other countries in order for them to progress. The idea that direct intervention is necessary can be tied to colonialist discourse on how it is imperative that Europe colonizes other nations in order to civilize and modernize these societies. Helene's plan would stop immigration and allow France to keep its historically white Christian culture while simultaneously pretending to aid others.

While many may assume that Helene's positionality is specific to the ideologies of the far-right in France, the complex intersection of race, religion, and republicanism in France displays a more nuanced picture—it shows that students of diverse political opinions still often agree with mainstream conservative discourses. Opinions surrounding French identity today are inextricably tied to France's minority populations, specifically French Muslims, who have been targeted in part because of their visible religious expression. French Muslims face discrimination and prejudice in the name of French republicanism, which emphasizes the privatization of religion. Within the framework of French republicanism it is necessary that the wider community work together towards the greater good, with a specific focus on self-realization through civic participation. In other words, "citizens must embrace the democratic process and its attendant obligation for reasonable, good faith interaction resulting in eventual consensus" (Mechoulon 2017, 239).

France's history with secularism began with the *laïcité* law of 1905, which established the separation of church and state. This law was originally created to act against the immense power of the Catholic church in France (Kelly 2017, 111). While the concept of *laïcité* was initially founded on the idea of limiting the

I was sitting down at a crowded table next to a French friend from high school, Paul, and some other students who were working on a group project. I had just finished a group interview with Paul and his friends at a business school outside of Paris and was now waiting for him to finish up some work before we headed to the student bar. Before I knew it, Paul had run away from the table to call over someone who he thought would be the perfect person to talk to for my research. That is when I met Helene, who had just grabbed a chocolate bar from a nearby vending machine and sat next to me, eager to speak about her views on France and French identity.

I was surprised to learn that Helene is a member of the *Le Front Nationale*, the far-right party led by Marine Le Pen. She told me that she is active in *Le Front Nationale* and was especially active during the 2017 presidential election, sticking up posters, handing out flyers, handling money for the campaign, and even participating in a think tank about the French-speaking world. While Helene became interested in activism at the age of 14, her parents, who are more liberal, never approved of her affinity for *Le Front Nationale*. Helene and I spent a lot of time talking about how she understands her French identity, especially in the context of increasing immigration to France. She believes that French culture is being lost and that people are no longer proud to be French. According to Helene, if you want to wear anything "French," such as a clothing item with a French flag design, people will think you are a right-wing extremist. Ultimately, she laments the fact that France has not done anything "impressive" since colonialism and World War II and therefore, French people have nothing to be proud of anymore.

Catholic Church's power and privatizing religious identities, the meaning of *laïcité* has evolved over time and has various definitions according to different academics. According to Idriss (2005), "behind the French secular system is the principle that no one religious code should be imposed by the state on its citizens, and references to religious beliefs in order to justify public policies are considered politically wrong" (261). This necessitates that religious beliefs and customs should be relegated to the private sphere. The emergence of new Islamic identities among France's post-colonial minorities led to the reworking of the historical notion of *laïcité* (Kelly 2017, 4). The recent rearticulations of *laïcité*—a notion that can be described as elastic as opposed to immutable—have primarily impacted the Muslim population in France, further isolating French Muslim citizens for their religious and cultural differences.

Furthermore, certain French republican ideals, such as secularism, have painted Islam as fundamentally incompatible with French culture. This has resulted from the racialization of French Muslims, where race is defined as an "abstract signifier for separating human groups socially, politically, and economically. As such, culture, ethnicity, religion, nationality and (but not always) skin colour can all stand for race at different times" (Lentin 2008, 490). More specifically, the racialization of Muslims in France has been an ongoing process of dehumanization and infantilization (Fanon 1967) that allows religious affiliation to be equated with race while subsuming both under a more general label of "ethnicity" or "culture" (Lentin 2008).

The idea that one must be secular in order to be a modern French citizen has widely affected Muslims in France, who are perceived to practice their religion in the public as opposed to private sphere. Despite the prominence of Catholicism and Christian religious traditions in the public sphere, Muslim religious traditions are not afforded the same space. French Muslim individuals find themselves in the midst of constant debates about Muslim practices deemed to be incompatible with French norms. Therefore, my article examines how French college students understand the question of

religion and *laïcité* within contemporary France and how they position themselves in a way that simultaneously feeds into the racialization of French Muslims and publicly challenges visible Muslim religious expression. These urban students have not only grown up in a time of de-facto racial and religious pluralism, but also following the 9/11 attacks in the United States and the French 2004 headscarf debates. This is a unique context where there is a lack of studies that examine the majority's views of the French-Muslim population through an academic perspective. More specifically, there is a lack of literature on French college students and their unique positionality within French society. Through this analysis, I seek to understand how the positions of students undermine or reinforce the racialization of the French-Muslim population.

In the spring and summer of 2018, I spent a total of six months conducting ethnographic research in Paris. I spent time with and interviewed nine French college students studying for professional degrees in order to better understand how these young students have been shaped by contemporary French discourses and understandings of *laïcité*. The only requirements for the participants were that they hold French citizenship and are between the ages of 18 and 27. I did not aim to obtain only non-Muslim students, but all of my interlocutors self-identified as non-Muslim. Furthermore, all of the participants came from a relatively similar middle to upper-middle class economic background and were a mix of men and women. My own identity as a young person studying for a university degree positions me as an in-group member to my interlocutors, but I was also an out-group member because I am not French. Specifically, as an in-group member, I felt as though my interlocutors were more comfortable discussing certain issues that may have been harder to discuss with an older researcher. As an out-group member, I felt that my status as an American inhibited discussion, as there may have been an assumption that I was ignorant about French history and culture.

