

**Securitization And Laïcité:**

***The Two Main Challenges of French Islam***

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*Grand Mosque De Paris*

The presence of Muslims in France is a direct though unforeseen result of the migrations of the early 1950s, which originated largely within the old colonial empire in North Africa. As Muslim populations grew during the 1970s, and with them the need for mosques, halal butchers, Qur'anic schools, and Muslim cemeteries, the rate of interaction between Muslim immigrants and French society rose correspondingly – as did the significance of religious and cultural factors in these interactions.

Additionally, major international incidents such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the First Gulf War, 9/11, and more recently the civil war in Syria as well as the rise of terrorist attacks on French soil have steadily raised fears of political connections between the global radical forms of Islam, like al-Qaeda and ISIS, and the French Muslim population.

The increased visibility of Islam has brought to the fore a host of questions, doubts, and sometimes violent confrontations, all related to the integration of newcomers within the national community. France, like other European countries, has undergone a racialization of Islam because of the specific ethnic concentration of Muslims from North Africa as an outcome of its colonial past. As a result, Islam is usually amalgamated with the visibility of the dominant ethnic group or with socio-economic features (from immigration to under-class or residential ghettos), with the devastating consequence of discrimination and racial hatred which make the headlines regularly.

Most importantly, the Muslim presence is forcing Frenchmen to reconsider the fragile balance between religion on the one hand and secular principles of social and political life on the other. Questions of citizenship, civic duty, social contract, along with “church and state” are being debated anew; arrangements and policies for the religious integration of Muslim communities are being discussed as a topic of national security.

The most recent iteration of this anxiety is the controversial “Islamic separatism” bill introduced in 2020 in the Parliament by President Macron, to protect the country from “radical Islam.” When the bill was passed through the National Assembly in February 2021, it included 51 articles covering a wide range of issues such as the funding of religious associations and mosques, the creation of a “contract of Republican commitment” to be signed by Islamic organizations and leaders, and the obligation for all children past the age of three to attend school (to avoid the influence of “fundamentalist” home schooling). The amended version of the bill passed through the Senate in March 2021 and was renamed as “Reinforcing the respect for the principles of the Republic and the fight against separatism.” It was even stricter, with additional measures such as expanding bans on religious symbols or clothing in public, banning religious practices in universities, or religious symbolism in political campaigns, not to mention the right for immigration authorities to refuse to renew the resident card of an individual who does not appear to accept republican principles.

Although the bill has received criticism for violating civil rights and religious liberty as well as perpetuating harmful stereotypes about Muslims and Islam, Macron has defended it as a means to protect the French Republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. This campaign against “Islamic separatism” encapsulates two key factors that fuel the French anxiety about Islam and Muslims: security and laïcité.

### **Securitization of Islam**

Securitization refers to exceptional measures and procedures outside the rule of law, justified by emergency situations that threaten the survival of political community. From this perspective, since 9/11, the cumulated attacks in Madrid (2004), London (2007), and the

Bataclan (2015), together with the Samuel Paty assassination (2020), have created a sense of urgency and “abnormality” that underlies all discussions on Islam and Muslims in France.<sup>1</sup>

Concerns for “transnational Islamic terrorism” have led to increased security measures that affect national populations, thereby blurring the line between international and domestic policies. In other words, aspects of socio-political integration – including education, urban development, and economic integration – are increasingly interpreted through the lens of culture and Islam, while concerns about socio-economic development or social mobility are conflated with the War on Terror and with Islam. Consequently, policies concerning immigration, citizenship, and the regulation of religion in the public sphere have become culturalized.

This externality is nothing new in the history of Western societies. Numerous scholars from Maxime Rodinson<sup>2</sup> to Hicham Djait<sup>3</sup> and Edward Said<sup>4</sup> have superbly demonstrated how “Homo Islamicus” is the typical other of Western modernity. The novelty lies in the international threat that is exacerbating the externality of Islam and Muslims and transforming them into enemies both inside and outside.<sup>5</sup> The consequence is that Muslims, especially the ones who assert their religious identity through dress code or participation in Islamic activities (mosques/Islamic education/religious leadership), are under increased political scrutiny and control. Two aspects are representative of this securitization of Islam: the rise of anti-Islamic discourse and the limitations on Islamic religious practice.

