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# THE POLITICS OF THE VEIL

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## INTRODUCTION

On March 15, 2004, the French government passed a law that banned the wearing of “conspicuous signs” of religious affiliation in public schools. Article 1 is the key provision:

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.

There is also an explanation of what counts as “conspicuous”:

The clothing and religious signs prohibited are conspicuous signs such as a large cross, a veil, or a skullcap. Not regarded as signs indicating religious affiliation are discreet signs, which can be, for example, medallions, small crosses, stars of David, hands of Fatima, or small Korans.

Although the law applied to Jewish boys in skullcaps and Sikh boys in turbans, as well as to anyone with a large cross around his or her neck, it was aimed primarily at Muslim girls wearing headscarves (*hijab* in Arabic; *foulard* in French). The other groups were included to undercut the charge of discrimi-

politicians who pass the laws and some feminists who support them is that the veil is an emblem of radical Islamist politics. In the words of the Australian Brownyn Bishop, "it has become the icon, the symbol of the clash of cultures, and it runs much deeper than a piece of cloth." In addition, it is widely argued that veils stand for the oppression of women. So insists Margaret De Cuyper of Holland: "Women have lived for too long with clothes and standards decided for them by men; this [the removal of the veil] is a victory."<sup>3</sup>

These answers don't explain enough. Headscarves (or veils) are worn by only a small fraction of Muslim women, the vast majority of whom have assimilated in some way or another to the Western values and dress of the countries in which they now live. Moreover, veils are not the only visible sign of difference that attaches to religious Muslims, not the only way a religious/political identity can be declared. Men often have distinctive appearances (beards, loose clothing) and behavior (prayers, food preferences, aggressive assertions of religious identity tied to activist politics), yet these are not considered to be as threatening as the veil and so are not addressed by legal prohibition. The laws do not go on to challenge the structures of gender inequality in codes of Muslim family law; these codes have been allowed to stand in some Western European countries, and are left to religious authorities to enforce, even if they are not the law of the host country. Even more confounding, concern with gender inequality seems limited to Muslims and does not extend to French or German or Dutch practices that also permit the subordination of women. It is as if patriarchy were a uniquely Islamic phenomenon!

What is it about the status of women in Islam that invites

special remedial attention? Why has the veil been singled out as an icon of the intolerable difference of Muslims? How has insistence on the political significance of the veil obscured other anxieties and concerns of those obsessed with it? How has the veil become a way of addressing broad issues of ethnicity and integration in France and in Western Europe more generally? To answer these questions we cannot take at face value the simple oppositions offered by those who would ban it: traditional versus modern, fundamentalism versus secularism, church versus state, private versus public, particular versus universal, group versus individual, cultural pluralism versus national unity, identity versus equality. These dichotomies do not capture the complexities of either Islam or "the West." Rather, they are polemics that in fact create their own reality: incompatible cultures, a clash of civilizations.

A number of studies argue convincingly that the Islamic headscarf is a modern, not a traditional, phenomenon, an effect of recent geopolitical and cultural exchanges that are global in scale. The French sociologist Olivier Roy, for example, describes the current religiosity of Muslim populations in Europe as both a product of and a reaction to westernization. The new Islamic religiosity, he maintains, parallels similar quests for new forms of spirituality in the secular environments of the West. "Islam," he writes, "cannot escape the New Age of religion or choose the form of its own modernity."<sup>4</sup> I would add that while present-day Islam is undeniably "modern," there is not one universalizing form of its modernity, and it is especially the differences that matter. I agree with Roy that today's Islam is not a throwback to earlier practices, nor does it emanate from bounded traditions or identifiable communities.

There is not, Roy insists, a single Muslim "culture" which corresponds to the sociological and demographic profiles of the immigrant populations now residing in Europe. Indeed Islam is historically decentralized; unlike Catholicism, with its headquarters in Rome and a single figure of authority at its head, Islamic theology is articulated through continuing debate and interpretation, much like Jewish theology. Moreover, there is no single theology, but a plurality of them. Among Muslim immigrant populations, there are, to be sure, attempts to establish group identifications, but these are voluntary, Roy says, since they do not correspond any longer to fixed places—territories, states—or even to institutions like the family. In fact, voluntary groupings tend to divide generations; religiosity is one way for children to declare their independence from family constraints. It is also a way for dominated groups to insist on the legitimacy of their religion. The contexts within which populations assert Islamic identity need to be specified. What does establish Muslims as a single community, a "virtual" community in Roy's description of it, is "specific legislation" that serves to "objectify" them.<sup>5</sup> Various judicial and legislative decrees in Western Europe, prominently among them the French law banning Islamic headscarves, are examples of this objectification.

The intense debates about passing such laws serve another purpose as well: they offer a defense of the European nation-states at a moment of crisis. As membership in the European Union threatens national sovereignty (borders, passports, currency, finance) and calls for an overhaul of social policy (the welfare state, labor market regulation, gender relations), as globalization weakens the standing of domestic markets, and

as former colonial subjects seek a permanent place in the metropole, the question of national identity has loomed large in Western Europe. Depending on particular national histories, the idealization of the nation has taken various forms. In France it has taken the form of an insistence on the values and beliefs of the republic, said to be a realization of the principles of the Enlightenment in their highest, most enduring form. This image of France is mythical; its power and appeal rests, to a large degree, on its negative portrayal of Islam. The objectification of Muslims as a fixed "culture" has its counterpart in the mythologizing of France as an enduring "republic." Both are imagined to lie outside history—antagonists locked in eternal combat.

This dual construction, France versus its Muslims, is an operation in virtual community building. It is the result of a sustained polemic, a political *discourse*. I understand discourse to refer to interpretation, to the imposition of meaning on phenomena in the world; it is mutable and contested, and so the stakes are high. Discourse is an important way of characterizing what I am studying; I use the term to counter the notion of culture that was employed in the debates. Culture in those usages implied objectively discernible values and traditions that were homogeneous and immutable; complexity, politics, and history were absent. Culture was said to be the *cause* of the differences between France and its Muslims. In fact, I argue that this idea of culture was the *effect* of a very particular, historically specific political discourse. Creating the reality one wants requires strong argument and the discrediting, if not silencing, of alternative points of view. Outlawing the veil, even though it was worn by very few students in French public schools, was an

attempt to enact a particular version of reality, one which insisted on assimilation as the only way for Muslims to become French. The presentation of what it meant to be “French” required suppressing not only the critics who were themselves French (and not Muslim) but also the Muslims (many of whom were French citizens) who offered conflicting evidence about the meanings of their religious identifications and of the place of the headscarf in them.

