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## The Semiology of Enlightenment

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**The Semiology of Enlightenment:  
How France's Secular Law Portrays Muslim Women  
as Homogenous Symbols of Oppression**

Piper Mullins  
College Scholars project  
April 29, 2005

## Preface

While I was researching this paper, some Muslims shared with me one of their sayings, “Islam is like water, it takes the form of the rocks over which it flows.” Their metaphorical message was that each culture interprets Islam differently, something that Western societies typically do not acknowledge. According to Islamic tradition, wearing *hijab* is a *hadith*, or Prophet’s saying, for women to dress modestly. As each culture interprets Islam according to its own mores, wearing *hijab* takes many forms.

One of the problems in writing about Muslim women’s practice of covering their head and bodies is the variety of images it evokes. The *hijab* is the most frequently worn headcovering. Essentially it is a piece of clothing that covers the hair and neck, though there are many variations on this design. When people talk of the Muslim headscarf, they are referring to the *hijab*. The *burqa* and *niqab* are both examples of Muslim headcovering, but they are much more extreme types than the *hijab*. The *niqab* covers the entire face as well as the neck and head, leaving only a small hole for the eyes. The *burqa* is similar to the *niqab*, but it includes a mesh cloth to cover the eyes and a robe to cover the body. Variations of the *niqab* and *burqa* are what the Taliban and the Iranian officials require women to wear in their respective states. Thus, it is erroneous to claim that a woman who wears the *hijab* is veiled, as veiled women wear something resembling a *burqa* or a *niqab*. For the purposes of this research, I will use the term *hijab* to designate all moderate Muslim headcoverings, the term ‘veil’ to designate anything that covers more than the head and neck, and the phrase ‘headscarf debate’ to refer to France’s *l’affaire du foulard*.

*Hijab, niqab, burqa.* Hat, scarf, raincoat. All of these items are used by women to cover their hair and various body parts; yet only one type of clothing has been branded by Western societies as oppressive. How can a simple piece of cloth cause so much debate? Intense debates such as the current headscarf debate in France arise when cultural traditions and stereotypes are transferred onto one type of clothing, and onto the people wearing that article of clothing. As we will see, the debate over *hijab* is due to cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes that disregard the Western principles of freedom of choice.

## **Introduction**

Over the past several decades Europe has seen a significant increase in its Muslim populations. Some claim that Islam is now Europe's second religion, although that is not an officially documented fact, owing to a lack of definitive surveys on religious practices in European countries. What is true is that cultural misunderstandings between Europeans and Muslims are occurring at increasing rates. The media outlets in Europe cover stories that usually portray Muslims in a negative light. Events such as Madrid's March 11, 2004 certainly do not help foster a positive image of Islam in the media. The young Dutch Moroccan who killed Theo van Gogh, a filmmaker critical of Islam, made international headlines as a vengeful, fanatical Muslim. Islamophobia is on the rise in Europe. France's newly enacted *loi laïque*, or secular law, is an exaggerated case of western European sentiment towards its newest demographic addition.

Widespread media coverage of *l'affaire du foulard*, or the headscarf debate, began in October 1989 when three Muslim girls were expelled temporarily from their

Creil middle school, north of Paris, for refusing to remove their Muslim *hijab*. Their fathers went to court over the issue, with the support of the local Islamic community. The *Conseil d'Etat*, the highest judicial administration in France, rendered its decision on November 27, 1989, recognizing students' freedom of choice to wear religious symbols ("Le Rapport" 19). Although ruling in favor of the students' right to wear religious symbols, the *Conseil* also attached four vague stipulations to its decision that prohibited religious proselytization, rejected racist behavior or behavior that attacked plurality, excluded action that disrupts the classroom, and affirmed the neutrality of public school programs and teachers ("Le Rapport" 19). The decision to expel was given to individual schools, thereby allowing the government to commit itself to a ruling but also adding to the ambiguity of *hijabs* and secularity in schools. This expulsion and the *Conseil d'Etat* decision sparked an open, continuing debate, fueled by media coverage, over the definition of secularity in French public schools.

Similar instances have occurred since the 1989 ruling, each case highlighting the ambiguity of the secular principle and the social tensions between Muslims and traditional French society. Each story that reached the media served to fuel both French concerns of radical Muslim influence and Muslim concerns of misrepresentation of Islam. There are exaggerated stories of Muslim fathers refusing to allow their daughters to attend physical education or biology classes, claiming it was against their religion. In 2003, Lila and Alma Levy became the center of the debate when their school sent them a letter claiming their headscarves were conspicuous and incompatible with physical education courses, and forbade them to enter the school while wearing the *hijab*. Their father, a lawyer with Jewish heritage, defended their right to go to school (Schofield). As

the headscarf debate intensified in the French media and public opinion, so too did the rhetoric shift from simply upholding secular principles to concerns of Muslim proselytization in French schools and misogyny within Muslim culture. While these concerns are not limited to the Muslim community, the headscarf debate scrutinizes the Muslim community to a greater extent than other communities in France. The *hijab*, in the opinion of some French citizens, is an external indicator of internal problems as well as a public proclamation of faith.

In July 2003, President Jacques Chirac commissioned an investigative panel, the Stasi Commission, headed by government ombudsman Bernard Stasi, to examine secularity in public schools. The Commission interviewed French citizens from diverse backgrounds and issued its findings and recommendations to the President in December 2003 (“Le Rapport” 1). Based on the Commission’s recommendations, the French government inserted into the education code Article 141-5-1 of law no. 2004-228 on March 15, 2004, prohibiting students in public schools from wearing “signs or apparel through which students ostensibly display religious membership” (LOI n° 2004-228)<sup>1</sup>. The law is sometimes referred to by French media as the ‘veil ban.’ Since the first day of classes in September 2004, there have been several cases of expulsion of Muslim girls who refused to remove their *hijabs* and several Sikhs who refused to remove their turbans, but the school environment has remained relatively calm.

The 2004 French ban on religious symbols in public schools triggered various reactions from different groups within France. Not surprisingly, some in the Muslim community interpreted it as a law targeting them. Several Muslim groups called for the law’s repeal while others suggested government pamphlets to define acceptable secular

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<sup>1</sup> Quote translated from French. All translations in this paper are my own.

behavior. The more conservative Christian groups, such as the French Catholic bishops, also opposed the law, claiming that it infringed upon citizens' rights to religious freedom ("French Cardinal"). However, one spring 2004 poll indicated that 70% of French citizens support a secular ban such as the law proscribes (Brenner 196). The French government argues that the law will protect the Republic's founding principle of secularity. Muslim and other religious leaders counter that the law is xenophobic and does not allow students the right to practice their religion. There is, however, one element that is largely missing from the highly publicized headscarf debate: the perspectives of the girls and women who wear the *hijab*.

Despite the plethora of images of girls and women in *hijabs* or veils, their individual voices are largely unheard in the debate. The girls and women themselves, with a few vocal exceptions who assume representation for the culturally diverse Muslim groups, are invisible. Printing a picture of a girl wearing a *hijab* and calling her oppressed due to the headscarf does not give her a voice; it merely transfers the photographer's opinions onto her now symbolic face. Interviewing a veiled woman, then publishing a report on the veil that represents Muslim women as oppressed is not necessarily championing her cause; it is merely rendering her invisible and symbolic by interpreting her words through a Western cultural context. Promoting gender equity and religious tolerance by forcing girls in public schools to remove their *hijabs* does not make them equal; it merely exacerbates their status as foreign in the host culture. Although women's *bodies* are the central focus of the debate, women's *voices*, their diversity of thought and experience, remain largely unheard, overshadowed by the symbolism that each side accords to wearing the *hijab*.

## French Culture and Politics

### *History of Secularity in French Culture*

French citizens are proud of their national identity, forged from centuries of art, language, gastronomy, and politics, all of which are reflected in the national culture. There are relatively few displays of nationalistic pride in France as compared to the United States, where flag-waving and reciting the pledge of allegiance are common. In place of these conspicuous displays of patriotism, the French citizenry pays homage to its rich cultural heritage by adhering to certain centuries-old traditions. The *Académie Française* is a national institute designed to maintain the purity of the French language and culture. Mainstream French society, by which I mean the majority population of white, middle-class citizens of Catholic heritage, values the ideals of the French Revolution, such as the principle of secularity, or *la laïcité*. The gastronomic reputation, the heritage of language, literature, music, and the arts, the changes instituted by the French Revolution and the rights of man, all are aspects of the French national identity in which French citizens take pride. Upholding secularity in public institutions is one aspect of French national culture. Originating from the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, French perspectives firmly reject religion in favor of a state instituted policy of secularity.

During the eighteenth century or the Enlightenment the elite, and by proxy the general French populace, began to reconsider the hitherto accepted dominance of the monarchy and the Catholic Church. Works such as The Social Contract by Rousseau and Candide by Voltaire presented liberal ideals of individual human worth and new systems of self-government. Their ideas challenged the authority of the Catholic Church and the



monarchy who ruled by the divine mandate of the king and the separation of society into estates. The rationality inspired by the Enlightenment led the French people to analyze and question their fiscal system, in which the Third Estate was heavily taxed by the monarchy. Ideas of social reform originating in the French Enlightenment became the philosophical framework for the French Revolution.

The French Revolution ushered in a new set of beliefs about French government and society that differed considerably from the values held during the Ancien Régime. In addition to ending the absolute rule of the monarchy and the separation of the French population into the three Estates, the revolutionaries questioned the supreme authority of the Catholic Church over governmental affairs. Consequently, the governing bodies immediately following the fall of the monarchy accorded less power and prestige to the Church. In 1790, the National Assembly passed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, requiring the clergy to swear allegiance to the State and in doing so to accept State salaries. In 1801, Napoleon Bonaparte signed the Concordat with the Catholic Church, asserting that although Catholicism was the majority French religion, there was no official state religion. Thus, the revolutionary struggles against the abuses of the Catholic Church brought about the beginnings of the separation of Church and State in France, although it would be another century before the French government would officially enact secular laws.