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<sup>1</sup>Jocelyne Cesari, *Why the West fears Islam: Exploration of Muslims in liberal democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Maxime Rodinson, *La fascination de l’Islam* (Paris: Fr. Maspero, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>Hichem Djait, *L’Europe et l’Islam* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

<sup>4</sup>Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

The rise of anti-Islamic discourse is the most obvious feature of the securitization of Islam. During the 1980s, anti-Islamic discourse was often linked to anti-immigration political positions and predominantly articulated by extreme right parties. Since 9/11 however, anti-Islamic discourse has pervaded mainstream politics. It is operating under the assumption that Islam is not a religion and hence cannot be treated as such. This perception is not the monopoly of extreme right-wing parties like the National Front. It has also permeated mainstream political discourse from the right to the left. Additionally, public intellectuals who display strong anti-Islam sentiments are being praised rather than disputed; for instance, the journalist Caroline Fourest was awarded the National Award of “Laïcité” in 2005 for her work warning of the fascination of the left with radical Islam. Her more recent books include titles such as *Eloge du blasphème (In praise of blasphemy)* and *Génie de la laïcité (The genius of secularism)*. This kind of speech is presented as courageous truth-telling in the face of moral relativists and dangerous Muslims. The view that freedom of speech is under attack by radical Islam has been exacerbated by the assault on Charlie Hebdo in 2015 and the assassination of Samuel Paty in 2020. The former was a reaction to the satirical comics ridiculing Islam and Muslims and the latter was the “punishment” of the schoolteacher who decided to show some of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons to his class.

It is therefore not surprising that the Paty murder was a large factor motivating the anti-separatists bill discussed above. A survey conducted by the Institut français d’opinion publique (IFOP) after the killing of Paty showed that 87% of respondents believed French secularism was under threat, and 79% agreed that Islamism had declared war on France.<sup>6</sup> Paty

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<sup>6</sup> Institut d’Études Opinion et Marketing en France et à l’International, “Le regard des français sur la menace terroriste et l’Islamisme,” *IFOP*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.ifop.com/publication/le-regard-des-francais-sur-la-menace-terroriste-et-lislamisme/>.

himself has been elevated to the status of a hero who was sacrificed on the altar for freedom of speech.<sup>7</sup>

The resulting effect of this fear is that securitization is not only translated into anti-Islamic discourses but also in more invisible and routine procedures that stray away from regular politics when they concern Muslims, and therefore impinge on civil liberties and especially religious freedom. In this respect, securitization exacerbates the externality of Islam and Muslims within French society. For example, certain religious practices, such as dress codes, are seen as incompatible with the acquisition of the French nationality. A 32-year-old woman, married to a French national, arrived in the country in 2000. She spoke good French and her three children were born in France. Yet, due to the fact that she wore a burqa and lived in “total submission” to her husband and male relatives, according to reports by social services, she was denied French citizenship in 2008. According to the ruling of the Conseil Constitutionnel (equivalent to the U.S. Supreme Court), “She has adopted a radical practice of her religion, incompatible with essential values of the French community, particularly the principle of equality of the sexes.”<sup>8</sup>

More generally, the perception of Muslims as the enemy has affected all aspects of the practice of Islam, from the status of imams to education, dietary rules, and family life.<sup>9</sup> Surveys have identified a significant increase of discrimination against Islamic practices, especially post-

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<sup>7</sup> Sudip Kar-Gupta, Richard Lough, “Beheaded teacher was a ‘quiet hero’ who incarnated French values, Macron says,” *Reuters*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-security/beheaded-teacher-was-quiet-hero-who-incarnated-french-values-macron-says-idUSKBN2760JV>.

<sup>8</sup> Angelique Chrisafis, “France rejects Muslim woman over radical practice of Islam,” *The Guardian*, July 11, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/12/france.islam#:~:text=14-France%20has%20denied%20citizenship%20to%20a%20Moroccan%20woman%20who%20wears.as%20equality%20of%20the%20sexes>.

<sup>9</sup> Jocelyne Cesari, *Why the West fears Islam*.

