

5-2017

An Investigation into the Socio-Political Dissonance between the French Government and the Islamic French Minority

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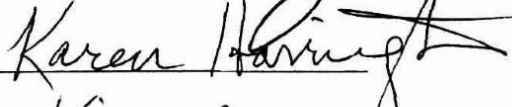
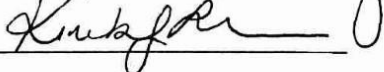
An Investigation into the Socio-Political Dissonance between the French Government and the
Islamic French Minority

Alexandria Exley

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Political Science, International Affairs, and Public Administration



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Abstract

The Islamic minority in France today is experiencing adversity as the government of France passed legislation stating that all facial coverings will be henceforth illegal, restricting or prohibiting religious symbols in various public spaces. Some Islamic women feel as though this is a pointed attack on women of the Muslim faith for their choice to wear traditional clothing which covers the face and body. There have been outcries that this is a human rights violation and restriction of religious rights. This project is an examination of the effects of France's "burqa ban" and restrictions on religious symbols on both Islamic men and women who live in France. The goal of this project is to speak directly to those affected by this legislation and to understand the perspective and opinions of French Muslims. Records such as documented personal testimonies, legal archives, and transcriptions of in-person interviews are utilized to study the perspective of this minority in response to the controversial legislation. Neglecting to pursue an understanding of another culture and belief system will only yield disharmony among groups, and this research aims to avoid this phenomenon. In collecting the data, I set a goal to have and later discuss a better understanding of this issue and the people affected by it.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mentor and committee chair, Dr. Michele Crumley, for her guidance and inspiration for the duration of this thesis project. Without her assistance, this research would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Karen Harrington and Dr. Kimberly Wilson. I deeply appreciate their input and willingness to help.

In addition, thank you to the leadership and encouragement of Dr. Joy Wachs and Dr. Karen Kornweibel of the Honors College at East Tennessee State University. They pushed me to do my best work and were always willing to offer assistance when I needed it.

Finally, I would like to thank East Tennessee State University's Department of Undergraduate Research and Dr. Richard Ignace for helping me realize this project with the Student-Faculty Collaborative Grant. I am both grateful and humbled that they saw potential in my research proposal, and I am pleased that I can now submit a completed thesis research project.

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I. Introduction

Introduction and Background

Considering current events, political climate, social pressures, as well as other such factors, one can attempt to empathize with the Islamic community in France today which has been experiencing what certain individuals might consider to be discrimination. In 2012 the French government passed legislation which officially banned full-facial covering garments, including traditional Islamic clothing such as the burqa and the niqab. Earlier legislation also outlines restrictions concerning what French politicians deem to be appropriate for government or public work attire as well as in certain education settings. The French consider the hijab, kippah, crucifix, and other such religious items as symbols which are not consistent with their officially secular state, meaning that attire such as those listed above are not appropriate for certain public places or positions of work. The issue at hand is multi-layered and rather complex. It touches on politics, culture, tradition, daily activities and many other elements of life in France.

While these pieces of legislation can affect any French citizen, those of the Muslim community in this state consider them to be specifically directed at them and their faith, traditions, and culture. The problem creates a rift within the French population and has sparked a debate about both the place of religion in their society as well as the general tolerance of faith. There is a balance between allowing a certain degree of religious elements to touch society and to protect people from the unwarranted exposure to organized religion and spirituality as well.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The question I am investigating is the following: do the females of the Islamic community of Calvados (Caen, Lower Normandy) consider the governmental limitations of religious clothing to be a restriction on their ability to practice their religion openly and freely in France? My goal is to investigate the difference between the opinions of the men and women in this community and their respective attitudes on this issue. Upon asking members of this community their beliefs and opinions, as well as reading related literature to the general Muslim community in France, I had set the goal of obtaining a better understanding of their position on this issue rather than relying solely on the testimonies of the Muslims who have already made their opinions known in the literature. In addition, this study provides insight into attitudes four years after the legislation was passed.

I expect to encounter strong opinions from this community about wanting to have the freedom to express their faith peacefully and without consequence. More specifically, I compared the responses of men and women to find out if it is truly the women who are speaking out against the legislation that allows them to wear modest clothing that originates with a religious purpose. My hypothesis is as follows: the Muslim women of this region as well as all across France are more vehemently questioning and fighting against French law which restricts or bans certain articles of clothing than their male counterparts.