The contemporary French concept of *laïcité* is born from the anti-elite, and thus anti-Church, struggles of the French Revolution and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century laws that implemented secular principles. After Bonaparte's reign, the country briefly became a constitutional monarchy before developing into a republic. The Catholic

Church, however, would never again attain the degree of power it had enjoyed during the Ancien Régime. The first series of secular school laws was enacted between 1881 and 1886, when Minister of Education Jules Ferry championed the removal of the Catholic Church's influence from public education. The subsequent law of 1905 formally provided for the separation of Church and State in education and Article II of the 1958 Constitution declared the separation of Church and State as a principle of the French Republic.

Although these laws seem straightforward, their historical context provides another perspective. Early twentieth-century France included three major religions or sects: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism. Each religion controlled some representation in the government and society, although Catholics were the majority and Jewish practitioners were still marginalized despite this minority representation. Due to the common Judeo-Christian heritage of the three major religions or sects, the laws of 1881 and 1905 did not contradict public religious practices of Catholic, Protestant or Jewish people. Since the early twentieth century, though, the French population's demographics have expanded to include more religious diversity, in particular Islam.

In addition to its secular principles, France's universalist assimilation principle also defines the French national identity. Whereas in the United States people attach ethnic modifiers to the label American, such as African-American, Hispanic-American, etc., no similar practices combining ethnic origin and current nationality exist in France. Instead, in official state surveys and censuses, all citizens are classified as "French." While the label French has different meanings for different people, mainstream French culture is proud of its assimilationist values. Rather than target certain groups as part un-

French and thus different by labels of ethnic origin like Tunisian-French, the discreet aim of France's assimilation principle is to recognize the common link among all the population, that of French residency. Assimilation of citizens as French is an effort to "level all playing fields" into a universal category without discrimination but also an attempt to preserve traditional French culture and heritage against changes brought by immigration.

As when any widely accepted cultural value is challenged by another group, problems arise. In France, several waves of Maghreb and African immigration to France have brought a new population of residents with cultures, languages, and religions different from those of mainstream French society. Given French society's pride in its culture and heritage, immigrants wishing to reside in France are expected to share similar pride in their adopted country. Problems arise, however, when the immigrants' motive for migration is not cultural but economic. Then, as is demonstrated by current clashes between some Muslim immigrants and mainstream French citizens, certain immigrants view France's universalist assimilation principle as the demand to forget their native traditions in order to assimilate fully into a French culture that is indifferent to cultural diversity. A cycle of cultural misunderstanding, miscommunication, and misdirection has developed between mainstream French citizens and the Muslim immigrant population, due in part to mainstream French society's principle of universalist assimilation.

*Origins of Contemporary French Politics and Attitudes towards Muslims*

The French government's attitude toward its colonies during colonization consisted of a *mission civilisatrice*, or civilizing mission, that continues to affect in part France's relationships with its former colonies today. Like other European countries, France entered into colonization for the new markets and supply of raw materials that the colonized countries provided. The intellectual difficulty arose in trying to justify how the country of *les droits de l'homme*, the rights of man, could exploit another people. In keeping with the institutionalized racism of nineteenth-century Europe that justified subjugating and exploiting peoples through colonization, France developed the *mission civilisatrice* policy toward its colonies, similar to colonial policies of other European countries. Cultural and biological theories contrasted the supposed superiority of the fair-skinned French people (they were educated and therefore civilized) with the inferiority of the darker skinned peoples of Africa and the Maghreb (who were not educated according to European standards and thus uncivilized). These theories supported the French idea that through colonization these "savage" peoples could be civilized. France's educational system in its colonies dissimulated the *mission civilisatrice* policy, attempting to assimilate the natives to European standards. As a result, students were educated in European subjects such as literature, but they could not use those skills to survive in their native lands. In practice, the cultural imperative of the *mission civilisatrice* permitted French colonizers to subjugate, denigrate, and "educate" colonized peoples to conform to French standards of behavior while slowly killing the native cultures.

The negative effects of the *mission civilisatrice* are still present today as France maintains ties with, if not government influence over, its former colonies and

protectorates. The most obvious example of France's influence is the DOM-TOMs, overseas departments and territories that are considered part of France. Citizens from these overseas departments and former French colonies come to France to receive an education, such as Martinique playwright and poet Aimé Césaire and writer and the former president of Senegal Léopold Sédar Senghor. Francophone writers still address issues of identity originating from the effects of the *mission civilisatrice*, in which France is associated with knowledge and culture while their native countries and cultures are undervalued. For most Francophone writers, who represent their societies' attitudes in part, it is difficult to reconcile the aforementioned associations into one identity. Nor is the *mission civilisatrice* exclusively operative outside France; it affects contemporary French society's general attitude toward foreigners.

While not as blatantly racist as the *mission civilisatrice*, mainstream French society's attitude is not welcoming towards those who do not emulate French standards. French citizens are fiercely proud of their heritage and culture, and do not adapt well to forces that may change that heritage, which makes the native-foreigner dichotomy a difficult one for foreigners. During the time of social change in the 1980s, when the period of economic boom in France known as the "Thirty Glorious Years" was fading away, hostility toward the new Muslim population grew into a scapegoat-like attitude. France was having its own identity crisis amidst the economic downturn, and its citizens were searching for traditional points of reference that were familiar and comforting, rather than embracing a new culture emerging within their country. It was during this time that anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant attitudes emerged, the best-known example being Jean-Marie Le Pen and his National Front party, who claimed that France's

national identity was being threatened by immigrants (Wieviorka, 134-135). Nicknames for immigrants emerged amidst this anti-immigrant rhetoric. Even though Muslims may be legal French citizens, the French regard them as foreigners, which is not a positive term in the French vocabulary.

Children of immigrants, Muslims especially, often occupy a marginalized position in mainstream French society, which is composed principally of white, middle-class citizens from Catholic backgrounds. Racial epithets such as “*beur*,” used to describe the second- or third- generation children of Maghrebi immigrants, or “black,” used to describe the dark-skinned immigrants from Africa, are part of the vernacular. Born as French citizens, the second- and third-generation children of immigrants are nevertheless alienated from mainstream French society, due to their apparent connection to the traditions of other cultures and religions. The French government’s policies, such as the 1993 Pasqua law that required all children of immigrants to apply for French citizenship at 18 years of age or forfeit the right (Pauly 47), and the attitudes of some French, which stereotype Muslims as radical terrorists, make it difficult for Muslims to integrate into mainstream French society while maintaining the traditions of their cultures of origin. The relationship between mainstream French citizens and Muslim citizens or immigrants remains precarious, with resentment and lack of effective integration on both sides.

There are recognized indicators, attitudes, and opinions in French society that constitute the label “native French person,” a positive label that contrasts with ideas about foreigners. These markers include French cuisine, religious heritage from the Catholic Church, adherence to customs of *la Patrie* and correct use of the French language. Emulating these cultural indicators and belonging to families that have lived for many

generations in France grants the label “native” in France, which corresponds to a general social acceptance. One can act and behave according to one’s own personality without concern that one’s actions and behaviors will be interpreted as representative of an entire culture. This same liberty of behavior is not accorded to those labeled “foreign” in France. Many signs identify someone as foreign, the most obvious being that one speaks French with a non-French accent, or one looks or dresses according to customs not generally observed in France. As is the case with the *beur* label, one can be a French citizen and still be identified by other French people as a foreigner, so strong is the French sense of tradition and heritage. Due to the fact that the majority of French citizens are identified as native, with families who have lived in France for generations, native French citizens hold more power in society, including the power to react negatively to foreigners. Compared with the national average, communities of Muslims are more likely to be relegated to shabby housing in poor areas, or kept apart from mainstream society, or not given as much social and/or financial aid, and/or frequently discriminated against for jobs (Hunter & Leveau 9). Due to the strong native-foreigner dichotomy in France, foreigners are allowed much less room to act as individuals and are instead regarded by native white French as a homogeneous group.

### **Muslim Diaspora and Presence in France**

#### *Historical Context of Muslims in France*

France has had direct political involvement with Muslims for over two centuries, mostly from the Maghreb, the region that includes Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. In 1830, France invaded Algeria, which became an occupied French colony until gaining its

independence in 1962. France also made Tunisia and Morocco protectorates in 1881 and 1912, respectively; both gained independence in 1956 ("North Africa"). During the period of colonization, the French government in the colonies accepted the traditions of the Muslim population to minimize Muslim unrest. However, if a Muslim living in the Maghreb wanted to become a French citizen, he or she had to accept French laws affecting marriage and inheritance, and reject the jurisdiction of Islamic courts, effectively rejecting his or her faith in order to assimilate into secular France ("Colonization and Military Control"). This culturally hegemonic attitude did not dissipate after the colonies gained independence, nor as the Muslim population in France increased significantly. Owing in part to the growing Muslim population in France, French society's general attitude toward all Muslims remains negative even for third-generation immigrants and French-born converts to Islam.

Muslim immigration to France began as a symbiotic relationship between the French government, which needed unskilled laborers to help cheaply rebuild the economy and infrastructure after the two World Wars, and the mostly Maghrebi temporary workers, who needed jobs that their home countries could not supply. During World War I the French government recruited Maghrebi workers to work in the mines. After the war, more workers were recruited to assist in postwar reconstruction. France again used Maghrebi labor during World War II, even demanding the governors of Algiers, Oran, and Constantine to dispatch 10,000 workers per month (Hunter & Leveau 5). Again, postwar reconstruction brought more temporary unskilled workers from predominantly Muslim countries, mostly from the Maghreb. The demographic profile of these workers, the so-called "reserve forces of capitalism" (Leveau 92), were mostly



single males. In the 1950s and 1960s, the wars for independence in the Maghreb contributed to some Maghrebi immigration, though the Muslim population did not increase significantly. Soon, however, the demographics and size of the Muslim presence in France began to increase as the government changed its immigration policies during the 1970s.

By the 1970s the economic boom had ended in France, also ending the need for foreign laborers. Rising unemployment and an OPEC-induced oil crisis in 1973 caused the French government to halt foreign labor immigration in 1974 (Pauly 36). Faced with the prospect of returning to depleted, impoverished home countries without being able to return to France to work, the Maghrebi temporary workers opted to remain in France. Instead of accepting incentives to return to their native countries as the French government wished, the immigrant workers began to settle permanently in France and to call for their families to join them (Hunter & Leveau 5-6). After the 1970s the majority of Maghrebi Muslim immigration to France was composed of women and children, whom the French government reluctantly permitted to immigrate. This family reunification trend created a large, permanent Muslim presence in France.

