

“You can’t forget our roots anyway”:  
French College Students’ views on a Multicultural France

by

**Marisel Elyssa Tabachnick**

Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, 2019

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences for the degree of

Bachelor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2019

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This thesis/dissertation was presented

by

**Mariel Elyssa Tabachnick**

It was defended on

March 18, 2019

and approved by

Heath Cabot, Assistant Professor, Anthropology Department

Paul Silverstein, Professor, Reed College Anthropology Department

David Petterson, Associate Professor, French and Italian Department

Jeanette Jouili, Assistant Professor, Religious Studies Department

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Mariel Elyssa Tabachnick, BA

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Islam is immanent to and constitutive of France, and yet 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 value. While many urban French college students in particular have grown up in a time of de-facto racial pluralism, they have also grown up in the aftermath of events such as 9/11, the 2004 hijab ban and the 2011 burka ban, all of which have played significant roles in dominant French discourses on Islam and *laïcité*. Therefore, how have these students been shaped by contemporary French discourses and understandings of *laïcité*? While there is much literature on post-colonial France and Muslims within this context, there is a lack of scholarly research on French college students in particular and their understandings of Muslims in France. In this exploratory ethnographic study, I argue that students on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum still reiterate opinions that fit within the dominant French discourse surrounding Muslims in France. This in turn perpetuates the racialization of Islam within the framework of French republicanism.

## Table of Contents

<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.0 Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.1 Theoretical Framework .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1.2 Methods .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>2.0 Empirical Analysis .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.1.1 French Student’s thoughts on French identity .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>2.1.2 Muslim Identity within the French Context .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>2.1.3 Assimilation: How should Muslims be incorporated into France? .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>2.1.4 Muslim Women and the Hijab in France .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>2.1.5 Perspectives on the <i>Banlieues</i> .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>3.0 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Appendix A .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>66</b>



## **Preface**

I would like to thank my family and friends for helping me through my most challenging academic venture yet. I would specifically like to thank my parents for dealing with the brunt of my thesis-related problems and always being there to support me. I would also like to thank Dr. Silverstein, Dr. Cabot, and Dr. Petterson for participating in the defense of my thesis and providing such valuable feedback. I also never could have completed this project without the help of my participants and with the aid of my wonderful thesis advisor, Jeanette Jouili.

## 1.0 Introduction

It's a sunny day in May 2018 and I am walking in the 9th arrondissement, listening to my music and thinking of what I'm going to make for dinner in my *foyer*. As I round the corner to pass the Tuileries garden, I notice a large group of men wearing all black gathering by the entrance. They have armbands and are holding large signs which are too far away for me to read. I start to walk faster as I notice the hordes of policemen gathering around the garden, all of them standing near the protestors. When I return home, I realize that I was walking near the Paris Opera one day after an attack there, where a man had stabbed and killed one and injured four others. This man, who had been claimed by ISIS and was yelling "Allahu Akbar", was presumed to be a terrorist. Immediately after the event, people assumed that the attacker was of Arab-descent, but later on, it was discovered that he was Chechen (New York Times 2018). Although this attack occurred in France, it fits into the wider global trend of stereotyping and scapegoating Maghrebi Muslim populations.

As stated by George Morgan and several other scholars in *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West*, Global Islamophobia has taken root in the West, specifically affecting the liberal democratic state and its ability to manage immigration and cultural difference (2012, 1). The way in which I utilize the term Islamophobia throughout my paper recognizes it as not only encompassing discrimination against Muslims, but also as a specific form of prejudice "that is reliant on identity abstraction that not only generalizes, but racializes a plethora of different individuals who may have nothing in common apart from their Muslim identities, into the singular and negatively predefined 'Muslim Race'" (Osman 2017). Globally, Muslims are not solely discriminated against based on their religion, but on the historical and current cultural assumptions

that are seen as an inextricable part of the wider Muslim community. The root of burgeoning Islamophobia is connected to geopolitical shifts with the Muslim world becoming a global enemy, from the Islamic revolution in Iran, to the first and second Gulf war, the war in Afghanistan and everything that followed. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the declaration of the war on terror, Muslims were and still are demonized and used as a scapegoat for larger global problems across the Western hemisphere. Islamophobic attitudes as amplified by the previously stated events is not solely contained to the Western hemisphere and in fact, Islamophobia is also common in Asia and is rooted in Asia's historical context of its colonial experience (Osman 2017). Furthermore, in Asia, "the rise of religious nationalism in many parts of the region can also explain the rising anti-Muslim feelings as seen from the cases of India and Myanmar which has seen a recent rise in anti-Muslim violence" (Osman 2017). While global attitudes towards Muslims may derive from different origins, they employ quite often similar languages and result in similar discrimination.

Additionally, more recently mass media's wide and detailed coverage of mainly Muslim refugees' journeys into Western Europe has led some to believe that there is currently a refugee "crisis." This in turn has led to the demonization by the media of Muslim populations, whether established since generations, or recent immigrants or refugees. In fact, "this demonization conflates particular cultural forms with disregard for the law and enmity towards the nation" (Morgan 2016, 2). Through this process, Muslim populations in Europe are seen as culturally incompatible with secular, liberal Western society. The 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 populations were targeted as "alien" populations that threatened social cohesion. In the 1980s specifically, with the rise of neoliberalism, the focus shifted from

Muslim immigrants' social problems to their "problematic" culture culminating in the shift from economic to cultural burden. This process resulted in the racialization of Muslim populations who are consistently associated with specific inherent cultural norms (Yilmaz 2016).

Furthermore, the recent spectacular rise of far-right populist groups has further fueled the fire and in fact, "the combination of the Paris bombings and the flight of refugees has offered a marvelous opportunity to the xenophobic right to expand its power" (Harris 2016). While the far-right has played a part in the rising rates of xenophobia, it is necessary to mention that both center and left parties have engaged in rhetoric that negatively affects how Muslims are viewed.

While increasing Islamophobia can possibly be tied to the failings of neoliberal policies, and the particular political cultures it enables (Yilmaz 2016), there is strong evidence to suggest that Islamophobia is playing out differently in various contexts. Therefore, how does Islamophobia manifest itself in these different national contexts? To what extent are the ways in which these developments are framed different in Europe to other places, such as the United States? The treatment of Muslims in the United States is greatly affected by its relatively distant geographic location— as opposed to European countries, which received the majority of Muslim immigrants from closer-by regions of the Middle East and North Africa with whom they often had historical connections, especially through colonialism. Furthermore, the way in which the United States treats its minority populations is founded in the idea of multiculturalism, which allows for cultural difference within the public sphere, a right that is actively practice by various communities around the United States (Casanova 2013). In comparison, many European countries have different national models of integration, which, together with their often colonial histories, impacts the treatment of Muslim minorities. To understand how Islamophobia manifests itself in different contexts, I will focus on the case of France because of its ostensibly unique way of configuring

these issues. To further understand my research questions, I will explore the particular case of French college students studying for university degrees in Paris and in the United States. Specifically, I want to know what self-identifying non-Muslim French students think of French Muslims and why.

Within France, the treatment and attitudes toward the Muslim population has developed within its own socio-political and historical context. To understand how Muslim populations have become “othered” in France, it is necessary to examine France’s colonial legacy, which is the beginning of France’s long and complicated history with its Muslim population. France colonized many countries in Western and Northern Africa in the 19th century, most notably Algeria, which was not merely a colony but became a French department. During this time, while trying to impose its republican values to various degrees, all the while especially concerned with extracting resources on its colonies and departments, France constructed a system in which certain cultural features were seen as compatible or incompatible with the French state, with incompatible practices seen as more “tribal” (Silverstein 2004, 40). These “tribal” practices were often associated with Islam. The idea that certain ways of being are incompatible with the French state continued as North Africans migrated to France at exponential rates, especially after Algerian Independence in 1962.

While assimilation remained the aim of the French state, Islam still seemed incompatible with French culture as it was perceived to counter republican ideals such as secularism which includes the privatization of religion. Secularism, interestingly, is claimed simultaneously to be a product of Christian-Western European history and an allegedly universal principle (Scott 2007, 94). The idea of secularism as modernism coincides with broader transnational processes in which many countries are becoming increasingly secular, insisting not only on the separation of church

and state but also on the privatization of religious identities, in order to become a fully modern nation-state.