The study of political discourse is best undertaken through close readings of arguments advanced in their specific political and historical contexts. Without history we aren’t able to grasp the implications of the ideas being advanced; we don’t hear the resonances of words; we don’t see all of the symbols contained—for example—in a piece of cloth that serves as a veil. For that reason this book is centered on the politics of headscarf controversies in France—a country whose history I have been studying for almost forty years. There are, of course, insights I offer that have more general application. These insights are based on my belief that we need to recognize and negotiate differences, even those that seem irreducible—an outlook many French commentators would dismiss as American and multiculturalist (synonymous in their view). To be sure, my ideas are an expression of my political outlook, but it’s not so much an American way of thinking as it is a particular understanding of what democracy requires in the present context. There are many Americans who do not share my views, just as there is a significant minority in France, many of whom I cite in the course of this book, who do share them.

These reflections about processes of politics and the handling of differences are not confined to national contexts; they

have wider application. The objectification of Muslims; the attribution of their differences to a single, inassimilable culture; the idea that a secular way of life is being threatened by “fundamentalists”—all this is evident in the reaction of Western European leaders to Muslim immigrants in their midst. Still, the specific ways in which these ideas are expressed and implemented as policy differ according to national political histories. These histories are critical for our understanding of the “Muslim problem” in Europe. For that reason I have confined my analyses to France, not only to gain the depth this issue requires, but also to highlight the local nature of the imagined general conflict between “Islam” and “the West.” It is, of course, true that there is a global dimension to these conflicts, the more so as the Middle East becomes a central strategic concern of American foreign policy, *the* site for the enduring “war against terrorism,” and as identification with a transnational Islam becomes the basis for rallying political opposition to the West in general and to the United States in particular. But, I argue, the situation of Muslim immigrants in Western European countries can be fully grasped only if the local context is taken into account. So, for example, a nation’s policy for naturalizing immigrants plays a part in its reception of Muslims; the experience of Pakistanis in England differs from that of Algerians in France; that of Turks in Germany is different yet again, while Bulgaria’s Muslims are not immigrants at all. We don’t learn very much by lumping all of these cases together into one Muslim “problem.” In fact, we exacerbate the problem we seek to address. I think that exactly this kind of heightening of difficulties was produced in France by the ways in which politicians, public intellectuals, and the media re-

sponded to the fact of a growing population of Muslim “immigrants” in their midst—immigrants whose diversities were reduced to a single difference that was then taken to be a threat to the very identity of the nation.

This book is a study of the political discourse of those French republicans who insisted that the only way to deal with what they perceived to be the threat of Islamic separatism was to ban the headscarf. There are not many Muslim voices in this book, in part because there weren’t many to be heard during the debates. The headscarf controversies were largely an affair of those who defined themselves as representatives of a true France, with North Africans, Muslims, and “immigrants” consigned to the periphery. I do consider the many meanings the veil may have for Muslims and arguments among them about how and whether to assimilate to French standards, but only briefly and then as a way of highlighting the inconsistencies of French characterizations of them. *This is not a book about French Muslims; it is about the dominant French view of them.* I am interested in the way in which the veil became a screen onto which were projected images of strangeness and fantasies of danger—danger to the fabric of French society and to the future of the republican nation. I am also interested in the way in which the representation of a homogeneous and dangerous “other” secured a mythic vision of the French republic, one and indivisible. I explore the many factors feeding these fantastic representations: racism, postcolonial guilt and fear, and nationalist ideologies, including republicanism, secularism, abstract individualism, and, especially, French norms of sexual conduct taken to be both natural and universal. Indeed, I argue that the representation of Muslim sexuality as unnatural and oppressive

when compared to an imagined French way of doing sex intensified objections to the veil, grounding these in indisputable moral and psychological conviction.



In France many of those who supported a ban on headscarves insisted they were protecting a nation conceived to be one and indivisible from the corrosive effects of *communautarisme* (which I have translated as “communalism”). By that term, they do not mean exactly what Americans do by “communitarianism.” In France *communautarisme* refers 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 belongs either to a group or to the nation. (In fact, of course, there are French Muslims who were recognized as such at the end of the Algerian War, but that history was conveniently forgotten in the outburst of republican myth-making associated with the celebration of the bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989.) American multiculturalism was offered negatively as the embodiment of communalism. Consisting of a multiplicity of cultures, riven by ethnic conflict and group identity politics, the United States is depicted as unable to grant individuals the equality that is their natural right. That equality is achieved, in French political theory, by making one’s social, religious, ethnic, and other origins irrelevant in the public sphere; it is as an abstract individual that one becomes a French citizen. Universalism—the oneness, the sameness of all individuals—is taken to be the antithesis of communalism. And yet, paradoxically, it is a universalism that is particularly

French. If America permits the coexistence of many cultures and grants the legitimacy (and political influence) of hyphenated identities (Italian-American, Irish-American, African-American, etc.), France insists on assimilation to a singular culture, the embrace of a shared language, history, and political ideology. The ideology is French republicanism. Its hallmarks are secularism and individualism, the linked concepts that guarantee all individuals equal protection by the state against the claims of religion and any other group demands.

French universalism insists that sameness is the basis for equality. To be sure, sameness is an abstraction, a philosophical notion meant to achieve the formal equality of individuals before the law. But historically it has been applied literally: assimilation means the eradication of difference. That is why the French census makes no record of the religion, ethnicity, or national origin of its population; such figures would represent France as fractured and divided, not—as it claims to be—a united, singular entity. The ideal of a nation one and indivisible harkens back to the French Revolution of 1789, which (after several years of bloody conflict) replaced a feudal corporate regime, characterized by hierarchies of privilege based on birth and wealth, with a republic whose citizens were deemed free and equal individuals. At the time, not all members of the population were considered individuals—women and slaves lacked the requisite qualities—but the ideal stood and became part of the national heritage, inspiring the claims of excluded groups for equal rights. I will talk more about the dilemma faced by excluded *groups* claiming the rights of *individuals* in chapters 2 and 4. Here I want simply to underscore the idea that French individualism achieves its universalist status by positing the

sameness of all individuals, a sameness that is achieved not simply by swearing allegiance to the nation but by assimilating to the norms of its culture. The norms of the culture, of course, are anything but abstract, and this has been the sticking point of French republican theory. Abstraction allows individuals to be conceived as the same (as universal), but sameness is measured in terms of concrete ways of being (as Frenchness). And ascriptions of difference, conceived as irreducible differences, whether based on culture or sex or sexuality, are taken to preclude any aspiration to sameness. If one has already been labeled different on any of these grounds, it is difficult to find a way of arguing that one is or can become the same.