Based on my interviews, I argue that urban French students' views are, in fact, consistent with the dominant French discourse surrounding Muslims and *laïcité*. Furthermore,

although I am researching a younger generation and younger generations tend to think more liberally than their predecessors, as we tend to think in the United States, I argue that some concepts may be so culturally ingrained that it often makes it difficult for young students to critically deconstruct the norm. While the students have a variety of opinions about how Muslims fit into a “secular” France, they often stay within mainstream French discourse. This impacts how we understand the influence of social and religious cultural norms, traditions, and histories on younger populations within France. Ultimately, often in spite of claiming to be anti-racist, these cultural norms undermine the capacity of some of these young, well-meaning students to become aware of the racializing narratives in their own understandings of difference.

French Students’ thoughts on French identity

I was astonished to discover how important yet contentious France’s relationship to Christianity was for my interlocutors, especially after reading so much literature on the importance of secularism to the French state. During a group interview, an argument about France’s origins and identity emerged almost immediately. During this interview, I was joined by four friends in Paul’s apartment, located near his business school in the suburbs of Paris. At the table, I sat between Paul and another boy, Thomas, who was rather timidly sitting next to me. Across from me were two girls, Christine and Ariane, wide-eyed and seemingly excited to start the interview. Both Paul and Thomas are white French and did not say they were particularly religious. In contrast, Christine is of French and Vietnamese background and Ariane’s father is from Northern Africa, but Ariane does not identify as Muslim.

The topic of French origins specifically emerged in reference to a particular incident in the West of France. In 2014, the small town of La-Roche-sur-Yon (in Pays de la Loire) installed a nativity scene on the public property of their town hall. The nativity scene was quickly banned by a local court after the secular campaign group, *Fédération Nationale de la*

Libre Pensée, complained about the scene. Other small towns faced similar problems regarding their nativity scenes which were located on public property. Ultimately, there were widespread debates among citizens who supported the secular protests and others who argued that secularism, in this scenario, was being taken too far (Dunham 2014).

Although I spoke with the group interviewees four years after the nativity scene controversy, the topic was brought up early on in our interview. Christine chimed in first, bringing up the nativity scene scandal, mentioning that not everybody was upset and that the small controversy is related to France’s interconnectedness with Christianity. She goes on to say:

Nobody’s Christian in my family, but we still celebrate Christmas and Easter and stuff like that. It’s just ingrained in the French culture in some way. My mom’s not even French to begin with; she moved to France when she was seven. She’s Vietnamese. So, that really wasn’t her culture to start with, but all the holidays are based on...they still happen around all the Christian religious days like Toussaint, All saints, Christmas...and then there is Easter. So, there are many things that revolve around it and it’s hard to get away from it because it’s really just French culture or French Catholic culture.

As Christine understands it, despite the fact that her family is not Christian, she still celebrates Christian holidays. Four of my interviewees share a similar sentiment with Christine, saying that they or their family are not religious, but they still often celebrate Christian holidays, especially because they are seen as cultural facets. This shows how Christianity has become a cultural staple of France, in contrast to religions such as Judaism or Islam, which are not considered to be part of the cultural landscape.

Throughout my conversations, the dominant narrative that France is now a very “secular” nation occasionally came into conflict with France’s proclaimed Christian history. In the group conversation, Thomas in particular was quick to interject his opinion on the true origins of France as a nation. He stated: “About the whole Christianity in France...in France we can

say that France was actually born when Claudius was baptized. So the roots of France, it's a Christian thing." Later in the discussion Thomas states, "*Nos ancêtres sont les Gaulois*," which means "Our ancestors are the *Gaulois*," another saying that clarifies French origins and dates French roots back to the *Gaulois* tribe or the Gauls (5th c. BC- 5th c. AD). The Gauls, a group of Celtic people, emerged north of the Alps around 5th c. BC and spread throughout modern-day France and nearby countries. To forge a sense of national identity in post-revolutionary France, there was an appeal "to the antiquity of a common ethnic heritage" (Dietler 1994, 587). Consequently, some French citizens will refer back to the Gauls when discussing the origins of French identity. While Thomas may have made the comment about the *Gaulois* a bit ironically, a couple of minutes later in our discussion he states, "you can't forget our roots anyway." Thomas' statement about the *Gaulois* and French ancestry not only places French identity in the context of Christianity and a long history dating back to the *Gaulois* tribe, but also inextricably ties together religion, culture, and ethnicity. In fact, referencing the *Gaulois* to demarcate French origins is done in order to make the case for a real French bloodline or to authenticate one's Frenchness. In this understanding of the origins of French roots, Christianity becomes tied to both whiteness and Frenchness, in turn racializing religious affiliation. This racialization happens when "a particular set of phenotypic features, understood in a specific social and historical context in western nations, comes to be associated in the popular mind with a given religion and/or with other social traits" (Joshi 2016, 127). This process is specifically tied to Western expansion and colonialism. In general, associating French identity with the *Gaulois* (and thus whiteness) excludes other possible formations of French identity.

