



Islamophobia: a French Specificity in Europe?

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Abstract: This paper argues that France is not more Islamophobic than other European countries. An 'institutional Islamophobia' or 'State Islamophobia' doesn't really exist. However, the relation toward Islam is complex and determined by the "missionary mind" which persists by wishing to emancipate Muslims from their religion, perceived as an archaic, obscurantist and despotic phenomenon. French society specificity expresses itself in the tendency to 'ideologize' Islam. In front of the 'danger' of the political Islam (fundamentalism, radical Islam, Islamo-terrorism...), French institutions would like to promote their own conception of a 'regenerated Islam' (comparable to the 'regenerated Judaism' during the Third Republic). The Jacobinism and republican view of 'Islam Governance' is founded on a 'powerful interventionism' of the State and the public institutions in usual Islamic matters. So France is characterized by a permanent paradox. It is a European country where Islam is officially institutionalized but it also exists within a Western society where Islamophobic tendencies are the strongest and most recurrent.

As in all European countries following September 11th, 2001, France experienced a rise of anti-Islamic racism in many social sectors. However, it must be said that these 'Islamophobic attitudes' were already at work prior to the 9/11 event as much as they went on far beyond this date. The attacks on New York City acted as a revealing and amplifying factor of French Islamophobia more than a deciding one¹. Even worse, French media easily indulge in pointing out the so-called US anti-Islamism (based on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the 9/11 related security measures, etc.),

while refusing to see how much it is also at work in their own country and among all social groups. It is, in France, a typical tradition to see evil in other countries while not being able to see it at home. As an illustration, almost every single French leader has bluntly criticized the George W. Bush 'Axis of Evil' formula even though the same culturalist and conflicting representation is also widely spread within the French society. The reasons for this 'French blindness' to Islamophobia are to be found in the national history. From the 18th century and especially during the French colonisation of Western Africa and Middle East, the French representation of Islam began to move away from the prevalent European ones, separating from its common Christian legacy.

¹ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, *Anti-Islamic reactions in the EU after the terrorist acts against the USA, 12th September to 31st December 2001*, published by European Union in 2001.

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ISLAMOPHOBIA: LEGACY OF CHRISTIAN RACISM OR NEW RACISM?

In most European countries, the break from the anti-Mahometist Christian medieval canon was the end result of a rather slow process. In fact, the derogatory picture of the Muslims had long depended on ideological, political and geopolitical necessities. Anti-Mahometism played a cohesive role within a Christian Europe deeply divided by wars between kingdoms and dynasties. This fear of Islam was indeed helping Western Christendom to exist as a political, cultural and religious entity. The historical analysis of Daniel Norman shows that “a collective way of thinking had taken place. By its strong internal cohesion, it represented the unity of the Christian doctrine in its political opposition to the Islamic society and played an evident social role, coordinating the military aggression with the intellectual aggression².”

But this Christian anti-Mahometism evolved along the centuries. From the 15th century, the Christian fear of Islam began to decline and turned into a geopolitical fear. The Ottomans kept on symbolizing a danger to the Western world but a danger that was getting more temporal and political than religious. This change stands out as a major turn in history as it clearly started the secularization process of our relation to Islam and the Muslims. Ottomans were no longer represented as religious enemies but merely as a rival European superpower³. The argument stating today that the ‘Islamic culture’ of Turkey would prevent it

from joining the European Union (EU) is, with this regard, an intellectual and ideological regression compared to the liberal and tolerant views of the 15th century. In those days, the Ottoman Empire frightened us but we nevertheless admired it and were looking at it as ‘culturally and politically European.’