In the last two decades or so, this contradiction has been exposed and challenged. The requirement of assimilation has come under attack by groups demanding recognition of their difference. Since women, homosexuals, and people of North African origin (stubbornly referred to as immigrants long after many had become citizens) were discriminated against as groups, it was as groups, they argued, that they must receive their rights—or as individuals whose difference from the norm is acknowledged and respected. The leaders of the feminist *mouvement pour la parité* insisted that discrimination against women in politics would end only when it was understood that all individuals came in one of two sexes. Sex, unlike ethnicity or religion, they argued, was universal. It divided all humans and so could not be abstracted: even abstract individuals were sexed. These feminists called for (and won) a law requiring equal numbers of women and men on the ballots for most elected political offices. The leaders of the gay and lesbian movement demanded the same rights for homosexual as for

straight couples, including the right to be considered families. They gained the equivalent of our domestic partnership contracts, but not access to adoption or reproductive technology. In effect, the law implies that families can be formed only by two individuals of the opposite sex—the cultural norm of the heterosexual nuclear family must remain in place. North Africans, many of whom are Muslims, claimed that the only way to reverse discrimination against them was to consider their religion on a par with that of Christians and Jews. If individuals with those commitments could be considered fully French, so could Muslims, even if the requirements of their religious beliefs led them to pray and dress differently—women wearing hijabs, for example. There was, of course, great contest about what these beliefs entailed, including whether the Koran even required women to cover their heads. There was also disagreement about the wisdom of passing a law banning the foulard; many Muslims told pollsters they did not oppose such a law even as they protested the discrimination they felt it would encourage. But whatever the controversies were among Muslims, what united them as a group was the desire to be considered “fully French” without having to give up on the religious beliefs, communal ties, or other forms of behavior by which they variously identified themselves.

The reaction of politicians and republican ideologists to these demands for the recognition of difference was swift and uncompromising. They insisted that the way things had always been done was the right way and that the challenges from groups such as women, homosexuals, and immigrants would undermine the coherence and unity of the nation, betraying its revolutionary heritage. Even as they granted that discrimina-

tion might exist and allowed some measures to correct it, they did so in ways that would not endanger the bottom line: the need to maintain the unity of the nation by refusing to recognize difference. After much debate, it was established that the exception was sexual difference. Embodied in the nuclear family, it was considered to be a natural difference, the foundation not only of French culture but of all civilized cultures.

As for Muslims, their claims were rebuffed on the ground that satisfying them would undermine *laïcité*, the French version of secularism, which its apologists offer as so uniquely French as to be untranslatable. Any word has specific connotations according to its linguistic context, of course. Nevertheless, *laïcité*, the French version of “secularism,” is no less translatable than any other term. It is part of the mythology of the specialness and superiority of French republicanism—the same mythology that paradoxically offers French universalism as different from all others—to insist that *laïcité* can only be used in its original tongue.<sup>6</sup> *Laïcité* means the separation of church and state through the state’s protection of individuals from the claims of religion. (In the United States, in contrast, secularism connotes the protection of religions from interference by the state.) Muslim headscarves were taken to be a violation of French secularism and, by implication, a sign of the inherent non-Frenchness of anyone who practiced Islam, in whatever form. To be acceptable, religion must be a private matter; it must not be displayed “conspicuously” in public places, especially in schools, the place where the inculcation of republican ideals began. The ban on headscarves established the intention of legislators to keep France a unified nation: secular, individualist, and culturally homogeneous. They vehemently denied the



objection that cultural homogeneity might also be racist. Yet, as I show in chapter 2, there is a long history of French racism in which North African Muslims are the target. The veil plays a particularly important part in that story.



One of the fascinating aspects of the headscarf controversy was the way in which words became conflated with one another. Muslim women in France wear what they refer to as a hijab; in French the word is foulard; in English, headscarf. Very quickly, this head covering was referred to in the media as a veil (*voile*), with the implications that the entire body and face of its wearer were hidden from view.<sup>7</sup> As I will argue in chapter 5, the conflation of headscarf and veil, the persistent reference to hidden faces when, in fact, they were perfectly visible, was a way of expressing deep anxiety about the ways in which Islam is understood to handle the relations of the sexes. It was also a way of insisting on the superiority of French gender relations, indeed, of associating them with higher forms of civilization. Although I do not want to reproduce that anxiety (rather I want to analyze it), I have found it impossible to make a rigorous or consistent distinction in my own terminology. My using "veil" and "headscarf" interchangeably reflects the way in which the words were deployed in the debates.

A similar set of conflations came with the word Muslim, a religious identification often (though not always) signified for women by the veil. Although it designated followers of the religion of Islam, "Muslim" was also used to refer to all immigrants of North African origin, whatever their religion. Sociol-

ogist Riva Kastoryano tells us that since at least the 1980s "immigrant," in France, has been synonymous with North African. Moreover, little distinction is made between North Africans, Arabs, and Muslims, although not all North Africans are Arabs, not all Arabs are Muslims, and not all Muslims in France come from North Africa. In the political discourse of French republicans, however, the different meanings are hard to distinguish, the terms bleed one into another. As with "veil," "Muslim" evokes associations of both inferiority and menace that go beyond the objective definition of the word itself: "Muslims" are "immigrants," foreigners who will not give up the signs of their culture and/or religion. Invariably, too, the religion they are said to espouse is painted as "fundamentalist," with incontestable claims not only on individual comportment but on the organization of the state. In this discourse the veil denotes both a religious group and a much larger population, a whole "culture" at odds with French norms and values. The symbolism of the veil reduces differences of ethnicity, geographic origin, and religion to a singular entity, a "culture," that stands in opposition to another singular entity, republican France.

