Politics of National Identity: Muslim Integration Discourse in France

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Abstract

Scholarship on post-colonial relations between the French and Muslims is divided on the cause of the passing of secularist laws in recent decades. This research analyzes major turning points in the history of Muslim relations in France to explain why such policies have appeared and the effects of the reinvigorated discussions on French identity and national belonging which includes Muslim integration. The debate has been and continues to be divided into separate groups by political party affiliation. However, the influences and motives of all sides have been called into question. While some believed that the goal of these policies was ultimately the protection of all French citizens regardless of their family's national origins, others claimed that the issue went much deeper into France's historic nationalistic intent to preserve longstanding notions of French identity. To demonstrate the ways that different understandings of secularism and Muslim integration have affected policy, This paper will examine how different actors respond in the legislative documents surrounding the passing of secularist laws: *l'affaire du Foulard* of 1989, law n° 209 of 2003-2004, and *L'affaire Baby Loup* of 2008. These cases are indicative of the ways in which such policy is discussed within the government as well as how it is portrayed by the media. By reviewing the opinions expressed in both the parliamentary debates and private meetings, this study will add to the debate on the ways in which post-colonialism continues to impact the ability of Muslims to be accepted as French.

Keywords: France, Muslim, Xenophobia

1. Introduction

In France, political debate has centered on Muslim belonging and integration as it relates to historical protectionism. Modern controversies and eruptions of contentions such as the Islamic headscarf debate have prompted continued studies in related areas of the relation of xenophobia to nationalism. Many give a detailed depiction as to why tensions have arisen between Muslim populations and their host countries, however, there are some lapses in explanations for the lack of successful assimilations and continued anti-Muslim sentiments and policies.[1] An analysis of identity in historical and present legal context and discourse is critical to understanding how portrayals of Muslim integration impact their integration into a country known for secularism and, more recently, polarized political parties.

With instances of secularist policies appearing in the French government, exact motives have varied between political parties and other actors such as the media. The narrative of right-leaning groups differed greatly from the left by logic, but the safety of French citizens remained the greatest concern. Attitudes began to shift once that safety was called into question by terrorist attacks or use of the burqa to conceal weapons. Center and left of center groups began questioning whether the goal of right-wing political parties is truly safety or a way in which to pass protectionist or *souverainiste* (often meaning leaning toward isolationist) policies. The goals of such policies align with the nationalistic history of French identity which seeks to preserve the political and economic aspects of the French Republic. Such policies relating to the public expression of religion can risk further polarizing the debate on national belonging.

Given France's current political climate and ever-increasing Muslim population, understanding the country's secular history can help to impede the progression of estranging policy.

2. Literature Review

France as a nation had started with "freedom of conscience, separation of State and Churches, and the equal respect of all faiths and beliefs."[2] However, this came with the idea that a united nation has "the oneness, the sameness of all individuals" as core values.[3] With its history of nationalism, France developed an extreme form of secularism called: *laïcité*.

According to scholars, France's hard secularism, which does not begin to describe the severity of laïcité, was a response to its specific relationship with the Catholic Church.[4] It came from a policy that served the desires of an elite group as opposed to a shared value of the nation. From the policies instituted during the Revolution to those that came during the Third Republic, were a number of laws that suppressed religious freedom.[5] The goal of the suppression was the same as that of the full integration of immigrants: unity. The ways in which such outsiders have historically been depicted continues to impact their relationships with the French while attempting to integrate.

2.1. French Modernization

Eugan Weber had focussed not as much on nationalism, but rather on France's civilization crisis which he had traced back to the beginning of the French Republic. Due to the emergence of modernization in French society, traditional attitudes and practices began to break down. Roads and railways were the truly decisive factors, connecting the remote and inaccessible regions with markets and major centers of the modern world. The products of industry made many of the peasant skills useless.[6] Such drastic changes to the structural organization of a society left the unavoidable pressure to be unified. The expanding school system that resulted from the societal shift taught not only the language of the dominant culture (French) but also its values including patriotism[7]. The education of a nation's youth can have a great impact on the values that foster nationalism.[8] The combination then of ethnic origin and state institutions played a role in the emergence of a more modern nationalism with narratives that are seen in France's right political parties to this day such as opposition to free migration and French membership in the European Union as well as economic protectionism.[9]