During the French Revolution, it is striking to see that Islam was in no case an issue for most European intellectuals. On the contrary, what was clearly an issue then was the status of the Jews, fiercely discussed between “anti-Jewish”⁴ and “pro-Jewish” advocates. At the time, Europe was typically more anti-semitic than it was anti-Islamic. The French Enlightenment was developing an anticlerical vision of society and most people were fighting against the omnipotence of the Roman Catholic Church. In reaction to Catholicism, those thinkers regarded Islam as a peaceful, exotic and liberal religion. It might sound like a paradox today, but throughout the 18th century the Muslim countries were viewed as outstandingly liberal territories with regard to their social and sexual habits (re. the sensual image of the harem). Such an image was praised by the liberal spirit of the ‘Lumières’ as they fought against the Catholic Church’s claim to control the private lives of individuals and families. We find a good example of this typical romantic vision of Islam in the writings of Voltaire who, though criticizing the Prophet Muhammed, nevertheless developed a positive representation of the Muslims who are described as “normal persons.”⁵

But this tolerant attitude toward Islam

² Daniel Norman, *Islam et Occident*, Paris, Les éditions du Cerf, 1993. Original version: *Islam and the West. The Making of an Image*, Edinburgh University Press, 1980, p. 355.

³ Maxime Rodinson, *La fascination de l’islam*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, p. 61 (1ère édition, François Maspero, 1980) ; English version : *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, University of Washington Press, 1987, 163 p.

⁴ Arthur Hertzberg, *Les origines de l’anti-sémitisme moderne*, Paris, Presses de la Renaissance, 2004, quatrième de couverture. Original version: *The French Enlightenment and the Jews. The Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1968.

⁵ M. Rodinson, *La fascination de l’islam*, op. cit., p. 74; Jean-Paul Charnay, *Les Contre-Orientes ou Comment penser l’Autre selon soi*, Paris, Sindbad, 1980, pp. 55-68.

was supplanted in the 19th century by the emergence of European nationalisms and imperialisms⁶. The image of Islam as a peaceful religion was then gradually replaced by an obscurantist, archaic and despotic one. It is in this changing ideological and political context that the homo Islamicus representation was being carved out⁷. The triumph of Eurocentrism seemed to legitimate the idea of the superiority of Western civilization on the Arab and Islamic world. The tolerant universalism of the 'Lumières' progressively gave way to a scornful one. European thinkers were starting to tackle new issues such as 'Muslim fanaticism,' 'Islamic fundamentalism' and 'Panislamism.' Even though no one can speak then of an 'Islamism' yet, the specter of an 'Islamic contagion' was already in mind. The most representative French thinker of this anti-Islamic universalist trend was probably Ernest Renan who, in the famous lecture he gave at the Sorbonne University in March 1883, declared: "One only needs to know little about our times to clearly see the inferiority of Islamic countries today, the decline of nations ruled by Islam, the intellectual uselessness of races whose culture and education derive entirely from this religion"⁸.

In the context of the French colonization of North Africa, especially in Algeria, Panislamism had great success and gave grounds to the surveillance and repression of the reformist Muslim groups. In his work entitled *Algerian Muslims and France* (1968), historian Charles-Robert Ageron shows how the French colonial authorities used the very traditional Islamic institutions and religious representatives (imams, muftis, qadis) to be instrumental in repressing the

claims of the colonized populations⁹. Even today, France is still imprinted with this colonial management of Islam. On this particular issue, we do agree with the analysis of Jocelyne Césari: "It is certainly in France where this fear [of Islam] is the strongest because the 'colonial wound' hasn't been healed yet"¹⁰.

As Orientalist Maxime Rodinson points out, it is most difficult for France to overcome its ambivalent representation of the Islamic religion¹¹. While the French authorities tolerate the public expression of Islamic groups, they impose strict limitations on the freedom to worship. The French political elites, media and intellectuals agree altogether upon an 'assimilationist' conception of Islam, a 'ready-made Islam' where the expression of religiosity is reduced to a minimum. In this regard, French intellectuals clearly appear to be the heirs to Ernest Renan's¹² essentialist theories which express more a culturalist racism (i.e., the belief in a hierarchy among cultures and religions) than a biological one. Indeed, Islam is still largely perceived within the French society as a 'regressive religion,' opposed to the secular and republican modernity.