The point made by Thomas was immediately rebuked by Ariane, who argued that there is a difference between the kingdom of France and the Republic of France. She clarifies: "I don't believe in France. I do believe in the 5th Republic. To me, it's France. France is an abstract notion. The political regime of France is a reality. It is the 5th Republic." Ariane made it

clear that she believes that the only France that matters today is the French Republic, as opposed to the French monarchy or the history of the *Gaulois*. The issue that this argument reveals is part of a wider tension between French republicanism, which encompasses the concepts of universalism and secularism, and French Catholicism, which has been so culturally ingrained that even non-religious people treat Christianity as the norm. Many scholars have noted the prominence of Catholicism in French society (Gray 2008; Laborde 2008), an institution so powerful that it remains socially relevant even after the introduction of *laïcité*. This has become increasingly relevant with the changing demographics of France, which places immigrants and Muslims in a precarious position in a society that promotes universalism yet points out visible differences.

Other students also grappled with the contradictory nature of Christianity and secularism in France. I met with Jean, a French white engineering student, on a beautiful sunny day in July. We sat outside on a picnic bench in the middle of a large, green grassy area located in the center of his university campus, and we began our interview by talking about Jean's understanding of *laïcité*. This quickly led Jean to discuss how *laïcité* is understood on his campus. Jean goes to a top military engineering school outside of Paris, and the school has about 2,000 students—500 per class, 20% of whom are female and barely any, to his knowledge, who are Muslim. I also noticed that the campus contained mostly white men. Jean told me that there are a lot of Christian students at his school, including students who formed an association that organizes Christian events that happen up to four times a week. Jean also mentioned that the group had recently organized a debate over the question, "Is God real?" which he respects as it opens up a dialogue and shows that this group of Christians is "good" and "open-minded." Despite the existence of this Christian group at his school, Jean says that it is often the norm in France to be secular and that many people in France do not believe in God anymore. Jean's anecdote about the Christian organization on his campus is not common, and none of my other interviewees mentioned a similar

experience on their campuses. Ultimately, Jean's explanation shows the potential acceptability of Christianity in places that normally remain secular.

Furthermore, when talking about French origins with my interviewees, most students did not directly address how the prominence of Christianity excludes other populations. Only Danielle, a French white student who I met in an airy bright apartment in the center of Paris, explicitly mentioned the hypocrisy of allowing Christian symbols to be displayed publicly while other religious symbols are seen as opposing French culture. She specifically states:

I know that's quite a contradiction from what I said before on public schools, but as the state should not interfere, I was quite disturbed. I agree with what you said, you will never see Jewish or Muslim symbols on the city hall. To me, there is a huge difference between one person having a hijab or a religious sign on them and the mayor who has a public role and who represents the state in a way, showing that. I know that in France, even people who are not religious at all have a *crèche* [nativity scene] in their houses. Just like my boyfriend has a huge *crèche* and nobody's Christian in his family.

Danielle was the only interviewee to acknowledge the double standard between how Muslims and Christians are able to visibly express their religion. Most of the other interviewees did not express discontent with the prominence of Christianity in French culture but treated it as a given and something immutable within French society. Christianity is clearly not something that can be left in the past, as its influence can be seen in various public places. Similarly, the connection between French culture and whiteness is also seen as a given, unchanging aspect of French identity.

Although France's history is rooted in a Catholic past, the relationship that many French citizens have with this French-Christian identity varies. Throughout France's history, Catholicism has been an essential part of French culture. Before the establishment of the Republic, the French government consisted of "divine" monarchies, meaning the French king or queen had the God-given right to be the ruler. During

the French Revolution of 1789, certain ideologies, such as secularism, began to develop into central tenets of French political self-understanding in order to curtail the power of the monarchy and its close ties to the Catholic church. The desire for a secular state became most evident with the codification of the 1905 *laïcité* law that "officially" separated church and state. This accelerated the process through which Catholicism was refashioned into a cultural staple as opposed to a dominant religion. While France takes pride in its secularism, Christian traditions and norms have been transformed into taken-for-granted facets of French culture. Therefore, the modern nation-state almost expresses a "crypto-Christianity" (Scott 2007, 92), a term that refers to the secret practice of Christianity by pretending to celebrate other religions publicly or through other means of camouflage. Joan Scott understands crypto-Christianity in France as the covert way in which Christian traditions have become a central part of secular French society.

Overall, it is important to consider how my interviewees view the role of Catholicism within French identity in order to better understand how they perceive others. Most of my interviewees recognize that there is an inextricable tie between Christianity and French history. Whether they believe this connection is crucial to French identity varies. Furthermore, while some interviewees recognized that most French citizens are non-religious, many still celebrate Christian holidays—an act that excludes those who are religiously different. This demonstrates that these French students understand that there is some interplay between the Christian cultural aspects of French society and France's republican ideals. It is important to keep this in mind in the following section, as the students' understanding of French identity and origins will inform how they understand the French-Muslim population and their place in French society.