For a small piece of cloth, the veil is heavy with meanings for French republicans who are worried about schools and immigrants, freedom and terrorism. Having an opinion about it serves to establish one's credentials on the heady topics of individualism, secularism, and the emancipation of women—it is an ideological litmus test. Banning the veil also became a substitute solution for a host of pressing economic and social issues; the law on headscarves seemed as if it could wipe away the challenges of integration posed for policymakers by former colonial subjects (most often perceived as poor and beyond re-

demption even if some were established members of the middle class). In a fascinating way, the veil in republican discourse served to cover a body of intractable domestic issues even as it revealed the anxieties associated with them. Getting beyond *that* veiling is the purpose of this book.

The answer to the question "why the veil?" then is complicated. Or perhaps a better word is "overdetermined." There were many reasons why French policymakers focused on the veil, even as they emphasized just one (the protection of women's equality from Islamist patriarchs). These reasons went beyond defending modernity against traditionalism, or secularism against the inroads of religion, or republicanism against terrorists. In this book I explore these reasons by treating separately the topics of racism, secularism, individualism, and sexuality, although all four were actually intertwined. To make sense of the complex fabric of French republican discourse on the veil, though, I have had to separate its interwoven strands. Each strand contributed to drawing and fortifying a boundary around an imagined France, one whose reality was secured by excluding dangerous others from the nation. At the same time, the political discourse of embattled republicanism created a firmer community of identification for Muslims than might otherwise have existed. The veil became a rallying point—something to defend as a common value—even for those who did not wear it.

My insistence on history and complexity is not just a scholarly indulgence; it has urgent political implications. Simple oppositions not only blind us to the realities of the lives and beliefs of others but create alternative realities that affect our own self-understanding. A worldview organized in terms of good

versus evil, civilized versus backward, morally upright versus ideologically compromised, us versus them, is one we inhabit at our risk. It leaves no room for self-criticism, no way to think about change, no way to open ourselves to others. By refusing to accept and respect the difference of these others we turn them into enemies, producing that which we most feared about them in the first place. This has happened in France and, with local variation, elsewhere in the West. Indeed, the French law seems to have inspired other countries to follow suit in what is fast becoming a consolidation of sides in a clash between "Islam" and "the West." The inability to separate the political radicalism based in the religion of a few from the religious and/or customary practices, or simply the ethnic difference, of the many has alienated diasporic Muslim populations, even those who want nothing more than to become full citizens of the lands in which they live. And it has secured "us" in an inflexible and thus dangerously defensive posture in relation to "them."

I have not used the word toleration to talk about how we should deal with those radically different from ourselves because, following political theorist Wendy Brown, I think toleration implies distaste (her word is aversion) for those who are tolerated.<sup>8</sup> I want to insist instead that we need to acknowledge difference in ways that call into question the certainty and superiority of our own views. Instead of assimilation we need to think about the negotiation of difference: how can individuals and groups with different interests live together? Is it possible to think about difference non-hierarchically? On what common ground can differences be negotiated? Perhaps it is the common ground of shared difference, as French philosopher

Jean-Luc Nancy has suggested. Nancy argues that it is wrong to think of community as a shared essence, a common being, because that "is in effect the closure of the political." Instead, he says, we must recognize that we all share "being-in-common," which "has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity."<sup>9</sup> Common being presupposes sameness while "being-in-common" says only that we all exist and that our very existence is defined by our difference from others. Paradoxically, it's difference that is common to us all.

We must stop acting as if historically established communities were eternal essences. This is one of the challenges of our time—one that French leaders were unwilling and unable to meet. Their story is for me an object lesson in politics, an example of the misuse of history and the blinding effects of hysteria. We need to think about the limits of their approach in order to develop alternatives to it—alternatives that will, of course, vary according to national context, but that will in each case allow for the recognition and negotiation of difference in ways that realize the promises of democracy.

# 1

## THE HEADSCARF CONTROVERSIES

In France, debate about whether girls could wear Islamic headscarves in public schools erupted at three separate moments: in 1989, 1994, and 2003. The chronological sequence does not reflect a steady increase in the number of headscarf-wearing girls or in acts by them which might be called disruptive. The girls were usually good students, with no disciplinary records. The only objection to them was that they insisted on wearing the hijab—the piece of cloth that became (as we shall see in what follows) a symbol of the "problem of Islam" for the French republic. What the chronological sequence does reflect is a hardening of the government's position in reaction to the steadily growing political influence of the anti-immigrant far right. From an early official inclination to tolerate expressions of individual religious conviction, there emerged a consensus that headscarves were dangerously political in their challenge to the principles of the secular republic and in their necessary association with Islamism and terrorism.

### 1989

The events that became known as the *affaires des foulards* began on October 3, 1989, when three Muslim girls who refused to

remove their headscarves were expelled from their middle school in the town of Creil, about thirty miles outside of Paris. The school is in a "priority educational zone" (ZEP), one that is poor and ethnically mixed, with a high turnover in the teaching staff and a great deal of class, religious, and cultural tension. The principal, Eugène Chenière, once referred to it as "une poubelle sociale" (a social garbage pail). When he expelled the girls, he claimed to be acting to enforce "laïcité"—the French version of secularism. According to Chenière, laïcité—a concept whose meaning would be furiously debated in the months and years that followed—was an inviolable and transparent principle, one of the pillars of republican universalism. The school was the cradle of laïcité, the place where the values of the French republic were nurtured and inculcated. It was, therefore, in the public schools that France had to hold the line against what Chenière later termed "the insidious jihad."<sup>1</sup>

What would at other times have been a minor incident—a school principal disciplining a few of his students—quickly became a major media event, tapping into, and at the same time inflaming, public uneasiness about the place of North African immigrants and their children in French society. Although many of these "immigrants" had long lived in France—indeed, some had even been born there and were citizens—they were seen as strangers to the dominant culture. They were, for the most part, poor; they lived in suburban enclaves on the outskirts of major cities; and many were Muslims. At a moment of international attention to Islam and to Arab militancy—as exemplified in the Iranian ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie and the start of the first Palestinian *intifada*

against the Israeli occupation—as well as of national concern about the emergence in France of a few small militant Islamist groups, the anxiety about Islam in France (said now to be its second largest religion) was intense. Press coverage of the expulsion of the three girls, and then of other conflicts about headscarves in other schools with similar populations, served to focus that anxiety, making a few schoolgirls' choice of attire the symbol of a challenge to the very existence of the republic.