A "COLD TOLERANCE": THE FRENCH PARADOX IN EUROPE

The Islamic religion's status in today's France is a permanent paradox that strangely translates into some social dynamics: significant breakthrough in the institutionalization of Islam regularly alternate with real or symbolic repressions. As a

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

⁷ About the invention of the myth of "Homo Islamicus": M. Rodinson, *La fascination de l'islam*, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-90.

⁸ Ernest Renan, "L'islamisme et la science," lecture given at La Sorbonne, March 29th, 1883.

⁹ Charles-Robert Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France (1871-1819)*, Tome I et Tome II, Presses Universitaires de France, 1968.

¹⁰ Jocelyne Césari, *Faut-il avoir peur de l'islam*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 1997, p. 126.

¹¹ Maxime Rodinson, *La fascination de l'islam*, *op. cit.*

¹² E. Renan, "L'islamisme et la science," *op. cit.*

minority religion, recently established within French territory, Islam is theoretically tolerated and protected. But this 'cold tolerance'¹³ toward Islam is also a way to encourage Muslim populations to gradually abandon their 'community attitudes.' The situation of Muslims in France is therefore extremely complicated and it can become difficult for a foreign observer to gain a clear understanding of what the issues really are. However, it is necessary to overcome two major prejudices that can blur the objective perception of what the situation of the Islamic community truly is in France.

The first prejudice is to think of France as a profoundly Islamophobic and anti-Islamic country continuously persecuting its Muslim minority. In spite of obvious ethnic and religious tensions within French society, there never were pogroms or anti-Muslim popular riots. Furthermore, one cannot either speak today of a 'State Islamophobia,' as historians can refer—with regard to the Vichy regime (1940-1944)—to a 'State Anti-Semitism.' With the exception of the radical right-wing nationalist parties (the *National Front* of Jean-Marie Le Pen and *The Republican National Movement of Bruno Mégret*), French political representatives widely promote a rhetoric of tolerance that supports the institutionalization process of Islam. In short, contrary to the awesome picture some are trying to draw, France is not the most Islamophobic country of Europe: assaults on Muslims and attacks on mosques are in no way more numerous than in any other European country¹⁴.

Moreover, France is probably the country in Europe that has been the most deeply

¹³ Catherine Coroller, "Une tolérance froide pour l'islam," *Libération*, 6 octobre 2003.

¹⁴ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, *Anti-Islamic reactions in the EU after the terrorist acts against the USA, 12th September to 31st December 2001*, published by European Union in 2001.

involved and truly instrumental in institutionalizing the Islamic faith at both national and local levels: the French government two years ago set up the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) at the national level while Regional Councils of the Muslim Faith (CRCM) were established and elected at the local level. Hence, even though the French secular State has always reiterated its commitment to the principle of the church /state separation set by the 1905 law, Islam enjoys a nearly official recognition by the Government and public authorities of the country. All of this eventually constitutes a quite paradoxical situation¹⁵.

The second prejudice is to nourish an 'angelic vision' of the French social reality, as if there were indeed no cultural and religious discriminations against the Muslims. To go by an old Jewish saying from the 19th century, we might say that Muslims live as 'happy as God in France!', implying from there that France would be the true haven for Muslims of all countries. This romantic representation denies the phenomenon of Islamophobia and minimizes the acts of anti-Islamism that have particularly increased over the recent years¹⁶. Although France is not yet an 'Islamophobic State,' French society is nevertheless inhabited by some 'Islamophobic trends' that live across almost every social group: popular classes and middle classes just as much as the country elites (intellectuals, writers, journalists, political leaders, etc.).

¹⁵ Xavier Ternisien, *La France des mosquées*, chapitre 12: "Le long chemin de la consultation," Paris, éditions 10/18, 2004, pp. 255-282.

¹⁶ French intellectuals refuse to use the term "Islamophobia" and even uphold the thesis saying that this term would have been invented by radical Islamists: "the word 'Islamophobia' was created to 'sap' the debate and divert the antiracism to their fight against the blasphemy," Caroline Fourest, Fiammetta Venner, "Islamophobie?," *Pro-Choix*, n° 26-27, automne-hiver 2003, pp. 13-14.