Relevance of the Question

France has experienced attacks by people who claim to be of the Islamic faith, indiscriminately carrying out acts of violence against the innocent and unsuspecting civilians. In November of 2015 at six different locations across Paris, eight men killed at least 120 people and

injured 200 others branding themselves as militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Since then, France had remained in a state of emergency, and individuals of the same terrorist group continue to claim responsibility for various other attacks across the globe including one other in Western Europe.¹

These acts of violence ignited a movement in France “Je Suis Paris” (I am Paris) which united the French people and people around the world in solidarity against terrorism and violence. This subject, still a fresh wound, can be difficult for not only the French to discuss, but also for those of the Islamic faith in France. The peaceful followers of Islam are forced to watch those who claim to be devout Muslims carry out such heinous acts of violence when, in actuality, Islam does not advocate killing. Islam does not teach hate, murder, or harm to others. There is an integral difference between these two belief systems: the belief of spreading peace versus that of causing violence.

Resulting from these past events and the emotions which have followed, it can be difficult to approach Muslims in France on the subject of their beliefs. While preparing for these interviews, a professor at my French university advised me to make it abundantly clear to them that I am not French. It is the current political climate which generalizes about religious and ethnic minorities in France and around the world that makes it even more difficult for people in the majority to understand or empathize with Muslim culture and traditions. It can be a sensitive subject due to the political climate, misperceptions, and defensiveness of interviewees.

¹ Drozdiak, Steinhauser, Verbergt, "ISIS Claims Responsibility for Brussels Attacks; More Than 30 Dead," The Wall Street Journal, p 1.

These recent politically-oriented and violent acts of terrorism have only contributed to the issue of people misunderstanding the beliefs and values of the global Muslim community. The extremists and terrorists who claim to be soldiers of Islam are not a representation of the whole, but many people all over the world do not understand this differentiation. This state of misunderstanding touches many aspects of the lives of Muslims everywhere. Most commonly, when non-Muslims see an Islamic women wearing clothing of religious significance ranging from a hijab to a burqa, the adjective they might use to describe the situation might be “oppressive.”² With these interviews, I assess whether or not women independently choose to be completely covered rather than it being a situation of oppression on the part of the men. It was important to understand their reasoning behind the choice to wear modest clothing whether that be resulting from pressure from their male counterparts or personal convictions. I also used these interviews to assess the differences in opinions between the Islamic men and women in regards to the French governmental regulation of religious clothing.

It is crucial that people outside certain communities understand the lives and faiths of people within them so that the populations of the earth can coexist peacefully. Especially in today’s international political climate, uncertainty is unescapable.

² Hashim, "Reconciling Islam and Feminism," p 7.

II. Literature Review

A Clash of Civilizations or of Cultures?

The division is not just between the secular French population and the Muslims minority of France, there are those who do not belong to any religious faith and still support the sale of veils in clothing shops throughout France. *Le Canard Enchaîné*, a weekly French paper, published an article debating the place of veils in French culture and retail clothing shops. The article is titled “Bikini ou Burkini, le débat prêt-à-voiler” (“bikini or burkini, the debate ready to veil”). The title itself as well as the article is indicative of the mixture of French culture and various religious traditions. Typically the phrase is “prêt-à-porter” or “ready to wear,” but the title of this article implies that people are ready to incorporate veils into French clothing culture and slowly integrate the veil into daily French style.

Dolce and Gabbana, H&M, and Uniqlo all sell hijabs in their stores as well as other retail clothing stores.³ It is becoming more common to see veils and other traditionally religious garments being sold to the general public of France. In the midst of a heated debate concerning the place of such items in a secular society, the question of religious symbols and social integration of such items becomes relevant. If veils are banned in public school settings and other such spaces because they are seen as religious symbols, will this idea continue if veils slowly become a secular as well as religious part of fashion?

Laïcité: Secularism in France

The word in the French language which describes this phenomenon of complete secularity in the public sphere is “laïcité.” The word encompasses the idea that society is what

³ *Le Canard Enchaîné*, Bikini ou Burkini, p 8.

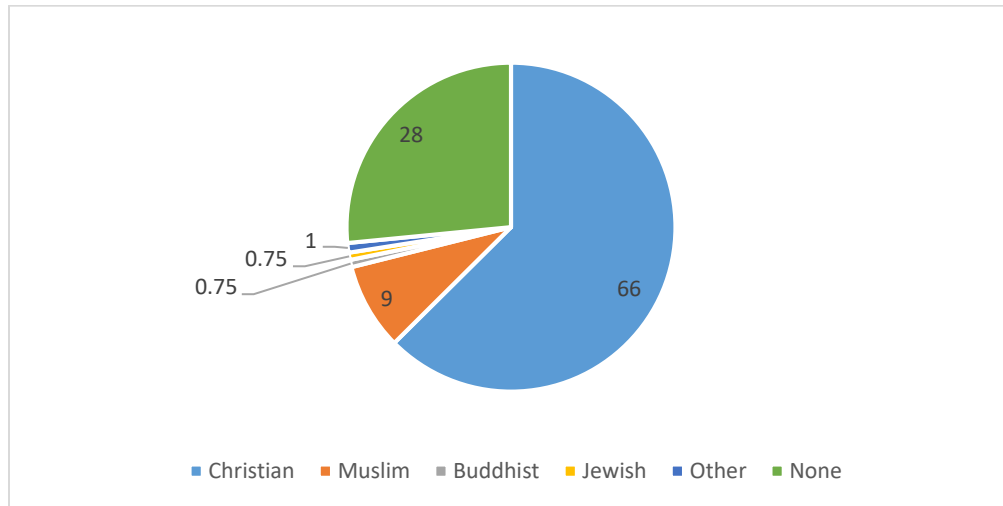
one might consider to be a “neutral zone.” Religion and faith have no place anywhere outside of the private sphere. While France has a unique approach to secularism, it is essentially meant to keep people free from unwarranted exposure to spiritual ideas and religious dogma. It is very important to those in French government and society that religion be kept out of law-making and public places.

