Islamophobia in France:
The Contradiction in the Implementation of *Laïcité* in the 21ˢᵗ Century

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> "*Ça va, Jade?* How was your day?" my colleague, D, questioned, as he did most days. I proceeded to recount my day, in which a middle-aged man decided that it would be a good day to put his hand up my skirt as I waited for my friends outside of a café in the Montmartre neighborhood. "He was black, right? Muslim?" D retorted. Taken aback, I responded that no, he was in fact a white, presumably French man, given his accent upon muttering inappropriate words to me like the coward he was. "But, he wasn't *really French*. He had to be a Muslim, maybe you didn't see him well," D countered.
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> My colleague is not a bad man altogether and holds a well-respected place in society as a government employee. But, after this day, I began to question him. And then, as more time passed in my stay in France, I noticed that his sentiments, however racist or Islamophobic, were not seen as particularly out of place in the context of identity politics. Generally speaking, French people corroborated time and time again to me that there was a particular French identity—but what was it? Most times these opinions were not exclusively based in a racist or Islamophobic context like D, but they often were wrought with undertones expressing that if you could not conform to fit into these seemingly arbitrary confines of the Republic, you should not be there in the first place.

Introduction

"France is an indivisible, *laïque*, democratic and social Republic. It ensures the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It respects all beliefs. Its organization is decentralized."[1] This is the first article of the Constitution of the

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all materials cited in this work that were originally published in French have been translated by the author.

Fifth (and current) Republic of France, introduced in 1958, detailing *laïcité*, France's founding principle of religious neutrality. This nuanced and unique concept, most closely but not directly translated to secularism, has shaped French society and identity, and has been interpreted in a multitude of ways over the course of French history, making it what it has become today.

Laïcité is an undeniable tenet in the repertoire of modern French Republican values.[2] In theory, it is aimed towards equalizing the nation into one cohesive France, one cohesive people; ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious identities take a back seat to this French identity, where everyone is treated in an egalitarian manner. In reality, there is a great contradiction between this "ideal universalist republicanism that claims not to differentiate" on the one hand, and "the reality of the social, political, and economic marginalization of citizens and residents of North African descent" on the other (Fernando 2014: 14). Many scholars argue that this contradiction produces an internally excluded second generation of French born and educated citizens not regarded as "fully French," but also extricated from their respective ethnic cultures. In the case of French Muslims, Mayanthi Fernando argues that "turning to Islam, especially in a growing climate of social, political, and legal Islamophobia, becomes a way to affirm a communalist identity against the failed universalism of French republicanism" (2014: 14).

The increase in Islamophobia has been fueled in part by recent French terrorism, in part by an influx of immigrants due to the refugee crisis and postcolonial migration, and in part to recent 2016 election rhetoric from party leaders. It has led to very real consequences for French Muslims, including but not limited to systemic discrimination in terms of education and employment, and disproportionate imprisonment (Fernando 2014: 13-14). Islamophobia is often viewed in a highly simplistic manner, overlooking how deeply rooted these socio-political structures have developed. This article examines how France's integrationist and assimilationist policies on the basis of *laïcité* have further contributed to the polarization of different identities, specifically Muslims, in French culture, resulting in a criminalization of Muslim bodies. The goal here is not to condemn France as a racist or Islamophobic nation, but to highlight a disparity between the intentions of laws and their problematic outcomes in implementation. By looking at how *laïcité* is articulated in theory through policy—as opposed to the practical implications on the lived Muslim-French experience, especially in response to recent acts of terrorism—it becomes clear that, seen through discriminatory government policies that normalize societal prejudice, the growing polarization between Muslims and non-Muslims within French society has led to a stark rise in Islamophobia.

Background

In order to better understand how and why current policies surrounding *laïcité* operate, one must understand the French nation's chaotic religious history. After the French

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[2] In the French context, the term "republican" refers not to a political party (as in the United States) but to an ideology wherein French identity is universalistic and staunchly anti-multiculturalist.