#### *Demographics and Socioeconomic Status of Muslims in France*

Although much French media attention focuses on the Maghrebi majority of Muslims, the contemporary French Muslim population includes immigrants from Libya, Turkey, and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as French-born converts, all of whom have had difficulties living in France. Ironically, the stereotype of the Maghrebis as Arabic is misleading, as Muslim conquerors introduced Islam in the eighth century and the

Ottoman Empire colonized the Maghreb region in the fifteenth century. The Maghreb and its peoples cannot be labeled solely 'Arab' or 'Muslim,' as native cultures such as Berber are still alive. Thus, although the majority of Muslims in France today hail from the Maghreb region, the Muslim community is diverse in its ethnography, as well as in its cultural and religious practices.

Compared to the French population as a whole, Muslim communities in France are relatively poor. Much of the Muslim population lives in poor conditions in the suburbs of large cities. As many as 30% of working-age Muslims are unemployed, compared to the national average of approximately 10 %. As one unemployed French-Muslim teen complained, "...they reject the job application because of the name, Abdullah or Ismail..." (Young, French & Muslim). More Muslim students enter the technical/vocational school track in high school than the university track. Their job qualifications are thus largely unskilled. The high level of unemployment and its social causes contribute to feelings of alienation among young Muslims.

Unemployment and poor living conditions combine to help foster feelings of animosity in young French Muslims toward mainstream French society, which in turn creates French stereotypes about radical Muslims. The disillusioned and frustrated young Muslim population is a prime target for radical Islamists to gain a foothold in France. As these groups, like the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, increase their support among younger people in Muslim neighborhoods, they incite their followers to commit subversive acts in the name of Islam or their home country's politics. An extreme but rare case is the example of the 1995 Paris subway bombings carried out by a group of alienated young Muslim men who were recruited by the Algerian Armed Islamic Group.

This terrorist action was linked to the Algerian civil war, and it was made possible in part by the alienation of the young Muslim men vulnerable to radical groups (Hunter & Leveau 15). Other Muslim groups in France also had a hand in this event, but in a positive role; they helped calm the Muslim population to prevent further violence after the bombings.

### *Muslim Organizations and Political Involvement in France*

Ethnic, cultural, and political diversity among those practicing Islam in France contribute to a fragmented Muslim population, who cannot unite under the auspices of one organization or gain much political parity or social representation. Although there is no one representative organization recognized by Muslims, such as the Vatican and its emissaries for Catholics, there are many Muslim groups and organizations in France, with varying religious practices and beliefs. According to Shireen Hunter and Rémy Leveau, editors of Islam, Europe's Second Religion, Muslim institutions can be grouped into three main categories: 1) those developed around mosques; 2) umbrella organizations regrouping smaller institutions; and 3) organizations associated with political parties or Islamic movements of the immigrants' native countries (11). The Paris mosque is categorized under the first group, although it is associated with Algeria (it was built by the French to honor Maghrebi help during World War I), and some Muslims of other ethnic origins discount its leadership. Several umbrella organizations are influential among certain Muslim groups in France. *L'Union des Organisations Islamiques de France* (UOIF), or the Union of Islamic Organizations in France, has a moderate fundamental ideology similar to that of the Muslim Brotherhood, an anti-secular

organization that promotes a conservative interpretation of the *Qur'an*. It is an umbrella organization for some 200 associations. *Le Conseil Français des Cultes Musulmanes* (CFCM), on the other hand, is a Muslim organization established in 2003 as a representative body to the French government. Nicolas Sarkozy in particular, then Minister of the Interior, advocated CFCM as a means for Muslims to gain political representation (Kramer 67). However, because the CFCM is a French-government sponsored institution whose leader, Dalil Boubakeur, is a senior imam of the Paris Mosque with ties to Algeria, not all Muslims recognize CFCM as a legitimate representative of their religion. While some Muslims are succeeding on the local level -- there were more than 100 municipal councilors elected in 2001 (Pauly 41) -- there are still no Muslim representatives in France's Parliament. As a result of the diversity among Muslims, no single organization accurately reflects the collective interests of all; with little success on a national level, Muslims as a group remain marginalized within French government and politics.

This real diversity of opinion among Muslims is contrasted with French society's perception of Muslims as a monolithic bloc, a fundamental group bent on changing everything to their specifications. As practiced in France, the various forms of Islam are used both as a cultural tool, to maintain the traditions of and ties to home countries, and/or as a political tool to regroup alienated young Muslims around political goals or to distinguish Muslim ethnic identity and heritage from the French culture that wants to assimilate them. Contrary to French citizens' and medias' beliefs and portrayals, which categorize Muslims as fundamentalists, Islam in France is practiced in varied ways, for varying reasons, and with varying levels of commitment.

Although Muslims in France are diverse in their application of Islam, with a variety of purposes, the majority practice an Islam of peace, not of political and cultural confrontation. Unlike the French image of Muslims who all support fundamental Islamic groups, most Muslims practice a moderate Islam quietly. This traditional Islam centers on personally upholding the Pillars of Islam and observing important life milestones such as birth, marriage, and death. In the latter sense, Muslims are not wholly different from secular Catholics in France who do not regularly attend church but do celebrate important rites of passage there. The Five Pillars of Islam are *salāh* (prayer), *sawm* (fasting), *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), *zakāh* (almsgiving), and *shahada* (declaration of faith). *Jihad* is commonly portrayed in Western media as the fifth pillar that calls for religious wars, but it is actually a recommendation, not a pillar, that means “effort in the path of God” (Nasr 91). Due to several negative events carried out in the name of *jihad*, such as the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States, Westerners tend to associate *jihad* with Islamic warfare, though it is more often interpreted by Muslims to mean internal struggle. As a 1994 *Sondage IFOP* poll suggests many Muslims in France do not strictly adhere daily to Islamic tenets: “only 31% of Muslims in France pray daily and 16% attend weekly services” (Pauly 41). In France, Muslims’ beliefs range from secular Islam, whose followers liberally adhere to Islamic rituals and adapt to the French legal and political principles; to conservative Islam, whose adherents observe Islamic practices while attempting to live within a secular, republican framework; to fundamental Islam, whose practitioners strictly observe Islamic principles of the *Qur’an* with no liberal interpretation; to Islamists, who are fundamental Muslims with a political agenda (Hunter

& Leveau 10-11). Among these categories, most Muslims in France practice a conservative form of Islam that follows the *Qur'an* and respects French mores.

Islam is part of the cultural heritage of many Maghrebi, Arab, and African immigrants in France, in the same way that France's *patrimoine* includes many Catholic references and holidays. As such, being able to practice Islam in France is not only a matter of faith, but also a question of cultural and ethnic identity. Just as French society wants to keep current French culture from being changed through the assimilation of foreigners, so do the Muslim immigrants wish to maintain part of their native culture while living in a markedly different one. Islam is one way for immigrants and those of foreign origin to maintain ties with their family and home countries. Given the Muslim population's marginalization within French society, practicing Islam is one way to assert an identity and gain social consideration. As an immigrant from Algeria or Turkey, it is difficult for the individual to assert his/her differences or rights in the larger society, but as a member of a Muslim community, he/she has more collective power to make his/her voice heard. Rémy Leveau uses the example of the workplace where immigrant workers used Islam as a legitimate method of collective bargaining power to gain group rights based on individual interests:

[Muslim] assertion of identity included requests for prayer rooms in the workplace and adjustment of working hours to allow them to worship. Starting out with spontaneous requests from small groups, Muslims in the same workplace eventually began acting together to negotiate with employers and unions about respecting religious practices, which they said was a matter of human rights. (Leveau 93)

While some might decry this method as collective bullying, one must remember that Christian traditions, such as letting school out at noon on Wednesdays for students to attend catechism, are institutionalized within France. It is significant to note that although

some Muslims may be third-generation immigrants and legally French citizens, they are still considered foreigners in France. Faced with a prejudiced French society that essentializes immigrants and Muslims, practicing Islam in France is a means to assert one's differences from the alienating French society, as well as a way to find solace and solidarity in the similarity of other Muslims.

For some Muslims, though, practicing Islam means more than just asserting differences or cultural identity. It can also be used as a political tool for outside groups seeking support in France and internal groups seeking political representation. As Leveau's example illustrates, Islam can be a way to assert identity and to gain political rights. As such, some Muslims are using Islam as a political rallying point to assemble marginalized individuals and communities. While Islam as a political tool for representation is a positive application, others use Islam to further radical, often destructive, agendas. Foreign *imams* and Islamic teachers have targeted young Muslim French citizens, who are alienated from and by French society, by "extol[ling] the virtues of orthodox Islam and berat[ing] the culture and values of a French society from which they feel excluded" (Pauly 42). The Algerian Armed Islamic Group is one such example; they recruited young French Muslims to carry out terrorist activities in Paris in 1995. Some Muslim adolescents think Osama Bin Laden "is leading a just battle" (Young, French, & Muslim).

As a connection to their native countries, Islam can play a role in the interaction between the French and the immigrants. During a 2001 soccer match, in which France faced Algeria, the field was invaded by people waving Algerian flags, interpreted as an act of protest against thirty years of failure of France's integration policy (Young, French,

& Muslim). France's islamophobia, as in many other European countries and the United States, was clearly a factor in France's failure to integrate effectively Muslim immigrants, although the failure was not directly related to Islam. Thus, practicing Islam in France is not solely a religious endeavor, it is also used as a means to assert cultural identity and gain political support.

### **La Loi Laïque**

#### *The Language and Politics of the Secular Law*

Created July 3, 2003 by President Jacques Chirac, the Stasi Commission, headed by mediator Bernard Stasi, was a temporary board designed to investigate the applications of French secularity in public schools and provide recommendations on which the President could act. Of its twenty members, fourteen are men and six are women, and most are intellectuals with influential status. All but one member was born in France. Although the President did not formally mention tensions caused by the Islamic *hijab* as a reason for forming the commission, it was no doubt part of the impetus, considering the publicity surrounding *l'affaire du foulard*. While the French became concerned to maintain secularity faced with Muslim *hijabs*, there had been no such debate over whether Sikh turbans violated secularity before the secularity law. Whatever the hidden political implications of the Stasi Commission, the members met for six months to discuss the definition of secularity and conduct nearly 100 public and 40 private hearings with religious and political leaders, teachers and principals, social groups, and individuals about secularity. On December 11, 2003, the Stasi Commission formally presented its report, comprising twenty-six recommendations, to the President.