The idea that one must be secular in order to be a modern French citizen has widely affected Muslims in France. 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). Eventually, 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 re-articulations of *laïcité* in the last three decades have primarily impacted the Muslim population in France. This has manifested itself through various laws, including the 2004 "headscarf ban" a colloquial term for a law, "*en application du principe de laïcité, le portes de signes ou de tenues manifestant une appartenance religieuse dans les écoles, collèges et lycées publics,*" (Kheir 2008), which prevents Muslim women from wearing hijabs in public schools. The concept of *laïcité* was initially founded on the idea of limiting the Catholic Church's power and privatizing religious identities, but the meaning of *laïcité* has evolved over time. Therefore, what are the particular French articulations of Islamophobia and how do non-Muslim urban French college students' understanding of *laïcité* reiterate or counter these trends?

To further understand my research questions, I focus on the particular case of French college students in Paris and the United States. How have young students been shaped by contemporary French discourses and understandings of *laïcité*? French college students in particular have grown up and gone to school in a primarily post-2004 context, where they may have seen their Muslim classmates on a daily level forced to unveil in public school. Not only did the discursive context in France focus on Muslims in terms of challenges to *laïcité*, but current French college students also grew up in a post 9/11 context, which further affects their unconscious

and conscious beliefs about Muslims. On the other hand, college students are of an age where they can be assumed, at least in urban settings, to have grown up in an environment of de facto racial and religious pluralism. Nonetheless, college students are in no way a uniform body in regards to their views and political opinions. Despite this, my study aims to cover a range of views that can be found amongst French college students who come from every part of the political spectrum. While this participant pool is too small to be representative of all French students, they can provide valuable insights into what current students think of these issues.

My research will provide insight into how French college students' views align with dominant French understandings of *laïcité* and Muslims in France. To fully explain my interlocutors' approaches and opinions, the body of my paper will be divided into three sections. I will first discuss my methods and theoretical framework in which my research is based and situate my study within the larger context of *laïcité* and Muslims in France. Then, after discussing my research methods, I will begin my empirical analysis, which consists of five core chapters or sections. First, I discuss French students' thoughts on French identity and the "Self." This section will allow me to explain how French students' define French identity in the contemporary context. The following sections discuss Muslims identity within the French context, assimilation, Muslim women and the hijab, and students' perspectives on the *banlieues*. These sections provide insight into how French students' understand the practical application of *laïcité* in a multicultural society. Ultimately, throughout the body of this paper I will use thematic analysis to uncover French students' opinions on *laïcité* and how this relates to their views on the French Muslim population.

Although my empirical data is limited in number and geographic location, I have already been able to observe interesting and relevant recurring themes that offer promising material for further research. I believe that, in general, urban French students' views are, in fact, more

consistent with the general French understanding of Muslims and *laïcité*. It is important to note that while there is some uniformity with dominant French thought, there is variance within the studied population. While I do not have enough information to generalize to any wider population, I consider that my small ethnographic study will offer valuable insight into the power of the French narrative and cultural history that is so proudly taught in all French schools. 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 makes it often difficult for young students to critically deconstruct the norm. This can ultimately impact 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 racializing narratives in their own understandings of difference.

### **1.1 Theoretical Framework**

Although I gave a brief overview of France's colonial history in order to frame my research, it is important to detail the work that has been published surrounding Muslims in France and where my research stands in relation to these important works.

A large body of scholarship has discussed the way in which French republicanism shapes current French discourse and policies, ultimately effecting the outward perception of those who potentially go "against" these values. In the case of France, it is common for French citizens to emphasize the necessity of a *laïque* or secular society, one which stays in line with the ideals of

the 5th Republic. For understanding differing subjectivities of Muslim and Black African immigrants and their descendants, Silverstein (2018), Scott (2007) and Parekh (2008) all examine how immigrants are often perceived to be subjects who bring their fundamentally different religious and cultural values— which are seen as incompatible— to France, and that this cultural difference prevents full and necessary assimilation. This viewpoint held by some French citizens is not necessarily seen as problematic or offensive, as it emphasizes the importance of assimilation in order to obtain equality between all citizens. The understanding that equality can only be realized through the privatization of any visible difference is a central feature of French republican discourse. Most importantly, this concept emphasizes that France will finally become politically unified when individuals leave behind or compartmentalize their culture or religion in order to fully integrate into French society (Parekh 2008; Fernando 2014). Fernando (2014) and Bowen (2012) further examine how Muslim migrants are perceived in the French public sphere through the lens of secularism and race, both authors showing the impacts of the racialization of Muslim populations within a “secular” France. Ultimately, French citizens whose practices fall outside the “norm” for French republicanism, including those who express their religion publically, are seen as disrupting the political and social unification of France. Immigrant Muslim populations and specifically Muslim women who veil have been largely the target of this widespread viewpoint.

In France, the various threats to *laïcité* have been redefined from the extremely powerful Catholic church to a religious and racial minority, ultimately targeting the Muslim community who are seen as a population which refuses to integrate into wider French society. Modern-day secularism in France is often invoked in cases of the hijab, the niqab, or other outwardly religious displays by Muslims, which are seen as in opposition to French republicanism (Wolfreys 2017). Since the hijab had been discursively constructed into a nationwide problem, Muslim women have

been the main target of political parties who seek to use *laïcité* as a uniting political tool. There has been much literature written about Muslim women in France (Scott 2007; Jouili 2015; Fernando 2014; Bowen 2007), especially after the Hijab ban in 2004 which caused much international controversy. Often times, while the assumption is that the hijab is an oppressive tool that restricts Muslim women's freedom, academic literature has uncovered a more nuanced picture. Scott, Jouili, and Bowen analyze the issue of the hijab by showing the complexities of feminist discourse and Muslim subjectivities. In Fadil's work *Not-Veiling as an body practice*, she discusses that many Muslim women have an immense self-discipline to dress modestly. Many of the women in Fadil's study also understand that while there is a religious obligation to wear the hijab, it is freeing when they choose to wear it of their own personal conviction (2011). Jeanette Jouili (2015) analyzes a similar topic with Muslim women in France and Germany, through the lens of religious subjectivities and their complexities. The women in Jouili's study state that it is difficult for some women to choose to veil or dress modestly, but they continue to do so because of their strongly held personal convictions. In both of these studies, it becomes clear that the choice to veil is nuanced, but this often goes ignored when tackling the issue of the hijab in the wider context of French policy. The complexity of subjective religious identities is pertinent to my own research as, often times, the varying religious identities of Muslims go ignored by my interlocutors. This will become relevant when analyzing the opinions of my interviewees later on and how much they take into account first-hand narratives of the French Muslim population.

Ultimately, I was not able to find any studies about how French college students understand *laïcité* as well as France's Muslim population. I was only able to find one short work that talks about how *laïcité* is understood by university students and faculty. This study was conducted at a French International Relations Institute (ILERI) by David Vauclair (2017). This is the only other

ethnographic work that I could discover which details how French college students and other university staff comprehend *laïcité* as a concept. This study is similar to mine as it was small in size with only 13 participants, 9 of them being students at the university. Ultimately, Vauclair found that while the participants regarded *laïcité* as a concept with varying meanings and definitions, most students thought of it in a positive manner and as “one of the core elements of French collective life” (154). Furthermore, only one interviewee, who was Franco-American, thought of French *laïcité* as problematic and restrictive while most others perceived *laïcité* as necessary for social harmony. In his conclusion, Vauclair mentions Foucault's 1970 idea of forging the notion of an “epistemic community,” a group that shares common symbols, references, and intentions. Vauclair describes his participants as an epistemic community because *laïcité* is used as a common thread by his interviewees to forge a “common understanding of...the limits of tolerance and the place of religion in a society” (156). It becomes clear that, as in Vauclair’s work, there are common objectives and shared experiences amongst my participants because of their age group and relative shared economic background. My work goes slightly further than Vauclair’s in terms of more varied thematic questions and analysis.

Ultimately, Vauclair’s usage of epistemic communities frames how I will approach the analysis of my interviewees in the following chapters. Fadil, Jouili, Fernando, Silverstein, and Scott’s works will also provide the context and framework for the forthcoming analysis, specifically in regards to understanding subjective identities of Muslim populations as well as the racialization of Islam in French discourse and how this is understood by my interlocutors.

## 1.2 Methods

To see if this topic was further worth exploring, I conducted an exploratory ethnographic study with 11 French students, all either studying in Paris or at the University of Pittsburgh in the United States. This study was based at the University of Pittsburgh and was conducted for an undergraduate thesis for a Bachelors of Philosophy in International and Area studies. I arrived in Paris in January 2018 to study abroad and stayed until the end of July in order to conduct my research. While I did not begin my structured and informal interviews until May, the time beforehand was spent conducting a literature review and gathering fieldnotes through daily lived experience, such as in a shared living environment in a dormitory. This research project was conceptualized over a year ago, but the actual fieldwork lasted roughly 5 months. My methods consisted primarily of 11 semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

The sample population for this study was small in size because of my difficulty obtaining more interviewees through the method of snowball sampling. Using existing contacts, I messaged multiple French students that I could identify through various networks and interviewed those who responded. Due to time constraints I modified the snowball sampling strategy by obtaining help from a friend named Paul, a French student, studying at a business school outside of Paris. Paul provided the names and contact information for other French students on campus with whom he had connections. His friends then connected me with other French students who attend different universities. Although my sampling frame is small, I believe that I obtained for my study a diverse sample of French students, including students of different races, religions, and political beliefs.