Revolution, a growing majority in French society wished to distance itself from the corrupted and heavily Catholic government that they had tirelessly overthrown. Between 1789 and 1880, much of the legal groundwork for *laïcité* was established; the modern concept was articulated in the 1905 *Law on the Separation of the Church from the State* ("Historical Legacies [France]" 2020). And on March 15, 2004, French Parliament passed the bill "Application of the Principle of Secularity," banning all "ostentatious" and "conspicuous" religious symbols from the French public school sphere. As Article 1 of this law states:

> In public elementary, middle, and high schools, the wearing of signs or clothing which conspicuously manifest students' religious affiliations is prohibited. Disciplinary procedures to implement this rule will be preceded by a discussion with the student. (Scott 2010: 1)

Although many assume that Muslim immigrants to France are a relatively new result of modernization, Muslim migration to France dates back to the eighth century, with the arrival of the Spanish Moors (Laurence and Vaisse 2006: 16). Medieval literature like *La Chanson de Roland*, (*The Song of Roland*) depicted the great army of Charlemagne battling a demonized "other," whom they mistakenly referred to as the "Païens" or pagans, but who were Muslim. Well into the 1900s, *La Chanson de Roland* was taught as a nationalist text meant to show "the long-lasting connection that joins the past to the present" (Chamard 1919: iii; quoted in Benton 1979: 237). The history of French-Christian *othering* of Muslims was deeply rooted in French educational pedagogy, as many saw French schools as "the ultimate incubator of French identity" (Piser 2017).

By the 1920s, France had colonized several Muslim-majority countries through imperial expansion—Egypt (1798), Algeria (1830), West Africa (1880), Tunisia (1881), Morocco (1912), and Syria and Lebanon (1920) (Laurence and Vaisse 2006: 16)—taking in most of North and West Africa. The majority of contemporary Muslim immigrants to France emigrated from this region, also known as the *Maghreb*. Approximately three-quarters were from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, most arriving soon after the colonial wars of independence between 1954-1962, in search of work (Laurence and Vaisse 2006: 16-17).

In following the principles of *laïcité*, France considers ethnic and religious identity a private matter, and therefore has not taken any official census of the Muslim population within France since 1872; a 1978 law prohibits documentation of this data (Laurence and Vaisse 2006: 17). Due to this lack of official information, estimates of Muslim populations in France have become a politically motivated and highly varying statistic. In 2006, professor of political science Jonathan Laurence and French historian Justin Vaisse compiled a list of different census estimates of Muslim populations in France, ranging from 2.5 million to 8 million. They note that the high estimate has been "propagated both by the extreme-right National Front, in order to alarm 'traditional' French citizens over what it perceives as excessive immigration and the corresponding threat to French identity and by Muslim associations with a political interest in inflating the number of Muslims they claim to represent" (Laurence and Vaisse 2006: 18). An inflated estimate of Muslims immigrating

into France implies that a significant variant population from the exterior is entering France, threatening the familiar societal norms to which "traditional French citizens" cling. The most recent and reliable estimate for the Muslim population in France dates from a 2010 study by the Pew Research Center, calculated at 4,710,000 (or about 7.5% of the French population) and growing (Hackett 2017).

The rise of the Islamic State—also known as ISIS, ISIL, or *Daesh*—and their horrible corresponding terrorist attacks within France and elsewhere, have led to a cyclical effect of the tightening of policies, policing, and disproportionate effects of *laïcité* enforced on or about French-Muslims, which has been cited as a reason of the necessity for these stricter policies. Attacks have been relentless and consistent, beginning with a shooting in Toulouse in March, 2012, and continuing with various other shootings, stabbings, decapitations, and vehicle rammings throughout metropolitan France—most notably the November 13, 2015, attacks in and around the Bataclan, a concert venue in Paris at which 130 people were slain ("Timeline" 2017).

The French public is afraid, and understandably so. Victims of these crimes are often police officers doing their jobs, commuters on their way to work, or students enjoying time off at a concert. Because the perpetrators of these recent atrocities have been supporting the alleged Islamic State, Islam as a whole has borne the de facto consequences of being the perceived threat to national security, expressed through incidences such as street harassment and school discrimination. The Collective Against Islamophobia in France (*Collectif contre l'Islamophobie en France*, CCIF)—which serves as a reporting system, often for abuses of power exhibited by French government institutions, and has dealt with a vast number of cases related to the French state of emergency procedures—found that the majority of discrimination against Muslims comes from French public institutions—as opposed to the general public—by way of *de jure* discrimination. As of February 10, 2016, the CCIF had found that 3,336 searches of Muslim homes had been conducted, with only 5 leading to an investigation that was terror related ("CCIF Releases Its 2016 Report" 2016).