On the face of it, the hubbub generated by the press seems exaggerated, but in fact it exposed the crisis the nation was confronting: how to reconcile an increasingly multicultural population with a universalism that precluded the recognition of cultural and social differences. The celebrations of the bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989 insisted that universalism was a defining and enduring trait of republicanism, the key to national unity. In many op-ed pieces, commentators warned that tolerating displays of Islamic affiliation would lead France down the disastrous path of American multiculturalism: ethnic conflict, affirmative action which put race above merit, social fragmentation, and political correctness. The distorted depictions of the American experience offered a warning that France must resist all efforts to address the realities of its social and cultural pluralism.

In the press accounts, the Muslim hijab referred to in French as a headscarf (*foulard*) quickly became the veil (*voile*), or more dramatically, the chador, this last evoking the specter of an Iranian-style Islamic revolution. Predictably, perhaps, Catholic leaders (as well as Protestant and Jewish) joined some of their Muslim counterparts in decrying the expulsions, arguing that laïcité meant respect for and toleration of differences

of religious expression among students. Less predictable was the split between the two leading antidiscrimination groups: one condoned, the other deplored, the expulsions, both in the name of the secular principles of the republic.<sup>2</sup> Demonstrations organized by Islamists to support the girls from Creil exacerbated the controversy; pictures of veiled women marching to protect their "liberty" and their "honor" only reinforced the idea of revolutionary Islam on the rise. The voices of calm and reason—those pointing out, for example, that radical, politicized Islam could be attributed to only a tiny minority of French Muslims, or that the number of headscarves in schools was hardly a widespread phenomenon—were drowned out by a growing hysteria fed by the pronouncements of some leading intellectuals. In an article published in the left-leaning magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, five philosophers ominously warned that "only the future will tell if the year of the bicentennial will also have been the Munich of the republican school."<sup>3</sup> The apocalyptic tone of their manifesto was, given the reality of the events, astonishing: "The foundation of the Republic is the school," they insisted, "that is why the destruction of the school will lead to the fall of the Republic." From this adamantly republicanist perspective there could be no accommodation with Islam.

Initially, however, there was accommodation. Overriding criticism from within and outside his party, Socialist minister of education Lionel Jospin managed to contain the situation by referring the matter to the Conseil d'Etat—the highest administrative court in France, whose task is to deal with the legality of actions taken by public bodies. On November 27, the council ruled that the wearing of signs of religious affiliation by stu-

dents in public schools was not necessarily incompatible with the principle of *laïcité*, as long as these signs were not ostentatious or polemical, and as long as they didn't constitute "acts of pressure, provocation, proselytism or propaganda" that interfered with the liberties of other students.<sup>4</sup> Students could not be refused admission to school for simply wearing headscarves; this would be a violation of the right to individual conscience, which included religious conviction. Their behavior (putting pressure on other students to wear headscarves, refusing to participate in athletic activities or to attend classes that conflicted with their religious beliefs) also had to clearly challenge or disrupt public order before it could be legitimately restrained. Those best able to interpret this behavior, the council concluded, were the teachers and school administrators, who knew their pupils. In a ministerial circular based on the council's ruling, Jospin left it to local school authorities to decide, on a case by case basis, whether headscarves were admissible or not.

Despite some condemnations, the ruling did in fact calm things down, and media attention moved elsewhere. There was hardly any coverage of various local negotiations, except for the conclusion of the story of the girls from Creil. Two of the three (sisters of Moroccan origin) were convinced by the King of Morocco, whose intervention had been sought by some French Muslim leaders, to take off their headscarves when they entered a classroom. It is interesting to note in this connection that the pressure that was brought to bear from their "community" forced the girls to abandon their choice of religious expression in favor of accommodation to secular authority. The compromise—and indeed it was a compromise—didn't actu-

ally remove headscarves from schools; it just bared the heads of the girls for the duration of each class. In a clear demonstration of their personal religious conviction, they continued to wear the hijab in the school's hallways and courtyards. But upon entering a classroom they were required, repeatedly, to enact deference to the secular rules that their deportment and dress refused. The compromise, in other words, did not resolve but rather made manifest the tension between France and its Muslim citizens. I do not qualify the term Muslim, despite the fact that as many as 45 percent of Muslims polled at the time agreed that the hijab should not be worn in school. Those republicans who wanted headscarves banned made no distinction between one Muslim and another. For them the headscarf was a symbol, not only of those who defined themselves as orthodox followers of Islam, but of the entire Arab/North African/Muslim population in France.

#### 1994

In 1994, Eugène Chénier again raised the question of headscarves in schools. Now he was a deputy representing the department of the Oise for the center right party, the *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR). Elected to office as part of the sweeping triumph of the right in the legislative elections of 1993, Chénier immediately offered a bill that would ban all "ostentatious" signs of religious affiliation. After a year of what one news account referred to as "Chénier's crusade," during which there were several conflicts in schools (among them a strike by teachers at one school in support of a gym instructor who claimed that headscarves were dangerous to wear during

physical activity), the minister of education, François Bayrou, decreed on September 20, 1994, that "ostentatious" signs of religious affiliation would henceforth be prohibited in all schools.<sup>5</sup> The behavior of the students need not be taken into account, he asserted, because certain signs were "in themselves" transparent acts of proselytizing. Bayrou drew a distinction between "discreet signs," those that demonstrated personal religious conviction, and "ostentatious signs," whose effect was to introduce difference and discrimination into an educational community that, like the nation it served, ought to be united. Indeed, the nation was the only community which could command the allegiance of its citizens. "The nation is not simply a collection of citizens with individual rights. It is a community."<sup>6</sup> Discreet signs were tolerable; ostentatious signs were not.<sup>7</sup> The ministerial pronouncement was followed by the expulsion of sixty-nine girls wearing what were increasingly referred to as "veils."