CONCRETE MANIFESTATIONS OF ISLAMOPHOBIA AFTER SEPTEMBER 11TH IN THE FRENCH SOCIETY

As in all European countries in the follow up of September 11th, France experienced a rise of anti-Islamic racism in many social sectors. However, it must be said that these 'Islamophobic attitudes' were already at work prior to the 9/11 event as much as they went on far beyond this date. The attacks on New York City acted as a revealing and amplifying factor of the French Islamophobia more than a deciding one¹⁷. In this regard, the slaughters of civilians that took place in Algeria between 1991 and 2000 produced a somehow greater emotional traumatic effect on the French public opinion, Islam being often related to barbaric violence and fundamentalist terrorism. Indeed, there is in France an 'Algerian trauma' comparable to the '9/11 trauma' in the United States, especially since a French-Algerian community of three-million lives in the country and many Algerian intellectuals are regularly denouncing the ill effects of radical Islamism. These French-Algerian networks are indeed working as a 'cultural lobby' anxious to fight every aspect of 'Islamic activism' and as a matter of fact, altogether contribute to shape the perception of the Islamic religion in the French opinion. It is therefore the particular conjunction of the fallouts of both the recent Algerian civil war and the 9/11 terrorist attacks that makes the French situation a very unique one among the European countries.

From January 2001 to June 2004, numerous attacks against Islamic places of

worship took place: racist graffiti (such as 'Down with the Muslims!' or 'Muslims Go Home!'), hurling Molotov cocktails against Islamic premises and arson (several Islamic prayer rooms were destroyed by fire). At the same time, records of desecrations of Islamic graves in civil and military cemeteries increased, whereas it was mainly happening so far to Jewish graveyards. In some regions of France, particularly in Alsace (next to the German border), attacks even spread to private businesses notoriously perceived by aggressors as 'Islamic.' Furthermore, up to a hundred openly racist and anti-Islamic websites targeted to the French audience began to flourish. But because of the strong legal restrictions we have in France (laws against racial discriminations), most of these radical nationalist websites are indeed hosted on the US "Libertysurf"¹⁸ network.

ROLE OF INTELLECTUAL ELITES IN THE LEGITIMATION OF "HIJABOPHOBIA"¹⁹

Parallel to attacks against Islamic places and graveyards, physical assaults on people increased, especially on young ladies wearing the headscarf in public places (streets, banks, post offices, supermarkets, etc.). French Islamophobia often intermingles with 'hijabophobia' (rejection of the Islamic veil)²⁰. Many are those who hide themselves behind the values of secularism and equality between men and women to express their categorical refusal of the wearing of the veil in public places: The hijab is largely identified by a majority of the French people as the expression of a

¹⁷ European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, *Anti-Islamic reactions in the EU after the terrorist acts against the USA, 12th September to 31st December 2001: National Report "France," op. cit.*

¹⁸ Vincent Geisser, *La nouvelle islamophobie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, p. 9-22.

¹⁹ Rejection of the Islamic headscarf.

²⁰ V. Geisser, "Hijabophobia in France": Note for the seminar of the Council of Europe, *Islamophobia and its consequences on Young People*, European Youth Centre Budapest, 1 - 6 June, 2004.

“threatening Islamity” and the symbol of a new Islamic fundamentalism which endangers the basic secular and republican values. For that reason, the Islamic hijab is not considered as a mere sign of feminine modesty or a simple religious garment but as a social danger causing a security problem. Hence the trend in French society to somehow ‘criminalize’ the hijab and to look at Muslim women wearing the veil as “offenders” or passive accomplices of radical Islamism. Overall, hijabophobia stands out as one specific expression of French Islamophobia that actually hides itself behind the values of republican universalism and secularism. This ‘emotional process’ has encouraged the adoption of the Law of February 11, 2004, against the wearing of religious symbols in public schools. In reality, it is an Islamophobic law specifically directed against the hijab. It is true that the majority of French opinion leaders, politicians and intellectuals have supported the prohibition of the hijab in public schools. Their position was clearly ‘hijabophobic.’

