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VEILED PHOBIAS

The French republican dress code

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1. INTRODUCTION

The debate about symbols of faith has been a big issue in Europe over the last few years. It has been questioned, for example, if it is appropriate for a schoolgirl to wear a cross round her neck, and is wearing such a Christian symbol a denial of secular ideas? The latest wave of this debate has centred around minarets in Switzerland and burqas in a number of European states. These symbols have been commonly regarded as conflicting with the national cultural values or a rejection of the secular ideals, as is the case in France.

This paper aims to examine the debate about the burqa ban in the French media, namely Le Figaro, Libération, Le Nouvel Observateur and Le Point, at the beginning of 2010. The debate in France was activated at the time because the parliamentary committee proposed to ban the burqa in public places. My study focuses on the debate that was waged in the above mentioned media both before and after the committee's proposal was released. I limited the study to the period between the 17th January and 10th February, because I assume that it is a representative sample of the debate.

I chose these four media because they represent different political camps and also project the current division between the government and the opposition. The newspaper Le Figaro and the weekly Le Point are traditionally regarded as conservative and therefore representing the government in power. On the other hand, the daily Libération and weekly Le Nouvel Observateur have leftist leanings and hence represent the socialist opposition.

I have examined the editorials, analyses, letters' pages and special interviews in these publications, aiming to determine the opinions and political orientations of the media covered. I also compared the coverage of the burqa ban in order to highlight the similarities and differences between the different media. One important aspect was also to examine whose stands got through to the columns and whose voices were heard in the media coverage about the debate on the burqa ban. How did the media represent Muslim women who wear a burqa, and how was their choice to wear it

interpreted? Was the burqa, like the Muslim veil earlier, considered a statement against "*la laïcité*" in France?
Besides the media coverage, I also consulted secondary sources, such as the literature and articles, which shed some additional light on the problem studied.

One aspect related to the backdrop of the study was the very fact that, in the post-9/11 world, the media narrative about Islam changed. Terrorism and Islamic extremism have created a negative image of the whole religion. In such an atmosphere, Islam is stigmatised and, in the narrative of the media, a burqa is seen not only as a symbol of Islam but also as a symbol of intolerance, oppression, and even fundamentalism and terrorism.

1.1. The Burqa vs. Republican values

The total size of the Muslim population is increasing all over the Europe. That is one of the reasons why the debate on religions is focused on Islam. The whole debate can be interpreted as a means of trying to find new ways for European countries to define the relationship between the state and the religion – or at least the relationship between the state and Islam.

In France, on the 26th January 2010, the parliamentary committee proposed banning the wearing of the burqa in public places, such as in the social services, hospitals or post offices. Also, a complete, general ban was discussed. The proposition to ban the burqa in public places in France is mostly connected to the republican values in France. The burqa is considered to conflict with these values. This is the official explanation presented by the president, Nicolas Sarkozy.

The latest debate on the burqa ban has direct historical links with previous debates in France. Since the 1980s, there have been similar debates about Muslim veils. In 2004, the French National Assembly adopted the so-called "veil law", which forbids the wearing of ostensible symbols of faith in public schools. The ban included the Muslim veil as well as the Jewish kippa and large Christian crosses.

The argumentation against the wearing of veils in public places has a similar logic today – the burqa should be banned because its use violates the idea of the secularism, "*la laïcité*".

1.2. The daily politics behind the debate

Parallel to the burqa debate, Sarkozy's government has tried to continue talking about the French identity. In autumn 2009, Sarkozy launched an official debate in order to update the concept. This debate has certain links with the debate about the burqa ban and the position of Islam in French society.

These debates have been combined and, from the government's point of view, it was meant to be so. The political purpose of this was to attract the supporters of the Front National (FN) party and catch the votes from the far right. The FN has, for years, been actively promoting the idea of national identity and has also spoken out about the threat of Islam. For many observers, the FN has so far monopolised the whole topic of national identity, so interventions into the topic by other political forces have been rare.

One may question if the burqa ban is ultimately merely a political move and whether it is motivated by the daily political struggle.

1.3. Outline of the study

The debate surrounding the burqa ban has been ongoing since summer 2009, but I will concentrate on the period around the parliamentary committee's proposition.
In my study, I would like to point out that the discussion about secularism, *la laïcité*, and republican values in this context could be regarded also as a trick to legitimate the criticism or even hostile attitudes towards Islam. I would like to analyse if Islam is still seen as "alien" or "other".

Thus, I would like to ask if the post-911 media narrative has strengthened the stereotypical image of Islam and whether journalists continuously reproduce it. Is Islam seen as a problem? Do the media describe it only as a problem? When Islam and its practices face civil society, does the media represent this as a conflict?

In chapter 2, I will concentrate on explaining the idea of French secularism, *la laïcité*, and its history. In the same section, I will explain how republican values are connected to the idea of secularism.

In chapter 3, I will provide a short history of the debate about the Muslim veil.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the basic research of the media and on comparing the different positions expressed in the said media. I will also explain the political context of the debate.

The last chapter provides the conclusion and answers the questions: is the debate over the burqa just about the burqa or are there other, more or less, hidden agendas underlying it? What kind of stereotypes of Islam can one detect in the editorials and analyses?

2. COMPLEX REPUBLICAN VALUES

Because the main motivation to legitimate the ban is explained by French republican values, in this chapter I would like to outline the history of these values. In French society, there is a certain ongoing process to update Republican values, mainly because France is not the same as it was over 200 years ago, when the French Revolution defined Republican values.

2.1. Liberté, egalité, fraternité

The French Revolution in 1789 created Republican France. The ideals of freedom and individualism, the enlightenment and equal rights were the cornerstones of its values. The slogan was *"Liberté, egalité, fraternité"*. The idea of universalism was the key to the philosophy – individual rights were regarded as universal – and France, with this republican model, became a model for the rest of the world. Since then, France has eagerly played the role of the partisan and "trendsetter" for real republicanism.

After the revolution, the ideal was that a person inside the French borders was firstly a French citizen and, after that, came the ethnic divisions. National unity, *la France une et indivisible*, is a crucial ideal in the French identity. In his article, *Citizenship, Republicanism and Multiculturalism in Contemporary France*, Jeremy Jennings notes that "behind this lay a sense of the fragility of social consensus and the fear that all particularisms - Breton, Corsican, Occitan or whatever – posed a threat to national unity" (Jennings 2000, 578).

Jeremy Jennings quotes Dominique Schnapper, whose argument runs like this: "National identity is not a biological but a political fact: one is French through the practice of a language, through the learning of a culture, through the wish to participate in an economic and political life" (Jennings 2000, 577).