This study involved 11 students who participated in semi-structured interviews and over 20 people I spent time with for participant observation. 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. I chose the age range of 18-27 to ensure that I specifically obtained information about young French students. All of the participants were studying in either Paris or at the University of Pittsburgh and came from a relatively similar middle to upper-middle class economic background. My own identity as a young person studying for a university degree positions me somehow as an in-group member to my interlocutors, but 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 discussions, as there may have been an assumption that I was ignorant about French history and culture. This study is limited by “desirability bias” as my status as a fellow student may have influenced the topics brought up by students.

It is also important to mention that the students in France are all undergraduates, while the French participants in Pittsburgh are graduate students studying the humanities. Their time studying in the United States may impact their opinions on *laïcité* in contrast to the French students studying in France, who may not have spent much time outside of the country. Furthermore, I did not choose participants based on ethnicity or gender, but my interviewees consisted of six young women and five young men.

During the duration of the five-month study, the interviews were conducted using an interview guide that can be found in Appendix A. I asked a variety of questions and obtained students’ opinions relating to *laïcité*, immigration, and far-right actors such as Front National politician, Marine Le Pen. Most often I recorded the interviews on my iPhone but did not record any names in order to keep the data anonymous. A few times I had to rely on my written notes of the interview, such as when the locality was too noisy for my recorder to work properly. For the

coding of qualitative data, I used Nvivo, a coding software provided by the University of Pittsburgh. Through this program I coded both a priori codes as well as themes that emerged from my research.

During this time, I was also able to spend time with French students in more casual settings, such as at parties and bars. This type of participant observation allowed me to observe what topics may be more salient to French students in their day-to-day life. Specifically, I spent time with French students at a business school outside of Paris as well in bars and at parties where I met other students through mutual friends. Throughout my stay in Paris, I also lived in a dormitory with students from all over the world, including many French students. During this time, I spent many hours with French students in communal dorm areas, including the kitchen, dining room, and gym. I took notes of my participant observations in my notebook or on my computer after the experience occurred. My time spent with these students led me to more specific questions including, how do French college students understand racial difference in conjunction with religious affiliation?

## 2.0 Empirical Analysis

### 2.1.1 French Student's thoughts on 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 5<sup>th</sup> Republic, the French government consisted of 'divine' monarchies, meaning that the French king or queen had the God-given right to be the ruler. After the French revolution, certain ideologies began to develop into central tenants of French political self-understanding, including secularism, 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. This started the process through which Catholicism refashioned itself 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 cultural facets of French culture. Therefore, the modern nation-state expresses almost a "crypto-Christianity" (Scott 2007, 92).

I was astonished to discover how important France's relationship to Christianity was with my interlocutors during my group interview, especially after reading so much literature on the importance of secularism to the French state. During the group interview, an argument about France's origins and identity emerged after talking about 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).

When I conducted a group interview at a business school outside of Paris in summer of 2018, I was able to discuss this topic extensively. During this interview, I was joined by four friends in my seed informant's apartment. At the table, I sat between my friend from high school, Paul, and another rather boy, Thomas, who was rather timidly sitting next to me. Across from me at the table 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. Although I interviewed the group interviewees four years after the nativity scene controversy, the topic was brought up early in our interview, specifically when we began our conversation about La-Roche-Sur-Yon. Christine, with dark hair and a friendly, engaging demeanor 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 (end of the year)...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 like Judaism or Islam, which are not considered to be part of the cultural landscape. France in general is known as a secular country and many of its inhabitants are proud of their personal atheism. Despite this, the prevalence of Christianity can be observed virtually everywhere. The way religion is perceived in France has affected every religion differently, with Christianity understood as a cultural norm and others, such as Islam, seen as imposing religion in a way that challenges *laïcité*.

Before the passing of the 1905 *laïcité* law, Christianity was a powerful establishment that informed French culture. In fact, as Talal Asad states, common European understanding of the key influences shaping modern-day Europe in general, generally evokes the Roman Empire, Christianity, the Enlightenment, and industrialization (2002). Therefore, Christianity not only had a large effect on French, but on broader European self-understandings. The powerful narrative that France is now a very secular nation often comes into conflict with France's proclaimed Christian history. In the group interview, 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 interview 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. While he may have said this a bit ironically, this statement has a particular history. Both of these statements exemplify one narrative on the nature of French origins, which places French identity in the context of Christianity and a long history dating back to the Gaulois (5th c. BC- 5th c. AD). This understanding of French origins thus excludes other possible formations of French identity. The point made by Thomas was immediately rebuked by Ariane who sat across the table with dark curly hair and one leg casually up on her chair. She argued that there is a difference between the kingdom of France and the Republic of France, which means that the “real” France was not created until 1789. 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 is making clear that she believes that the only France which matters today is the French Republic as opposed to the French monarchy or the history of the *Gaulois*. This point is then contested by Christine who argues that a large part of French history is intertwined with Christianity, including the *Palais de Papes*, a palace in Avignon, which housed popes who were competing with Rome during the 14th century. While Ariane subsequently acknowledged that France’s Christian history is undeniable, she believes that the current nation hasn’t been built on Christianity, but on a specific political system that inscribes the law of *laïcité*.

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 infused 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*. The tension between modern secularism and France's Catholic history have defined the French Republic's imperatives to both universalize and particularize (Fernando 2014, 34). This has become increasingly relevant with the changing demographics of France, where immigrants and Muslims are put in a precarious position in a society that promotes universalism, yet points out visible difference. Therefore, French identity depends on how one is perceived as French by others, which often disproportionately affects immigrant and Muslim populations. In fact, "despite a long history of immigration and colonialism, France rarely acknowledges that history, invoking its republican ideology to preserve the status quo and promote a monolithic version of French identity and history" (Beaman 2017, 6). Republican ideology is therefore used to perpetuate a certain idea of what France should look like, which willingly or unwillingly results in the ideal of a particular type of French community that cannot include many people of Muslim faith.

Only one of my interviewees, Louise, directly referenced French republicanism and specifically the topic of universalism. Louise is a PhD student at the University of Pittsburgh, studying French literature, which may inform her logical analysis of universalism, especially in regard to its intended application and its present day form in France. Louise is a person of color and grew up in the suburbs of Paris, but later moved two hours away during the 2005 race riots. When we first met, she greeted me in the lobby of the French and Italian department at the University of Pittsburgh and immediately brought me to the kitchen where we could have more privacy. She was eager to speak with me, especially as I had given her some of the interview questions the night beforehand in order to be able to prepare herself. Although Louise had more

time to think about what she wanted to say, and this may have impacted her opinions, I believe that our discussion was valuable nonetheless. Towards the beginning of our discussion, we talked about how *laïcité* is understood in France. Louise told me that the original law is taught to children, but often its current day application goes ignored. She goes on to clarify what exactly is taught in French schools:

“So the text itself. The origins of different republics. French republicanism. French universalism. These values and notions are taught about. But again, in a more historical sense. So you’re given dates, you’re given names and you know that these people have influenced or created or really influenced the formation of the French Republic based on these notions. That’s the extent of it. It’s not as if we were engaging in critical discussion of *laïcité* and say ‘ok today, let’s look at the texts, let’s look at the applications of *laïcité* and let’s see what we have to say about these two things.’”

In this quote, Louise reveals one potential cause of the current day tensions that exist in deciphering the origins of France. In French schools, which are seen as a pillar of French republicanism, the origins of republicanism and universalism are taught extensively. In an interview with another French PhD student, Amina, she verified this by stating that the history of France and its origins are a huge part of France and its school system. Similar to Louise, I met with Amina on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh in the French and Italian department. Amina is half-Arab, but was born in the North of France, close to Belgium. Her mom is French and her dad is of Moroccan origin, but Amina only speaks French and is only immersed in French culture. Amina states that she does not have any relationship with the Moroccan side of her family because her grandparents wanted her father to be fully assimilated into French culture. Therefore, she never learned Arabic, is not Muslim, and has never been to Morocco. Amina and I sat in the kitchen of the department and discussed the way in which French-Christian history has become tied to French

identity. While republicanism, secularism, and universalism are taught to be the foundations of French society, France's Christian history constantly comes into conflict with these notions. Christianity's continuing prominence in typically secular locales is seen in my interview with Jean, a French white engineering student outside of Paris.