French Islamophobia can probably be characterized by its intellectual and elitist dimension²¹. The direct or indirect fallouts of the widely publicized debates about the prohibition of the Islamic veil within public school premises (Stasi’s Commission on the wearing of religious signs) played a significant role in ‘facilitating’ a latent Islamophobia: Opinion leaders (journalists, editors, philosophers, security experts, etc.) are the main vectors of this latent Islamophobia which takes advantage of the right to criticize religions and the freedom of conscience to draw stigmatizing representations of Islam and Muslims. Islamophobia is thus taken over and further supported by some representatives of the French elites who are therefore directly

contributing to its justification among various social groups. To some extent, they are indeed promoting a liberalization and trivialization of the Islamophobic thesis.

According to philosopher Pierre Tévanian, French Islamophobia is primarily the expression of a ‘cultural racism’ (as opposed to a biological one). From there, the Islamic religion is not seen as a specific form of spirituality but rather more as a ‘totalizing culture,’ carrying a threat to our Western civilization (essentialist vision): “One is to face the facts: there is in France a ‘cultural racism’ that specifically targets the descendants of colonized people, and is entirely grounded in their belonging to the Islamic world. That particular type of racism is as much alive within the ‘educated’ groups as within any other social group.”²²

This fear of Islam has its roots in the ambivalence of the French universalist ideology. France hasn’t yet overcome its complex of a ‘republican purity’ and French intellectuals are still the defenders of a genuine ‘republican puritanism.’ On behalf of the alleged superiority and universality of the ‘French republican model,’ elites are sincerely convinced they have indeed the very mission to emancipate the Muslims and the moral duty to regenerate the Nation. In their republican consciousness, they consider Muslims to be the unfortunate prisoners of their ‘community spirit’ (Umma). In this regard, the French attitude towards Muslims today is somehow comparable to the one that prevailed toward the Jews during the last century. The universalist mission of the French Republic is therefore to make possible for Muslims to free themselves from their ‘ummist spirit’ and to refrain from their natural tendency to communitarianism.

The French intellectuals implicitly defined ‘a level of tolerable Islamophobia’

²¹ V. Geisser, “Islamophobie médiatique: les journalistes et les intellectuels en question?,” dans *La nouvelle islamophobie*, *op. cit.*, p. 24-56.

²² Pierre Tévanian, “De la laïcité égalitaire à la laïcité sécuritaire. Le milieu scolaire à l’épreuve du foulard islamique,” www.lmsi.net, mars 2004.

for our secular and republican society. This points to the historian Charles-Robert Ageron's theory about the colonial Algeria, 'the gradual assimilation.' According to the French republican norm, a perfect Muslim is one who has given up a part of his faith, beliefs and 'outdated' religious practices. A beautiful mosque is a quiet one without minaret, practically invisible, in harmony with the republican context. An emancipated Muslim woman is one who has escaped from her tribe, being freed of an "Islamic male's" supervision.

CONCLUSION: FRANCE, CHAMPION OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN EUROPE?

To conclude, France is not more Islamophobic than other European countries. An 'institutional Islamophobia' or 'State Islamophobia' doesn't really exist. However, the relation toward Islam is complex and determined by the "missionary mind" which persists by wishing to emancipate Muslims from their religion, perceived as an archaic, obscurantist and despotic phenomenon. French society specificity expresses itself in the tendency to 'ideologize' Islam. In front of the 'danger' of the political Islam (fundamentalism, radical Islam, Islamo-terrorism...), French institutions would like to promote their own conception of a 'regenerated Islam' (comparable to the 'regenerated Judaism' during the Third Republic). The Jacobinism and republican view of 'Islam Governance' is founded on a 'powerful interventionism' of the State and the public institutions in usual Islamic matters. So France is characterized by a permanent paradox. It is a European country where Islam is officially institutionalized but it also exists within a Western society where Islamophobic tendencies are the strongest and most recurrent.

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