As in 1989, there was a huge media controversy, and many of the same arguments were rehearsed.<sup>8</sup> As earlier, the situation was likened to the Dreyfus Affair, the dispute over what turned out to be a spurious charge of treason brought against a Jewish army captain at the end of the nineteenth century. Each side was adamant. Those supporting Bayrou came from across the political spectrum; their tone was urgent. They inevitably linked events in France to the violent civil war then raging in Algeria. A principled defense of the republic required decisive action, they insisted. One could not tolerate the expression of a religiosity that was itself inherently intolerant and oppressive. Those opposing the minister's decree included a handful of academics and (again) representatives of France's religious estab-

lishment. Sociologists Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar interviewed girls who wore the hijab in an effort to demonstrate the complexity and diversity of their motives. "If one accepts the postulate that the royal road to liberation is through education," they wrote, "then to reject girls with veils . . . is to penalize them . . . by denying them the possibility of becoming modern."<sup>9</sup> Although Gaspard and Khosrokhavar were often attacked as proponents of the veil, in fact their argument accepted the same opposition between tradition and modernity, religion and enlightenment used by those who favored expulsion of veil-wearing students. The difference was more than tactical, however. Bayrou and his followers were engaging in symbolic politics (France takes a stand against Islam), while Gaspard and Khosrokhavar were interested in practical outcomes: they believed that negotiation, not exclusion, would lead to the desired end of integrating Muslims into French society as well as promote feminist goals of education and emancipation.

Bayrou's decree was challenged by some of the girls who had been expelled from school, and it was overturned by various courts and by the Council of State, which reaffirmed its 1989 ruling. The council rejected Bayrou's claim that certain signs could be separated from the intentions of those who carried them and again left it to teachers and administrators to interpret the actions of their students. In the wake of this ruling, Simone Veil, the minister of social affairs, appointed a woman of North African origin, Hanifa Chérifi, as official mediator for problems linked to the wearing of the veil. Chérifi's work seems to have borne fruit: the number of disputes dropped dramatically (from about 2,400 in 1994 to 1,000 in 1996), and

only around a hundred students were reported to be wearing headscarves to class. In some schools, girls were permitted to wear bandanas to cover their hair (although there were often intricate negotiations about size and color); in others, headscarves could be worn in the school building as long as they were dropped to the shoulders upon entering a classroom. As in 1989, the compromises did not resolve the tension but embodied it.

The controversy again died down, although it continued to receive government attention, in no small part because of insistent pressure from the increasingly visible, far-right populist party, the National Front. In 2000, the High Council on Integration, a body appointed by the government to address issues of immigration, made a number of recommendations about how to deal with "Islam in the Republic." In what political scientist Marc Howard Ross calls a "soft" republican approach, and what seems to me to be an exercise in equivocation, the report recognized the difficulty of excluding students with headscarves at the same time that it defined the wearing of these as antithetical to the goal of "integration."<sup>10</sup> It endorsed efforts at mediation rather than the passage of laws. But it did not resolve the ongoing tension between the definition of France as a nation "one and indivisible," in which difference was rendered invisible, and the increasing social and cultural diversity of its population.

### 2003

In 2003, the question of headscarves was first brought to national attention when the minister of the interior, Nicolas

Sarkozy, insisted that Muslim women pose bare-headed for official identity photographs. (Concern about terrorism after the attacks of September 11 in the U.S. was one of the justifications for this ruling.) In the wake of the controversy generated by the policy, schools once again became an issue, and politicians from the major parties rushed to declare their fealty to the republic. Socialist deputy Jack Lang presented a bill to the National Assembly that, in the name of *laïcité* (and in the interests of not being perceived as discriminating against Muslims), would outlaw signs of any religious affiliation in public schools. In June the assembly created an investigative body to gather information, and in July President Jacques Chirac appointed a commission headed by a former government minister and deputy, Bernard Stasi, to explore the feasibility of enacting a law.<sup>11</sup>

While the Stasi commission was meeting, press attention turned, at the end of September 2003, to two sisters in the suburban town of Aubervilliers (just outside of Paris). Alma and Lila Lévy were expelled from their high school when they refused either to remove their headscarves or to accept in its place a head covering the school administrators called “un foulard léger” (a headscarf “lite”!), which revealed the neck, earlobes, and hairline. (I will return to the question of what is covered and what is exposed in chapter 5). The girls had recently converted to Islam, much to the consternation of their parents and paternal grandmother, all of them leftists and avowedly secular. The father, a lawyer, referred to himself as “a Jew without God”; the mother, a teacher, was ethnically a Kabyle (a Berber, not an Arab) from Algeria who had been baptized as a Catholic but who did not practice her religion.

The parents were separated, one of the reasons for the girls' dismaying decision to convert, according to their grandmother. “It's not their fault. They are victims; they don't know how to find stability in a society that is too difficult for them,” she wrote in *Le Monde*.<sup>12</sup> But she, like their father, insisted on the girls' right to attend school in whatever costume they chose: “I detest their conversion, their veil, their headscarf and their prayers to Allah, but I love them and want them to be happy and I believe that it is only through the education they receive in the course of their studies that they will be able, perhaps, to no longer need Islam, which for the moment is necessary to them.”<sup>13</sup> “I'm not in favor of the headscarf,” the father commented, “but I defend the right of my children to go to school. In the course of this business I've discovered the hysterical madness of certain ayatollahs of secularism who have lost all their common sense.”<sup>14</sup>

The Lévy case was particularly interesting because there was no family pressure to wear the hijab, nor did the girls belong to any Islamic group. (The conversion of these girls may have made the case especially worrisome, since it demonstrated that Islam had the power to supplant even a secular upbringing.) One other girl, from a North African family, initially joined the two sisters but later had to relinquish her struggle, she told reporters, because her father beat her for wearing a headscarf. In all three instances, the decision seems to have been an individual one, contrary to the explanations offered by those who sought to ban the foulard in order to liberate women from the control of Islamist men. The Lévy sisters had only occasionally been to a mosque, yet they followed what they took to be the precepts of their chosen faith. They prayed five times a day,



fasted during Ramadan, studied the Koran, began to learn Arabic, and listened to tapes of some leading theologians, among them Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss Muslim scholar. They wore a long veil over their clothing (removing it when they got to school) and a headscarf (tucked into a turtle-neck shirt), in order to attain the modesty they thought their religion required of them.<sup>15</sup> Theirs were individual decisions, which while religious might well be read also as exquisite gestures of adolescent rebellion, or as attempts to challenge mainstream society as the girls' parents had, though in a completely different idiom from the left-wing politics of the older generation (a politics no longer available in a postcommunist age). Indeed, one sociologist, commenting on the headscarf controversies, suggested that for young dissidents in the twenty-first century, identifying with Islam was the functional equivalent of the Maoism of the 1960s and 70s. There was as little room, however, for an examination of motives in this case as in any of the earlier headscarf controversies. The issue was debated less in terms of the individuals involved than in terms of the symbolic positions attributed to them.