2.2. The Role Of The Media

Many scholars have found that much of what had impacted the formation of the Muslim identity in France is the stigma found often in the media.[10] The media's portrayal of secular policy as well as terrorist attacks has labeled all Muslims by religion alone. Millo[11] cites several examples of news articles in which the ideas expressed could bring about the further isolation of anyone who identifies with the Islamic religion, including French converts. A notable example is the misuse of terms found in a New York Times article where terms like "Salafist Islam" are used without first giving a definition.[12]

Scholarly depictions of the secular French society can also consider the community's historical roots. An article in the Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe, for example, found that the categorization of Islam in France is contributed to the colonial and post-colonial relations between France and its former African colonies.[13] In order to put recent events in context, the colonial history and France's continued presence in Africa must be considered.

2.3. French Nationalism

More recent events such as the Islamic Veil Affair of 2004 led to a significant amount of published scholarship. Much of the theoretical debate centers on whether religion, race or ethnicity is truly the explanation for the current secularism. Cesari[14], for example, focuses on religion alone to account for the entirety of issues in present social and political spheres. There is much more to the debate than just religion. The discussion of ethnicity as a concept is made complicated by the variety of similar terms, such as race, nation, and minority group.[15] The terms may occasionally be used interchangeably or treated as completely separate, and each choice has a distinct effect on the way that their argument

is formed. Its ambiguity and vagueness account for much of the political issues due to term misuse. A common linkage between immigration populations is the Muslim faith. However, this distinction is a problematic, albeit a neat, explanation which oversimplifies the complex history that has led to present relations.

The arguments which provide a strong explanation of French identity and nationalism are able to provide a much more comprehensive view of present Muslim-French relations. The rhetoric that has emerged alongside policy has shown the anxieties related to national allegiance. Full immersion may still appear far away as the public continues to embrace what has historically made the Republic strong: unity. An accomplishment of the French Revolution was the creation of a unitary nation, but it is now attributed to the xenophobic nature of French nationalism.

The scholarship remains divided between the historical analysis which places the reformation of identity at the forefront of the issue[16] and the political theorists that theorize that the state is to blame and therefore it is up to them to diversify.[17] The hope of this research is to bridge the gap and argue that the two go hand-in-hand in creating the separation of the current political atmosphere.

3. Methodological Choices

This paper uses a discourse analysis, specifically speech act analysis, to analyze major turning points in the history of Muslim relations in France. A speech act analysis will include a study of both the function and the speaker's meaning behind their discourse. The discourse analysis will be conducted under an interpretive methodology framework that will seek to analyze what function the language serves. The research will be focused on significant nationalistic events in French history that have shown changes in the way that the public views immigrants and Muslims in particular. This will include legislative documents surrounding the passing of secularist laws such as *l'affaire du Foulard* of 1989, law n° 209 of 2003-2004, *L'affaire Baby Loup* of 2008, and the burqa robbery of 2010.

The time periods that will be analyzed are points in which discourse marks a certain shift in Muslim relations. To contextualize more current political platforms, the independence of French colonies in the 1960s will be considered in order to identify how nationalism was affected during the time. The focus will then be specific legislation such as the "conspicuous" religious symbols in schools ban of 2004 and face covering ban of 2010. The actors producing discourses during these periods will include such presidents as Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy, nationalist groups, and newspapers. Such sources will include transcripts of speeches, policy documents, newspaper articles, and informal and formal meetings between heads of state; they will be chosen based on their publishing date in relation to the legislation as well as the actors involved. The selections will also be determined by reliability as the opinions stated in transcripts differ depending on the initial audience. These texts will be invaluable in order to understand the ways in which history impacts personal views and thus cultural norms. The majority of such documents are available from France's online governmental archives.

3.1. Limitations Of Reports

Many of my primary sources present challenges. As a preface to the research, it will be necessary to inform the audience that translations may not include necessarily as much cultural nuance as the original French. While will be able to translate the documents myself, there is a possibility that I may miss something that a native speaker would pick up on. As these are also laws that include legislative language, the documents may prove difficult as I do not have a legal background.

I must also address my limitations of objectivity. I had lived in France during the terrorist attacks of 2015 and 2016. The feelings of French citizens was expressed openly to me and, while this did impact my personal feelings, I intend to present only ideas synthesized from other scholars or archival research. While the sources from the French Senate had some great topical points, the information provided is noted as being "subject to the usual reservations" according to the president.[18] This could mean that any number of things may have been omitted from or edited in the transcript.