The recommendations included observing the Jewish holiday Yom Kippur and the Arabic holiday Eid al-Kabir in state schools, developing a pedagogical approach to teaching the world's religions as aspects of civilization, developing a national higher education institute for Islamic Studies, and offering substitutes for the traditional pork and fish served on Fridays in schools, in addition to banning conspicuous religious symbols in public schools. Having claimed that "secularity is not negotiable," President Chirac waited for the Commission's report before enacting a law.

Of the twenty-six recommendations to amend the application of secularity in France, only the proposition to ban religious symbols in public schools was endorsed as a legal remedy. According to Commission member and sociologist Jean Baubérot, the Commission was created under three contexts: 1) The possibility that a radical Islam might impinge upon civil liberties; 2) gender equity; and 3) the internal crisis of schools since 1975 (Baubérot, 136-137). His dissention from the recommendation to ban the *hijab* and other religious symbols publicly questioned the Chirac administration's motives for the secular law as a quick fix. President Chirac defended the decision, saying "France is an idea of citizenship, an identity forged in the neutral space of public school...Religion is not a subject we impose on French children" (Kramer 60 & 62). The administration deliberated over other recommendations, such as the suggestion to include Jewish and Islamic holidays in the school calendar. After the decision to remove Pentecost as a national holiday, President Chirac claimed that the added holidays "would create many difficulties for parents who work during those days" (Caldier, Chaverou, Barral). In the end, the other recommendations were all deemed unnecessary or inappropriate to be enacted into law. After three months of debate in Parlement, the

National Assembly voted 494 to 36 and the Senate voted 276 to 20 to ratify the secular law. On March 15, 2004, the phrase “In the public elementary, junior and high schools, the act of wearing signs or clothing by which students manifest an ostensible religious association is forbidden” (“LOI n° 2004-228”) was inserted into the education code and enacted into law. As the law was passed in March and would not become active until the following September, there was little proof of its efficacy until then.

### *Results of Ratification of the Secular Law*

During the period between the secular law’s enactment and the new school year, kidnapped French journalists in Iraq brought attention to the Muslim *hijab*. In August 2004, Georges Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot were taken hostage in Iraq by the Islamic Army of Iraq. The fundamentalist group demanded as ransom that France reverse the ban on Muslim *hijabs* in schools. Political and religious leaders in France condemned the action. As the *New York Times* reported, a demonstration of solidarity with the journalists and the French state gathered several thousand people in Paris shortly after the journalists were taken hostage (Sciolino). In a move of unity with France, French Muslim leaders cautioned outsiders to keep out of the issue of religious symbols. Not wanting to be seen as supporting radical Islamists, some of the Muslim groups lessened their protests against the law. Despite repeated threats by the Islamic Army of Iraq to execute the journalists if the law was not revoked, France refused to let the group interfere with the new law’s enforcement. Malbrunot and Chesnot were freed in December 2004, but the law remained. In spite of the fundamentalist group’s demands, the hostage situation seemed to create a sense of solidarity among the French, transcending cultural and

religious ties to remain unified against terrorists. Perhaps partly as a result, the beginning of the school year 2004 was relatively calm.

Despite dire predictions by some, the start of the school year 2004, after the enactment of a ban on religious symbols, passed without much fanfare. Officials for the city of Lille, which contains a large Muslim population, reported that 5-10% fewer girls came to class wearing the *hijab*. Several girls did wear the *hijab* as a symbolic protest against the law (Sobocinski 4). Given the statistics that only a few hundred girls wear the Muslim *hijab* out of six million students attending French public schools, the *loi laïque* is not affecting the majority of students directly. As the school year progresses, though, there have been several objections to the law and its vague wording. Among the dissenters, those who practice the Sikh faith have belatedly voiced their opinion, as the traditional turban is now defined under French law as a conspicuous symbol. Since the start of classes, the French government has issued a statement claiming that it would readjust the law to respect other religions.

#### *Muslim Reactions to the Secular Law*

Muslim reactions to the headscarf debate and the secular law are generally unfavorable but not militant. Several Muslim groups organized public protests in Paris before and after the law was passed. The leader of the *Union des Organisations Islamiques de France* (UOIF), Fouad Alaoui, called for a suspension of the law after the French journalists' kidnapping, but the French government remained firm in its decision (Kramer 67). Saïda Kada, co-author of *L'Une voilée, l'autre pas*, defended the *hijab* before the Stasi Commission, saying "This is a debate that belongs in the Muslim

community, not to be decided by the French state. This is a divine prescription” (Brenner 196).

Despite the unfavorable reaction of the majority, some practicing Muslims or those from Muslim backgrounds have come forward to defend secularity in France. Amirouche Laïdi, deputy mayor of Suresnes, a town just west of Paris, favors prohibiting headscarves in public schools: “It is in the schools that we develop critical thinking skills, and one cannot learn that with a veil” (Ternisien 10). Yet he does not feel that the issue is sufficiently large to warrant a law, since it concerns only a few hundred girls as opposed to the tens of thousands of Muslims and other groups who are discriminated against in France. Fadela Amara is president of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, a feminist organization that helps inner-city Muslim women gain some autonomy outside their family. She has had many opportunities to witness the oppressive uses of the *hijab*. In her mind, “the veil has no religious connotation. It is the seal of women's humiliation” (Amara). Amara does not, however, favor a law banning *hijabs*, since that stigmatizes Muslims. Instead, she suggests a government pamphlet with guidelines that state the rules of secularity in schools and specify acceptable behavior.

Leaders from moderate Muslim countries, such as President Mubarak of Egypt, stated that the ban was particular to the French context and did not condemn it. The traditional Muslim group the Muslim Brotherhood, based in Egypt, issued statements strongly opposing the ban. Tantawi, the Grand Sheikh of the well-known Muslim theological school Al-Ahzar in Cairo, issued a statement permitting Muslim girls in France to remove their *hijabs* in order to respect the laws of the country (“Mubarak”). Mufti Tantawi, whose role for some Muslims is similar to that of the Catholic Pope,

allowed for the different context of the *hijab* in France and stated that different rules apply to Muslims in non-Muslim countries, where the *hijab* may be seen as a religious symbol rather than a form of personal worship.

## **Orientalism in France**

### *The Origins of Contemporary Orientalism*

Since scholar Edward Said published Orientalism in 1978, Orientalism has been an important tool for those attempting to analyze the West's interaction with the East. "Orientalism" refers to "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (Orientalism, Said 134). In effect, the Occident creates stereotypes of the Orient as homogenous, exotic, and backward in relation to the West. The current secularity debate in France illustrates this Orientalist attitude, as the French media and government tend to portray Muslim women and girls who wear the *hijab* as oppressed. In much the same way that Europe differentiated itself from the Orient through Orientalism to justify its imperialist politics, Europe now differentiates itself from the Islam within its borders using the political dogma of secularity to justify its cultural hegemony over Muslims. An analysis of the semiology of *l'affaire du foulard* in France, in which women wearing the *hijab* are viewed as "unenlightened," reveals France's Orientalism in its interactions with Muslim populations.

Said examines the origin of Orientalist discourse during Europe's empire building period of the nineteenth century. Orientalist discourse reflects an image of Europe more than of the Orient, for "Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable

dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ [Occidental] world” (Orientalism, Said 138). Occidental scholars constructed an image of the Orient in the nineteenth century more in keeping with their perceptions of the Orient than with actual intellectual or physical experience. Even the geographical classification of the Orient, as one vast region to the east of Europe, suggests a definition that demarcates more clearly what is European than what is Oriental. While Europe is no longer directly involved in colonization, Orientalist attitudes do sometimes emerge when Europe interacts with peoples to the east and south.

Contemporary Orientalism is manifest in the way the media tends to portray “the Arab” as a fundamentalist, misogynistic terrorist with a hatred of Western culture. Said highlights this media tendency in Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World: “For the general public in America and Europe today, Islam is ‘news’ of a particularly unpleasant sort. The media, the government,...[speaking about] Islam are all in concert: Islam is a threat to Western civilization....negative images of Islam continue to be very much more prevalent than any others...”(144). The Western media has focused heavily on the religious zealotry of terrorists who act in the name of Islam, so much so that anyone watching major news channels might get the impression that all Muslims are fanatics. An article, entitled “Islamistes: la France menacée”<sup>2</sup>, published in the French magazine L’Express immediately after the September 11 attacks in the United States illustrates this negative portrayal of the ‘Islamists’ : “Internationally, the nebula of Allah’s crazy men has bases throughout Europe. Several plans for attack on the Hexagon’s soil have been outwitted. Here is how these networks were identified” (Pelletier and Pontaut). While not every

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<sup>2</sup> “Islamists: France Threatened”

media outlet portrays Arabs and Muslims from an Orientalist perspective, media coverage tends to represent Muslims in the Middle East from a European perspective. Rather than include footage of events from native Middle Eastern sources like *Al-Jazeera* news channel, Western media shoot their own footage and interpret it through their own cultural perception, lending a subjective and one-sided interpretation to a seemingly objective report. The manner in which Occidental media tend to cover Islam typifies the Orientalist thinking that appears in contemporary French culture.

*L'affaire du foulard* in France exemplifies contemporary French Orientalism. In October 1989 three Muslim girls were expelled from their Creil middle school for refusing to remove their *hijab*. This expulsion sparked a public opinion debate on the limits of secularity in public schools, a debate continued in the media. In 2003, sisters Alma and Lila Levy were expelled for the same reason. This expulsion also gained much media coverage, due in part because their father, whose heritage is Jewish, defended their decision. In effect, Muslim girls who wear the *hijab* have become the unwilling symbols of French Orientalism. During the start of the school year 2004, for example, journalists monitored closely how the Muslim girls, rather than the general student body, were reacting to the secular law. Aurélie Sobocinski's September 4, 2004 article in Le Monde is one such example of how the media targeted Muslim girls; the journalist presented only one Muslim girl's thoughts during the first school day as she had to remove her *hijab*, thereby portraying her as the representative of Muslim girls. However true the claims of oppression may be for some Muslim women, the French media perspective tends to portray most Muslim women as oppressed, which illustrates the homogenizing

effect of Orientalism. The question is not so much *whether* Muslim women are oppressed, but rather *how* the French public and government feel they should remedy it.