When the French republican ideals were first launched, the French population was homogenous, white and mostly Catholic and agrarian. Since then, immigration has changed the population and communities and large parts of the population live now in an urban environment. c Europe's largest immigrant society now lives in France. Jeremy Jennings points out: "in short, despite an astonishing level of cultural and ethnic diversity, France has seen itself as and has sought to become a mono-cultural society" (Jennings 2000, 575).

2.2. Multiculturalism and the pressure from the political far right

The multicultural dimensions of society and immigration have been largely used in the political struggle in France. The French far right parties, especially the Front National (FN), have raised these issues on the political agenda since the 1980s. In FN's populist rhetoric, these issues have been linked to unemployment and security problems. The mono-cultural ideal has been at the core of the FN's manifestos for decades. For them, "la France" is immortal and mono-cultural.

In FN's ideology, as well as multiculturalism, Islam is also seen as a threat to French society. For the far right, Islam is "alien" and something that cannot and should not be integrated into French society. Also, Islam is linked to security problems, because it is identified with extremism and terrorist groups. So, Islam, immigration and multiculturalism are demonized as major threats to the national identity and as having their own interpretation of republican values.

As I pointed out earlier, FN has monopolised in the public debate the issue of national identity. You could also argue that FN has "orchestrated" the debate surrounding immigration, Islam and multiculturalism. They have opened the debate, framed it and given direction to it. The debate has, in a way, been a prisoner of the far right ideologies. The others have followed the given paths and they have only reacted to the given impulses.

Therefore, today, there is also a lot of talk about immigration, Islam and multiculturalism and how these things affect the whole idea of Republican values. These changes have caused the debate surrounding Republican values during the last few decades. Are those values any longer compatible in this new world and how should republicanism be renovated?

2.3. A new interpretation of universalism

Jeremy Jennings again quotes Dominique Schnapper and her idea that the key to the renovation of republicanism can be found in the interpretation of universalism. It should not be interpreted inside the specific historic time. "The universal cannot be identified with any concrete historical reality; it is a principle, an horizon, a regulatory idea", writes Schnapper, who explains further, "the error of the false universalism of the nineteenth century was precisely that it did identify itself with a particular historical reality: Western society" (Jennings 2000, 591).

You could say, simplifying Schnapper's idea, that the universal (and the Republic) is an aspiration that the citizen seeks to attain. She explains that this aspiration is a form of *ouverture potentielle*, wherein "the citizen breaks with the 'given', achieves distance from a 'historical destiny' but does not deny it". In a way, the question is: is there a need to choose between the universal and plurality? Schnapper answers:

"We must refuse the general, the unique, the global; we must choose the particular, and therefore plurality; but by inscribing in within a reference to the universal which in the very condition of its existence and of the possibility of dialogue with others, as well as of the fundamental recognition that the dignity of others, of all others, is equal to my own".

Jennings crystallizes that "the Republic can no longer be built upon the 'utopia' of an 'abstract humanity'" (Jennings 2000, 592).

As I have pointed out, the pressure to rethink the content of republican values arises, on the one hand, from the far right ideologies and from the need to reinterpret the whole fundament of those ideals, on the other. “The utopia of an abstract humanity” has really been a target of the far right and, in their simplistic argumentation, this “utopia” is seen as impossible, dangerous, unacceptable and against the very idea of ‘*la France une et indivisible’*.

2.4. The plurality of ways of being French

The need to redefine republican values is taken seriously also by France officially. Several official reports (Rapport de la Commission de la nationalité, 1988; Reports of ‘Haut Conseil à l’intégration’, 1995 and 1997) have been written under the above mentioned pressures. The focus of these reports has been on immigration and Islam. The key questions in these “guides” have been about how Islam should be treated and what efforts should be made by the state to assist its organisations.

The basic message in these reports is clear: French universalism cannot acknowledge the rights of minorities or accept the claims of communal particularisms. Only individuals exist in the eyes of the Republic.

In the 1997 report, it was written in this way: “It is each man and each woman that is granted full rights in order to allow him or her individually to take place in French society”. In other words, immigrants should be in accord with “la laïcité” - it is individuals that integrate and immigrants must respect French law. One crucial point is also that immigrants and the French must be treated equally. “Equally” in this context means that there should not develop the sentiment that immigrants are better treated than their French neighbours.

This has been the new climate of thinking which has framed the debate surrounding multiculturalism and republican values. The French thinker, Joël Roman, wants to invent ‘a middle path’ grounded upon ‘a relative pluralism, a plural universalism’ (Jennings 2000, 592). Roman suggests that the French must cease to give an ‘aura’ of

universality to all of their national particularities (cuisine, fashion, politics, philosophy) and start to 'recognize the diversity of society and of the groups which compose it'. Roman talks about a move from a 'democracy of emancipation' to a 'democracy of recognition'.

Roman clarifies his idea and talks about the need to invent a plurality of ways of being French. "French society is not on the point of disintegration but it is diverse. What threatens it is the refusal to accord a place to these differences, its forced homogenization." One could ask if there is a link between the idea of forced homogenization and the idea of banning the burqa in public places or in general?

2.5. La laïcité - the French version of secularism

The French idea of secularism, *la laïcité*, has also a long tradition and is linked with the history of republican values. *La laïcité* is a crucial part of those values. Shortly after the French Revolution, clashes between the Roman Catholic church and the state started strongly to affect the relationship between those two powers. The republican side wanted a total separation of religion from the state. Monarchists, in those days and even today, supported the Roman Catholic church and wanted Catholicism to be nominated as the state religion.

The driving force of secularist ideas was the ideology of the enlightenment and the principle of individual freedoms. The freedom of religion was seen as one aspect of the freedom of thought. Religion belongs to private life and therefore the state should not have any relationship with it. These two entities should be totally separate.

Jennings explains the rise of"la laïcité" to the level of a constitutional principle in this way: "this doctrine postulates the existence of a secular ethic, grounded in science and philosophy, that would act not only as a civil religion and social bond but also as the means of educating the free and tolerant citizens required by the new democratic order" (Jennings 2000, 578).

The principles of the French Revolution, *"Liberté, egalité and fraternité"*, stand beside the fourth pillar – *laïcité*. These principles can also be seen today in the official documents. Article 1 of the French constitution states: "*La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale*".

The idea of *la laïcité* does not mean that the state is atheistic. The state does not confess any religion, is not in favour of any religion and does not support them in any way. On the other hand, the core idea of *la laïcité* is – or at least should be – that all religions are equal. In the spirit of the enlightenment, the school was the place where the idea of *la laïcité* should be fully implemented.