It was a beautiful sunny day in July when I met with Jean, which influenced our decision to sit outside on a picnic bench in the middle of a large, green grassy area. We began our discussion by talking about Jean's understanding of *laïcité*, which quickly led Jean to the discussion of how *laïcité* is understood on his campus. Jean goes to a top military engineering school outside of Paris, where they have about 1,000 students— 500 per class, 20% of whom are female and barely any, to his knowledge, who are Muslim. Jean told me that there are a lot of Christian students at his school, students who formed an association that organizes Christian events which 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. Despite the fact that the original 1905 law predominantly affected Catholic symbolism in the public sphere, forcing the removal of crucifixes and prayers from public spaces (Kelly 2017, 112), Christianity still remains prominent in public places. This becomes evident when looking at the *crèche* (nativity) controversy or other visible expressions of Christianity which have been

around for centuries. Christine notes the subtle prominence of Christianity when she lived in the South of France where she went to a Catholic high school. More specifically, Christine talks about how she didn't realize the power of Christianity in France until the debates started over the legalization of gay marriage in France. She states:

“I remember we had those debates in high school in class where a teacher gave us a debate about gay marriage. And I remember some of the arguments and I know I am in a Catholic private school but, I didn't think it was *so* Catholic. You suddenly realize, day-to-day, you don't talk about Catholicism that much or anything, but I remember just realizing some of the people in my classes, they were not necessarily far-right Catholic or extremely Catholic. Some of them didn't even go to church that much. But, they had an idea of defending the true version of a family. It was so foreign to me and I think it was a mixture of the culture and the fact that we were in the countryside and it was a bit more rural. I remember being like wow.”

Through this anecdote it becomes clear how pervasive Christian norms are in French society, even if not all French citizens truly consciously perceive its impact. It is also interesting to note that despite her shock and discomfort surrounding the gay marriage debates, Christine does not frame these religiously-founded arguments within the discursive framework of the *laïcité* debates, which shows how Christianity is debated differently in the public sphere, than, for instance Islam. It seems as though many of my interviewees recognize Christianity as a central aspect of French culture, but still argue that true French society is founded on a secular public sphere. This ultimately puts minority populations and specifically Muslims in a precarious position, where they are “hyper visible as Muslims and invisible as French” (Fernando 2014, 69). In a later chapter I will discuss further how my informants understand the visibility of Muslim populations.

When talking about the origins of French roots with my interviewees, while Christianity was brought up often, how this excludes other populations was rarely addressed. Only one interviewee, Danielle, a French white student who I met with in an airy bright apartment in downtown 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 in their houses. Just like my boyfriend has a huge crèche and nobody’s Christian in his family.”

Danielle was the only interviewee to mention the double standard between how Muslims are able to visibly express their religion versus Christians. 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 unchangeable 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.

Overall, it is important to understand the context in which my interviewees situate themselves regarding 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. 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. Even more importantly, only Danielle mentions other religions in the discussion about French identity, including Judaism and Islam. Danielle recognizes the hypocrisy of the public display of Christian religious practices, while other religions are not afforded the same leeway. 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.

### **2.1.2 Muslim Identity within the French Context**

As mentioned in the introduction, I was in Paris when a man, who was labeled a terrorist, killed one person and injured four others near the Opera. The identity of this man was a national topic for debate and his nationality came into question almost immediately. This news story was brought up early on during my group interview in June, about a month after the attack. The students in the group interview discussed how the perpetrator was described across French media, Ariane specifically saying that many sources described him as Arab and as an immigrant from Northern Africa, when in actuality, she heard that he was Chechen. The automatic assumption that the terrorist must have been of North African descent and an immigrant is especially telling and exposes powerfully France's complicated relationship between its colonial past and its current national identity.

Franco-Maghrebis have always been seen as a challenge to French identity because French culture is seen as an "unchanging, homogenous entity" (Beaman 2017, 19) and Muslims are a challenge to this entity. Increasing marginalization of Muslim populations began when Muslim immigrants were recruited to work in factories in France after the Algerian war ended in 1962. These workers were primarily discriminated against by the French population for economic

reasons as they were believed to be “taking away jobs” from French citizens. As stated in the introduction, in the 1980s, the focus shifted from the economic problems of migrants to issues of their culture. The entire Muslim population in France was essentialized into one, singular “problematic” culture. This widely affects the descendants of first and second generation immigrants who are still discriminated against based on their cultural heritage. With the increase in visible religious practice among second and third generation French Muslims, there has been increasing anxiety in France surrounding the concept of French identity. While some French people may argue that this concept is simple rhetoric used by politicians, others internalize a certain definition of French identity which impacts how Muslims are viewed by other French citizens. The concept of French identity was debated in 2009, when the ministry of Immigration, Integration, and National Identity held a debate on National Identity, “comprising a website and series of public forums around the country” (Fernando 2011). During this debate, people were able to lament about the disintegration of French national identity, an attitude that may be derived from the decline of France as an imperial world power as well as immigration from its former colonies (Fernando 2011). Viewing Muslims as a challenge to French identity is inextricably tied to the history of immigration in France. Even if certain Muslim citizens were born in France and have no connection to their parents or grandparents’ home country, their differences in religious and cultural practices are seen as an undeniable part of French-Muslim populations. If someone is of Arab-descent, they may have to continuously prove that they are French or show that they don’t identify as Muslim. Their difference is seen as an active agent which will ultimately change French culture and French identity.

Only three of my interviewees talk about question of Muslims being a challenge to French identity explicitly, and two of those three argue against the homogenous idea of French identity.

Other interviewees talk about immigration and Islam as a subtle way of hinting at French identity and what it means to be French.

During our interview, Ariane recognized that with the growing numbers of Muslims in France, there has been increasing anxiety surrounding the roots of French culture. Some of Ariane's opinion may be influenced by her parents as her dad is an immigrant from Northern Africa. Ariane is not actively against Muslims in France, but she neutrally reiterates a common argument of those who are fearful of Muslim immigration:

“There is also the fact that, for 10 years, the number of Muslims in France has gone up and some people are like ‘oh my god, they’re invading us. You see they start to appear on the TV and they talk to our friends. Sometimes they raise our children. That’s a problem and we are losing the roots of our country.’”

In order to explain how some French people react to Muslims in France, Ariane reiterates an argument that is commonly used across French media and amongst politicians, most prominently Marine Le Pen and the Far Right. In fact, “much of the contemporary nationalist response to the perceived existential crisis consists in rallying white constituencies around the populist idea that they are the ‘real,’ main root French (*Français de souche*), and instructing racialized others that, as putative newcomers, they cannot ever truly belong” (Silverstein 2018, 1130). While most of my informants did not explicitly insist on being the real, “original” French, many acknowledge the importance of French history and culture in relation to French identity. This way of thinking ultimately has an exclusionary aspect towards those who do not share this aspect of French history.

One interviewee in particular, Helene, was passionate about French culture and made it clear that “French culture is losing itself.” I sat down with Helene in a busy, communal area of a

business school outside of Paris, the same school where I held the previously mentioned group interview. Helene grabbed a chocolate bar from a nearby vending machine and sat next to me at a round table, right by some other students who were working on a group project. She was eager to speak with me and was also kind enough to switch between French and English in order to explain some of her opinions. I was surprised to learn that Helene is a member of the *Le Front Nationale*, the far-right party led by Marine Le Pen. Going into my research, I was not expecting to meet someone from the far-right, especially because in the United States, many members of the far-right are not necessarily very public about their opinions. I was unsure at first if I could stay objective while interviewing Helene, as I disagreed with many of her viewpoints, but ultimately she was very willing to share her experiences. In fact, Helene told me that she is active in *Le Front Nationale* and was especially active during the 2017 presidential election. She stuck up posters, handed out flyers, handled money for the campaign, and even participated 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. As stated before, Helene believes that French culture is being lost and that people are no longer proud to be French. In fact, even 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 hasn’t done anything “impressive” since colonialism and World War II and therefore, French people have nothing to be proud of anymore. Helene also refers to the case of Maryam Pougetoux, a student union leader who, while speaking on television about student reform, became known and then criticized for her hijab.

Helene argues that UNEF, a national union of French students (of which Maryam Pougetoux is the leader), is fighting against Catholicism. She goes on to say that it seems as though more and more people are offended by the cross, but not by the hijab, which is common right-wing discourse. Helene also mentions earlier in the interview that the “burka” is in opposition to French culture. Although not explicitly stated, Helene hints that the French-Muslim population has changed the concept of French identity.