As in 1989 and 1994, debate was intense. But now that a commission was considering recommending a law, the stakes were higher. Those on the left in favor of a law excluding headscarves from schools likened those they called Islamic fundamentalists to Nazis and warned of the danger of totalitarianism (Iran was a favorite example). Those on the left opposed to exclusion saw the law as a continuation of French colonial policy: Arabs were still being denied rights of self-determination by a racist republic. *Their* critics, in turn, accused them of naive leftism. Among leftists, as among feminists, the question of the

status of women in Islam was also at issue. Those who favored a law banning headscarves (including some women from countries with oppressive Islamic regimes) saw it as a blow for women's emancipation, a sign that France would not tolerate oppressive, patriarchal practices. The far-left party *Lutte ouvrière*, for example, supported interdiction of the veil as a way of refusing "the infamous oppression of women."<sup>16</sup> And the editors of the feminist journal *ProChoix* attacked those who urged tolerance as being guilty of dangerous "cultural relativism."<sup>17</sup> Those who opposed a law, in contrast, insisted that the expulsion of girls with headscarves would not emancipate them but drive them either to religious schools or into early marriages, losing forever the possibility of a different future. If these girls were victims of manipulation, then barring them from school amounted simply to punishing the victim. How could that be called emancipation?<sup>18</sup> Others warned against treating girls with headscarves as victims. "We want to consider veiled girls or prostitutes as subjects, not victims. So we must listen to what they have to say," cautioned a representative of *Femmes publiques* (Public Women), an advocacy group for prostitutes. But in the dozens of articles and books published in 2003, it was rare to find the voices of the girls whose fate was at issue. Until a book of interviews with them was published in 2004, even the Lévy girls—who were at the center of the controversy—had little chance to explain themselves.

As the pages of newspapers and journals filled with debate, as friends and families stopped talking about the issue because it so bitterly divided them, the Stasi commission held interviews and long meetings. It issued its report, "Laïcité et République," in December. The report reaffirmed the hallowed

traditions of secularism, and on these grounds called for the outlawing of all “conspicuous” signs of religious affiliation in public schools. Its recommendations also included recognition of a need to tolerate varieties of religious practices and even to adopt policies that were more inclusive than in the past. Acknowledging the reality of the pluralistic nature of French society, the commission called for “full respect for spiritual diversity”; the addition of instruction in the history and philosophy of religions to the educational curriculum; the establishment of a national school for Islamic studies; the creation of Muslim chaplaincies in hospitals and prisons; alternatives to pork and fish on Fridays in school, prison, and hospital cafeterias; and the recognition of Yom Kippur and Aïd-El-Kébir as national holidays.

Despite all kinds of significant qualifications (for example, that the acceptance of the country’s spiritual diversity must not be allowed to diminish the historic place of Christianity in French culture, or that substitutes for pork would be offered only on Friday and absolutely not on any other day of the week), these recommendations granted the need to adopt policies that ended the marginalization of Muslims and that would make them feel more fully a part of French society. They were meant to deny the charge that the headscarf ban was a rejection of Muslims in general. For a few members of the commission these recommendations were as important as the headscarf ban, because they signaled that the law did not apply solely to Muslims, that it was not discriminatory in intent. But—in a sign of what could only be read as a hardening of the government position—the sole recommendation accepted by Chirac in January 2004 was for a law prohibiting the wearing

of conspicuous signs of religious affiliation in public schools. Yarmulkes and Sikh turbans were also swept away by this law which, despite that, was popularly referred to as the headscarf law. There was to be no room for the compromises that had been negotiated in years past (scarves on shoulders, “lite” scarves, bandanas); the law was designed to dispel the tensions these compromises had embodied. It became the law of the land in March 2004, and its enforcement began the following October. Without the softening effect of the other recommendations, the headscarf ban became a definitive pronouncement: there would no longer be compromises or mediation—it was either Islam or the republic.

### Timing

There are many explanations to be offered for the hardening of the government position. The years between 1989 and 2003 saw a dramatic increase in international attention to political Islam, even if it did not see an increase in the number of headscarf conflicts in French public schools. Events in Iran, Israel/Palestine, Algeria, New York City, Afghanistan, and Iraq certainly contributed to anxiety about the place of Muslims in France, despite the fact that polls continued to show that the vast majority of Muslims were becoming more secular, more integrated into French society. There was, to be sure, a more visible and outspoken Islamist presence in France in 2003 than there was in 1989 (though its numbers were still small), and there were more “hot spots”—schools in which young male militants were seeking ways to challenge secular values and practices. But putting pressure on girls to wear headscarves was

among the more benign of activities which included wearing distinctive clothing and beards, as well as refusing to attend history or gym classes that were at odds with their beliefs and practices. It is hard to conclude, then, that the decision to pass a law banning headscarves from public schools was a reaction to an objective worsening of these circumstances. Rather we must look both to domestic politics and to the international climate (migrations of former colonial subjects, global economic pressures, transnational diplomatic events) to explain the timing of the *affaires* and the decision to pass a law banning headscarves in 2004.

The intensifying determination of successive governments to address the Muslim question—symbolically, by taking a firm stand on headscarves—came in reaction to the growing popularity and electoral success of Jean-Marie Le Pen's populist National Front party. The *affaires des foulards* are episodes in the continuing drama of Le Pen's challenge to the mainstream parties, and the timing almost exactly coincides. Le Pen managed, during the 1980s and 90s, to build a formidable machine by focusing on the issue of immigration. When he refers to "immigrants," he means those of North or West African origin, who may or may not be Muslims and who are often second- and third-generation French, so not immigrants at all. But Le Pen defines them all as immigrants to emphasize their foreignness.

Beginning in 1983, Le Pen entered the electoral field, and his party slowly gained footholds in a few municipal and regional councils. In the presidential election of 1988 the tide turned for him. Much to his satisfaction, Le Pen created a panic when he won 14 percent of the vote in the first round.