Assimilation: Culture, Religion, and Minimizing Visible Otherness

From the first moment I sat down at the kitchen table for my group interview, Christine was enthusiastic, alert, and engaged. Although she

was busy with her schoolwork, she made time to sit with me and her friends to talk about their perspectives and experiences. Christine was specifically very open about her background throughout the interview, which is important to know in order to contextualize her viewpoints. As mentioned above, Christine's mother is Vietnamese and, while Christine wants to keep learning about her heritage, growing up, her mother continuously made sure Christine understood French culture, including Catholicism. Christine's mother does not believe in God but would urge Christine and her sister to learn about Catholicism because they lived in France. Her mother knew the best way for her to fit in was to thoroughly understand, as Christine puts it, "old French conservative culture." Christine admits that by learning about Catholicism, she was better able to understand French culture. This is not uncommon as "the normative power of whiteness and Christianity in the West...results in the racialization of religion. For non-white non-Christian immigrants who have settled in western nations, their racial and religious minority status...is an essential challenge in becoming part of the social fabric of the receiving nation" (Joshi 2016, 128). Throughout our discussion, Christine uses her personal experience as half-Vietnamese to explain her complex understanding of assimilation.

Her mother's desire for Christine to fit in with French culture is one reason why she attended a private Catholic high school in the south of France. After spending a lot of time learning about French culture, Christine is trying to actively learn about her Vietnamese heritage. Although balancing these two realities may be difficult, Christine talked about navigating cultures with ease. Despite this, racism often acts as an impediment to integration. In fact, Christine states: "I've had people ask me 'oh, does your mom speak French?' when she arrives. Because she's Vietnamese, so she looks Asian. 'Does your mom speak French?' And I'm like yeah, duh. I can't speak Vietnamese. What language do you think we speak together?" She goes on to say:

She's the only person in the family who married a French guy so I'm half Vietnamese. All her sisters and brothers married other

Asian people, so when we're with my cousins, depending on if I'm standing by my mom or my sisters, or if my cousins are standing beside us, you can see the way people look which is very different. When they see my sisters or me, we look more French. We don't look more Asian, so she feels more integrated. She speaks French.

Here, Christine explains how the presumed whiteness of French identity affects her mother, who feels more assimilated when she is with her daughters who "look" more French, meaning they look less Asian. In short, the assessment of Christine's or her mother's "Frenchness" is racialized.

It is evident from this anecdote that a certain level of assimilation helps Christine's mother to feel more "French." By speaking French and learning about French culture from her mother, Christine was able to more easily assimilate into French society. Although both Christine and her mother were able to employ certain tactics in order to assimilate, their visible "otherness"—which is racialized—still makes it almost impossible to be perceived as completely French. This is seen in the case of Christine's mother who is often impacted by racist attitudes, including when she went to go vote in the 2017 French presidential election. At the voting poll, Christine's mother had a small issue with her registration when suddenly, out of nowhere, a man walked up to her and yelled, "you're foreign, you shouldn't have the right to vote." According to Christine, her mother screamed at the man in response, but this type of othering is not uncommon. Christine's mother is the perfect example of an assimilated non-European migrant who is still impacted by exclusionary racist mechanisms that are a part of the French imaginary. This again exemplifies how French identity gets tied to racial identity, thus permanently excluding those who have different religious and racial subjectivities.

As discussed previously, when it became clear that Muslim immigrants who migrated during the 20th century were in France to stay, it became a goal of many French politicians and citizens to promote their assimilation, while others wanted these immigrants to return to their respective home countries. Despite this, much of the immigrant population from West

and North Africa, many of whom migrated after World War II, decided to stay in France because of financial incentives provided by the French government. In order to fit into wider French culture, many of these immigrants had to compartmentalize their cultural differences into their private lives (Parekh 2008; Fernando 2014). Some immigrants even stopped practicing their religion as well as further separating themselves from their home culture by speaking French and teaching their children only French cultural norms.

Multiple interviewees recognize this complex nature of assimilation and expressed this in their interviews. They understand that while it is a reality that residential segregation has caused many segments of the French Muslim population to live in the same neighborhoods, which is perceived by the French as “separate communities,” these individuals did not necessarily choose to be isolationist of their own volition. External factors, including policies by the French government, have forced various populations to separate themselves. Christine personally understands this reality and compares it to the United States when she states:

The American way of integration is more like a melting pot, you bring your own culture. In France, you really have to leave your culture back. You have to fit inside the pieces and it's really, really tough and when you finally fit inside the pieces, you have forgotten where you come from.

Here, Christine is exposing an emotional personal reality, a sense of loss that she feels in relation to her heritage. She is saying that, unfortunately, in France, you have to compartmentalize your different identities in an effort to assimilate, but this often leads to the forgetting of certain aspects of oneself. Some interviewees share a similar understanding of the loss of cultural identity while simultaneously arguing for a certain level of assimilation. This is one reason why many children and grandchildren of immigrants are, in fact, very culturally French, but are not fluent in their parents' native language and do not feel any patriotic attachment to their home countries (Silverstein 2018). Often, many second and third generation immigrants simultaneously want to

know and understand their heritage while also navigating acceptance into French society. This idea is most clearly recognized by Christine, who states that many second or third generation immigrants, including herself, try to find different ways to connect to their heritage; often, they do this through religion. She states: “They [second and third generation immigrants] don't know the place they come from, or if they've never been there, or don't really speak the language. The only thing they can find often that really links them is religion.”