At the end of our interview, Helene got into a heated debate with Paul, my friend from high school who participated in the group interview. Paul 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 be shifted onto developing the home countries of immigrants. Paul immediately started arguing 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 saying that direct intervention is needed in other countries in order for them to progress. The idea that direct intervention is needed can be traced back to colonialist discourse on how it was imperative that Europe colonized other nations in order to civilize and modernize these societies. The colonial project was also a racist project that perpetuated the racialization of Muslims, a fact which Helene ignores. Helene’s plan would stop immigration and allow France to keep its historically Christian culture while simultaneously pretending to aid others.

In contrast to Helene, both Danielle and Amina (despite their geographical distance) held similar opinions on French identity and how the concept is dated and irrelevant. Amina specifically talks about how Arab people are forced to assimilate to a specific idea of a French citizen. She states:

“They have no problem with European immigrants. When, you know, they can have different religions, they can have different beliefs. You meet someone from Sweden, very different from them, but they’re never going to be seen as a threat. And they’re never going to be asked to assimilate. But, when it comes to Arab people, suddenly they have to give up everything they have and be French, but what does it mean to be French? Most of them are born in France. They’re French. But those right-wing politics sometimes make it hard to identify to the French system. Because it’s this constant media propaganda that if you’re Muslim you’re not French.”

In this quote, Amina critically brings up something that is discussed by many French scholars, the argument that Islam is inherently incompatible with French culture and therefore Muslims will never truly be seen as French (Silverstein 2018; Scott 2007; Parekh 2008). Assimilation as a concept would require Muslim immigrants to understand French republicanism and abide by its rules, thus conforming to the notion of a certain type of French identity. Broader French discourse, which pushes for immigrants to conform in this way results in the continuing discrimination against second or third generation immigrants who do not necessarily choose to integrate for various reasons. Thus, these populations are not accepted as French citizens despite their citizenship status. Often times, Muslim immigrants have to purposely construct their identity to fit within the framework of French republicanism, “yet in their interaction with whites, they experience discrimination and marginalization” (Beaman 2017, 68). Therefore, even if immigrants and their children may be legally French, they are not seen as culturally French. In order to be considered culturally French, one must share in the traditions, customs and history of France, which are rooted in the history of Christianity in Europe. This means that despite its intentions, secularism does not necessarily subsume equality between people of different religions. This specifically impacts Muslims, who, in order to integrate, have to participate in cultural practices

that are derived from Christianity. Other requirements to be considered “culturally” French include speaking the language perfectly, sharing a common history, and spending most of one’s life in France (Beaman 2017, 69). This ultimately ends up excluding a large swath of Muslims who are not considered truly French, despite the fact that huge amounts of second and third generation Muslims speak French fluently and have lived in France their entire lives. Despite this, it is easy to pinpoint these already marginalized populations as being affected by the traditional notion of French identity.

Only Amina expresses an opinion that is not talked about explicitly by any other interviewee. In her view, if you think you are French, you are French. She states:

“I think you have French identity if you’re born in France. Or if you lived in France long enough and you actually want the identity. You live your life day to day in France and that’s it. I don’t, do we even need a French identity? I don’t think so. You know you can just live your life. And do you really need to identify with a group?”

Here, Amina is talking about de facto assimilation and de facto Frenchness. Despite acknowledging that French identity can be claimed by anyone who wants to be French, Amina goes on to say that it is still necessary to abide by certain rules, including aspects of *laïcité*. Therefore, even though Amina understands French identity as fluid, she still recognizes the necessity of certain populations to conform to a certain extent. This tolerance of Muslims and immigrants in conjunction with the understanding that they need to assimilate to some extent is a commonly held opinion amongst my interviewees. Although these concepts are not necessarily paradoxical, there is tension between the desire for freedom of public expression of difference and the need to fit into wider French culture. Ultimately, “freedom is pitted against obligation, public

rights against private rules, tolerance against intolerance, modernity against tradition— with hegemonic secularism consistently failing to recognize its own traditions, impositions, and intolerances” (Silverstein 2018, 1344). French secularism fits into Silverstein’s explanation, as many are unaware of the immense cultural impact of Christianity on France as well as secularism’s underlying enlightenment philosophies that count as “tradition”, yet still create intolerances and exclusions. Many people understand the dichotomies as stated by Silverstein as an “either or” choice, as opposed to both being able to work in harmony. This dichotomized thinking makes it difficult for people who have multiple identities to be able to fit into French culture, which is seen as homogenous and grounded in a European-Christian history.

Ultimately, of my informants, only Helene seemed to be passionate about the concept of French identity. In contrast, most of the interviewees seemed to agree that Muslim immigrant populations should be assimilated, most often by compartmentalizing their cultural heritage, and while this is not directly related to the notion of French identity, it may hint at the desire for as much continuity amongst the French population as possible. There seems to be an overarching desire for an all-encompassing common ground, which can be seen through my interviewees affinity for French republicanism and *laïcité*.

### **2.1.3 Assimilation: How should Muslims be incorporated into France?**

Should various immigrant communities in France assimilate into wider French culture? The way in which assimilation is promoted by dominant French discourse, “builds on a type of republican individualism, which seeks to assimilate individuals who become citizens through a ‘political choice’” (Jouili 2015). This question of assimilation came up multiple times during my interviews. Throughout my time with French students, this question took on a new form and

transformed from ‘*should* Muslim immigrants be assimilated’ to ‘*how* should Muslim immigrants be assimilated?’ In one of my first interviews, Christine uses her personal experience as half-Vietnamese to explain her complex understanding of this issue.

From the first moment I sat down at the kitchen table for my group interview, Christine was bright-eyed, 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. 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 French Catholicism. Christine’s mother does not believe in God, but would urge Christine and her sister to learn about Catholicism because they lived in Western Europe. Her mother knew the best way for her to fit in was to understand, as Christine puts it, “old French conservative culture.” Christine admits that by learning about Catholicism, she was better able to understand French culture.

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. Despite spending time absorbing French culture, Christine still tries to actively learn about her Vietnamese heritage. As she understands it, religion is the most convenient way to connect to your roots. Although balancing these two realities may be difficult, Christine talks about navigating cultures with ease, even though this is not always the case. 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.”

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.

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 to promote their assimilation, while others wanted these immigrants to return to their respective home countries. Despite this, much of the immigrant population from Western and Northern Africa decided to stay in France. In order to fit into wider French culture, many of these immigrants decided to compartmentalize their cultural differences into their private lives. Some immigrants even stopped practicing their religion as well as further separated themselves from their home culture by speaking French and teaching their children only French cultural norms. This was indeed the case for Amina.

Amina’s approach to assimilation is founded in her personal experience of not having any connection to her Moroccan roots, despite being half-Arab. She has seen this loss of heritage firsthand and believes that now, in general, parents are making more of an effort to pass on their culture to their children. Amina is not alone in the belief that immigrants and their offspring should not be

made to forget their culture in order to assimilate and fit into wider French society. Multiple interviewees recognize this complex nature of assimilation and expressed this in their interviews. They understand that while it is a reality that there are many separate Muslim communities in France, these communities did not necessarily choose to be isolationist of their own volition. External factors, including policies by the French government, have forced these 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.”

Christine is saying that 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. Many 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, aren’t fluent in their parents native language, and do not feel any patriotic attachment to their home countries (Silverstein 2018). Often times, many second and third generation immigrants oscillate between wanting to know and understand their heritage while also navigating acceptance into French society. This idea is recognized by Christine who states that many second or third generation immigrants, including herself, try to find different ways to connect to their heritage, which most often includes religion. She states:

“They [2nd and 3rd 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 people who “refuse” to assimilate because of their desire to practice their religion. This idea is reiterated in various ways by some of my informants who believe that Muslims can still practice their religion and simultaneously assimilate into French culture.

The idea that the French Muslim population should assimilate by keeping their religious practices private is not uncommon. Jean, the student at the military-engineering university, iterates the idea that steps must be taken in order to avoid segregation between communities. In order to avoid segregation, 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. He specifically uses the phrasing to “mix in well” which is an English translation of the French concept *mixité sociale*. This concept 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 & Xuan 2006). While Jean promotes the idea of *mixité*, he ignores the social reality for Muslim populations.

In fact, Muslims who do not neatly fit into the role of 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 700). Therefore, Muslim populations are seen as separate communities which are unable to assimilate. In general, it is seen as a good goal by many 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. Being French is more important than any visible markers of difference (Beaman 2017). Despite this desire to have a homogenous French label, French citizens are seen as living “side by side” instead of “living together” (Bowen 2011, 33). 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 the focus remaining on the socio-economic issues that they face.