4. Empirical Evidence

The French Republic has proclaimed that Muslim immigrants must integrate into the French national, secular identity in order to enjoy the same liberties as those of native-born French citizens.[19] But truly just how egalitarian is laïcité toward Islam? France has been known to believe in the "autonomous individual who exists prior to his or her choices

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of lifestyle, values, and politics," but the recent policies that have been created in the name of defining values instead foster anti-immigration sentiments directed towards Muslims that have permeated into modern political decisions.[20] The policies include: compelling school children to sing the national anthem, prohibiting the full Islamic veil in public spaces, and creating a stricter 'citizenship contract' for would-be French citizens.[21] However, there have been many who have openly criticized the practices for pushing inequality, rather than defining French values.[22] While the goal of security is one that is rightly emphasized in light of terror attacks, the direct singling out of certain religions poses many more problems than potential solutions for France.

4.1. Political Debate

Discussions on national identity are mostly brought forward by Nicolas Sarkozy, president of France from 2007-2012 and member of The UMP: a center-right, Gaullist, and conservative political party. A movement associated with both the party and Sarkozy is *Sarkozysm;* It is mostly concerned by security policy and, notably, immigration control. After political adjustments had been made for the Muslim population, Sarkozy said that "the French republic is retreating in certain areas."[23] This language shows how much fear can contribute to identity politics. Other people sharing his opinions fear that accommodation to immigrants will reduce integration even more which has many doubting the survival of the Republic. Voluntary integration is doubtful in this instance because the number of immigrants is ever increasing and they group together in cities and form communal ties based on language and culture within their new country and will then disassociate with the host country's norms. For example, a survey shows that sixty percent of Muslims living in the Netherlands identify themselves first as Moroccans or Turks before Dutch.[24] The Dutch identity is still a part of the entirety of the person, but the nation of origin or nation of parents' origin has played a larger role for immigrant families that place a relatively high value on their religion.

4.2. Discrimination As An Inherent Ideology

Discussions concerning secularist policy often surrounded incidents related to public religious affiliation. In 1989 was *l'affaire du Foulard* (The Scarf Affair) where three girls were suspended from their middle school for refusing to remove their Islamic scarves.[25] The Parliamentary debates that ensued discussed the issue in the broader context of secularism in the state. In the debate of the 27th of November 1989, Adrien Gouteyron, a right-leaning politician and member of the *Union des Démocrates pour la Cinquième République* argued that regardless of "the conditions under which [the headscarf] would be worn… [a ban would] violate the dignity or freedom of the student.[26] The conditions that were specifically mentioned to be "anti-French" were acts of provocation, proselytism or propaganda, and it was determined that future incidents would be examined on a case-by-case basis with those in mind.[27]

Many of the roots of the present debate are in relation to law n° 209, 2003-2004, adopted by the National Assembly. This bill, proposed by Nicolas Sarkozy and in the application of the principle of secularism, would prohibit displays of religious affiliation in public schools.[28] Unlike Islam, the majority religion of France, Christianity, would remain more or less unaffected. Such an interjection could be ignored as there is nothing distinctive and related to daily wear that is required or expected by the Christian church.

In the months surrounding the signing of law n° 209, 2003-2004 by President Jacques Chirac, the National Assembly held several meetings which transcripts are available online. The meeting directly following its passing outlines the aims of the law and the more technical details of how it would eventually be implemented. The liberal but non-Gaullist Prime Minister at the time, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, said that the law affirmed secularism as a "strong value of our Republic."[29] The same year brought many other instances of pushing forward a similar national narrative. There was a bill that was only backed by the political right in response to several public riots: the equal opportunities law.[30]

Also in 2003, President Chirac (UMP) nominated Bernard Stasi (Union for French Democracy: center-right) to head a commission of 20 experts coined the "Stasi Commission."[31] The commission's creation was surrounded by several meetings that outlined the objectives of the experts. This includes a meeting between Stasi, Borvo (Communist party), Ferry (Minister of Youth, National Education and Research) and others on March 2, 2004. The first goal mentioned was to avoid stigmatizing the Muslim religion, but they go on to say that young women in France wear the veil "because of pressure and brutality from their parents."[32] The goals are entirely contradictory as the mere creation of the law creates a new stigmatization especially when framed as female oppression. In the words of Bernard Stasi, the law was necessary to "stop the will of certain radicals who try to test the resistance of the Republic."[33] The "resistance" of the Republic also shows that the maintenance of historical republicanism is still ingrained in the political system.