The next year, the National Front had a strong showing in elections for the European parliament. In the elections for the European parliament in 1994, the National Front scored even better, gaining eleven seats. In the first round of the presidential election of 2002, Le Pen came in second. In reaction, there were huge demonstrations in Paris and elsewhere in defense of the republic, and in the second round of the election, his opponent, Jacques Chirac, the leader of a coalition of parties of the right, won by a landslide. But even with this decisive defeat, Le Pen is perceived as a continuing threat to the established parties, as well as to the republic they claim to represent. The conservatives keep looking for ways to recapture the constituencies they have lost to him (although they are not above allying with the National Front in order to defeat Socialist Party candidates), and the left also worries (rightly) that the immigration issue has stolen increasing numbers of its working-class votes. Le Pen's role—pushing parties of the right, left, and center to take firmer stands on "immigrants"—is characteristic of what's happening elsewhere in Europe. Laws regulating Muslims—sometimes spurred by a radical-political attack in the name of Islam (the murder of Theo van Gogh in Holland, subway and bus bombings in London), sometimes offered simply as a substitute for costly social supports—come in response to populist or nationalist demands for action. The premise of these laws is that violent action is typical of Islam, and they at once foreclose other options for integration and consolidate diverse groups of Muslims into Roy's "virtual" communities.

Many French political leaders did not contest Le Pen's attribution of France's social problems to "immigrants" but offered

different solutions. None of these proposals were very satisfactory because for the most part they were watered-down versions of Le Pen's: instead of expelling "immigrants" from France, expel girls with headscarves from French public schools, for example. In 1989 the expulsions at Creil followed Le Pen's strong showing in the presidential election the year before; Bayrou's ministerial circular and the sixty-nine expulsions in 1994 followed the National Front's winning seats in the European parliament; and Chirac's law came shortly after he defeated Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election of 2002. In each case, the fear of Le Pen's party pushed more moderate parties farther to the right.

A good illustration of this process is the path followed by Eugène Chenière, the principal of the school in Creil, instigator of the first *affaire* in 1989. As celebrations of the bicentennial became the occasion for repeated assertions of the sanctity of universalism and the dangers of "communalism," Chenière, a black man from the Antilles, decided to display his republican credentials and, it seems too, to set the stage for his political career. Already active in the RPR and one of those in the party who sought closer ties to the National Front, Chenière took a stand on "immigrants" by refusing to accept them in his school if they did not dress in conformity with secular standards. By 1994, he had won a seat in the assembly—presumably at least in part as a result of his outspoken stand against Islam—and from there he continued his demands for a clear policy on headscarves, pressing Bayrou to issue his decree. No concessions must ever be made to ethnic or religious difference, Chenière insisted. And if, unlike Le Pen, he was willing to admit "foreigners" to citizenship, it was only when—as indi-

viduals (like himself)—they embraced the values and identity of the French.

Another illustration comes from 2003, in the wake of Le Pen's presidential challenge. The parties of the right were in power, seeking at once to dispel the charges that the state discriminated against its Muslim population and to hold off criticisms from Le Pen that they were capitulating to Islamic extremism. Responding to claims that Islam was being treated differently from other religions (and that this unequal treatment was a source of disaffection and a spur to radicalism), the minister of the interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, created a national representative body for Muslims to parallel those of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. These confessional councils deliberate on such matters as state support for religious schools, make recommendations about chaplains in hospitals and prisons, and offer opinions about what impact proposed laws will have on their constituencies. In a nation that is avowedly secular, the councils are a way of taking religion into account, and they are a means for the state to gain a measure of control over religious leaders—to create acceptable religiosities. The Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM) came into being in April 2003. Elected by representatives of mosques and Islamic associations, it is now the official voice of French Muslims. The representatives are a mix of moderate and radical, but the strong showing of l'Union des organisations islamiques de France (UOIF), a radical group, confirmed the fears of those who thought that any Islam is, unlike Christianity or Judaism, antithetical to republicanism. And it had the worrisome potential to provide more grist for Le Pen's mill. The UOIF had been a particularly vocal advocate of the wearing of headscarves in public schools.

So the proposition by Socialist deputy Jack Lang in June and the quick action by the National Assembly (controlled by a coalition of parties of the right) and the president in July can be seen as a reaction to UOIF influence on the CFCM, a way of countering the official recognition of the UOIF as a voice for Muslims with an official prohibition of headscarves in schools. The state might have to recognize radicals when they were voted onto a representative religious body, but their influence would be curbed at the door of the school.

The strong stand taken against headscarves was, in fact, a sign of the impotence and/or unwillingness of the government to address the problem it shares with many other European nations: how to adjust national institutions and ideologies that assume or seek to produce homogeneity to the heterogeneity of their current populations. Capitulating to pressure from the far right only compounds the problem by accepting its Manichean terms and suggesting that resistance to change is the only possible solution. But it is precisely the Le Penist hysteria about "immigrants" that has made alternatives difficult to explore, by turning a disadvantaged and discriminated-against social group into a scourge and by conflating all Arabs with North Africans and all North Africans not only with Islam but with politically driven Islamism. The insistence that all Muslims are Islamists (and so terrorists or potential terrorists) distracts from the very real issues of social, economic, and religious discrimination faced by those of North African origin—issues that, in the absence of other solutions, Islamists have been able to exploit. Islam was taken to stand not only for religious difference but for a "culture" that caused the social marginality of these "immigrants." The effect of the *affaires des*

*foulards* was to make the headscarf the symbol of a difference that could not be integrated.

### Conclusion

It would be a mistake to blame the hostility to headscarves entirely on the influence of Jean-Marie Le Pen. While there is no doubt that the popularity of his anti-immigrant stance has forced the mainstream parties of the right and left to try to coopt his message, there is also no doubt that Le Pen taps into a set of racist attitudes with deep roots in French history. What some have referred to as "Islamophobia" antedates not only the attacks of September 11 and the war on terrorism but also the Algerian War. It is an aspect of the long history of French colonialism that began at least as early as the conquest of Algeria in 1830. In that history, the veil has played a significant part as a continuing sign of the irreducible difference between Islam and France—a difference (as I will argue in chapter 5) that gains force by its implicit reference to the irreducibility of the difference between the sexes. The veil, however, signifies not only religious incompatibilities but also ethnic/cultural ones. For that reason, we cannot understand the intense controversy generated by a few girls in headscarves without a consideration of the place of the veil in the history of French racism.