In the context of terrorism, and the corresponding political views on counter-terrorism national security measures, the 2016 election season proved to be a platform for how best to handle the fears of French citizens. Many of these debates centered on the topic of *laïcité* as a controlling mechanism to combat radical Islam—in actuality, the expression of Islam and its adherents. Rather than focus on the terrorism, we shall now examine why the politics of identity are shaped by these discourses and the multiple meanings of *laïcité* in contemporary France.

A Note on Sources

Care must be taken to take into account biases in the various sources.[3] In media coverage,

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[3] My own bias in studying a uniquely French concept comes from the vantage point of an American; although I lived in France for 6 months, I recognize that I have an outsider bias, particularly because the American concept of religious freedom is altogether different. Similarly, while I read French at a proficient level, my non-native proficiency is also likely a factor when dealing with French sources.

there is undoubtedly a bias towards political interests and therefore these biases are present in the articles being used. However, these biases can be used as a type of stratified sampling to gauge public opinions in several political directions. One example is "*Le terrorisme n'est que la partie émergée de l'iceberg politico-religieux islamiste*" ("Terrorism is Only the Tip of the Political-Religious Islamist Iceberg") by Renée Fregosi, published in *Le Figaro* in 2017. While *Le Figaro* is considered one of the most widely read conservative leaning newspapers in France, it is also known to have a reputation of promoting certain xenophobic tendencies and other similar ideals. Nonetheless, these sources require that we be aware of the preexisting political climate of a media source to better understand its motivations. We also must acknowledge that these examples do not represent all individual French viewpoints. Combined with other sources from an academic or governmental setting, we can see how *laïcité* operates on a functional level by comparing the ideals in laws and journals to their outcomes in ethnographic studies and personal accounts. For the purposes of this research, "fair" religious freedom leans in the direction of pluralism and is an American bias.

The conclusions in this article have been drawn from a reading of recent newspaper sources written since the French terrorist attacks in 2015, a date chosen deliberately in order to reflect the most current ideas on the subject. They serve as primary sources because they represent popular, current thought in the most straightforward and unfiltered manner, offering personal feelings of the current political climate in France in relation to *laïcité*.

In order to further understand the Islamophobia facing Muslim-French citizens in modern times, we must further analyze the identity politics at play that led to these issues of polarization. The question of what and who determines what the French identity consists of is important to further contextualize the negative impact on contemporary Muslim experience in France. Previous scholarship has seen *laïcité* and the experiences of Muslims in France through a variety of lenses that are of use to our research. Laurence and Vaisse refute the commonplace belief that Muslim and French values are inherently contradictory (2006). They also challenge the idea that Muslims are the parties reluctant to integrate into society, an idea made popular by Islamophobic beliefs that Islam and democratic society are mutually exclusive. Throughout the work, they suggest that the difficulty within the question of inclusion lies in the prejudices ingrained within French society. The traditional notion of "Frenchness" in France ordinarily may not be described using Muslim signifiers. When this preconceived "template" exists, it is often assumed that Muslim identities are unable to fit into the prevailing French narrative.

Similarly, gender history scholar Joan Wallach Scott explores France's 2004 laws banning "conspicuous" religious symbols aimed at Muslim women's headscarves. She argues that these laws are indicative of France's failure to accept their former colonized people as truly French citizens. She explores the *hijab* controversy through the lenses of racism, secularism, individualism, and sexuality. While her work focuses specifically on the veil, nonetheless it offers a great framework for the reasons French identity remains static and therefore causes conflict.

Through the use of ethnography, Mayanthi L. Fernando has analyzed *laïcité* as theory (as opposed to practice) as a vehicle to comprehend exclusion of Muslims. Fernando's

analyses give individual Muslim voice to the practical issues found in the attempted enforcement of *laïcité*, which she argues stem from a French hesitancy to go against the dominant narrative of white and Christian normativity. The pre-existing literature on the topic not only confirms the need for further discussion, but also corroborates the need for more current research in the wake of French terrorism and the 2016 election season that led to a rise in Islamophobia. Existing literature helps historically to set up our current question, but needs further research for a modern context. How has *laïcité* been approached by recent policy as a response to these events, and what does this mean for Muslims in France, and for French identity?