Therefore, in the 1880s, the French parliament adopted the famous Jules Ferry laws, in which *la laïcité* was officially stated to be a basic principle of the school system. Actually, the law about the total separation of the state from religion emerged slightly later – in 1905.

Because the school has been the place where the principle of *la laïcité* was fully implemented and where it has been flourishing, the school has also been the place where the ideal has had its toughest clashes with real life. Michel Wieviorka reminds us about the new threats that school faces in modern France. Because of social and economic problems, urbanisation and immigration, wealthy parents choose to send their children to private school rather than state school. Many of these private schools are basically religious (Wieviorka 1995, 63).

Inequality has increased. Other children can study in good schools while others' destiny is to be preserved in the overcrowded state schools, where the social problems are enormous, including marginalisation and violence. "This evolution has made the idea of an equal school a denied myth", Wieviorka points out (1995, 63).

3. DEBATES SURROUNDING THE MUSLIM VEIL – A SHORT HISTORY

"What is in a woman's head is a lot more important than what's on it."

Sherifa Zuhur

As stated earlier, schools were the places where the ideal of *la laïcité* met reality. The Christian, mostly Catholic, heritage was strongly visible – the church was still in its place at the heart of the village and the fear of God was the backbone of spiritual thinking. Therefore, the presence of religion in schools was substantial.

3.1. 1989 – The Satanic Verses and the fatwa

French colonial history has given France the biggest Muslim minority in Europe. France has also the largest Jewish minority in Western Europe. The religious co-existence was quite smooth until the rise of the populist far right in the 1980s. The FN used immigration and Islam in its political campaigns and manifestations. The undertone was negative – immigration and Islam were linked to security problems and other social problems.

One could argue that FN hijacked the whole political debate surrounding these issues. The leader of the party, Jean-Marie le Pen, orchestrated the whole show with his exaggerated comments that were intentionally racist. Despite the fact that the socialist, François Mitterrand, stayed on in power between 1981 and 94, it is widely claimed that the 1980s were, in French politics, an era of "lepénisation", which means that the whole political climate and debate shifted substantially to the right. The phenomenon of Le Pen and his skilled rhetoric was part of it and the political pressure came also from FN's success in the elections (Deltombe 2005, 364).

1989 became a turning point in French thinking about *la laïcité* (Wieviorka 1995, 61). Ten years earlier, the regime in Iran changed as a result of the Islamic revolution, and Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. The general mood surrounding Islam changed and the highpoint was in spring 1989, when the Iranian religious leader, Ayatollah

Khomeini, pronounced a *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie. Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, was published in 1988 and, in Iran, was interpreted as insulting to Islam.

Iran was a religious state and was seen, more or less globally, as intolerant and an enemy of the freedom of speech. This incident created a totally new climate regarding Islam and the whole religion was interpreted through the Iranian interpretation of it. The idea of one, monolithic Islam became stronger and stronger and was adopted all over the Western world.

3.2. The headscarf as a religious symbol

Clothing as a symbol of faith was not really a big issue until 1989. In October 1989, three Muslim schoolgirls from the *Collège Gabriel-Havez* in Creil were expelled for wearing the *hijab* in class. So, their heads were covered with the Muslim headscarf, *le foulard islamique*, and they refused to remove it. Wearing such a scarf was seen as a religious expression that conflicts with the principle of *la laïcité*.

The debate surrounding *le foulard islamique* was incredible. One could generalise that the rare voices in favour of the right to wear the scarf came from the political left and, on the right side of the political spectrum, opinion was almost totally opposed to the scarf. "The public response was almost unanimously hostile, not to say at times hysterical", Jeremy Jennings summarises (Jennings 2000, 584).

"The wearing of the headscarf was seen not merely as a religious gesture but also as a symbol of male dominance, of the patriarchal character of the Muslim faith. As the school was a 'site of emancipation', it could not tolerate this 'symbol of feminine submission'." (Jennings 2000, 584)

The media interpreted the girls' choice to wear *le foulard islamique* unanimously, as simply an act of provocation. The problem was that the media, in general, failed to ask the girls themselves about their motivation in wearing the *foulard*. Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhavar undertook a series of in-depth interviews with

girls and found out that their reasons for wearing the *foulard* varied. Often, it was a way of mediating between two different cultures and also a form of protection against the *anomie* associated with modern society (Jennings 2000, 593).

Therefore, wearing the *foulard* was more an expression of identity than a sign of Islamic fundamentalism. Gaspard and Khosrokhavar pointed out that, "the wearing of the headscarf should not be interpreted as a rejection of French citizenship but as a desire for integration *without* assimilation".

In any case, wearing *le foulard islamique* at school hit hard at the heart of the whole ideal of *la laïcité*. The school was, for *la laïcité,* its place of birth, and the republican ideals of equality and freedom were seen as being disgraced by the 'symbol of feminine submission'. These same arguments have been on the agenda ever since.

The debate continued throughout the1990s and there were a few similar cases to that in Creil. Finally, in 2004, the French National Assembly adopted the so-called "veil law", which forbids the wearing of ostensible symbols of faith in public schools. The ban included the Muslim veil as well as the Jewish kippa and large Christian crosses.

4. DEBATES ON THE BURQA - VEILED PHOBIAS

"S'il y a une loi, je ne sors plus;
Mon voile, je ne l'enlève pas.
Avec cette loi, on va me mettre en prison."
Tesnim (Libération, 22.1.2010)

The debate on the burqa, *le voile intégral*, started on 17th June 2009, when the communist Member of Parliament, André Gerin, publicly demanded that there should be a parliamentary committee to tackle the issue. A few days later, President Nicolas Sarkozy pronounced his opinion, saying: "the burqa is not welcome to the territory of the Republic of France". The official process then began to find out how to ban the wearing of the burqa, at least in public places. There were also suggestions that there should be a general ban on the wearing of *le voile intégral.*

At the same time, there was a debate about French identity. These two ongoing discussions share a symbiotic relationship, feeding off one another. It should always be remembered that, at a rough estimate, there are some 1,900 Muslim women who wear the burqa among the 60-million strong French population. Therefore, it is fair to question whether this political operation and outcry is only about the burqa or whether there are other reasons underlying these debates. One key to understanding these debates is the long tradition of debating Islam by stigmatising the whole religion.