Ultimately, the idea that separate communities are bad for both immigrants socially and politically is consistently spread by politicians, despite the lack of ideas for how to actually economically integrate marginalized populations. Although there is a lack of concrete policies to

tackle what is perceived as 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 neoliberal fashion, personal initiative over structural policies that would tackle the socio-economic issues faced by Muslim and immigrant populations.

Ariane, who is pro-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 ok 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 makes clear that some parts of cultural heritage are more acceptable than others (i.e. food and music), while others must be hidden away (religion). 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.

As more Muslims began to move into Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, adopting mainstream French cultural norms and codes then became a necessary aspect of assimilation. Not only was becoming *laïque* important, but also the idea of ridding Muslims of their history and traditions in order to fit into wider French society. Ultimately, it became a goal of France to assimilate Muslim

immigrants. While this has been a long-standing goal, it has become clear that separate communities still exist and are not so easily integrated, of no fault of their own. These separate communities, which often end up living in the suburbs or *banlieues*, will be discussed in a following chapter.

It cannot be concluded from these interviews how being a second or third generation Muslim affects one's opinion on assimilation. Both Christine and Amina come from mixed ethnic backgrounds and talk negatively about certain aspects of assimilation, especially the loss of cultural heritage. In contrast, Ariane, whose father is from Northern Africa and therefore is also of mixed heritage, has different opinions about assimilation. In her view, you can simultaneously hold onto your culture, that is certain legitimate aspects of culture, and fit within the framework of the French Republic. In general, the other interviewees tend to agree that assimilation is important, although some are more hesitant about how immigrants should be assimilated.

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 people still face discrimination. 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 an issue with her registration and 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, yet she 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.

#### **2.1.4 Muslim Women and the Hijab in France**

The expectations around assimilation can also be revealed in the debates specifically surrounding Muslim women and headscarves in France. The status of the Muslim woman and her agency has been a topic of interest in the French imaginary for almost two centuries, nourished by particular Orientalist ideas about Muslim societies (Said 1979). France particularly became interested in the “sexual” and “exotic” nature of oriental societies (Scott 2007). As France began its colonization process, part of the spoils of war and conquering were not only money, but native women. Muslim women were seen as objects of desire and the veil was a barrier to the right of Western men to view these women. The visibility of Muslim women became an assault on male sexuality and their right to access female populations. Not only did veiling give Muslim women some sense of power over their sexuality, it also allowed them to move through various public spaces despite fantasies of colonial domination (Scott 2007, 160). Instead of recognizing the potential agency provided by the veil, French populations insisted on emancipating Muslim women from their “oppressive” societies. Therefore, the visibility of the body became a sign of emancipation (Scott 2007, 155). The various meanings of the hijab, as attributed by dominant French discourses, haven’t changed much since France’s colonial history and have only become more complex with France’s increasingly visible religious Muslim population.

Since 1989, there have been many debates surrounding the Muslim headscarf and its place in French culture. A key moment in regards to these debates was the “headscarf ban” of the early

2000s, a colloquial term for the banning of “conspicuous religious symbols” in public schools, which were particularly targeted at headscarves. This was the first time that a law was implemented to outlaw Muslim garments in France. I argue that the way in which the hijab has been used as a political tool by both sides of the political spectrum in France has disenfranchised Muslim populations and ultimately paints Muslim women as both lacking agency and as active agents of political Islam. This can be seen in the discourses that utilize certain feminist arguments surrounding the hijab, the face-veil and the most recent debate over the *burkini*, a modest swim suit worn by headscarf wearing women.

In order to discuss the intricacies of the situation of Muslim women in France, it is necessary to understand the specific French context in which they find themselves. Muslim women who veil are often ostracized because they are seen as refusing to integrate into French society. Muslim women are further seen as “backward” and “traditional” if they choose to veil. Furthermore, while religious difference is supposedly tolerated, the French state consistently recognizes and prioritizes the rights of certain religious groups, such as Catholics, Protestants and Jews (Parekh 2006, 190). This results in a cultural context in which the government constructs a dominant tradition that is legitimate, which includes France’s very Catholic history. This pushes some Muslims to try to fit in by not expressing their religiosity publicly. Therefore, Muslims are often forced to adapt their cultural identity or religious convictions. Adapting Islam to the French context became especially important during the Islamic revival of the 1980s and 1990s, when there were increasing requests for mosques, halal food, and prayer spaces in workspaces. The revival was primarily aimed at Muslim immigrants in the hopes that these communities would be able to maintain their Islamic way of life “endangered by a gradual secularization of Muslims in Europe”

(Jouili 2015). The Islamic revival ultimately brought religion into the public sphere in a way that was different from previous generations.

Furthermore, other Muslims who express their religiosity publicly are rejected by larger society, despite their desire to be a part of French society. The veil in particular becomes a representation of the wider Muslim population in general and has sparked passionate public debates as well as codified laws. A common argument against Muslim women who veil is the understanding (or misunderstanding), that the hijab is oppressive in nature. This is best represented by the interviewees in my study, on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum, who argued against the hijab in public spaces for self-proclaimed feminist reasons.

The subject of the hijab was an especially sensitive topic 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, as mentioned earlier. Ariane joined the conversation quickly and stated:

“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 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 can’t 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 doesn't, is a form of oppression. She goes on to say that there are two cases in regards 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 larger French society, no matter her intentions. In her words, “it is not integration.” It is in opposition to French republicanism to embody one's religion in the public sphere, such as wearing a hijab in a public space. Despite French Muslim women's best efforts to style and make fashion-statements with their hijabs, a sense of oppression still remains. 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. Interesting enough, although fashionable hijabs are seen as dressing up something that is oppressive, the contrary, such as women who are scantily clad, is 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 you from someone else's gaze. This resonates with Joan Scott's point, according to which Western feminists believe in the innate desire of women for emancipation in Western terms, meaning an openness to sexuality and desirability or the freedom to take agency over one's sexuality (2007). This idea that the hijab is inherently oppressive, as stated by Ariane, is based on its “purpose” to hide oneself from the

look of the man and to not entice his desire. Both Ariane and Christine are coming from admittedly leftist backgrounds, but understand the hijab as an object that can be oppressive in nature. In this case, it is unperceivable for these interlocutors that the Muslim women in question could be in control of their decision to wear a hijab.

Furthermore, other left-leaning and center 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 clarified that this is likely because the university is a military school so there is a lack of girls. The hijab would be considered a violation of the uniform because it is not compatible. Although Jean did not clarify his political position, he made clear of his belief that even people in the center do not like hijabs because of its 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 histories of racism and supremacy and Muslim women’s specific positionality within these histories (Scott 2007). This falls in line with dominant French discourse which promotes a “color-blind” ideology in which race is not recognized. Thus, despite Jean’s claim that it is not racist to oppose the veil, he ignores the wider histories that have racialized Muslim women and the act of the wearing the veil itself.

To further understand Jean’s reasoning, I asked about the 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. This is common among many of the interviewees, who all have varied opinions, but none of whom brought up personal opinions and experiences of Muslims. Jean argues that in his school there are no attitudes of xenophobia because everyone there is “educated and open-minded.” This reflects ideas of a middle-class superiority, a group who is automatically deemed open-minded and is widely seen in a positive light. Although his school is open-minded, he states that some women from “lower-classes” may not necessarily get a choice to veil. With this classist 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. This privilege allows Jean to dismiss the true racial reasons behind why there are not many Arab students at his school.

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 a lot of variance in public opinion surrounding Muslim women’s agency and the headscarf bans. In spite of 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 describes in her article *Not Unveiling as an Ethical Practice*, 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 (2011). Similarly, in Jeanette Jouili's (2015) work, she uses her ethnographic research to argue that 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.

In public discourse, Muslim women 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. In fact, "the refusal to accommodate the assimilation model raises the issue that Muslims have generally demonstrated an unwillingness to integrate into French society" (Mazher 2005). 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? In regards to 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 don't want to fit in or assimilate into French society. By wearing a hijab, Muslim women are sometimes unknowingly 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*, otherwise known as 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, 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 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.’”

In these statements, Ariane is highlighting a common theme found in more typical liberal French thought. 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. In her statement, Ariane also

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 wouldn't 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 suit to look like a *burka*, is so that they can make a political statement. Despite this, Ariane focuses on the term *burkini*, assuming it implies that the woman is wearing a *burka* on the beach as opposed to a more fashionable bathing suit (as seen in highly circulated photographs). 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 summer of 2016. It is clear that both Ariane and Christine are confused about the issue and argue about the *burkini* and its place in modern, popular French fashion. Despite this, both Ariane and Christine still express their discontent with the *burkini* and how the situation has unraveled in France.

Another student who participated in the group interview, Paul, spoke up for the first time during the 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 discuss the hijab as oppressive, non-feminist, and anti-assimilation (which is confused with non-integration).