Religion then becomes a way for both immigrants and their children to remain connected to their heritage. Yet, from the perspective of the republican assimilationist model, Muslim immigrants and their children are seen as individuals who “refuse” to assimilate because of their desire to practice their religion. The idea that many Muslims “refuse” to assimilate is reiterated in various ways by some of my interviewees, who believe that Muslims can still practice their religion and simultaneously assimilate into French culture. Jean, the student at the military-engineering university, expresses the notion that steps must be taken to avoid segregation amongst communities in France. In order to avoid segregation, minority communities, not the state nor majority communities, must actively try to “mix in well.” He goes on to say:

In France, it is not a question of color or origins, it's just your culture. If you reject French culture, people won't be nice to you. You can be whatever color, whatever race. If you have lived in France all of your life and you understand how it works, there is no problem at all.

As Jean points out, as long as you understand French culture, such as the French republican ideal of *laïcité*, you will not have a problem. Jean reiterates the widespread French discourse of color blindness by reinforcing the idea that assimilation is not a matter of skin color, but instead simply a matter of knowing French culture and choosing to fit in. Furthermore, elements of racial tension exist in Jean's desire for social integration, specifically in his sense of discomfort of separate communities. Alana Lentin (2008) emphasizes that this discomfort “impels us to find solutions to the ‘living

together' (Touraine 2000), of culturally (racially) different—incompatible groups" (498). Jean specifically uses the phrasing to "mix in well," which is an English translation of the French concept *mixité sociale*.

In general, the concept of *mixité sociale* promotes the idea of social mixing, which assumes that an individual will have more opportunities for social mobility if they mix with people of different social classes, participating in the ideal French republican model (Sabeg and Xuan 2006). While Jean promotes the idea of *mixité*, he ignores the social reality for Muslim populations. In fact, Jean is fully subscribing to the French doctrine of color blindness, which makes it nearly impossible for people to recognize racism and different forms of racialization. According to Beaman and Petts (2020), "Colorblindness is an ideology that enables people to ignore the persistence of racism by providing nonracial explanations for enduring racial inequalities" (1).

Furthermore, Muslims who are not considered by others to fit into the mainstream idea of a "French citizen" face discrimination based on their actions. This is because Muslim and black migrants and their descendants are seen as "mobilizers of cultural and religious values fundamentally deemed incompatible with French secular, liberal norms" (Silverstein 2018, location 713). Therefore, Muslim populations are seen as separate communities that are unable to assimilate. In general, it is seen as a good goal by various French pundits to rid France of "communalism" or *communautarisme*, a term deployed in media and political discourse to suggest a tendency for Muslim French and other immigrant populations to congregate in "enclaves" with their own community values (Silverstein 2018). By doing this, France can achieve its goal of having all citizens seen as simply French as opposed to any other hyphenated identity. As various political actors state, living together would improve conditions for immigrant and Muslim communities. In fact, "in 2010 Interior Minister Claude Guéant said that high unemployment among those who come to France from outside the European Union proves 'the failure of communalisms' because those immigrants tend to clump together by culture and doing so keeps them from getting

jobs" (Bowen 2011, 33). In this statement, Guéant shows how the culture of Muslims has been problematized instead of focusing on the socio-economic issues that they face (Yilmaz 2016). The racial to culturalist discourses about the very heterogeneous Muslim populations in Europe, in combination with concerns over economic stability, has ultimately led to the stigmatization of Muslim minority populations. In previous times of economic instability, Muslim communities were targeted as "alien" populations that threatened social cohesion. In the 1980s specifically, with the rise of neoliberalism, the focus changed from Muslim immigrants' social problems to their "problematic" culture culminating in the shift from an economic to a cultural burden. This process resulted in the racialization of Muslim populations in France who are consistently associated with specific inherent cultural norms (Yilmaz 2016).

Ultimately, the notion that separate communities are bad for immigrants both socially and politically is consistently spread by politicians, despite the lack of ideas for how to economically integrate marginalized populations. Although there is a lack of concrete policy ideas to tackle what is perceived to be communalism, some of my interviewees still believe that it is important for secluded communities to make a *personal* effort to assimilate. In this way, some interviewees seem to prioritize, in quite a neoliberal fashion, individual initiative over structural policies targeting the socio-economic issues faced by Muslim and immigrant populations.

Ariane, who has made strong statements in favor of assimilation, understands that it is important to keep your own culture while simultaneously adjusting to life in France. She states:

I think that you can live with your own culture within another frame and I think that the French *laïcité* is good. I like this model. Sometimes people are thinking that it's tough and that it's a way to erase the culture of the immigrants, but you can still have your culture and adopt to some codes and I'm okay with these codes, because I still want the *laïcité* to apply to the Catholic church.

Ariane uses the concept of *laïcité* to express why it is crucial for immigrants to assimilate. She also highlights that some parts of cultural heritage are more acceptable, while others must be hidden away. By assimilating, immigrants show that they recognize the importance of *laïcité* to the French Republic and its citizens. By publicly expressing their religious beliefs and living in separate communities, which were created by segregating housing policies, immigrant communities are interacting with the French Republic in a way that is different from many other French citizens. This often becomes a point of tension and is expressed in some of Ariane's and Jean's sentiments.