4.1. To see and be seen

In France, the debate surrounding the burqa is a direct continuation of the earlier debates on the Muslim veil. The debate on the burqa dates back to more or less the same time as the people in Switzerland voted in a referendum against minarets. Therefore, one could argue that, in Europe, there is a growing belief that symbols that are linked to Islam should be banned. Similar tendencies and debates to those in France exist also, for example, in Belgium and in the city of Barcelona in Spain.

In my study, I have concentrated on the latest wave of the debate (from 17th January to 10th February, 2010) in two newspapers, Libération and Le Figaro. I have also chosen three copies of two weeklies, Le Nouvel Observateur (17.12.2009 and 28.1.2010) and Le Point (21.1.2010). I also studied the editorials, analyses, special interviews and opinion pages, and one special edition of Libération (26.1.2010).

Le Figaro is traditionally in favour of conservative ideologies, as can be seen in this case also – Le Figaro‘s opinion was almost identical to that expressed by president Sarkozy. Le Point also has rightist leanings and it could be regarded in this case as a “pro-government weekly”. Libération and Le Nouvel Observateur have leftist leanings and one can find the socialist opposition’s voice in these media, so I have chosen them for my research. These aforementioned political engagements were clearly visible and this chapter aims to explain and analyse these findings.

Politically speaking, the debate on the burqa ban is not a classic “government against opposition” issue. For example, the communist Member of Parliament, André Gerin, was the head of the parliamentary committee to explore the possibility of banning the burqa. Interestingly, Sarkozy’s UMP-party gave the post of spokesperson for the burqa ban project to a well-known communist. This political trick certainly aimed to blur the political scene surrounding the case. The disputes between those who favour or oppose the burqa ban takes place within parties as well as between them. I will return later to the party political aspects of the burqa case.

The argumentation in favour of the burqa ban relies on the concept of French republican values. The burqa conflicts with those values and is therefore not welcomed in France, in line with president Sarkozy’s main message. In this argumentation, the burqa, *le voile intégral*, is seen as a problem of liberty. It is seen as a gender issue, highlighting that women do not have the same right as men to express themselves. Under the burqa, a woman loses her identity and her dignity. In this reasoning, the burqa is linked to an old-fashioned interpretation of Islam.

“The burqa is not a clothing, it is a shroud (*un linceul*) which signifies the negation of an identity and personality”, states André Gerin (Le Figaro, 21.1.2010). Le Figaro and

Le Point allot quite a lot space to this sort of argumentation. “Living in society is to be seen”, explains the psychoanalyst and philosopher, Jacques-Alain Miller, in an interview with Le Point (21.1.2010), and later goes further in his psychoanalysis, saying that “wearing a burqa is a symbolic murder of a human being, it signifies the castration of a person”.

Burqa, murder and castration in a same sentence certainly sound impressive. This same idea of a dead body under the burqa can be seen in Gerin’s comparison between a burqa and a shroud (*un linceul*). To connect a burqa with murder is a very strong mental image. How much stronger it is when the burqa is linked to Islam and, finally, Islam is linked to extremism and terrorism? You do not need to be a psychoanalyst to understand the power of such comparisons.

Le Figaro (8.2.2010) continued with this chosen path in its opinion pages and gave column space to Marie-Laetitia Bonavita. Her idea was that the existence of a human being comes true with his/her face. The idea of appearance is the face and that is how one is connected with other human beings. “The burqa is a collection of negations: negation of being subject or having a soul, negation of the body, negation of the face. The burqa denies the existence of these things.” Finally, Bonavita sees the burqa as a negation of humanity. The justification for her train of thought springs from various western pholosophers (Aristotle, Marx, Spinoza, Heidegger) and from God and the Bible. The key to this thinking is “the West”.

Le voile intégral and “Islamic dress code” are seen through western eyes and the interpretation is that a woman who wears a burqa is oppressed and under male dominance. It underlines that it is her husband’s choice when a woman wears *le voile intégral* and there is no other possibility to understand it. In this simple, or even biased, interpretation, the woman is not a subject and she has not made any choice. Le Figaro made exactly this kind of interpretation. Actually, in Le Figaro, there was not a single story in which the voice of Muslim women could be heard.

Le Point and Libération gave space to Muslim women to express their motives in wearing *le voile intégral*. This gives a slightly different image of the case. Muslim women from France seem to have various reasons for wearing the burqa. Some of

them are related to religion, while other women explain the dress code as the cultural heritage from their ancestors' homelands. Of course, other women simply do not want to be looked at by men.

The French media did not discuss at all the fact that wearing *le voile integral* is also a game in which you want to protect your identity from looks and glances. In this game, a woman wants to be voluntarily invisible to a world that tries to force you to be more and more visible. She is brave enough to cover and hide herself. This aspect does not fit into the image of women under oppression and male dominance, and is incompatible with the official explanation of Muslims as a group.

As mentioned earlier, Le Point gave space for Muslim women to explain their motives in wearing the burqa but, on the other hand, the weekly showed clearly how to read these tales. In the caption to the main story, Le Point asks: "Who are these women who disappear under religious dress?" Le Point interprets that these women have disappeared; there is no free will behind their choice to wear *le voile integral* and certainly it has nothing to do with the idea of hiding and protecting.

Yamina Benzarba states in Libération (22.1.2010) that "*le voile intégral* is for *les Maghrébines* partly spiritual evolution and partly cultural issue. My mother and mothers before her in Morocco have dressed like this…Personally I understand those who are against *le voile intégral* and those who are in favour of it…I don't wear it in relation to male looking but in relation to God".

Yamina Benzarba's statement shows us all of the main stereotypical attitudes about Islam and wearing the burqa. It shows that there certainly are various reasons for wearing *le voile intégral*, and it cannot be interpreted plainly by religious explanations. Secondly, it demonstrates how Muslims are seen as a monolithic group rather than individuals. Thirdly, it drills deep into the core of *la laïcité* – religion is a very personal thing, like your relationship to God. If your clothing in this sense demonstrates your personal relationship to God, how could it be banned in the name of *la laïcité*?