The next crucial meeting was on November 23rd of that same year. This meeting gave great insight into the short-comings of the reports of the Stasi Commission. Its creation was said to be a "political project based on a humanist

conception of man," but also was said to be to "strengthen republican principles."[34] The overall impression gained from these meetings is that the French government sought and vetted several potential forms of secularism, which would maintain the French identity without going so far as to be considered discrimination. Actors involved in these debates understood the estranging effects of their discourse yet chose to value policy that would promote French protectionism.

4.3. Laïcité In 2003

Much of the collected evidence pertaining to the headscarf debates have been gathered from newspapers reporting at the time: politically moderate *Le Monde* and the politically right-wing *Le Figaro*. These data contribute to a reaffirmed, French national narrative through arguments about whether religious symbols, specifically referring to headscarves, should be allowed in different areas of the public sphere ranging from streets to schools. From Sarkozy to the Stasi Commission, prior political actions do not reflect the secularist, post-2003 motives. Although, politics in France today continue to be protected from the influence of civil society and lobbies hold little-to-no legal weight, meaning the interests of minorities are often overlooked.[35]

While widely known for being the president who initiated the debates in 2003 with his speech to the UOIF, Sarkozy had not initially had that intention. In fact, several parliamentarians had originally hoped that laws regarding head-scarves would not pass for the worry that it would increase the stigmatization around Muslims.[36] Instead, Sarkozy wanted to continue the 1989 decision to look at each decision individually[37].

At the same time that law n° 209, 2003-2004 was initially discussed, the Stasi Commission put forward a proposal to recognize the Muslim holiday, Eid al-Kebir, the festival of sacrifice, as a national holiday[38]. This would have been an unprecedented event in France that would have been well placed with the increased numbers of Muslims in France. Only the ban passed.[39] This only helped to solidify the view that republicanism and secularism are synonymous with belonging in France.

Later that year, in a parliamentary session with president Chirac and Jean-Claude Carle of the French Senate, the more moderate side of the Stasi Commission report is exemplified. Bernard Stasi is quoted as saying that, to him, "laïcité is neither passive nor combative," but what has historically upheld the ideal is that, in theory, it provides "freedom of conscience of each person in his religious choice; equality in law which prohibits all discrimination on the part of the State; and the neutrality of political power, which should not privilege or spoil any religion in relation to another."[40] Despite its intentions, the fear among politicians was that the censure of the Muslim religion would increase communalism among French Muslims and threaten the French Republic.

4.4. "*L'affaire Baby Loup*" of 2009

The affair coined "*L'affaire Baby Loup*" after the daycare where it took place is a clear mark of the most recent developments in France. In 2008, Fatima Afif was dismissed for "serious misconduct" after refusing to remove her Islamic veil once she returned from maternity leave.[41] Similar to other incidents, her argument grew into a national debate, but the Court of Appeals ruled that the firing was not discriminatory.

In 2009, Nicolas Sarkozy spoke directly to parliament regarding religious symbols in public spaces in France. This is an interesting speech mostly because he takes such a strong stance against the burqa compared to his statements when he was French minister of the interior. The goal of the passed law was secularist, but the context of this speech adds that, to Sarkozy, the burqa is not welcome in France.[42] There was also no clear definition of what would be considered "public space.[43]"

Also in 2009, the communist MP, André Gerin's (Rhône), proposed to create 'a commission of inquiry examining the burka and niqab on the national territory.[44]" What resulted was additional questioning of whether Islam could be considered French and the greater stigmatization of French Muslims. The fines varied greatly between a person found wearing a facial covering versus someone who forced others to do so. Extracts of the law were leaked to *Le Figaro*; Article 1 of the law proposes a 150 euro fine for the wearer and article 2 is for the enforcer who would pay 15,000 euros.[45] The harsh difference between punishments reinforces this stigma that there is oppression of women within Islam which then created a new view of gender equality in France. In contemporary France, gender equality is equated to republican sameness and gender difference within Islam.