It cannot be concluded from these interviews how being of mixed ethnic background affects one's opinion on assimilation. Christine comes from a multi-ethnic background and talks negatively about various aspects of assimilation, especially the loss of cultural heritage. Christine also recognizes the pressures of assimilation that many individuals face. In contrast, Ariane, whose father is from North Africa and therefore is also of mixed heritage, has differing opinions about assimilation. In her view, you can simultaneously hold onto your culture, that is certain legitimate aspects of your culture, and fit within the framework of the French Republic. In general, Ariane is very optimistic about the possibility of maintaining some cultural aspects. It thus follows that perhaps the only real French republican way to "live with your own culture within another frame," as Ariane states, is reduced to facets such as food and music. In general, the other interviewees tended to agree that assimilation is important, although some were more hesitant about how to assimilate immigrants.

From these interviews, there seems to be a general consensus that Muslims should be assimilated in some way in order to fit into French society. To what extent they should be assimilated was a more difficult question for my interlocutors to answer. Ultimately, even the most seemingly assimilated individuals still face discrimination.

Muslim Women and the Hijab in France

The hijab in France is a sensitive topic and was especially contentious amongst the students in the group interview. In the beginning of the interview, after I explained the premise of my research, I asked my interviewees about the recent incident involving Maryam Pougetoux, a student union leader who, while speaking on television about student reform, became known and then criticized for wearing her hijab. Ariane was quick to state her opinion:

This kind of reaction...can come from both sides of the political landscape. From the right because people are like, "she's Muslim and she's wearing a hijab so this is not possible because if she wants to be French, she has to endorse the values of France," whether that is to say *laïcité* or Catholicism. But there is also a trend on the left side, that is to say that she's fighting for freedom, equality, and things like that and she cannot do it with a hijab on her head, because a hijab is basically the opposite of freedom.

Christine elaborated on this point by describing how the political right views the hijab as an instrument of oppression, but in France it cannot necessarily be considered an instrument of oppression, at least not in the same way. Ariane solidifies her viewpoint when she says that personally, she thinks that anything that a woman has to do, that a man does not, is a form of oppression. She goes on to say that there are two cases in regard to the hijab:

The case where you have to do it, someone tells you to do it or you have to do it to be integrated into your family and community. And there's another case where you choose it, you are free to choose it. But it is not because you are free to choose that you are not alienating anyone.

In this understanding, a Muslim woman is either forced to wear a hijab or has chosen to wear a hijab, but then has willingly alienated herself from society at large. Christine quickly agreed that a hijab-wearing Muslim woman is excluding herself from broader French society, no matter her intentions. Christine tentatively expresses that "it is not integration." Whether

or not she personally believes this notion is difficult to decipher. I saw during this discussion that Christine had a hard time explaining how others may understand the hijab and reconciling her own views surrounding the hijab. Despite earlier expressing her own sense of loss and regret related to her heritage, she still had a hard time grappling with hijab-wearing Muslim women in France, as many believe that it is in opposition to French republicanism to embody one's religion in the public sphere.

When I asked about the new availability of hijabs in popular clothing stores in America and Europe, Ariane responded that the hijab is never about fashion. The implication was that no matter how much one may dress up their hijab, it is still a symbol of oppression. Despite French Muslim women's best efforts to style and make fashion statements with their hijabs, non-Muslim citizens often still understand the hijab as oppressive. Interestingly enough, although fashionable hijabs are seen as dressing up something that is oppressive, the contrary, such as women who are scantily clad, are rarely seen as a problem. Ariane argued about this with Christine, saying that it is different to wear something recognized by society as a sign of vanity, such as high heels, and wearing something to hide from someone else's gaze. This resonates with Joan Scott's (2007) point that Western feminists believe in the innate desire of women for emancipation in Western terms, meaning openness to sexuality and desirability or the freedom to have agency over one's sexuality. This also fits into a wider history of the racialization of Muslim populations who were initially of interest to France due to the inherent "sexual" and "exotic" nature of oriental societies (Scott 2007). Thus, culture becomes racialized and is subsequently tied to gender.

This idea that the hijab is inherently oppressive, as stated by Ariane, is based on its supposed purpose of hiding oneself from the gaze of a man and to not entice his desire. Subsequently, Muslim women who veil are often ostracized because they are seen as refusing to assimilate into French society. According to Al-Saji (2012), "what is at stake...is a form of cultural racism that hides itself under

the guise of anti-sexist and even feminist liberatory discourse" (877). Therefore, Muslim women are seen as "backward" and "traditional" if they choose to veil. Both Ariane and Christine are coming from admittedly leftist backgrounds, but they understand the hijab as an object that is inherently oppressive in nature. In this case, it is difficult for these interlocutors to understand that the Muslim women in question could be in control of their decision to wear a hijab.

Other left-leaning and centrist interviewees also shared similar sentiments about the hijab being oppressive. When discussing the hijab with Jean, he mentioned that he never sees them on his campus unless someone is visiting from the outside. He explained that this is likely because the university is a military school so there is a lack of girls. The hijab would also be considered a violation of the uniform because it is not seen as compatible with the typical French military uniform. Although Jean did not disclose his political position to me, he highlighted his belief that even people in the center do not like hijabs because of their association with the oppression of women. He goes on to quickly clarify, "I wouldn't say, for most people it's not a racist thing. Yes, it's really associated with women's repression and in France we are really against women's oppression." Here, Jean is ignoring the intertwining of racism, white supremacy, and Muslim women's specific positionality within these histories (Scott 2007). This falls in line with dominant French discourse that promotes a "color-blind" ideology that does not recognize race. Thus, despite Jean's claim that it is not racist to oppose the veil, he ignores France's colonial history that has racialized Muslim women and the act of wearing the veil itself.