Laïcité in Theory: Perspectives of *Laïcité* from the State

Laïcité has become particularly relevant today in the face of recent terrorism in France (and worldwide) committed by those whom France considers the <u>Islamists</u>, or religiously motivated extremists committing these atrocities. There is quite a debate surrounding the concept of *laïcité* in that many feel that maintaining a strictly secular state may help discourage these attacks, while others maintain the opposite—that excessively strict policies against religious expression create more of a problem. French elections in 2016 exacerbated the rhetoric surrounding *laïcité* and how it should or should not be expressed. The laws of *laïcité* have always been a relevant point of contention in society, but they are of particular concern currently due to the negative treatment the Muslim-French have received in response to these current events.

    Laïcité, by nature, is extremely vague, which makes these dilemmas even harder to address. While its first functions were to make guarantee against another Catholic (or religiously affiliated) regime, the very institutions of modernity raise questions about its principles and their effect on other religions and cultures, namely Islam. In theory, *laïcité* is presented as a concept to protect French citizens from forced and state sponsored religious influence. To be clear, the French State and its leaders do not openly condone exclusion from the French nationality. In a speech in Montpellier in October 2016, French President Emmanuel Macron analyzes through a historical lens what appears to be an understanding of the repercussions of *othering* a group of people:

> France was given up to fire and bloodshed, she experienced famine, she experienced the worst of things, she was nearly chopped up in pieces forever because of the decision … to exclude, to brand one party as guilty and annihilate them … ("Emmanuel Macron" 2017).

In this scenario, it was the Protestants who were the party branded as guilty, as France was a Catholic nation. To combat this problem for the future, French society chose to prefer total public secularism that today they call *laïcité*. In theory, this idea seems like the best compromise to ensure equality in the treatment of different religious groups in modern France. However, in the same Montpellier speech, in a statement that troubled both Muslims and non-Muslims, President Macron continued that

> "Our mission … it will be difficult, it will take time, it will be demanding for all men and women … will be to act in such a way that French people of the Muslim faith are always more proud of being French than of being Muslim …" ("Emmanuel Macron" 2017).

This statement implies that the state of being French and of being Muslim are potentially mutually exclusive, or otherwise at odds with one another. But why can't one be both? Why must there be a competition?

Renowned gender historian Joan Wallach Scott identifies the aforementioned phenomenon that France views as utterly "corrosive to the nation" as *communautarism*, much different from American pluralism. Scott translates *communautarism* most directly as

> communalism– [referring to] the priority of group over national identity in the lives of individuals; in theory, there is no possibility of a hyphenated ethnic/national identity—one either belongs to a group or to the nation … French universalism insists that sameness is the basis for equality" (2007: 11-12).

French insistence on the erasure of difference in order to assimilate into the dominant white, male-centric, Christian, heterosexual narrative culture that already exists (and subsequently the nation) can be viewed as an opposition to what is historically an <u>other</u> to "traditional" French nationhood—in this case, being Muslim.

Similar to President Macron, former French President François Hollande held strong opinions on the topic of *laïcité* as a measure of counterterrorism. A month after the devastating terrorist attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*, where several French born-and-raised nationals killed seventeen people by gunfire in the satirical newspaper's offices and a kosher supermarket, President Hollande held a press conference vowing to "defend France's Republican ideals," with *laïcité* at the forefront.

> France was attacked in what it holds most sacred: freedom of expression, the republic and human equality … France reacted with dignity and pride. When the terrorists wanted to put it on its knees, it stood its ground. When the fanatics wanted to spread fear, it came together. When the extremists wanted to divide it, it stood as one. (Bilefsky 2015)

This concept of equality and oneness stems from this belief that the French identity comes before all others—ethnicity, race, or religion alike. And in theory, in the face of national terrorism, a united front makes perfect sense.