The French government operates under the assumption that the conspicuous absence of religion, a founding principle of the French Republic, is more progressive for the community than an overt proclamation of faith, such as wearing a Muslim *hijab*. In maintaining its belief that religion is a private matter, the French government has also ruled out the possibility of new interpretations of the secular laws. Given the unequal attention to *hijabs* as opposed to other religious symbols like crosses, Orientalist attitudes appear to be partly behind the rationale for the law.

Even without the problems that Islam presents to secularity, France remains a fiercely secular state that relegates religion to private life, away from public scrutiny. French secularity originated in French citizens' sincere attempts, beginning with the French Revolution and continuing into the twentieth century, to diminish the Catholic Church's domination over public life during the Ancien Régime. As such, French secularity strives to maintain equality and is not an inherently racist system. However, after the legislation separating Church and State in the early twentieth century, it was not until the headscarf debate that French leaders questioned religious symbols in public schools; Sikh boys have worn turbans in French schools without the threats of expulsion that Muslim girls faced. This is not to say that every French citizen harbors Orientalist stereotypes, but that France's government has reacted in an Orientalist manner to the problems of maintaining secularity in schools. Faced with diverging definitions of religion as public or private, the government chose to retain its definition of secularity rather than redefine secularity to adapt to the situation. The rhetoric of the headscarf



debate tends to define French culture as enlightened and/or progressive in contrast to the unenlightened and/or backward Muslim culture. The context of Orientalism in France has thus become to maintain the French cultural status quo against societal transformations brought about by Muslims and one of the vehicles to do so is the headscarf debate.

### *Orientalist Stereotypes about the Hijab in France*

Although there is little information on the ethnic origins of the French population, due to the French belief in universalism<sup>3</sup>, an anti-Muslim attitude does exist in France. According to a study published by the *Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme* (CNCDH), there exists in France “an irrational fear and total rejection of Islam at once as a religion, lifestyle, communitarian project, and culture” (Zappi 11). This French cultural attitude against those who practice Islam sometimes takes the form of hostility toward the Muslim *hijab*, a visible symbol of adherence to Islam. The stereotypes have emerged in France in the past decade that Muslim women who wear the *hijab* are oppressed, forced into arranged marriages, forbidden to talk to men, and generally undervalued by the community. Certainly such extreme cases do exist, as was the case of Sohane Benziane, a Muslim girl who was burned alive by a Muslim boy allegedly seeking revenge against Sohane’s boyfriend (Brenner 199). However, not all Muslim women live under such oppressive conditions.

The two major stereotypes of Muslim women perpetuated in France are first, that the *hijab* is a symbol of inequality between the sexes because the women are forced by men to wear it, and second, that the *hijab* hides a politico-religious fundamentalist

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<sup>3</sup> In keeping with the French universalist belief that one is French if living in France, the national census surveys do not ask questions about ethnic origin. Thus, the statistics of ethnicity in France differ.

agenda. The former stereotype is the more prevalent reason behind the French secular law, as it runs counter to the belief that the French public school environment should be maintained as a neutral space free from inequalities. The latter image is less prevalent, but it surfaces after events linked with fundamental Islam, such as the 1995 Paris subway bombings. Mainstream French culture typically portrays Muslim women and girls as oppressed by their male relatives who dogmatically adhere to the *Qur'an*, and the *hijab* is seen as the external symbol of this oppression. Some claim that Muslim women are being forced by their fathers or husbands to decline health care because they cannot be treated by a female (Chartier). Even the members of the Stasi Commission hold to the idea that the *hijab* is a symbol of women's oppression, stating in section 4.2.2.1 of the report that "the familial and social environment [of Muslim women] sometimes imposes upon them choices which were not their own. The Republic cannot remain deaf to the cry of distress of these young girls" ("Le Rapport" 23). Using these assumptions, based on more than one hundred interviews, the Stasi Commission included among its recommendations a ban on conspicuous religious symbols, specifically the Muslim *hijab*. Certainly Muslim women are not the only citizens subject to violence in France, yet the secular law does not attempt to decrease domestic violence in French homes. Instead, it seeks to decrease the public display of the *hijab*, a supposed symbol of oppression and violence.

The general French population has thus seized upon the Muslim *hijab* as a symbol of women's inequality and Islam's presence in France, but such an attitude, based on stereotypes, denies individual Muslim women the agency to choose what to wear and the privilege of explanation. Muslim women are essentialized – one explanation is given by others for the entirety of their reasons for wearing the *hijab* – and overlooked. However,

if one asks individual Muslim women why they wear the veil, oppression is only one possible explanation among many.

### **Feminism and Women in Islam**

*“Heaven lieth at the feet of mothers”*

Wearing *hijab*, a physical indicator of worship, is but one way in which Muslim women practice their faith. Islam teaches respect for others, and many Muslims cite its guidelines as a significant support in life. Western media tend to broadcast negative images of women perpetuated by a relative few fundamentalist Muslims, such as women in *burqas* under the Taliban. Classical Islam, the Islam practiced during and directly after Prophet Muhammad’s death, portrays a much more positive image of women.

Woman is considered sacred in Islam. “Heaven lieth at the feet of mothers” is one of Prophet Muhammed’s famous *hadiths*, or sayings. As George Washington University Professor of Islamic Studies Seyyed Hossein Nasr states in his book Islam: Religion, History, Civilization: “Islam sees the role of the two sexes in their complementarity rather than their opposition. The role of women is seen primarily but not exclusively as preserving the family and bringing up the children and that of men as protecting the family and providing economically for it” (68). Family is the cornerstone of the Muslim community, and mothers (as well as wives and sisters), as important figures who preserve the family, are considered sacred for this purpose. In addition to a lifestyle that respects women, Islam provides guidelines for dress and behavior.

Literally translated in Arabic, ‘*hijab*’ means “protection and covering.” As Islamic tradition interprets it, *hijab* refers to a full body garb that fulfills the injunction by

the Prophet to dress modestly. This injunction applies equally to men and women, though men do not wear *hijab*. Each culture interprets the injunction according to its own traditions, so that Muslims in China may wear a headscarf over the traditional cheongsam dress, while Muslims in America may wear jeans with their *hijab*. Islamic law scholar Mohammad Ali Syed contends that the *hijab* developed from the specific practices of the Prophet's wives and was not directed to all Muslim women. During Muhammad's life, "she took the veil" meant the woman became the wife of the Prophet. Syed hypothesizes that "the combined result of veiling prevailing among the non-Muslim in the conquered territories and the acceptance of the Prophet's wives as role models may have contributed to the general adoption of the custom of veiling among Muslim women" (109). In addition to models of dress, Muhammad's wives were role models for practitioners of Islam who played an integral role in the early propagation of the religion.

Contrary to Western images of isolated Muslim women, Muhammad's entourage included many intelligent women who helped spread his word. Khadija, his first wife, was a local merchant fifteen years his senior. In an independent spirit that most Western women do not practice even today, it was she who proposed marriage to him. Historical accounts of their marriage indicate that it was a happy and monogamous one. Khadija was one of the first converts to Islam and she supported Muhammad during the time of his revelations from Allah when others in the community began to reject him. After Khadija's death, Muhammad did contract polygamous marriages, which Nasr claims "were for political reasons, to unite various tribes within the Islamic community" (52). These polygamous marriages also served to provide protection for women widowed by war. As close members of the family, Muhammad's wives were in privileged positions to

gather and preserve the Prophet's words. Writer Assia Djébar asserted in Loin de Médine that Muhammad's wives were thus early Islamic scholars, although history would dismiss many of their testimonies as inaccurate.

The figure of woman as sacred in Islam and the important roles the first Muslim women played in their religion combine to create a powerful image of women. Although cultural practices have lessened the early Muslim women's role in the religion, there remains a tradition of strong women. Given the historical inspiration, then, is there today an Islamic feminism?

*Is there an Islamic feminism?*

As with any label or category, the terms "feminism" and "feminist" encompass many, sometimes contradictory, definitions. Feminism includes various activities and beliefs, and is not limited to actions that directly and aggressively challenge the status quo. In fact, it is quite difficult to categorize all actions purported to improve women's status as solely feminist, since the activists may have had other motives and messages in mind. In other words, feminism does not have a straightforward definition agreed upon by everyone; thus it is difficult to extract consciously feminist intentions from other cultural or political agendas. One must be especially careful in applying the term to Muslim women, as feminism has become a Western construct over the course of the twentieth century. Some Muslim women eschew the term because they do not want to align themselves with the West, even if they engage in what could be labeled feminist activities. The initial question, "Is there an Islamic feminism?" must therefore be

dissected into its individual meanings and reformulated. A better question is: “Are there people who observe Islamic principles and strive to help women?”

Before analyzing the question, it is necessary to explain some associations Muslims have with feminism. Contacts between cultures and among those calling themselves feminists can bring misunderstanding about feminism as much as unity of shared ideas. The British colonizers in Egypt, the same ones who vehemently opposed feminism in England, distorted feminist rhetoric in order to dominate the culture and force women to remove their veils (Alloula 43). In Egypt, then, what the citizens know of the term feminism originates with their disdainful treatment at the hands of their colonizers, even if feminist-like ideas had existed under other labels. During the mediatized feminist movements of the 1960s, feminism became almost synonymous with refusing the status quo and anything that women did not want to do. The media portrayed exaggerated images of feminists who labeled as backward any woman who wanted to be a wife and mother instead of work outside the home. For Muslims, whose religion encourages community cooperation, such an individualistic rhetoric seems to run counter to their communal worldview. These examples of cultural hegemony, along with many others, have created an image of feminism as a Western idea; one that some Muslims claim has no place in their lives.