According to Joan Scott (2007), Muslims have been singled out as incapable of assimilation and have had various traits, including presumed sexual proclivities and the veil, seen as a representation of inherent Muslim inferiority. The attribution of racial traits to Muslim populations can be traced back to France's colonial "civilizing missions" in predominantly Muslim communities. The cultural information gained from these missions resulted in the dissemination of books

that detailed the innate “profound differences” between France and Muslim communities (Scott 2007). The foundations for a racial understanding of Muslims was subsequently solidified in the public imaginary.

To further understand Jean’s colorblind reasoning, I asked him about the possibility of agency of Muslim women and if they ever truly have a choice to wear a hijab. Similar to other interviewees, Jean reassures me that while Muslim women in France are in a good environment to be able to choose, he is still not sure if this is the case, especially because he is not familiar with anyone in the Muslim community. This is similar to other interviewees who hold strong opinions about the French-Muslim community but lack much direct experience with them. Many of the interviewees have varied opinions, but none of them brought up personal opinions and experiences of Muslims.

Furthermore, Jean argues that in his school, which is mostly male and somewhat ethnically diverse (but not economically), there are no attitudes of xenophobia because everyone there is “educated and open-minded.” This reflects ideas of a middle-class superiority, a group that is automatically deemed open-minded and widely seen in a positive light. Although his school and similar places are open-minded, he states that some women from lower classes may not necessarily get the choice to veil because there would be more pressure from their community. With this class distinction, Jean is constructing his argument within a wider French framework. Furthermore, thinking within the framework of class is a privilege that people of color are not necessarily afforded because their race cannot be separated from their economic situation. Jean’s privilege allows him to dismiss the effects of structural racism because of the lack of Muslim students on campus.

In general, education is often associated with becoming more modern, liberal, and secular. Therefore, if a woman happens to be more religious and expresses this religiosity by wearing a hijab, she may automatically be considered less educated, less liberal, and less secular. Ultimately, there has been much variance in public opinion surrounding Muslim

women, their agency, and the headscarf bans. While there was significant opposition to the headscarf ban, a majority of public actors, especially self-proclaimed feminists, were forcefully in favor of the law (Teepie Hopkins 2015). Despite divergent perspectives, rarely is the reality of Muslim women and the issues they face given any space in these discussions. As Nadia Fadil (2011) describes, many Muslim women recognize that obedience to religious rules should be a result of one’s personal convictions. In this interpretation, Muslim women understand that the hijab is a matter of personal choice, despite what popular opinion says. Furthermore, many of the women in Fadil’s article believe that wearing the hijab is a religious obligation, but there is also a sense of freedom in the act of personally choosing to wear it. Similarly, in Jeanette Jouili’s (2015) work, she uses her ethnographic research with Muslim women in France and Germany to argue that, in actuality, many women struggle in choosing whether or not to veil. This kind of internal struggle was not mentioned by any of my interviewees because it is a particular narrative that is left out of popular discourse. Many of Jouili’s interlocutors recognized the agency of other Muslim women and respected where other Muslim women were in their personal veiling journey. Despite this, my interviewees focus on whether or not the hijab itself is oppressive and if it can fit into the French public sphere at all.

Ultimately, in public discourse, Muslim women who veil are painted as both having no choice and as active agents of political resistance. This is done in fear of political Islam, which is seen as a rejection of the French political model because of a refusal to assimilate. These two popular portrayals of Muslim women are technically incompatible but are widespread in France. This understanding of Muslims as unwilling to integrate by wearing the hijab was also a common theme with some of my interviewees. Multiple interviewees brought up the wearing of a hijab as a form of protest. How can the hijab be both an instrument of oppression and a way to show one’s resistance? Regarding the hijab as an agent of resistance, Jean stated, “It’s also that it’s associated with the fact that certain groups of people don’t want to fit in. It’s kind of a way

to say that they don't want to fit in the culture of France." Jean explains that it may be the case that some Muslim women do not want to fit in or assimilate into French society. By wearing a hijab, Muslim women are sometimes knowingly engaging in what other French citizens may consider a rejection of French ideals.

This issue was also brought up in the context of the *burkini* debate that arose during my group interview. The *burkini*, a modest bathing suit that Muslim women can wear, caused waves of controversy throughout France when it was first introduced. Because the burka, a misnomer of the face veil that few Muslim women in France actually wear, is not allowed in public spaces, the *burkini* was quickly banned on beaches by many small-town mayors during the summer of 2016, making Muslim women who wear the *burkini* seem "subversive and excessively religious" (Jung 2016). None of the interviewees commented on the viral photos of the women who were forced to unveil by male police officers on the beach. Instead, Ariane was quick to state her opinion on the issue of the *burkini*, saying how both the right and left-wing disliked the *burkini* but for different reasons. Specifically, she said,

The *burkini* phase was quite interesting because the far-right started to yell about this burka on the beach and a part of the left-wing started to say, 'oh my god, we fought in '68 in order to liberate women.' So, I'm from the left-wing. I'm not particularly Islamophobic, but don't do it.