President Hollande expands on what he means by human equality and what it takes to be one—that this equality comes from maintaining a *laïque* nation, that this is "nonnegotiable," and that "*laïcité* is a guarantee for France against internal and external threats and influences" (Bilefsky 2015). Hollande's assertion that *laïcité* is the most unifying and necessary republican concept in the face of terrorism rests on two important foundations. First is the notion that keeping religion legally out of the public sphere

reduces the importance, impact, and influence of belief systems (nonetheless maintaining places of worship and private gatherings as perfectly legal). Second is the presumption that overt expressions of religion are inherently threatening.

In the case of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, like the majority of other acts of French terrorism, suspects Chérif and Saïd Kouachi were born and raised in France, falling victim as products of a broken system. Orphaned from the ages of 12 and 14, respectively, they grew up in foster care in Treignac, central France, and found their way in their mid-twenties to the 19th arrondissement of Paris, known for its high North African immigrant population and poverty rates (Callimachi and Yardley 2015: 1). With no resources or support systems, and a society that did not fully accept them, the brothers were the perfect recruits for Islamist extremists who prey on disenfranchised youths for their own goals of radicalization. Starting in petty crime, the brothers continued down a path that led them to meet influential radical Islamic leaders after a brief prison stint by Chérif, and "set up a pipeline for young French Muslims to travel to join Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's network in Iraq," reifying the vicious cycle (Callimachi and Yardley 2015: 1). They eventually committed the horrible attacks on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, which ended with their deaths in a subsequent hostage situation. Their story is important to understand the sociopolitical context in which Islamophobia and societal disadvantage are able to feed terrorism. The efforts put into enforcing *laïcité* create a general distrust in government and further polarize Muslim-French from the supposed goal of French national unity. These efforts could be better channeled into improving the lives of these disenfranchised youths as an effort to break this cycle, starting by validating at a governmental level their identities as both French and Muslim.

Perspectives of *Laïcité* from the Media

While Presidents Macron and Hollande are significant representatives of the ideals of the State, the way in which French citizens view their own identity and policies can also be illustrated through French media sources. *Laïcité* is a hot topic and a great source of debate between French political parties and, therefore, corresponding news sources. Based on opinions expressed in various media sources, while most French nationals do not disagree with the existence of *laïcité* conceptually, the do disagree over how this vaguely defined matter ought to be enforced, and the reasons why it is necessary.

In an article in *Le Figaro*, Renée Fregosi asserts that France should not leave the discussion of *laïcité* to the National Front (*le Front national*), the far-right populist party championed by Marine le Pen. She warns against letting the National Front dominate the discussion "[b]ecause the *laïcité* of the National Front is not the secular struggle for the emancipation of individuals and republican principles, and it cannot hide its inherent xenophobia and authoritarian dimension" (Fregosi 2017). In this way, Fregosi suggests that the National Front's openly anti-Islamic tactics are not representative of the values of the French Republic. However, she continues, "[t]he fact that all Muslims are not terrorists does not mean that Islam has 'nothing to do' with *Islamisme*," the term she uses to describe

the beliefs of fundamentalist religious adherents.[4] As she notes,

> The ideological political-religious matrix is based in the Muslim religion, its sacred texts, its precepts of gender separation and of hatred of women and homosexuals, it's urges to murder their enemies, apostates … and this is why it is so easy for Islamist militants to create solidarity between themselves and the Muslim *community*."

In this way, Fregosi, an esteemed political science scholar at Paris-Sorbonne-Nouvelle, implies that Islam (as a religion) is violent and dangerous—or otherwise has the potential to be—all within the confines of a highly read and circulated public newspaper. Whether opinion-based or not, the spread of such ideas from such a high post normalizes similar sentiments. While all religions contain the seeds of violence, Fregosi's argument that the belief in similar texts equates typical Muslims with terrorists is simply a poorly concocted fallacy based on a non-Muslim perspective.

Importantly, Fregosi identifies *laïcité* as a weapon against terrorism similar to claims made by President Hollande. She explains that taking an approach of "*laïcité ouverte*" ("open" or "non-strict" *laïcité*) has not done anything to curb further radicalization from spreading through the nation, that "[m]ulticulturalism is not the remedy for thoughts of orthodoxy," and that "accommodation with religious and communalist demands are unreasonable" (Fregosi 2017). She suggests that the way to stop the spread of radical Islam would be to keep religion entirely out of sight, something much easier to do from a minimalist religious perspective.