9/11, which are not mirrored in discrimination against the majority religion or other minority religions.<sup>10</sup>

Along the same line, the burqa ban in 2010 was justified on security rather than secular grounds. The argument was that in situations such as withdrawing money from a bank or voting in an election, the *niqabi* needs to prove that she is who she claims to be (i.e., she needs to show her face). Additionally, civil servants or figures of authority should not be veiled while interacting with the public, as this undermines the public's trust in their position. Such arguments fit in well with the securitization of Islam because they appeal to the need for public order and safety for all. In 2016, a terrorist attack occurred on Bastille Day in Nice, killing 86 people. In the following weeks, the local authorities launched a campaign to ban the burkini from the beaches, stating that "wearing [an] outfit ostentatiously showing religious beliefs may be interpreted as affiliation with religious fundamentalism." The burkini ban was ultimately overturned by a French judge's ruling that, "the emotion and concerns arising from terrorist attacks, including those committed in Nice on July 14, are not sufficient to legally justify the contested ban."<sup>11</sup>

In sum, the securitization of Islam is more than an emotionally powerful rhetoric. It is also a vast array of policies and bureaucratic practices which are intended to mold the behavior of Muslims in accordance with the "liberal" values of European societies, and hence to make

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Fox and Yasemin Akbaba, Religious iscrimination against religious minorities in Western democracies from 1990 to 2008," (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association Annual Conference "Global governance: Political authority in transition," Montreal, Quebec, Canada March 16, 2011), accessed March 20, 2012, [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p501549\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p501549_index.html).

<sup>11</sup> Lauren Said-Moorhouse, "Burkini ban in Nice overturned by French court," *CNN*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/02/europe/france-burkini-ban>; The Conseil d'État ordinance can be read in full here: <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/site/ressources/decisions-contentieuses/dernieres-decisions-importantes/ce-ordonnance-du-26-aout-2016-ligue-des-droits-de-l-homme-et-autres-association-de-defense-des-droits-de-l-homme-collectif-contre-l-islamophobi?fbclid=IwAR18hkvGrTybv2q9yU8XamVsb3GHk4pAfXN0gDou0O2u3zJEwQj2cqiLtSs>

Islamic practices and groups compliant with the “right” governance. The same logic is at play in the never-ending discussion of the content and limits of religious freedom and religious practices in the secular space.

### **Laïcité as a secularist ideology**

The French form of secularism or laïcité has paradoxically become a significant obstacle to the religious integration of Islam. Laïcité is a legal concept based on two principles: equality of all religions under the law and state neutrality vis-à-vis religions. These two principles, though, are understood through multiple narratives and cultural expectations of what is “religious” and what is “secular” that present religion as a negative force in society and politics and, therefore, something that has to be at best contained or at worse weakened. The common French political conviction, shared by most Europeans, is that religion is or should be mostly a private matter. However, the French interpretation of the private/public distinction has gone the furthest in Europe by removing almost all religious signs and practices from the public space.

Interestingly, and rather paradoxically, this private/public distinction is coupled with the active interference of the French state in the creation of a representative body of Islam at the national level. The engagement of Muslim leaders in this institutional integration of Islam within the dominant framework of laïcité shows their acceptance of the French secular rules. Yet, their willingness often goes unnoticed, along with the growing role of the state in reshaping Islam and creating new Islamic institutions and representatives. Since the 1990s, the successive Ministries of Interior have labored to create an Islamic umbrella organization which would become the national representative of Islam to address topics that intersect with state level policies (slaughtering houses, religious education, burial procedures). These efforts led to the establishment in 2003 of the French Council of the Islamic Religion (*Conseil Français du Culte*

*Musulman*), after local elections conducted through Muslim associations. The head of this institution has a status parallel to the cardinal's for the Catholic Church or the national chief rabbi for Judaism. All Muslim leaders have actively participated in this process without raising questions about the leading role of the state that went beyond the scope of what the law of *laïcité* allows. Besides the creation of the Council, other examples of state encroachment are the bans of headscarves (2004) and *niqab* (2010) in public spaces, supervision of the training and accreditation of imams, the control of *khutbas*, the policing of female dress code in public venues ... and the list goes on. These interferences are an infringement of the separation of state and church inscribed in the law. The irony is that this breach comes from the same state rulers who continuously suspect Muslims of rejecting it! It is worth mentioning that most of the Muslim organizations in France are led by two types of leaders. One is made of figures representing the interests of some countries of origin like Algeria, Morocco, and Turkey with which the French state has close connections. The second type includes representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood with a significant influence on the Muslim youth<sup>12</sup>. Both types have actively participated in the creation of the state-endorsed representative body of Islam.