The idea of freedom inside body-covering clothing can be found in a marvellous book *"The Veil"*, edited by Jennifer Heath. Women from all over the world relate in the book their own thoughts about the *burqa, chador, jilbab, safsari, haik* and *dupatta*. As it has many names, being under it also veils different kinds of feelings. Mohja Kahf writes:

> *"In this little mobile sanctum, my body is free. My limbs swing loose; each leg is not stuffed sausagelike into a pant leg. Nothing cinches my waist. Nothing holds my belly in. Nothing demands that I conform to a certain shape or size. It is supple as a living membrane and offers a depth of layered meanings…*
> *…Sometimes I love to cast it off, layer after layer, like a revelation of my heart. And sometimes I love to draw it around me and gather its folds like insights. The play of veiling and unveiling, neither is possible without the other. How blessed is each to each!"*

4.2. Threat and Fear

"On me regarde comme si j'étais un monstre.
J'ai été argessée, insultée,
on s'en prend aussi à mes filles."
Siham (Le Point, 21.1.2010)

As noted earlier, there are less than 2,000 women who wear *le voile intégral* in France. Nobody can give an exact figure because it has not been counted. It is the same for the total number of Muslims – at a rough estimate, there are 5-6 million Muslims in France. For the official and secular France, there are only individuals and none are registered by his or her religion. That is the way in which *la laïcité* works. Nevertheless, for the media in France and elsewhere too, Muslims are seen as a monolithic group of people, not as individuals and, when talking about Islam in France, the group wearing the burqa represents the whole religion and they are interpreted as a threat.

"There is a sort of sharia law in certain neighbourhoods. And there *le voile intégral* is just a peak of an iceberg of fundamentalism." This is a quotation from André Gerin (Le Figaro, 21.1.2010). Again, we find rough stigmatisation and generalisation in one sentence. The message here is that people who wear the burqa are fundamentalists and actually they are only the visible part of fundamentalism and Muslim extremism. Women who wear the burqa represent the whole religion and all Muslims are fundamentalists.

Libération gives a totally different view of the situation. "A few hundred burqas became a national phenomenon and small bunch of fundamentalists takes place of spokespersons of Islam. The referendum of Swiss minarets resounds all over the Europe…The proportion of believers among Muslims in France is a minority; the faith itself is peaceful and it does not create any troubles for the public order…France has not been a scene for any attack by islamists for 15 years – not from outside France nor inside France." (Editor-in-chief Laurent Joffrin, Libération, 26.1.2010)

The stigmatization of Islam has a long tradition in France and, of course, elsewhere. The mechanism in the media has been as follows: it marginalises Islam as a minority and Islam is ignored or becomes invisible, and when Islam is represented in the media, in public, "the representation in often construed in negative discourses" (Saeed 2007). Amir Saeed quotes Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband, who studied racism in Britain in the 1970s:

> *"… the perspective that coloured people are presented as ordinary members of society has become increasingly overshadowed by a news perspective in which they are presented as a problem"* (*Racism and the Mass Media*, 1974).

This same pattern was seen at the same time in France, where immigration from the former colonies, North and West Africa, was an increasing phenomenon. Immigrants lived in their own suburbs and their education and language ability was often poor. That caused marginalisation and social problems and finally a vicious circle whereby everything that was linked to immigrants was regarded as negative.

Immigrants were seen as "others" and "aliens", and their assimilation into French society was categorised as a mission impossible. Another dimension was that most immigrants were Muslims and that created another narrative for the media. Immigrants were seen as a mass, and the unifying factor was Islam. The media explained that religion is the basic reason for social problems. Social problems had a new explanation from the cultural basis and socio-economic reasons were put aside. This negative circle stigmatized Islam and the religion as such was seen as a problem.

During the last few decades of the 20th century, the French media were full of stories from suburbs with a bad reputation. In almost all of these stories, religion was clearly visible. Laurent Joffrin writes: "Let's be honest: our ghettos have nothing to do with religion, but they have much to do with the classes in French society" (Libération, 26.1.2010).

Joffrin's claim has been partly understood in other French media too. One could say that, during this current debate, the burqa is not seen as a part of the problem linked to suburbs, but this time the burqa – as a problem – represents the religion. It could be crystallised that, during recent decades, fears, phobias and stereotypes have turned straight towards Islam itself.

"The media tend to ignore religion unless it becomes problematic and/or religious individuals/groups behave in a disruptive fashion", state Leen d'Haenens and Jan Bosman in their article "Media and Religion" (2010, p. 457). D'Haenens and Bosman have studied the Dutch media and its reporting of Islam. A similar analysis can be performed all over the Western world.

D'Haenens and Bosman (p. 460) quote P.S. Van Koningsveld: "The media often portray Muslims as fanatics, as irrational, primitive, militant and dangerous people…the portrayal of Islam is too simplistic and too unsympathetic; Muslim groups are presented as the source of intractable problems and are often stigmatized; society is split into the categories of *us* and *them*".

The Palestinian philosopher, Edward Said's, idea of "*Orientalism*" rises just from this categorisation: "it is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are

essentially covered, discussed, apprehended, either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists". The above mentioned André Gerin's comments about sharia law and fundamentalism (Le Figaro, 21.1.2010) demonstrate openly this "Orientalist" conception and he is certainly not alone in his views.

Another famous quotation of Said is surely appropriate here:

> *"In newsreels or newsphotos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures represent rage and misery, or irrational gestures. Lurking behind this is the menace of jihad. Consequence: a fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world"*.

Edward Said wrote the quotation above over 30 years ago and it is still valid today. The media continuously build the narrative of Muslims and Arabs by expressing them as masses, and the context for this narrative arises always from problems. In this narrative, Islam is seen as one and homogenous – there are no variations between Muslims from different countries, backgrounds and histories.

The debate surrounding the burqa in the studied French media shows that there is a strong presumption that such an entity as the Muslim community exists and that Islam can be seen as a united phenomenon. For example, Le Point (21.1.2010) asks in the caption to its main story: "What does Islam say about the burqa?" The presumption here is that there is one Islam and that it is possible to find one solution to "the challenge to the burqa", as Le Point describes the hysteria surrounding the burqa ban.

One could ask, with good reason, why no one ever talks about the Catholic community. Why are Catholics more individual than Muslims? Why do the media never refer to Catholics as a mass? Actually, only Laurent Joffrin in Libération (26.1.2010) pays attention to such a generalisation of the Muslim community. "There is no such thing as the Muslim community. The republican and anti-communitarian model functions well, much better than is assumed. There is no Muslim vote that could be identified."

4.3. The new narrative after 9/11

> "*Ce qui les dérange, c'est que l'Islam tel que nous pratiquons est trop visible.*
> *On fait peur car nous revendiquons haut et fort le droit de pratiquer notre religion.*"
>
> **Sandra** (Le Point, 21.1.2010)

As I pointed out earlier, Islam is nowadays seen in the French media as the core of problem and posing a threat to French society. The above-mentioned historical development is one reason behind this growing mistrust of Islam. Secondly, much has hanged after 9/11 and during the so-called "war on terror". The strong suspicion of Islam is now even stronger, and has created a new narrative for the French media as well as the media throughout the Western world.