In his work *Holy Terrors*, Bruce Lincoln examines minimalist and maximalist cultural models, arguing that between these models "lies the more complex, variegated, and realistic middle ground in which most historic and social experience actually transpires (2006: 59). Lincoln explains that in the maximalist view, religion is the "central domain of the culture" with "cultural preferences constituted largely as morality and stabilized by religion," while in the minimalist view, the central facet is the economy and "cultural preferences [are] constituted largely as fashion and opened to market fluctuations" (2006: 59). While not all (or even most) Muslims fall into the maximalist category, Lincoln's notions inform the conflict between the extreme French minimalist views in *laïcité* that wish effectively to force a "shut down" of religion and its tangible branches in public spheres on the one hand, and the moderate view that the choice to wear a *hijab* as a personal preference is a right of expression on the other. The interpretations of *laïcité* have largely been based upon the historically Christian contextual culture of France, even if the level of actual Christian religious practice is not particularly high. Modern Christianity's visible markers, such as necklaces with a cross (or crucifix), are not as visible and easily targeted as a headscarf, for instance. In theory, however, the playing field is viewed as equal by disallowing all religious symbols in public, regardless of how comparably visible the symbolism of different religions may be, and does not acknowledge that *laïcité*'s alleged

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[4] The term "*Islamisme*" is often used in context as a somewhat pejorative word for religious fundamentalism where adherents believe in imposing Islamic beliefs by law.

fairness may not apply to those who view religion as inextricable from their identity.

Laïcité in Practice: Navigating a Police State

In practice, harsher enforcement of *laïcité* and unequal laws can be seen as a type of government-sponsored Islamophobia. On October 30, 2017, the law "to Strengthen Internal Security and the Fight against Terrorism" was promulgated in France under President Emmanuel Macron, much to the chagrin of human rights activists worldwide. It has been compared to American President George W. Bush's hasty post-9/11 *Patriot Act* and has incited concerns from both inside and outside France. Prior to its passing, United Nations rights expert Fionnuala Ní Aoláin expressed concerns for the law in a letter to the French government. Ní Aoláin's address called upon France to honor its internationally mandated human rights commitments and urged the French National Assembly to rethink the repercussions that this law would have in terms of *de facto* discrimination towards Muslim peoples. She and other representatives from the United Nations and international human rights organizations expressed a "foreseeable harmful impact on the exercise of the right to liberty and personal security," as well as limitations on "the right of access to justice, freedom of movement, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief" by the laws (Aoláin 2017). Among the specific issues she raised were a vagueness in defining the terms "terrorism" and "threat to national security"; a legal normalization of emergency measures after finally putting an end to the official state of emergency (the length and necessity of which is regulated by regional and international rights commissions); the giving to prefects and police officers more discretionary power to limit movement of those viewed as part of the vaguely defined threat to national security, to perform administrative searches, and to close places of worship; subsequently taking away the necessity of prior judicial authorization and therefore judicial review; and, excessive surveillance of individuals without a worthy cause.

According to Ms. Ní Aoláin, these shortcomings on behalf of the French state were egregious and violations of the democratic principles that it cherished in its constitution and national rhetoric. She identifies the contradictory consequences of legal discrimination: further polarization. As she states,

> There is no doubt that in the face of the terrorist attacks committed in France since 2015, the French authorities are justified in taking measures to better prevent such acts. In this context, however, it must be kept in mind that the history of France and its commitment to the field of human rights underlines an acute awareness on the part of your country that the long-term prevention of terrorism and extremism depends on the effective and equitable application of human rights. The prevention of terrorism is inextricably linked to that of respect for the fundamental principles of human rights. (Aoláin 2017)

Terrorism is bred out of the exclusion of identities from a society, and becomes a cycle wherein the more people feel alienated from their country and are denied fundamental human rights, the easier it is for terrorist organizations to successfully radicalize, recruit,

and maintain members.