4.5. Burqa Robbery Of 2010

Up until this point, political motives were concerned with the safety of the French citizen, but, in the fall of 2010, two robbers wearing burqas stole 4,500 euros from a French post office. According to French news sites, what followed were discussions about limiting the use of the full Islamic veil due to its incompatibility with French values.[46] The subject matter became the national discourse rather than specific points on how to prevent another such event. The veil became something to fear could be used for attacks.

This has created a dissonance between an immigrants' personal identity and what others' perceptions of the immigrant are. Even though an increasing number of naturalized immigrants have chosen to keep their former nationalities in recent years, their own feelings don't impact the way that the historically French people view them.[47] Reports of hate crimes against Muslims only began to be reported in 2010 with a majority (70%) targeting women.[48] Ultimately, discrimination exists where differences are easily distinguishable, and women in full the Islamic veil are recognizably Muslim.

There is also a notable difference to be taken into account. Even though some immigrants could feel 'at home' in France, they may not feel entirely French with the historical emphasis placed on such principles as secularism and republicanism. The recent influx of refugees due to the European crisis can be expected to continue the current trends in national feeling.

The most recent political decisions of specific incidents now refer back to the 'freedom of conscience' law of 1905.[49] However, this is also referred to as the separation of church and state in France. The boundary between religion and education, however, is blurred. The state continues to contribute funding to Catholic schools and church maintenance.[50] The result of the discussions was the decision that wearing the headscarf alone would not be enough for expulsion. There would also need to be proof of threatening public order, proselytizing, or endangering herself or others.[51]

4.6. November 2015 Paris Attacks: Religious Expression

While most event-specific debate centered on those of 2004 and 2010, the most recent events that have sparked controversy in France began with the terrorist attacks that took place on November 13, 2015. The state of emergency that ensued and its policies were intended to end after only a few months but were extended after Nice and Rouen were attacked in the summer of 2016.

The new permanent state of emergency put in place that replaced the original, legally allows the enshrining of de facto discrimination against French Muslim, a version of stop-and-frisk policing.[52] French police will also be able to conduct home searches and place suspects under house arrest, with limited involvement by the courts, and local authorities will be empowered to close "places of worship in which are disseminated the writings, ideas or theories that provoke violence, hatred and discrimination."[53] These measures make police discrimination all the more possible. With simply a claim that they are working towards national security, police can now play a much stronger part in the validation of French citizens' fears that the expression of religion can be dangerous.

5. Conclusion

Proposals of the analyzed laws remain grounded in the legal principle of laïcité, but, they also reference the key concepts of the national narrative. The historical events that formed the current French identity and national narrative of what it means to belong go together with the actions of the state in order to influence the harsh distinctions between today's political parties relating to the integration of Muslims. Nationalism has been used to justify far more than the initially idealized portrayal of one united nation through the sameness of its citizens.

The disaffected portrayal of incidents including the Islamic religion or any of its symbols in both the media and legal documents can continue to foster anti-Muslim sentiments in France. The fear relates not only to incidents of terrorism but of the survival of the French Republic which puts politicians in a position where protectionist policies are preferred by not only extreme right political groups but also those with more centrist views. The ideals fostered by political parties are strong as seen with the change in discourse from Sarkozy surrounding the crucial formation period of public opinion surrounding the rise of Islamophobia.

Hate crime in France targeted at Muslims was not reported until the after the 2010 proposal by the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFDCM).[54] Better collection of data would also include distinguishing between crimes against race, culture, and religion. For example, incidents such as the "death to Arabs" sign as well as when pig legs were

thrown inside a mosque in Perpignan could be rightfully categorized as against a race or a religion[55]. It must be noted that such incidents are not constrained to France alone. Future research would expand the scope to include the Muslim ban by President Donald Trump in the US to explore the effects of political statements in greater detail. Similarly, the historical aspects of this research could be widened to include an in-depth analysis of how legal arguments dating back to the French Revolution discuss secular policies.

Alongside such research, the political climate, as it pertains to the social positions of the French citizen, would benefit from a change in the media portrayal of events. Newspapers have shown that they contextualize incidents to the point that specific events relating to the public expression of religion spark new debates on national belonging. Present relations in France are a result of historical portrayal that has created ingrained biases. The first step forward would be to reverse the effects of the state of emergency as it violates the rights of the stigmatized religions simply through the use of fear and under the pretext of the war on terror.

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