Feminism encompasses many different definitions, and these definitions vary depending on culture. The question “Is there an Islamic feminism?” implies in some way that Muslims are a group unified around their religion. While Muslims may experience a feeling of solidarity with other Muslims, it is false to claim that everyone who practices Islam holds the same beliefs and values. There is no unity of identity for Muslims, much

less a unified definition of Muslim feminism. An Egyptian feminist defines her feminism differently than an Algerian feminist, who defines her feminism differently from a French feminist. In order to answer the question, one must first analyze individuals to determine how their beliefs do or do not embody feminist thinking.

There are many diverse examples of Muslim women who work toward change. As Miriam Cooke, Duke Professor of Arabic, defined it in her book Women Claim Islam, feminists are “women who think and do something about changing expectations for women’s social rules and responsibilities” (ix). The following examples describe several Muslim women who are re-defining aspects of Islam, in the process defining feminism among those who practice Islam.

### **Fatima Mernissi**

With her book The Veil and the Male Elite, Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi boldly challenges the long-held Muslim belief that Prophet Muhammad claimed “Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity.” Mernissi refutes the claim that these words originate with the Prophet, instead directing attention to one of his followers who claimed only after the Prophet’s death to have heard the Prophet utter this remark. Her analysis of early Islam portrays a religion that provides for the physical and spiritual welfare of all, including women.

### **Assia Djébar**

Algerian author Assia Djébar re-interprets Islamic history of Prophet Muhammad’s life through women’s perspectives in her historical novel Loin de Médine. In addition to several forgotten heroines or misinterpreted villains of Islam, Djébar depicts Muhammad’s wives and his daughters. As Djébar describes them, the wives

served as counselors, who, rather than being marginalized and isolated, helped to shape the new Islamic community. Djebbar has written other books in which female characters address issues surrounding being a woman and a Muslim, such as Vaste est la prison, in which a Muslim woman recounts her life during and after colonization in Algeria.

### **Irshad Manji**

As a reform Muslim, or a Muslim who calls for liberal-thinking reform in Islam, journalist Irshad Manji works to change contemporary thought about Islam. In her book The Trouble with Islam, Manji advocates a return to the liberal Muslim societies of earlier centuries that promoted *ijtihad*, or the Islamic tradition of independent thinking. Rather than sitting complacently by while a fundamentalist few tarnish Islam's name in the world, Manji promotes "operation *ijtihad*" to question Islam as a foil to fundamentalism. She suggests supporting Muslim women entrepreneurs, through organizations such as the Grameen Bank that gives small loans to village businesses run by women. As a self-described "refusenik," Manji "refuses to join the army of automatons of God" (Manji lecture).

Despite examples of feminist thinking among some Muslims, other Muslims specifically reject feminism as contrary to the principles of Islam or their cultural heritage. Haidah Moghissi argues in Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism that feminism and Islam are incompatible because the former is based on struggles for gender equality and the latter is founded on gender hierarchy. Moghissi fears that valorization of Islamic feminism "highlights only one of the many forms of identity available to Middle Eastern women...overshadowing forms of struggle outside religious practices and silencing the secular voices which are still raised against the region's stifling



Islamification policies” (qtd. in Cooke 58). Moghissi’s concerns, shared by other Muslim women intellectuals, are not centered so much on feminism but rather on the danger of creating a specifically Islamic feminism that could be co-opted by fundamental religious governments to take away women’s rights. Other Muslims are weary of feminism as a contemporary embodiment of Western hegemony that imposes Western ideals and mores onto Middle Eastern cultures, disregarding specific cultural contexts. Regardless of a similar philosophy of gender equality, the Algerian feminist who is struggling against a rigid patriarchal system does not have the same experiences or priorities as the great-granddaughter of French colonizers who demands equal rights. While almost everyone is opposed to clitoradectomy, it is much easier for an American feminist, who has never faced such a prospect, to denounce it than it is for a Cameroonian feminist, for whom the practice is also part of her heritage (Cooke 123).

Certain Muslim women claim that wearing the *hijab* is one action similar to feminist liberation. Some Muslim traditions describe the *hijab*’s purpose as preserving woman’s beauty for her husband and family, rather than allowing a perhaps undeserving stranger to look at her body. In this way, the *hijab* or veil allows women to transcend the physical construction of gender by removing themselves from the male gaze. As described in feminist theory, the male gaze acts to render a woman as an object to be looked at in a world where all subjects are male. Rather than being a slave to fashion in the Western world, where women are expected to make themselves attractive to any passers-by they might meet, Muslim women who wear the *hijab* reject this attitude. However, detractors of the *hijab* and veil cite its ability to attract attention. According to author Nawad El Saadawi, the veil draws attention to the body by denying the male gaze,

thus increasing curiosity about the exotic body that lies beneath and simultaneously veiling the woman's mind (Cooke 133).

In answering the question of Islamic feminists, then, one must take into account cultural and religious diversity, as well as individual activities. If one extends Miriam Cooke's definition of feminism, it could also be added that feminists are women who work or think about changing other cultures' perceptions of women. In this context, Muslims who champion a beneficial cause for women, even if she/he champions the *hijab* for beneficial reasons, are considered feminist. Although the Western media tend to portray Muslims as culturally unprogressive and backward, in opposition to the progressive and liberal ideas of Western culture, certain practitioners of Islam also practice feminism. Although they may reject the label, Muslim women who strive to redefine and improve culturally ascribed roles for women in Islam and/or correct Western stereotypes about Muslim women are practicing Islamic feminism.<sup>4</sup>

### **Unveiling the Veil: Individual Women's Stories about Islam**

Why do some Muslim women wear the *hijab* while others do not? What does the *hijab* mean to each Muslim woman? The media debate does not allow for such questions, nor does it allow a diverse range of women to speak. In this context, a woman's explanation would not be heard even if she offered it. Her words would be interpreted according to the politically correct association with the *hijab*, depending on the culture. Thus, though there may be a plethora of images of Muslim women, and some Muslim women's voices are quoted, the majority of Muslim women are ignored in Western media

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<sup>4</sup> In order to dispel the Western myth that all Muslims have misogynistic attitudes, I found it necessary to use a Western label. I do not mean to assign imperiously to these women a label they reject, but rather to demonstrate to Western audiences that some Muslims do strive to help women.

and national cultures as unable to speak for themselves in their politically ascribed role as subaltern. Considering that Muslims constitute over one billion people in the world, and women are one-half of that population, women who practice Islam have many diverse experiences to share. Here are a few of their stories.<sup>5</sup>

*T., originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo*

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a former Belgian colony in central Africa. Although the official language is French, other African languages and dialects, such as Swahili and Lingala, are widely spoken. Catholics are the majority religion although approximately 10% of the population is Muslim (“Congo”). The country was granted independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960, though political in-fighting has resulted in a state of insecurity. Given the post-colonial context, T.’s experiences do not directly relate to the French secular law. However, practicing Islam in a non-Muslim, French-speaking former colony, T.’s experiences can give insight into the variety and heterogeneity of perspectives in Islam. T. is in her early twenties.

As a Muslim in the non-Muslim Democratic Republic of the Congo, T. encountered stereotypes and adversity. She attended a private Catholic school, because it was the best in the city, but not all of her family agreed with her parents’ decision: “It was okay for me [because] my parents wanted me to go and it was the best school in the city. My family, like my father’s sisters and brothers, were like ‘That’s not right, you shouldn’t let your kids go to this school, [because] it’s not Muslim,’ but the Muslim schools were even more expensive than the Catholic school, and they weren’t any good

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<sup>5</sup> As expatriates living in the United States, these women may have different perspectives from Muslim women living in their respective countries where values can differ from those in America.

[because] they just taught the *Qur'an* over there. But the Catholic schools were better for me. My sister even got baptized, in the Catholic school [and she still practices Islam].” T. does not seem as if she minded attending a Catholic school, but she did not tell the school officials when she observed the Islamic holidays: “You don’t have to tell them because you’ll have problems with the head of the school, stuff like that. [If] there was a prayer, everybody comes to school and goes to church, you have to go to. Because you didn’t tell anybody that you were Muslim. And even if they know you’re Muslim, even if there’s a prayer, just pray like everybody else, stay quiet.” T. claims it was not that bad living in a non-Muslim country, but she still experienced some prejudice due to ignorance: “The biggest problem was our neighbors, [because] when we put incense on the door for Ramadan and pray, people see it and they’re like ‘OK, these people are, like, weird. They’re like witches or something’ and they wouldn’t even come near our house because they were scared. They think if they do something bad to you, you’re gonna pray to your god and then something bad’s gonna happen. It was something they were scared of.” T. lived in Cameroon, a predominantly Muslim country, for a short time, and I ask her if she was treated differently there: “Um...you can get treated differently [than] in the Congo, because most of the people there [Cameroon] are Muslim, so over there it's normal. When it's Ramadan, everybody is fasting, and in the market you see everybody selling the kind of food you eat during Ramadan. Over there it's normal, where in [my hometown] it's weird.”

T. does not wear the *hijab*. She claims it is a personal decision whether or not to wear the *hijab*, and based on family tradition. “My mom used to wear them, but not all the time because in my family it’s not an obligation to wear it. You wear it when you



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want to, or on Fridays when you go to pray at the mosque. But it's not a family tradition, and in the Congo it's *hot*. It's your choice to wear it." T. expands on the *hijab* as a choice when explaining the reasons why some people wear the *hijab* to mosque and others wear it all the time: "I have an aunt who wears hers all the time. She chooses it, [because] she thinks it makes her a better person. She knows that she doesn't have to but she wants to. So, I think it's her choice, and if she thinks she wants to wear it, she can."

When asked if she ever thought the *hijab* or veil could be oppressive in any situation, T. replies no. "Unless it's something you have to do, ordered by the state like in Iran, countries like that....But I don't think they are oppressed because they want to wear it too. Because if they didn't want to they would get out of the country, do something not to wear it, but I think they want to." I explain that especially in the West, there is a stereotype that Muslim women are oppressed because they wear the *hijab* or veil. "Yeah, it depends on traditions too. In our tradition, our grandmothers didn't wear the veil,...But in Iran you see that the great-grandmother, she wore the veil, so everybody wants to do the same thing because it's a tradition." I then ask if there are any Western practices regarding women that she thinks oppressive, giving the example that another Muslim woman had told me of the custom of married women taking their husband's name. T. does not think any Western customs were oppressive, but talks about the marriage custom, "I like the way my mother, when she married my father, she didn't have to take his name. So she has her own name, and when we got here [United States] to get Social Security cards, the people were like, 'OK, why don't you have the same name as your husband?' and she was like, 'I wanted to keep my own name.' And they were looking at her like she was weird or something. But I think it's her choice, if she wants to keep her

name she can keep it. You don't have to take your husband's name to prove you are married. It's your own choice.”