Defining Religion and Recognition of Difference

An ongoing debate in the academic study of religion is over the definition of religion. Not surprisingly, it can be difficult to determine what constitutes a religious symbol, making the vague nature of *laïcité* so easy to be compromised by individual prejudices. After the 2004 law banning headscarves was put into effect, much of the conversation about *laïcité* in France centered on the subject of the *hijab*, or veil. Notes Mayanthi L. Fernando: "If headscarves were religious signs, were not beards as well and in that case, how would one tell an Islamic beard from a secular one?" (Fernando 2014: 22). Similarly, in the overseas department of Mayotte (between the east African coast and Madagascar), where most of the population is Muslim, the French Ministry of Education has determined that headscarves are cultural, not religious, and therefore allowed. While these attempts at defining a religious symbol for the purpose of banning are precarious by nature, "it is precisely this instability, and the need for boundary-drawing decisions, that constitutes and reconstitutes secular power" (Fernando 2014: 22). In other words, decisions of what constitutes secularity reify power structures in existence between the State and the Muslim population.

In defining what is seen as a religious symbol, it is also important to distinguish why, specifically, current measures of *laïcité* are unacceptable and unfairly biased against Muslim populations. Prior to the French elections in 2016, far-right front-runner Marine Le Pen claimed a "right to cultural purity" against arguments of a Muslim right to difference. In this way, she argued that Muslims automatically did not fit into a formula for "cultural purity" (that is, whiteness), an argument that spread like a virus during election season (Fernando 2014: 72).

Mayanthi L. Fernando succinctly explains the outcome of the normalization of this rhetoric:

> In this political context, public expressions of Muslim ritual life as well as various appeals by Muslims for state-funded Muslim private schools, the right to wear headscarves in public schools, the incorporation of Muslim holy days into the national school calendar, and state funds to build mosques are interpreted by many republicans as unacceptable demands to recognize and institutionalize Muslim difference. (Fernando 2014: 72)

Why should the French state accommodate a particular religion? The answer lies in the fact that accommodation already exists, in a nation built upon Catholicism, for the dominantly Christian population. Even many that claim not to adhere to any religion must admit that their cultural practices have undoubtedly been shaped by France's Christian heritage, and this must be recognized in properly analyzing *laïcité*.

The decision to wear a *hijab*, which to non-Muslims may seem to be simply a headscarf, has been criminalized to the point of disrupting educations of young women in public schools. The French government refuses to fund Muslim private schools, where

Muslim women would be able to practice their religious freedom, while the State still pays salaries of private Catholic school teachers and subsidizes students' private Catholic educations. Oddly enough, many Muslim parents send their children to Catholic schools, where the headscarf ban does not legally need to be enforced; in numerous Catholic schools, it is not. "It's ironic, but today the Catholic church is more tolerant of, and knowledgeable about, Islam than the French state," noted Imam Soheib Bencheikh, former grand mufti in Marseille and founder of its Higher Institute of Islamic Studies, whose oldest daughter attends Catholic school (Bennhold 2008: A6). He continued, "*Laïcité* has become the state's religion and the republican school is its temple."

Conclusion

It is important to note that the argument presented here is not that the enforcement of *laïcité* is the cause of terrorism. Rather, it is that often the enforcement of *laïcité* is biased against Muslims as toward people of other faiths, and that this fact leads to a further polarized French identity, countering the intention of *laïcité* in the first place and creating a cyclical situation. Further polarization and a dissociation from a society that wishes to regulate Muslim individuals but not claim them as "fully French," a lack of social, economic, and educational resources, and a criminalization of Muslim bodies which are seen as capable of violence from birth, are what makes young people more susceptible to crime and radicalization—not wearing a headscarf. With that being said, stronger enforcement of *laïcité* should not be viewed as a tactic for counterterrorism. In order to move forward in bringing together the French nation in this tumultuous time, a sense of understanding from the legal, governmental level, and an open societal level, are necessary. What does it *really* mean to be French? Who gets to decide this?

> A young Muslim man named Farid took the stage at the annual congress of the Union of Islamic Organizations on April 20, 2003. After speaking about his late father, who came to France to work as a track-layer for the French national railway, he exclaims: "Our parents built this country on their backs. Stop talking to me about integration! I am here, and I am French. France is my homeland; the republic is mine." (Fernando 2014: 35)

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