The impact of the terror attacks on 9th September 2001 has been enormous. Attacks against the Western way of living were immediately used as a cause for deepening the division between "*us*" and "*them*". Terrorists began to represent Islam in the Western media. It was an easy answer for journalists all over the world to "explain" what had happened. The most famous question in those days was: "Why do they hate *us*?"

The new narrative brought a new dawn to Samuel Huntington's "*Clash of Civilisations*". Huntington's idea of cultures competing against each other spread like wildfire. Again, Islam was seen as a monolithic religion and homogenous culture. It was represented as medieval, suspicious and a threat to the Western world. The only predictable thing about Islam was that it wanted to expand, and to do so violently. In the simple dichotomy of the West/the Rest, Islam took the leading role of the Rest.

As is well known, the French government had its own doubts about the so-called "war on terror". Frankly speaking, this line of thinking can be seen in the government's policy during the debate on the burqa. Laurent Joffrin (Libération, 26.1.2010) recognises the government's goodwill: "The myth of Islam as conqueror can't be identified in the reality of Muslims in France or in the government's policy during the

debate". The sentiments among people are a completely different thing and, in the process of formulating the so-called public opinion, the media play a decisive role. The burqa wearing women, for example, are often associated with terrorism. What does this mean then? The simple answer could be that, under such a costume, the women really carry guns and bombs. The French media studied in this paper did not directly shoot down that absurd idea.

In the recent past, when talking about Islam, the most salient example of the manipulation of public opinion has certainly been the article in *National Review* on 3rd December 2001, just after 9/11. In that story, George Bush was presented as a medieval crusader and the article was headlined: "*Martyred: Muslim Murder and Mayhem against Christians*". The article's 'Huntingtonian' message was the following: "The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power".

The composition "*us*" and "*them*" slides easily into an even more dangerous position in the contemporary political rhetoric. The principle "*You are either with us, or against us*" was widely used after 9/11 and has become a sort of a motto in the so-called "war on terror". This pattern of stigmatisation, humiliation and victimisation is clearly visible also in the French debate about Islam generally and about the burqa ban particularly.

"Humiliation" was the headline in the editorial of Laurent Joffrin (Libération 27.1.2010) the day after the parliamentary committee released the report about the burqa ban. The fear of public humiliation and victimisation of all Muslims has been present during the whole process of banning the burqa. At the time when the committee officially launched the report, this aspect was, surprisingly, covered quite timidly.

On the same page as Joffrin's editorial, the sociologist, Vincent Geisser, was interviewed and he warned: "the law banning burqa creates martyrs". Geisser points out: "there is a risk that the law strengthens the development in which the fractures within the Muslim identities and communities reinforce" (Libération, 27.1.2010). A

further aspect is that some extremist movements are content to have a reason to manifest their martyrdom.

Since 9/11, Western Europe has feared terrorist attacks happening on its soil. From this point of view, the attacks in Britain on the 7th of July 2005 were crucial. The suicide bombers were British citizens and the threat of terror drew nearer than ever before. In European countries, like France and Britain, which have a notable Muslim minority, the idea of security has strengthened. The Muslim communities are being monitored and that has created a lot of tension between them and the authorities. Many Muslims feel humiliated by this.

In France, the whole issue of Muslim communities, immigration and Islam has, for years, been partly a question of security. Politically speaking, FN and its leader Jean-Marie Le Pen linked these themes to security in the 1980s, when the suburbs' social problems started to culminate in marginalisation and violence. That was politically successful and the populist leader, Le Pen, achieved some victories in the elections. FN emerged on the political scene and started to set the agenda and frame the debate. FN shouted loudly its anti-immigration, anti-Islam and openly discriminative message – and people, as well as the other parties, started to listen. The old parties ruled the country and FN dominated the debate.

Shortly afterwards, Jacques Chirac, having been elected to government, appointed Nicolas Sarkozy to the post of Home Secretary. Sarkozy was ambitious and wanted to see results. His statements and politics were noticeably influenced by FN's ideas. Some French people were fascinated by Le Pen's populist rhetoric and Sarkozy wanted to struggle for these souls and their votes. Sarkozy continues his politics now as a President with the same ambition, and his projects are still leaning a lot towards FN's populism.

Laurent Joffrin (Libération, 26.1.2010) writes about this tendency, saying that Sarkozy's right wing government no longer holds onto the diversity of French society. Actually "it presents Islam as if it were a strange part of the nation and that connects Sarkozy's government to the principles of the FN".

4.4. National identity – the excellence of the past

"*Avec le niqab, c'est impossible de trouver*
du boulot aillers qu'au sein de la communauté."
Nadia (Le Point, 21.1.2010)

In parallel with the debate on the burqa in France, there is an ongoing debate about national identity. The government is also behind this debate. The background to this though is naturally the fact that France is now much more multicultural than it used to be in the past. Another reason for the consideration is the pressure from the political far right and especially from FN. There is a certain need also to provide another way to approach the issue than the populist one but, as noted earlier, FN has defined the angles from which to approach these themes.

Laurent Joffrin (Libération, 27.1.2010) defines the debate as a form of "paranoid national identity", whereby a woman wearing a burqa is seen as "an *accused* rather than a *victim*". Here again, the categorisations unveil the presumptions behind the thinking. Women are either accused or victims. They are objects rather than subjects of their free will.

Because the sentiments among the Muslim population are tense for the various reasons mentioned above, they certainly look and listen to the confused debate over the burqa and national identity. The fear of being marginalised is evident. "I feel that the France that I love has betrayed me. Thanks to France, I am now a free woman, but now France wants to chain me because it doesn't accept my choices", says Siham in an interview with Le Point (21.1.2010).

The most crucial point here is that FN has, in recent decades, been the moving force when dealing with the definition of the nation and national identity. Michel Wieviorka points out that "the globalisation of the economy, the culture becoming more and more international- under American hegemony – and the construction of the Europe

have weakened the idea of the nation as open space and – on the contrary – nationalism has strengthened" (Wieviorka 1995, 68).

Wieviorka looks sadly at the development and finds that the idea of nation has now "gloomy (*sombre*), nationalist, racist and xenophobe face, which is a result of a strong presence of the FN in the political scene". Wieviorka notes that we live now in an era of cultural fragmentation that develops particular identities to be recognised in the public space. That causes confusion and complexity over national identity (Wieviorka 1995, 68).

The French author, Abdelwahab Meddeb, crystallises his idea of himself as follows: "I am both Tunisian and French, Arab and Latin, European post-Muslim and I am contemporary with my post-Christian and post-Jew fellow citizens" (Libération, 26.1.2010). This clearly points out that the old-fashioned mono-cultural ideal of France as being "*une et indivisible*" is past and it is impossible to restore it to the old excellence.