As for the French secular law, T. does not agree with the rationale behind it. “I think people have to make their own choices. Wearing the veil doesn't make people terrorists, because not everybody thinks the same. So if somebody wants to put bombs under the rail to kill all the people and thinks that's how God is going to thank her, it's not the same way that everybody is thinking. I don't think that it's right to prevent people from doing what they want or think is right.” If T. wore a *hijab* in France, she asserts that she would not remove it, even if it meant expulsion: “There are many other schools. I'd just pick another one.”

*N., originally from Yemen and lived ten years in France*<sup>6</sup>

Yemen is situated below Saudi Arabia, and the predominant ethnic group is Arab. Islam is the majority religion, but there are small numbers of Jewish, Christian, and Hindu groups. Although Yemen is not a French-speaking country, N. moved to France at age 15 when her father became an ambassador. She lived and studied in Paris with her parents until she married at 24 years of age. N. does not wear the *hijab*. N. is in her late twenties.

N.'s descriptions of Islam reveal how her faith guides her life. As N. recounts, “We always say that the Islam that we know, it's not simply reading the *Qur'an*, going to mosque, praying, no. Islam is also working with others, evaluating yourself, doing something that could help others in society. That is to say, if I want to stay home, I don't want to help others. Whereas if I go study at university, I'm going to work, I will become

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<sup>6</sup> Interview translated from French. All translations are my own.



a professor, I will teach others, this is going to help them discover other parts of life, and maybe other paths in life. That is really the principle of Islam. Doing good for others and improving yourself, because we cannot do things in one single direction. It is for and with the other.”

In talking about Islam, N. also frequently mentions her family as another foundation in her life and her faith. When her father became ambassador, she followed her parents to France, because “in the Arab countries, daughters follow their parents.” Her parents instilled in her the foundations of Islam: “We learn from the family how to respect the aspects of Islam that we really cannot ignore. Like prayer, for example.” However, different families have different traditions, so N. practices Islam according to her family’s traditions, such as praying at home rather than at a mosque: “I am in a family where the women do not go to the mosque. My mother did not go, she prayed at home, as I grew up I saw my mother doing certain things, so I do the same things. My father went to mosque on Fridays, because it’s an obligation for the men to pray at the mosque at midday.” When her family moved to France, N. says she did not feel very different practicing Islam there. As it was not family tradition to go to mosque, N. did not go in France. The only thing that was truly different in France was “during the religious holidays, we found ourselves alone with our immediate family members. It’s not like in Yemen, where the extended family and everyone celebrated.”

As N. explains, the stereotype of Muslim women forced into arranged marriages is totally untrue in her case. She met her husband in France and had a five-year engagement while he studied in the U.S. As she asserts, “They say that Muslim women are not allowed to meet their husbands... That’s totally false. I knew my husband for five

years...and then I married him after a long history of romance. It was not because my father or my mother decided for me. Even in the *Qur'an*, they say that God asks men to give their daughters the right to choose their husbands. They say that our prophet Muhammad denied a marriage because the girl had not wanted it. There are many families who do this to their daughters. But I find this gives a bad image of Islam, it's not really Islam. There are people who have problems conforming in Islam and they translate that in doing things that have nothing to do with Islam, in claiming that it is fact."

In talking about the secular law in France, N. reveals her own thoughts about the *hijab* and the law. She is against the secular law, because "I find it's a personal freedom, I should not force others to wear their clothes in a specific fashion. If I respect that person, and he/she has done nothing wrong, why force her to remove her *hijab*, or his cross?"

When I ask her about her understanding of the *hijab* in Islam, she replies that it is an obligation: "Muslim girls must wear the *hijab*...outside the family. Once you are outside, wearing the *hijab* is part of the religion, not to show your femininity outside the family. Frankly, I realize that I should wear the *hijab*, that it's an obligation. But, since my childhood,...wearing the *hijab* was not stressed in my family. So that even now I don't wear the *hijab*, despite the fact that I am Muslim and I practice Islam. Well, I practice all the possible aspects of Islam, but not the *hijab*. The *hijab*'s purpose is not to attract strangers' attention by your femininity. We consider woman's hair and the nape of the neck part of femininity, that we need to hide and keep for our husbands and own families." N. then elaborates on the *hijab* in a cultural sense: "When I was in Yemen for my marriage, I realized that wearing the *hijab* was important there. If you know the daughter of so-and-so and you see this daughter in the streets without a *hijab*, it's going

to create rumors.” N. wore the *hijab* in Yemen, but hers did not go to the extreme and cover her body.

Talking of *hijabs*, N. also mentions the stereotypes of veiled Muslim women. “There is one *hijab* that is truly extremist and has nothing to do with Islam. It’s what you see sometimes on TV, women wearing very long, very large things, and covering the head and face. That is not my Islam. This is a point that is really important to specify because sometimes people mix everything together. There is another *hijab*, just wearing [something] on your head, and you can wear pants, T-shirts, in ways that don’t attract attention.” Due to its importance in Yemen, N. wore the *hijab* during her stay, but not in the extreme sense with a veil over her head and a long robe covering her body. She mentions her other friends in Yemen who wear the *hijab*, “simply the veil without going to the extreme.” Given her experiences, N. questions the stereotype that Muslim women who wear the *hijab* are oppressed by men: “I think it’s a stereotype created by a few who don’t truly know what religion is, whether it be Islam or Christianity. ‘Good Muslim woman’ does not mean that I wear the veil on my head, my face, that I don’t go outside with men, that I don’t work, that I stay at home, that I don’t see anyone. This isn’t Islam. A woman in Islam, she goes out, she works, she does what she can to help her man, her children, her society, but always in respecting herself. Because I must respect myself, I respect the man that I have chosen as husband, I respect the society around me. That is something that some people do not understand. ‘She is oppressed.’ No! She is respected, and she must respect man, because it is reciprocal.”

After talking about stereotypes of Muslim women, I ask N. if she considers any Western traditions oppressive toward women. N. immediately responds yes, citing the

betrayal of women. N. elaborates in particular about lack of respect for women: “It’s normal in Europe that if a woman cannot work, she cannot live. In Islam, for example, we don’t have that, because the woman, whoever she is, is protected by the family. If I don’t work, I won’t die of hunger. I will knock on a cousin’s door and always be welcome. This, I am almost sure of, is not the case in France. In France, if you don’t earn a living, you die. That is to say that no one is going to take the responsibility. In Muslim countries, woman is part of the sacred that we must truly protect by all means. I find that admirable in Islam.” I ask if the men are also considered sacred, but N. says no, it all begins with woman: “In the *Qur’an* God says that Heaven lieth under the feet of mothers. It is truly the elevation of woman in Islam. It’s metaphorical, that woman is sacred. I must respect my mother, I must love her, I must do all that I can to protect her. It’s the mother of which we speak, it’s all women. It’s the mother, the sister, the daughter.”

Finally, I ask N. if she would remove her *hijab* if she were a French Muslim schoolgirl. “No,” she says, “it’s something between me and my God and I don’t want humans forcing themselves between that relationship.” N. would refuse to remove her *hijab* even if it meant expulsion. However, N. interjects, one of the great Muftis (Islamic religious leaders) of Al-Azhar school, has given permission to French Muslims to remove their *hijabs*, “because it’s a social law that they must respect.” It’s also a question of respect for N., “There are some who say that Islam doesn’t respect others and Mufti Tantawi explains that this permission to remove the *hijab* is because they must respect the country’s laws.” This raises the question of Muslim allegiance to religion or culture, whether Muslims followed the laws of the countries in which they lived or the Islamic laws coming from other countries. N. clarifies that with Tantawi, his pronouncements are

applied to Islam: “He explains something across Islam. But if it wasn’t someone like Tantawi, I don’t think the girls would listen. He gives advice originating from Islam.” N. elaborates that Islam is not a fixed religion, “Islam must follow the evolution of the people. This is why Tantawi gave permission. Woman in Islam must evolve. She must find her place in society.”

*A., originally from Morocco*<sup>7</sup>

Morocco, a country in the Maghreb region, is a former French protectorate. The country gained its independence in 1956, and its current government is a constitutional monarchy. Morocco’s constitution includes an article that proclaims Islam the state religion, with the king as the state’s spiritual leader, but everyone is guaranteed the right to practice his/her own faith. Women in Morocco have had the right to vote since the early 1960s, and there have been women representatives in Parliament since the 1990s. A., a Moroccan woman living in the United States, wears the *hijab* and is extremely devoted in her faith. Our conversation centers on the differences between cultural and Islamic traditions, as well as the effects on Muslims of September 11. A. is in her thirties.

In describing Morocco’s government, A. addresses the differences between cultural and Islamic traditions. Morocco’s legal system includes the *modawana*, or the family code, that “governs the relationship between husband and wife.” Although the *modawana* “draws from the principles of Islam, it is not 100% Islamic.” The *shari’a*, on the other hand, is traditional Islamic law. To make a better distinction between the two, A. elaborates using the example of polygamy: “Polygamy is permitted in Morocco, and it is linked to Islam as well. It is not a right acquired for man, just like that. There are

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<sup>7</sup> Interview translated from French. All translations are my own.

parameters and limits as well. The *modawana* is still inspired by Islam, but it also imposes limits.” The *modawana* now requires that a man alert his wife if he wishes to obtain a divorce. The difference, A. asserts, is that the *modawana* has added changes to Islamic law. In discussing laws affecting men, women, and families, I ask about her family.