Ariane goes on to say,

If I was saying no *burkini* on the beach, it was like 'oh my god you are so Islamophobic' and I am just like 'no I am just for equality of women in general' and they're like 'they can choose freely.'

While Ariane is against the hijab in public spaces in general, she emphasizes her personal feminist philosophy, which is shared by some of my other interviewees. According to this view, Muslim women can only become truly emancipated when they are able to rid themselves of the hijab or burka and fully assimilate into French society. Despite this, Ariane still shows that there is a divergent opinion that does see these forced unveilings

as problematic and the hijab ban as Islamophobic, but these opinions are often in the minority.

In her statement, Ariane interestingly mixes up the terms burka and *burkini*, implying that she views the *burkini* as essentially the same as the burka, despite the actual look of the *burkini*. During this discussion, Christine also mentioned that at first, she did not understand the purpose of the *burkini*, because all of the suits she saw were tight and form-fitting. This confused her as she believed the purpose of the *burkini* was to hide the woman's body. She goes on to say that these women could easily just wear a big t-shirt to cover-up, which would ultimately be easier because they would not be breaking any laws. In actuality, the woman who was forced to unveil during the 2016 controversy was not wearing a *burkini* but simply a blue tunic, black pants, and a headscarf. Ariane jumps in after Christine makes her point, emphasizing that the reason Muslim women want their bathing suits to look like a burka is so that they can make a political statement. When hearing the term *burkini*, the French imaginary sees it as a political statement as opposed to a modern-day fashion choice for Muslim women. It is also important to note that Ariane assumes that the *burkini* and burka look similar, whereas Christine perceives the *burkini* as very tight, which is unlike other traditional covers. Christine's understanding of the *burkini* is more in line with how the suit actually looked in the incident during the summer of 2016. It is clear that both Ariane and Christine are confused about the issue, and their arguments about the *burkini* and its place in modern, popular French fashion displays a general lack of knowledge around Muslim head coverings in France. Ultimately, both Ariane and Christine express their discontent with the *burkini* and how the situation has unraveled with Muslim women in France.

Paul also spoke up for the first time during the group interview in order to agree with Ariane. He brought up the fact that at the time of the 2011 burka ban, many people started to wear burkas in order to support the wider Muslim community. He also agreed with Ariane that this is the case for the Islamic scarf in general—people will wear it as a sign of

solidarity with the French Muslim community. In this understanding, it is clear that the hijab is simultaneously an instrument of oppression as well as an instrument of resistance. My interviewees from both left and right-leaning parties discussed the hijab as oppressive, non-feminist, and anti-assimilation.

While there is much divergence in opinion about the hijab across France (Teeple Hopkins 2015), much of the conversation does not seem to consider the actual opinions of Muslim women. Many of the interviewees in my study share the sentiment that the hijab is oppressive and that if you do in fact choose to wear it, you are actively excluding yourself from French society. This common thought process does not consider the actual lived experiences of Muslim women in France. The public discourse surrounding the hijab has ultimately presented Muslim women as a homogenous group. This affects Muslim women negatively because they are all painted in the same way, without acknowledgement of their differences. The general discourse surrounding the hijab, as seen in my and others' work, also clearly shows Muslim women as oppressed when they choose to veil. Although they are viewed without agency when they publicly display their religion, they are also argued to be active agents of resistance. This is seen when Muslim women chose to wear either the *burkini* or other modest clothes on the beach. Overall, it is interesting to note how the racialization of Muslim women has become an integral part of dominant French discourse, so much so that the veil is understood in racist terms—either denoting excessive sexuality or a lack thereof. It is clear that this is the framework in which my interlocutors try to make sense of Muslim women in the French public sphere.

Conclusion

Although the scope of my research is limited, notably by the small number of participants, my study provides valuable insight into French college students' opinions on *laïcité* and Muslims in France. At the beginning of my study, I had various preconceived notions about what French college students think about Islam and *laïcité* in France. Originally, I believed that these students would be more liberal and progressive, ideologies which are sometimes

seen as a given within younger generations and especially college students, at least in America. Throughout my stay in Paris and the time I spent with French college students, my understanding of them began to change. I started to think in terms of traditionalism, assuming that maybe French college students were more influenced by dominant French discourses than I originally thought. This change in thought occurred during my initial interviews, where interviewees held views consistent with dominant discourses founded in French republicanism. As time went on and I began to thoroughly analyze my data, I realized that the variance between students on different sides of the political spectrum was not drastic and fit within the wider frame of French republicanism.

As stated before, while one would assume that students have been raised in a time of de-facto racial and religious pluralism, especially in urban areas, some have little to no direct contact with Muslim populations, and they still express the commonplace belief that there is a "problem" that needs to be solved within the French-Muslim community. Overall, throughout my interviews it became clear that the racialization of Muslims has become such a large part of dominant French discourse that some of my interlocutors reiterate ideas that are founded in the historical processes of racializing Muslim populations. Many of these young students, who are even admittedly "leftist" and well-meaning, rationalize racist exclusions of Muslims in a typical French "color-blind" fashion. Again, even as leftists, it is hard for these young students to dismantle racial hierarchies and forms of domination; therefore, they used culturalist language to explain their beliefs, which ultimately attributes responsibility to individual Muslims for their fate. No matter how they understand issues facing the Muslim community, these students were still re-articulating broader French discursive trends and framing the discussion within French republicanism.

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