The French republican values have the universal ideal and Dominique Schnapper doubts the possibility of placing the "*universal*" into any specific "*time*". With the debate about the burqa, religion and the national identity, there are certain tendencies to place it in the time when the Republic was created, when France was mono-cultural and Christian. The reality of today is totally different.

Yet, as two researchers, Rachid Benzine and Patrick Haenni, underline in their analysis in Libération (26.1.2010), Nicolas Sarkozy himself has strongly demanded that Muslims should respect the Christian heritage of France. Sarkozy came out with this statement when Europe was confused by the Swiss referendum on minarets. "Sarkozy placed Islam at the centre of the debate about national identity." Benzine and Haenni summarise that, in these debates, the burqa represents oppression and the minaret represents domination (Libération, 26.1.2010).

As becomes clear, the agony of adjusting the republican values to the new world with a multicultural population is prominent. Politically, this is problematic because FN has been successful in many elections. Jean-Marie Le Pen's simplistic message has

been efficient and FN has gained support from the communists, socialists and the moderate right. These parties have adopted the same themes as FN and mostly with the same vocabulary, just to win back lost voters. During the debate on the burqa, these political divisions can be seen inside all of the political parties and each of them had their own camps both for and against the burqa ban.

Sad to say, intellectually, the debate is in the same position as it was in the 1980s, when FN monopolised the themes like national identity, immigration and Islam, defining them by the ideal of mono-culturalism. Farhad Khosrokhavar claims: "republicanism becomes more and more intransigent and monolithic to the extent that its capacity to secure adherence weakens. Republican "mono-culturalism" has to be abandoned and to be replaced by a "new republican compromise", a *républicanisme élargi*".

The fanatical idea of mono-cultural France has certainly straight links to racism. This ideology has distanced itself from the crudest notions of biological inferiority and replaced them with cultural definitions. In this ideology, for example, Islam as a religion and as a "*culture*" is other and alien and therefore it is undesirable that it will be assimilated into French society. French society is seen as a unified cultural community – ethnically pure, homogenous – and white.

"*I believe that the fanatics of cultural identity, those who raise collective difference to the level of an absolute, do not proceed differently from racists, even if to be accurate the determinism within which they enclose individuals is not genetic but rather historical or traditional."*

This quotation by the French philosopher, Alain Finkelkraut (Jennings 2000, 587), is sharp and true, and expresses the core of the so-called "new racism". The definition of islamophobia is widely used in this connection in terms of Islam. In this case, racism or discrimination are more accurate definitions just because "*islamophobia*" sees Islam as a special case and it presumes that there is one, monolithic Islam.

4.5. Who has a voice?

> *"C'est vrai qu'on a le droit de porter l'habit qu'on veut, mais c'est vrai aussi qu'il y a une montée extrême des femmes qui le portent de force*."
>
> **Yamina Benzarba**
>
> (Liberation, 22.1.2010)

Jean Daniel writes in his editorial (Le Nouvel Observateur, 28.1.2010) that the representatives of different religious groups (Catholics, Protestants and Muslims) have been silent or have made relatively neutral comments about the burqa debate. The French media have, in general, tried to underline that this is not a question about religion. In this sense, Le Figaro is the exception.

Le Figaro (4.2.2010) published an interview with William Goldnadel, a famous pro-Israeli advocate. In the interview, Goldnadel said: "I am not scared to say, that France is historically built on its Jewish-Christian culture and especially on its churches. And is there a place for talk about compatibility between Islamic fundamentalism and the Republic? I am not an Islamophobe. I believe in the notion of moderate Islam that incarnates finely in Soufism. Unfortunately, intellectual terrorism suspects all critics of that religion of racism. In this way, banning the burqa is seen as a stigmatisation of Islam".

This quotation clearly expresses Le Figaro's stand in terms of the government's policy. It has defended it unconditionally and, during the period studied, the journal did not publish any critical voices against the burqa ban. Le Figaro has provided an opportunity to express oneself only to hard-line burqa ban supporters, like André Gerin and Goldnadel. Furthermore, during the period studied, Le Figaro did not give any column space at all to Muslims or their representatives. The Muslim voice was totally denied.

The most controversial comments, as those mentioned above, could not be found in Le Figaro's editorials, and therefore one can say that those opinions were not "the

official stance" of Le Figaro. These comments were in interviews and on the opinion pages in order to distance the media from this material. Richardson argues rightly that: "Newspapers frequently use letters' pages to include but rhetorically distance themselves from racist or controversial comment" (Richardson 2009, 374).

It should be remembered that the debate on the burqa started to intensify in June 2009. Since then, there has been a lot written about the issue and every type of media has had its own rhythm in raising the question on its pages. During the period studied, there was, however, a certain tiredness regarding the issue and that was clearly and explicitly seen in Le Figaro in particular.

One further political aspect is that, during the period for which I examined the newspaper coverage, France was preparing itself for the regional elections held in March 2010. That was certainly the reason why Libération, as the voice of the socialist opposition, wanted to show its active stance on the burqa case. It was, for them, an issue to differ themselves from the government's official burqa policy. Libération gave space to various critical voices concerning the burqa ban. It also interviewed Muslim women and gave them the opportunity to express themselves and clarify their motives in wearing *le voile intégral*.

Libération was also the only media, during the period examined, that paid attention to the practical problems that the burqa ban could cause for Muslim women. "Today I can go everywhere wearing my burqa. I take my children everywhere. It would cause huge problems for me if they say that I am forced to stay at home. What do I do with my children?" This comment by Tesnim can be found in Libération (22.1.2010). Finally, none of the other studied media paid any attention to this issue of the basic right to move. This individual right was not seen as a Republican value in the other media.

Libération's opposition stances could be seen clearly in the stories and titles of the editorials and analysis. The burqa ban was seen as a "Humiliation"; Islam was considered "One component of the Republic" and "Muslims do not want to apply the sharia law in France". One headline showed clearly that, also for socialists, the question of national identity is delicate. The title, "L'islam, une religion française",

gives a free hand for a reader to define independently how Islam is French. Is it possible to express your religion just as you like or should you adjust your way of being a Muslim into the old-fashioned and mono-cultural France - *la France une et indivisible*?