The story of A.’s marriage may evoke negative associations with forced marriages, but A. claims that was never the case. She also adds that “I was the only member of my family to be married like that.” A.’s family had known her husband’s family for years, so “there was an arrangement between families. My father told me that so-and-so’s son was coming to see us. If it worked out, so much the better, and if not, too bad. So he came and we talked alone. We saw that we had the same outlook on life and that we had perhaps the same life objectives, and so we accepted the marriage. It wasn’t love at first sight, it began with mutual comprehension.” Despite the fact that not all marriages are arranged in Morocco, and that all her cousins “dated” before they were married, “it is not a subject openly discussed.” A. gives the example of her cousin, who knew her husband before their marriage, “and I also knew him before their marriage. Sometimes now there will be a moment when he will say ‘You remember when?’ and tell something that happened three years before their marriage. Everyone gives him surprised looks. No one says ‘I knew him for three years before our marriage,’ it is said in other ways.”

Although A. accepted her marriage, she does not rule out the possibility that other marriages are arranged and forced. Perhaps arranged marriages occur in the countryside, A. says, but “it does not occur in the milieu of educated people.” However, A. warns, this

practice is “not at all Islamic. During the time of the Prophet, a woman came to see him and told him ‘My father married me to this person.’ He asked her if she wanted it, and she said no. So the Prophet said ‘You can divorce him. no one is forcing you.’” As A. asserts, “The woman’s consent is a condition in the marriage contract,” but consent can be given in two ways. When a father asks his daughter if she accepts the marriage, “if she is embarrassed to say ‘yes, he pleases me,’ she can say nothing. It is understood by her silence that she accepts, because she has shown nothing to the contrary. But a woman who has already been married must say yes.” Thus, A.’s description of her marriage and those of her family in Morocco illustrates the influences cultural tradition has on Islamic tradition.

The *hijab*, another Islamic tradition, has been influenced by culture as well. A. firmly states that “the *hijab*, according to the *Qur’an*, is an obligation.” A. did not always wear the *hijab*, “out of social fear. At home, we regard a veiled woman as antiquated. It’s not modern, and modern people dress like the Occidental countries. In my case, you can combine the two, being modern in my mind and conservative in certain acts.” For A., donning the *hijab* was not a quick decision: “I was 22 years old and my family had decided to go to Mecca rather than to Spain. We were there for two weeks, and since then I no longer take it off. I knew it was an obligation, but I was afraid of losing my friends, being rejected by my family and my society.” A. was the first among her family to wear the *hijab*, but soon her mother and certain aunts donned it, too. However, A. says that only ten percent of her family wears it, “but I would never ask why they did not wear it. It is personal, it is not a conspicuous symbol like they say in France.” According to A., “it

is more than a scarf on your head, it is a cover of the entire body, it is also a cover for your heart.”

Using this definition of religion, then, A. talks about people’s reactions to her as a Muslim after September 11. For her, the *hijab* is not oppressive, but some people treat her badly because of her *hijab*. Islam’s image, A. asserts, “has been tarnished these last few years. There are certain people who know nothing of the religion and who begin to propagate erroneous ideas. Unfortunately, this is what has happened. Killing innocent people is not Islam at all.” Despite people’s negative associations with Islam and their subsequent treatment of her, A. understands their reaction: “They think ‘She is Muslim, she wears the veil, she is like the other Muslims who destroyed us.’ I find this understandable, and I forgive their behavior because it is entirely human.”

In talking of stereotypes of Muslims, we turn to France’s secular law. While A. does not condone the law, “You need to respect the laws of the country in which you reside. You are not obligated to be there, it’s your choice.” The two extreme effects of this law are that the girls do not go to school, or they remove their *hijab*. A. is against both cases, “If I were a student in France, with the current conditions, I would have two choices: either study at home or go to a private school. These laws were voted on, they were not arbitrarily thrown in there.” However, A. does not approve of the law because “it is a limit on personal freedom.”

In explaining her faith in Islam, A. also explains the principles of any religion. Religion, A. claims, is like a ladder with different levels. All the religions “are based on the same principles, to attempt to reach the ideal. Yet this ideal is unattainable. The further one embarks on discovering Islam or any religion, the more one tries to reach this



ideal, the more one connects to the religion, and the more one practices it.” Yet there is no longer a pure Islam, as “people who practice it on a daily basis do not cease to change it.” The *hijab* is a divine order, but “now people say ‘it’s not modern to wear it, we don’t want to wear it.’” Islam dates back fifteen centuries, A. declares, “and now there is a good mix between culture and religion. Each time that a country opens to Islam, the culture adds to it.”

Although these women’s backgrounds and experiences are diverse, they share some similar thoughts and experiences. Each woman cites family and cultural traditions as an important aspect of her life. T., from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, explains that family tradition is one determining factor in whether or not a woman wears the *hijab*. N., from Yemen, discusses tradition often when explaining how the family practices Islam. She, too, mentions the family tradition when explaining why she does not wear the *hijab*. A., from Morocco, explains the differences between the tradition of classical Islam and current cultural religious practices, declaring that stereotypes about Muslims arise from the misunderstandings created when the two are blurred together. Each woman also addresses stereotypes about Muslims.

As much impact as September 11 had on the world, its role in perpetuating stereotypes of Muslims is often neglected in the Western press. During the interviews each woman addressed negative images of Muslims without being prompted. A. comments on others’ negative reactions to her *hijab* after September 11, stressing that what the hijackers did had nothing to do with her Islam. T. referred to the erroneous American belief that wearing *hijab* is synonymous with terrorism, emphasizing that

terrorism is not synonymous with Islam. N. addressed the Western media image of Muslim women as veiled objects and makes the distinction between wearing the *hijab* from extreme acts often associated with the veil. While these women share similar experiences, their stories are also very different, especially with regard to the *hijab*.

Of the three women interviewed, only A. wears the *hijab* whenever she is in public. For her, the *hijab* is a non-negotiable duty required by the Prophet, but she does not denigrate other women who do not wear the *hijab*. N. does not wear the *hijab*, but she recognizes that she should wear it as part of her religion. T. does not wear the *hijab* on a daily basis, only to go to mosque with her mother. T.'s understanding of the *hijab* centers on family tradition and personal choice, rather than on a divine mandate.

Three different women from different parts of the world have a common link, Islam. They all share certain similar experiences, especially pertaining to Islam and stereotypes of Muslims. Yet each woman has a distinct story to tell, unique to her experience. None of their narratives should be taken to represent all practitioners of Islam, but each story contributes to the range of experiences in Islam. They all spoke of the negative stereotypes of Islam and its practitioners; in contributing to this research on the diversity of Muslim women they help to contradict those stereotypes.

## **Conclusion**

Western societies have created myths about the oppressed Muslim woman for years. In doing so, they have also created an implicit dichotomy between the oppressed Muslim woman and the liberated Western woman. Inherent in this dichotomy is the assumption that oppression no longer exists in the enlightened Western countries. An

obvious example of the stereotypes this dichotomy of myth inspires is that of the oppression and subordination of the veiled Muslim woman. In contrast, then, the unveiled Western woman must be liberated. Another example is the stereotypical Western image of the Middle Eastern harem as a den of sexual iniquity reserved for one man.

It is a Western assumption that women secluded from men are deprived and oppressed. While this may indeed be the case for some women, Leila Ahmed refutes the image as an absolute by revealing the origins of the harem. In her view, the harem is interpreted according to two perceptions, “a system that permits males sexual access to more than one female,...[or] a system whereby the female relatives of a man share much of their time and their living space” (524). While the Western myth tends to ignore the explanation of harem as women’s space, this definition may be authentic. The harem is a space for women, where men are forbidden. This separation creates a woman’s space in which “activities performed in the world of men for and by men must also be performed in the world of women for and by women” (528). Ahmed argues that, rather than being confined to this woman’s space by men, it was women who instigated the segregation of the harem (529). As Ahmed speculates in her conclusion, “...it seems to me that to believe that segregated societies are by definition more oppressive to women, or that women secluded from the company of men are women deprived, is only to allow ourselves to be servilely obedient to the constructs of men” (531).

In re-examining the myth of the harem as a method of women’s oppression, it is also necessary to examine the Western myths about Western women. By accepting the (male) Western stereotype of harems as a symbol of women’s segregation, Westerners also accept their social segregation in the nuclear family. Many feminist scholars have

exposed and refuted Western societies' assumptions about the inferiority of women, but they have done so only in the Western context. At the same time that Western feminists decry Middle Eastern Muslim women as oppressed under the veil and in the harem, they also create their own myths that Western women are superior in their liberated status. However, have not Western feminists decried the inferior status of the Western woman? In The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan exposed the isolation of the American housewife, describing it as one of the only roles assigned to women in the 1950s. Simone de Beauvoir exposed similar ideas a decade before in France, claiming in The Second Sex that women in Western societies are viewed as the abnormal gender, the Other. The idea of the "second shift," in which men go to work then come home to relax while women go to work then come home to do housework, still exists in the twenty-first century. Given these negative images of the Western woman, is it still appropriate to claim that Western women are liberated, or at least any more so than Muslim women? Or are Western women oppressed in their role as wife and mother isolated within the nuclear family just as Muslim women are oppressed in their segregation outside the harem?

I argue that we all impose metaphorical veils on others, in stereotyping other peoples and traditions. Furthermore, in generalizing and dismissing others in our minds, we veil ourselves to others' potential. Although it is human to classify and categorize the world, and even to establish "us vs. them" dichotomies, this instinct arose out of a need for physical survival that is no longer a pressing issue. Stereotyping and discrimination lead to cycles of hate, violence and misery. Stereotyping also enslaves people to their own minds, denying them the diversity of experience. While their attempts to eradicate prejudice are noble, the members of the European Union are occasionally guided by

stereotypes. In heeding these stereotypes, member countries of the European Union are veiling themselves to the potential good that could be achieved in uniting with the European Muslim populations to create a new world system. Certainly, the French secular law imposes veils on public school officials and students by training them to assume that girls wearing the *hijab* are oppressed. Rather than enacting a law that targets those who practice their religion through dress, such as Muslim girls, the French government needs to address the integration problems of Muslims and other ethnic communities as well as to re-define *laïcité* to include students who wear moderate religious symbols that do not interfere with the neutral school environment. By immediately dismissing people based on personal stereotypes, we veil those individuals in our minds. Unless we take the time to know and understand other people and their experiences, no amount of legislation will eradicate these “invisible” veils.

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