Ultimately, while there is much divergence in opinion across France about the hijab (Teepie Hopkins 2015), much of the conversation doesn't seem to take into account the actual opinions of Muslim women. Much of the issue surrounding the hijab involves the implication that the hijab is oppressive and therefore shouldn't be allowed in public places because there is no way to ensure that the woman is making a personal choice. 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 take into account the actual lived experienced of Muslim women in France. As detailed by Nadia Fadil and Jeanette Jouili and many other scholars, the reality of religious Muslim women and their veiling practices is much more complicated and nuanced. 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 given to their differences. The general discourse surrounding the hijab, as seen in mine and others works, also clearly shows Muslim women as oppressed when they choose to veil. Despite the fact that they are viewed without agency when they publically 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 specifically has become a 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.

### **2.1.5 Perspectives on the *Banlieues***

The first person I interviewed during my research was Jacques, a film student who lived in my foyer during my study abroad experience. Jacques was adopted from Madagascar and grew up in a small village near Alsace where, in his high school, he was the only person of color. Jacques used to be more liberal in high school, but describes himself as more politically moderate after he spent some time in Canada. Jacques and I chose to talk in the communal kitchen area of the dorm, where it was noisy and loud, but where he would be more comfortable, as we had never met before. Unfortunately, I was not able to record the interview because of the noise level, but I took detailed notes as the conversation took place. Jacques opened up about his childhood when we began talking about assimilation. He told me that he grew up in a ZEP, an educational priority zone, which has benefited from additional state resources channeled into disadvantaged areas, especially in the *banlieues* —the French word for suburbs, intended to counteract the failing school systems there. He stated that where he grew up, there were a lot of delinquents, mugging, and crime because people feel “left over.” He added, “when you are abandoned by society, you build yourself by yourself.” He referred to the *banlieues* that he lived in as “almost like another country.”

While *banlieue* is the French word for suburbs, there is a specific cultural and historical context tied to the word. In general, *banlieues* are areas of spatial isolation, immobility, and high unemployment rates (Silverstein 2018). While they were originally built for middle-class workers,

they now often house immigrants and their descendants, mainly people of color who are forced to live in poor living conditions due to various economic, political, and social factors. The *banlieues* are often depicted by media and political pundits as “lost areas of the Republic” and are described as lawless zones of migrants and their descendants who refuse to integrate into French society (Wolfreys 2017). In order to combat the seclusion and exclusion of immigrant populations, “state-directed integration efforts have often taken the form of urbanization and urban reform policies that have targeted the ultra-modern housing projects (*cités*), built across the French urban periphery, and particularly in the Northern suburbs (*banlieues*) of Paris, that today suffer from high rates of unemployment, physical dilapidation, and crime” (Silverstein 2004, 78). These areas have also become increasingly known internationally for their high rates of crime and have actually been labeled “no-go zones” by the American media channel Fox News. This perpetuates the idea that *banlieues* are areas of danger and creates an association between people of color and Muslim immigrants and high rates of crime. The overarching view of *banlieues* effects how French citizens understand the people who live there, many of whom are Muslim and immigrants.

Although originally none of my interview questions in my guide were aimed at tackling the issue of *banlieues*, this topic, because of its perceived connection to the French Muslim population, came up almost naturally amongst my interviewees. For example, in the group interview, we started talking about the *banlieues* when discussing how second and third generation immigrants often reclaim their roots through religion. This led to a discussion about integration and social mobility for immigrants, which is very limited in the *banlieues*. Christine was the first to explain to me that the suburbs were designed to be inaccessible and hard to get in or out, which explains the lack of adequate transportation. She goes on to physically describe the *cités*, which are large enclosed squares of cement buildings designed to be housing projects. Thomas jumped

into the conversation immediately after Christine, wanting to make clear that the *cités* were not originally built for immigrants, but for French people. Thomas may have mentioned this in order to counter the previous argument about housing segregation, asserting that the *banlieues* were not created to specifically segregate migrants. It is also interesting to note that Thomas emphasizes the distinction between immigrants and French people. While this may be due to Thomas's English-speaking skills, it also speaks to the delineation between immigrants and other French citizens. Despite the fact that the *banlieues* currently house many second and third generation immigrants who are French citizens, they are not necessarily recognized as truly French. Thomas goes on to say that the immigrants only moved into the *banlieues* after the working-class French citizens moved out. Immediately, Ariane jumps in and emphasizes that the *cités* were built to block the poor, a point that Thomas contests, stating that the working-class citizens were able to move out when they wanted to. This argument was brief, but emphasizes the tensions that exist surrounding the issue of the *banlieues*. In actuality, the *banlieues* were built after World War II because of a lack of adequate housing (Silverstein 2004). After World War II and again after the Algerian war, because of a lack of domestic workers, many immigrant populations were given incentive by the French government to settle and work in France. Most migrants were initially forced to settle in *bidonvilles*, or permanent shantytowns located on the peripheries of cities (Silverstein 2004). Over decades and well into the 1970s, migrants moved into the *banlieues*, which previously housed the working-class. When the housing situation in France began to improve, people who were better off economically moved out of the *banlieues*, leaving impoverished populations stuck in these urban peripheries.

In general, the topic of the *banlieues* did not come up amongst all of my interviewees, but apart from the group interview, at least four interviewees mentioned the *banlieues* in some way.

They all understood that there are issues with the *banlieues*, although how these issues are understood varies greatly amongst the students. Two students, Jacques and Jean, both perceive the *banlieues* as dangerous areas, a stigma that has been attributed to them through widespread media coverage. This media coverage often emphasizes “cultural difference as the defining feature of racialized individuals” which enables the media and politicians to blame minorities for the “inability” to become “French” (Wolfreys 2017). Therefore, the dangerous aspects of the *banlieues* are blamed on inherent cultural differences as opposed to external factors which anger and frustrate minority populations.

As mentioned earlier, Jacques’ opinion on *banlieues* is informed by his time spent in these areas, while Jean did not grow up in the *banlieues*. Jacques specifically recognizes that the *banlieues* often have more crime than other areas and that this crime is not random or inexplicable. In fact, the *banlieues* are often known for their lack of adequate facilities and transportation which further upsets and marginalizes the populations that live there.

Jacques’ earlier statement that the residents of *banlieues* feel “abandoned” by society is shared by two other interviewees, Danielle and Amina, who both sympathize with the situation of immigrant-descendent populations who are “stuck” in these suburbs. Amina specifically states:

“After the war when we asked for immigrants to come over to help us rebuild, we put them in the suburbs. We built buildings for them and stuff. And now it’s 2018 and they’re still there. So yeah they stick together because who are they going to stick with otherwise?”

Amina recognizes the role of the French state in placing immigrants in isolated areas that lack any physical mobility. Amina goes on to say that while she understands there are some dangerous neighborhoods, the entirety of the *banlieues* should not be cast in such a negative light.

Danielle iterates a similar point, stating that while there are some dangerous areas, including areas with drug trafficking, you can still travel to the suburbs. She emphasizes that there are even some famous universities in the suburbs, including ENS, which is her university.

In general, while the topic of the *banlieues* did not come up too much throughout my interviews, the points that were made by the interviewees say a lot about how the *banlieues* may currently be viewed by French students. Many universities, especially universities in the Paris region, are outside of the city in the suburbs. Thus some of the interviewees used their personal experience to explain that the suburbs, in totality, are not completely dangerous. While they understood that not every area of the suburbs is dangerous, only some interviewees brought up the plight of the people who live in these areas. The conversation ultimately focused on how my interlocutors have interacted with and perceive the *banlieues* as opposed to how current populations are affected. The interviewees only sometimes mentioned the conditions in which these populations are forced to live, recognizing that the lack of upward social and economic mobility as well as physical mobility to leave the *banlieues*.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that those who are most outspoken about the inequalities in the suburbs, Jacques, Amina, Ariane and Danielle, have all spent time in the suburbs, either during their childhood or during their time in university. Therefore, it may be easier for these students to better understand the suburbs by seeing and living in them first-hand. Jacques and Ariane are the only two students to explicitly state that they spent their childhood in the suburbs, and both of them are very forward in their opinion on the marginalization of populations in the *banlieues*. Interestingly, Jacques' and Ariane's deep understanding of class-related issues of marginalization stands somehow opposed to their incapacity to grasp the negative influence of the cultural hegemony on immigrant-descendent populations as was exposed in previous sections.

This shows how even potentially left-leaning students are shaped by dominant French discourse specifically touted by French politicians. These political pundits have “cultivated a narrative that [have] racialized and stigmatized minorities” who find themselves denied access to common pathways to integration “held up as the very fabric of Republican opportunity” (Wolfreys 2017, 131). Thus, even these students who criticize class-based discrimination are not capable to fully disrupt historical process of racialization of Muslim populations that attribute negative cultural and racial attributes to French Muslims, without recognizing the structural economic processes that truly limit their mobility.