Besides the institutional aspect of State-Islam interactions, the most acute challenge concerns the public/private divide that defines the status of religion in public space. More

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<sup>12</sup> Khosrokhavar, Farhad. "The Muslim Brotherhood in France." In *The Muslim Brotherhood*, pp. 137-147. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010. Also see Vidino, Lorenzo. "Aims and Methods of Europe's Muslim Brotherhood." *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 4 (2006): 22-44.

specifically, the ideal of a privatized religion leads to major tensions around three features of secularism: the principle of secular justification, the visibility of embodied religious practices, and the tensions of individual/collective rights.

The principle of secular justification means that only arguments based on secular reasoning are legitimate in public debates with binding outcomes. From this perspective, many of the recent crises related to Islam in public spaces – such as the Rushdie affair and the controversy over cartoons published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* – can be seen as the result of the challenge posed to Muslims to express their grievances through the principle of secular justification. More specifically, these crises shed light on the difficulty for some Muslim leaders to articulate their claims within the secular framework of the public space. It is worth emphasizing that while the majority of Muslims live their religion within this framework, some religious leaders, especially those trained and socialized in Muslim countries, convey their positions in a religious language not receivable in the French public space.

The ultimate irony is that, because the French legislation limits freedom of expression on the ground of hatred of speech or racial discrimination, most of the protests of Muslims against the Danish cartoons or the Charlie Hebdo insulting drawings were legitimately voiced within this legal framework, conforming to the principle of secular justification. However, even when presented in the language of prevention of racial or ideological hatred, Muslims protests were not heard and were not even distinguished from the more inflammatory ones conveyed by some religious figures.

The recognition of Islamic law within the French legal systems, and the concern that specific subcultures can stifle individual rights, is another example of tension between the political order and Muslim communities. Shari'ah is often depicted as a fixed set of medieval

laws opposed to democratic principles by projecting the situation of some Muslim-majority countries onto Muslims in Europe, and by creating the widespread belief that Muslims want to include Shari'ah in the constitutions of European countries. The reality, attested by many surveys, is that Muslims are satisfied with the secular nature of European states:<sup>13</sup> they politically engage within the democratic rules, while still referring to Islamic principles as a guide for their daily personal and family lives.

It is most likely that family law and the right to cultural identity are the spheres in which Islamic norms may find a place within the European legal structure. The general trend in France and across Europe has been to accommodate some Islamic requirements about divorce or marriage within national laws, which has led to the construction of an “invisible” form of Islamic law adapted to Western secular contexts. The most acute challenge is about the confusion between cultural claims that affect gender equality and are often perceived by the French public opinion as religiously prescribed, like forced marriage, honor killings, or FGM. As a result, a new generation of religious authorities have emerged who attempt to tailor interpretations of Islam to the French secular culture. One of those leaders is the head of the grand mosque of Bordeaux, Tareq Oubrou, who has been very outspoken against the headscarf, asking Muslim women to “put your headscarf in your pocket” and claiming that the practice of wearing a headscarf gives a negative view on the way Islam views women. He went as far as declaring that the debate over headscarf regulations is “shameful” because it prevents the establishment of a modern Islam, compatible with the concept of French emancipation. His position, however, is not dominant as most of the religious figures either from the Muslim Brotherhood or the

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<sup>13</sup> See Jocelyne Cesari (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of European Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Jocelyne Cesari, “Intimate strangers: Islam and Europe” in G. Davies (Ed.), *Oxford handbook on religions in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press).

countries of origin have adopted a more traditional stance, while asking the students to compromise by removing their headscarf only in the classroom if the teacher demands it. Notwithstanding Oubrou's position, the appeal of hijab, and more generally modesty rules, remains significant among French Muslim youth but is treated with suspicion if not outright hostility. Islamic dress is considered an "improper display of religious signs" in public spaces. According to figures provided by the Collectif contre l'Islamophobie en France (CCIF), the typical victim of an Islamophobic act is a woman who wears the hijab.<sup>14</sup>