Concerning the weeklies, the debate on the burqa was, for them, an excellent opportunity to cover Islam and the Muslim community in greater detail. Le Point and Le Nouvel Observateur had quite similar approaches to the issue. They interviewed various Muslims to find out their sentiments about the burqa ban. The difference between the two weeklies was that Le Point (e.g. 21.1.2010) decided to interview only Muslim women while Le Nouvel Observateur's (e.g. 17.12.2009) idea was to draw "a modern picture" of the Muslim community by interviewing illustrative and also successful people from that community.

From Le Point's stories, the reader could find a quite genuine image of Muslim women and their fears about the burqa ban. Their everyday life was visible. Every story was a statement by an individual and the Muslim community was pushed more into the background. Le Nouvel Observateur's "modern Muslim society" was obviously well meaning in trying to focus on the positive dimensions of the Muslim community and show their success stories. Yet, the interviews with psychoanalysts, engineers, senators and business people gave the impression that these Muslims are the good ones, because they are compatible with the French community, and that community is defined in the old way, with the old ideal of a single, unified France.

Le Nouvel Observateur was the only media that connected the issues of Islam and the national identity to a broader and historic perspective of the French colonial past. "Let's be serious, Islam has been the second biggest religion in France since Algeria became a part of France in 1830", underlines the historian, Benjamin Stora, in an interview with Le Nouvel Observateur (17.12.2009). Stora reminds us that the presence of *Maghrébins*, who are Muslims, have continued for decades and now there are various generations that have been born and grown up in France. "These descendants of immigrants say now: It is over – we don't go back to anywhere. We are French".

5. CONCLUSION

It is often said that the media have an interest in religion only when it poses a problem. In the post-9/11 world, this could be clearly seen particularly with Islam. Islam as a religion and a culture has been commonly associated in the media with Islamic religious fundamentalism and terrorist groups. Threat, fear and violence have been connected to Islam in the post-9/11 media narrative. The French media debate on the burqa ban has been a straight continuation of this narrative. A one and monolithic interpretation of Islam was widely used, and it also created a rather negative image of Islam as an intolerant religion.

The media studied in this paper showed explicitly its political leanings. Le Figaro was completely in favour of Nicolas Sarkozy's government and its policy. Le Figaro took the government's principle that the burqa, *le voile intégral*, is against French Republican values as a given. Muslim women wearing the burqa were totally interpreted as being under male domination and oppression. Le Figaro did not interview Muslim women and ask about their own motivations for wearing the burqa.

Of all of the media studied, Libération, at the forefront, tried to give a much more detailed picture of Muslim women's motivation in wearing the *le voile intégral*. In Libération, Muslim women were seen more as individuals than plainly as representatives of a Muslim community. In this media coverage, Muslim women's everyday life was also highlighted. Libération clearly adopted an opposition voice and it supported strongly the same stance as socialists in general.

Yet, one should remember that the burqa ban is politically a question that divides the parties internally also. In this perspective, it was not at all surprising that the stands of the weeklies studied here (Le Nouvel Observateur and Le Point) were less politically motivated than journalistically considered. Le Point wanted Muslim women to give genuine statements about their lives. Le Nouvel Observateur showed its own conception of the ideal Muslim community and interviewed only Muslims who were successful, as the French bourgeois population "should be". This was a strong image

of the historically defined French society that has its background in the era following the French Revolution.

The French media examined here were also stuck with the debate about national identity. Islam and Muslims were very much regarded from that point of view. National identity was seen in an old-fashioned way and the multicultural reality of French society was denied. This definition of French national identity has strong links with FN's populist rhetoric. The debate about national identity is still a prisoner of the political moment when FN and its leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, monopolised the theme for their own use.

All in all, the debate on the burqa ban was surprisingly tired and there was a huge lack of innovative thinking. In the editorials, analysis and commentaries, the basic argument that the burqa conflicts with Republican values was not really questioned as such, nor thoroughly analysed. The media covered here did not widen this perspective to ask if there were some other oppressive practices in French women's lives in which their Republican rights might be threatened.

The Interior Ministry estimates that there are around 1,700 women who wear the burqa, while other estimations (e.g. Rue89 – internet site, see http://www.rue89.com) say that there are less than 400 burqa wearing women. The phenomenon is quite limited and, yet, has attracted enormous media coverage. It is fair to ask why the media is less interested in the over 160 women who die yearly at the hand of their husband or companion (see e.g. Rue89)? Is it not against French Republican values when tens of thousands of women are forced to live their everyday life under constant threat and amidst acts of sexual violence? The media studied here did not have the bravery to highlight such comparisons that could demonstrate Republican values in greater detail and give a new perspective to their interpretations.

Finally, while the burqa was interpreted as a cultural code to symbolise Islam and its culture, it also led the debate straight to the core of the religion. The idea of Islam as a monolithic religion was powerfully present. The burqa was interpreted as a symbol of oppression – and Islam was interpreted as an oppressive and dominant religion. These

arguments, connected to the post-9/11 media narrative, were the starting point of the whole debate and created the negative "aura" surrounding it.

Therefore, one could argue that the debate on the burqa was actually not about the burqa, but rather about the relationship between Islam and French society. French society is willing to draw new borders between the state and religion; in other words, it wants to update the idea of *la laïcité*. Basically, the old-fashioned ideal of a mono-cultural and homogenous France, with its Jewish-Christian heritage, is competing with the new idea of a multicultural France, where the largest Muslim minority in Western Europe resides.

On the other hand, the whole of Europe is defining its relationship with Islam in the post-9/11 world. In this process, the burqa, or minarets, are being used as weapons to show the otherness of Islam. Humiliating or stigmatising Muslim individuals or communities are not wise solutions. Doing so would just create martyrs.

For Muslim women, there are various reasons for wearing a burqa. In some cases, they are forced to wear it and, in other cases, they wear a burqa, jilbab, or chador to express their identity. The French media covered here did not discuss how wearing a burqa might also be a political manifestation and an act of resistance against the West. (Heath 2010, 319) In this sense, being covered by a burqa expresses an anti-Western sentiment, but not Muslim extremism. It is a game with a political message.

Related to this, in my view, Jennifer Heath goes straight to the key point in the epilogue to *"The Veil"*:

"Neither legislation nor bombing will "solve" veiling. The veil does not need to be solved. The energy that has been expended on veiling, unveiling, reveiling, or deveiling by non-Muslims and Muslims alike has by now become downright preposterous and dangerous. Considering the real problems facing women, ideological battles about the veil are tragic wastes of time…That millions are undereducated and unskilled and have no economic power. That millions are victims of HIV/AIDS and domestic violence. That millions die in childbirth (or their children do not live past the age of five). That millions are refugees. That millions are robbed and raped and held hostage by conflicts they did not invite and do not want".

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