Furthermore, Thomas and Jean, although both living in the suburbs of Paris while attending university, are the only two students to be more wary of the *banlieues*. Thomas spent time arguing that the *banlieues* were not designed to block the poor and Jean, who is originally from Montpellier, stated:

“And North and West of Montpellier, it’s like the middle-class suburbs with huge and ugly buildings and all people live together and you don’t go there by night by yourself, you know?”

As Jean understands, in both Montpellier and Paris, there is not much that can be done about the segregation between the rich, who live in the inner city, and the poor, who are forced to live in the urban peripheries. In his comments, Jean focuses on the classist issues of the *banlieues* while ignoring the racial factors implicit in its social reality. Ultimately, despite many urban renewal programs, it is understood by many of my interviewees that the situation in the *banlieues* has not at all improved. This became evident in the 2005 race riots which began after a case of lethal police brutality in the Parisian *banlieues*. More specifically, the riots occurred in October and November of 2005, during which thousands of young people from the *banlieues* participated

in an urban uprising after the deaths of two teenagers who were electrocuted while hiding from police in *Clichy-Sous-Bois* (Wolfreys 2017). The riots were mostly amongst ethnic minority youth and it “exposed a racism that scores deep into the French nation” (Murray 2006). A mix of police brutality, poor living conditions, and discrimination all exploded during the race riots, which ultimately showed the tensions that exist between the *banlieues* and the rest of France. Overall, this event sparked controversy, but not much has changed in the 13 years that have followed. While young people may be less fearful to venture into the *banlieues*, as seen with some of my interviewees, the *banlieues* are still recognized as a problem. They are problem due to the separation of immigrants from the wider French population and because of the dilapidating conditions that continue to affect those who live there. Those who have lived in the *banlieues* understand that the marginalized should not necessarily be blamed for their living conditions. Those who have not spent much time in the *banlieues* are skeptical and are more inclined to blame individual prerogative. What can be understood is that the way in which the media portrays the *banlieues* has an uneven effect on how the suburbs are perceived by various populations and one’s personal experience with the *banlieues* plays a large role in how one views the suburbs.

### 3.0 Conclusion

Ultimately, although the scope of my research is limited in number, I believe that my study provides valuable insight into French college students and their opinions on *laïcité* and Muslims in France. At the beginning of my study, I went in with 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 with younger generations, especially college students, at least in America. Throughout my stay in Paris and time 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 was based on 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.

In general, my interlocutors understandings of Islam and *laïcité* seem to be shaped by dominant French discourse, which ultimately structures how most of the students think, even if they consider themselves “leftist.” Through my analysis of various topics, I came to realize that while there is variance amongst French college students, this variance fits into the wider framework that the dominant French narrative provides. For example, when I talked with my interviewees about French identity as a concept, there was a lot of variety in how people discussed this notion of identity. Christianity was always brought up in terms of situating

identity, even if the student disagreed with its inextricable tie to French identity. The concept of French identity was also brought up in relation to the French-Muslim population and their current situation in France. Some students recognized that citizens of Arab descent are treated differently and are often assumed to be foreign-born. Some of the interviewees have also had personal experiences where they or their family members were perceived as other because they did not fit the description of what a French person should look like. These viewpoints are counteracted by others who maintained a typical right-wing argument, that France should not give up its roots and that France's cultural identity is currently under attack. Muslim difference seems to be a consistent problem within secular France and to my interlocutors. Even the more liberal students, who potentially understand the marginalization of Muslim populations, are shaped by dominant French discourse and have trouble dismissing essential French concepts such as *laïcité*, which caused them to see certain religious or cultural practices as at least partially responsible for their predicament.

The students' opinions only became more varied in the discussion about the French-Muslim population. When talking about assimilation, the students are unsure about how Muslims should be assimilated. There is no consensus on what should be done or how, but, despite this, the students' understandings about assimilation fits into the pro-assimilation ideal of French republicanism. Furthermore, when talking about the hijab and the agency of Muslim women, there are trends within the students' responses that indicate the prominence of dominant French discourse, which is why the majority of the interviewees are clearly hesitant about allowing the hijab in various public places and public schools in particular. This again shows that even more liberal students are still impacted by the dominant French framework.

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 no direct contact with Muslim populations and there is still a common sense of a “problem” that needs to be solved within the French-Muslim community. Overall, throughout my interviews it becomes 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 and, therefore, they use culturalist language, which ultimately attributes responsibility to individual Muslims for their fate. No matter how they understand issues facing the Muslim community, these students are still re-articulating broader French discursive trends and framing the discussion within the wider framework of French republicanism. In this way, these students show that they are a part of an epistemic community, as they share a common understanding of *laïcité* and French republicanism and the symbols embedded within these structures.

This study was my first time being a primary investigator conducting ethnographic research to this extent. While the study was fascinating and yielded some interesting results, there are some things I would change that may have made my research stronger. In regard to research design, I would have increased the number of participants in my study in order to obtain theme saturation in my interviews. I also would have spent more time engaged in participant observation with students and taking active notes. In order to enhance my study, I would have included more qualitative research while I was in France. This could have been done by handing

out surveys to all the students I had met over the course of my time in Paris. This would have resulted in more data to analyze salient themes and to see if there were, in fact, more consistent trends amongst students. Ultimately, I believe that if my research had more in-depth interviews with French college students, more themes would have emerged and I would have been able to come to a well-supported and stronger conclusion.

Again, while my research cannot be generalized to any wider populations due to a lack of participants, I still recognize the importance in studying youth and their opinions on these topics. In general, while there has been a great deal of research on the French population and their views towards Muslims as well as ethnographies on French Muslim populations, there hasn't been much research on non-Muslim French college students. My ethnography fits into a wider field which seeks to understand the current situation of the French Muslim population and how and why they have been marginalized. Hopefully, my study can provide some explanation or background as to why majority populations continue to have certain understandings about Islam. Because my study was conducted with college students, my research may be able to help other researchers conduct similar studies about French youth.

Ultimately, my research is filling in a gap in the literature, which still lacks ethnographic studies on French college students. I believe that this study provides an avenue for potential future research within the realm of Postcolonial France. I personally would like to conduct future research within a similar avenue of study. I believe that future research could involve conducting a wider and more comprehensive study with French college students in order to fill any gap of information in my study. More specifically, an ethnographic study could be conducted on a French university campus with a large Muslim and non-Muslim population. By using interviews and participant observation, I could study what cohabitation looks like, how different students

interact or don't interact, what spaces they share, what spaces are separate, and if there are any communal tensions. This could provide even more insight into how Muslim and non-Muslim students interact in their daily lives, trends which may permeate larger French culture. Conducting this study may reveal how the racialization and marginalization of Muslim populations is perceived by both Muslim and non-Muslim students who interact on a daily basis.

Ultimately, throughout my research it has become clear that young students have been greatly shaped by contemporary French discourse and understandings of *laïcité*. With increasingly widespread global Islamophobia, it is important to question how these sentiments become globalized. In the case of France, current Islamophobia is tied not only to the country's colonial history and racializing of its subsequent Muslim citizens but also to the specific exclusivist articulations of republicanism and secularism. France is not the only nation that has racialized Muslims causing their religious and cultural identities to become intertwined and seen as unchangeable. Nations in both the Eastern and Western hemisphere fall victim to appealing to normality and tradition in order to maintain the status quo, which ultimately negatively affects Muslims who are seen as an outside force of change. The status quo can often ignore those who are most marginalized, including racialized Muslim communities. As Van Houtum states, these liberal governments often times ask people to conform to the social expectations of either an oppressive majority or an authoritarian minority and that "such a government might be dismissing legality in favour of the tyranny of tradition such as religion" (2017, 88). Houtum is warning against appeals towards normalcy as recent developments show that many liberal governments have made a turn towards illiberalism. This is ultimately the case for many countries around the world, who often times impose their majoritarian cultural norms onto Muslim and other minority populations. Ultimately, it is difficult to know how to effectively

refashion dominant discourse when it is harmful to marginalized populations, but understanding the context in which Muslims have become racialized and subsequently discriminated against can provide valuable knowledge in fighting against this globalized prejudice.

## Appendix A

1. What are your feelings about the different political parties in France today?
2. What do you feel about the recent influx of immigrants in France?
3. What does *laïcité* mean to you?
4. Do you think college has had an effect on your political views?
  - a. If yes, how so?
5. Where did you grow up? Do you think this had an effect on your religious and political views?

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