The headscarf and other embodied religious practices (modesty rules, gender separation, dietary guidelines, sexual behaviors) shed light on the inconvenient reality that secular individualism and religious individualism are not synonymous. According to the former, the body is under the control of the individual who as an "enlightened" person exerts rational thinking and regulates emotions in all domains of life, including the most intimate ones. As a result, the cognitive dimension of religion is emphasized over religious bodily functions (ablution, fasting, flagellation, sexuality). Simultaneously, religion becomes the personal and private feature of the "enlightened believer" and loses its social and public significance. The supremacy of the secular form of individualism in France has obliterated the fact that all religions hold a different conception of the individual. The religious individual is restricted by self-discipline in order to serve the religious group and message. By contrast, the modern individual is defined by the absence of limits in the pursuit of its desires and by the supremacy of personal choice over religious constraints. Therefore, the irresistible progression of the individualization of beliefs is a staple of the Western narrative, but does not reflect the historical

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<sup>14</sup> Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France, "2020 Report: Islamophobia in France," *CCIF*, 2020, <https://www.islamophobie.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RAPPORT-CCIF-2020-EN.pdf>.

tension between the autonomy of the subject as a believer and the modern individual. From this perspective, any religious individual must balance identification with and participation in the religious collective to secular individualist societies. Therefore, the headscarf is not seen as the outcome of individual freedom because in France this individual freedom can only be secular. While it can be said that initially laïcité was intended to provide the free space for the enactment of both secular and religious individualisms, the erosion of the social significance of religion and the drastic decline of religiosity in the French population have rendered incomprehensible the possibility that individuals would freely choose religious limitations of their personal freedom in the name of religion.

### **Conclusion: The French Phobia in a Global Context**

The visibility of Islam in French society has also made more acute the fact that the regime of truth in Islam is a site of competition between different international and transnational Islamic organizations and globalized authority figures. This includes the religious promoters of a global *Ummah* (a.k.a. pan-Islamists), who belong to diverse groups from the Wahhabi/Salafi to the Muslim Brotherhood, as each has a very different position regarding modernity.

The Muslim Brothers in Europe are in favor of the political and civic participation of Muslims in mainstream society. In the current political discourse, they are often associated with Wahhabis and Jihadis and deemed terrorists, which is far from reflecting their religious reality on the ground. Part of the paradox highlighted earlier is that they were included in the negotiations with the French state to build the national Islamic organization. In the current climate that led to the Islamic separatism bill discussed above, some of their associations have been under scrutiny or shut down despite the fact that they oppose intolerant or reactive trends of Islam at the grass-

root level. In fact, the Muslim Brothers are in competition with the Wahhabi/Salafi movements that have gained global influence across Muslim majorities and minorities. Salafism, or rather neo-Wahhabism, is based on a literalist interpretation of the Qur'an and *Hadith* and a rejection of critical, mystical, and historical interpretations of Islamic tradition. It also operates on the rejection, if not excommunication, of other religious interpretations. The accessibility and visibility of Salafism has made it very popular and has also turned it into the norm for Western perception of what a "good" Muslim ought to be. Therefore, a generalization is made that all Muslims are inherently and essentially Salafi (i.e., conservative, revivalist) in their beliefs. This oversimplification does not reflect the diversity of the religious identities of French Muslims that runs the gamut from cultural identification to religious conservatism. This essentialism sets Islam and Muslim as being diametrically opposed to the Western, secular, "liberal" values of France. This perceived incompatibility, in turn, is channeled within the French political treatment of Islam as shown by the security policies and controversies about *laïcité*.

In sum, the convergence of securitization with the ideological version of *laïcité* as a contra-religion creates a very volatile situation where Muslims are seen as uncivic and dangerous not because of their political engagement but because they want to practice their religion. It will require political courage and civism to overcome this dominant perception.

### **Author Bio**



### Profile

**Jocelyne Cesari** holds the Chair of Religion and Politics and is director of research at the Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion at the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom; at Georgetown University she is a senior fellow at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. President elect of the European Academy of Religion (2018-19), her work on religion and politics has garnered recognition and awards: 2020 Distinguished Scholar of the religion section of the International Studies Association, Distinguished Fellow of the Carnegie Council for Ethics and International Affairs and the Royal Society for Arts in the United Kingdom. She is a Professorial Fellow at Australian Catholic University's Institute for Religion, Politics and Society. Her new book, *We God's*

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