According to Ahmet Kuru, a political science scholar, a state that is secular can be defined by two qualities: religious institutions cannot control the judicial or legal processes, and the state does not establish an official, nationally recognized religion, spirituality or belief system.⁴ To be considered truly secular, a state or government must fall in line with these characteristics and reject the laws of religion as relevant parts of its official processes.

This rule of secularism also makes it difficult to obtain accurate data concerning the number of religious individuals who identify as such in this state. The government of France has not collected data concerning the existence of religion within its borders in over a century, so the data that has been collected by organizations is probably not incredibly accurate. According to the CIA World Factbook, the following data is the best that could be attained considering the legal situation:

⁴ Kuru, "Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies toward Religion," p 569.

Figure 1: Religion in France



Source: CIA World Factbook, Europe: France, p 1.

History of Secularism in France

The history of France and the events that transpired between the Church, the monarchy, and the population are crucial to understanding the culture of secularism today. In pre-revolution France, the Church played a significant role in society. The Church was structured in a similar way to the monarchy, giving it a similar power as the monarchy as well. Within the Church, there was a king-like figure (the Pope), a hierarchy of powerful leadership (the clergy), and their followers. The Church had a great deal of power and influence in France during this time, but its influence began to decline leading up to and after the revolution. The philosophical ideas of the Lumières, Pascal, Descartes, and others, began the shift towards secularism and the strict separation of church and state in France.⁵

⁵ Wylie, Brière, *Les Français*, p 261.

This phenomenon, known as anticlericalism, swept across France and continued to shape and form French culture into what people know today. Since the revolution of the 18th century, secularism has been an important part of French life and culture. Because of these events and sentiments resulting from the violence and unrest of the revolution, French society today is deeply rooted in secularism and the idea that religious practices have no place in the public sphere.

Passive and Assertive Secularism

The way that France has approached secularism has been vastly different than in other industrialized states such as U.S. There are two types of secularism: passive and assertive. France has typically been more assertive with its secularism than the United States. Considering the daily limitations and freedoms of religious people in each state, it is a simple task to label French secularism as assertive considering the laws that the French parliament has passed as well as the people's attitudes towards religion in the past. When making the comparison between France and the U.S., the difference is clear. France is continuously working to generate laws that restrict the display of religion in public places.⁶

Understanding the difference between passive and assertive secularism is important to the study of this issue. While current times complicate the issue, the U.S. is still officially a secular state. Various types of religious interest groups have a tight hold on some policy makers and their beliefs certainly influence their representatives, but official governmental documents and the constitution are formally void of spirituality.⁷ The United States can be categorized as a

⁶ Kuru, "Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies toward Religion," p 569.

⁷ Brochure, "Is America a Christian Nation? Religion, Government, and Religious Freedom," p 1.

passive secular state as it allows freedom of speech and assembly, religious or otherwise and restricts the government to interfere in these freedoms.

France, on the other hand, is a different story. One of the key differences between American and French cultures concerns the way that the people approach people of various cultural differences entering their countries. In the U.S., where the population recognizes its historical root in immigration and diversity, citizens of many different backgrounds celebrate their heritage such as Irish-Americans, for example.⁸ France, in a way, expects all who enter its borders, not to deny their original culture, but to rather embrace how they define French culture to be. The passivism and aggression in secularism has been felt differently and very clearly when people have entered each of these respective states in the past. Integration in France concerning religion and secularism, while not required by law, is certainly heavily socially encouraged. The French people expect faith to be kept within very specific confines, a church or synagogue, for example. Socially, politically, and legally, French culture requires religion to be kept quiet and maintained, if at all, in the private sphere.

The difference between French assertive secularism and secularism of other industrialized states lies in the institutional and legal regulations of religious practices and symbols. Considering the differences between France and the United States, for example, one must study governmental documents of each state. In the U.S. Constitution, it specifically states that the government cannot interfere with the expression of religion, the right to free speech, or the right of assembly.⁹ In contrast, France's government has passed two laws in the 21st century restricting and regulating what they consider to be religious symbols in public spaces. The key

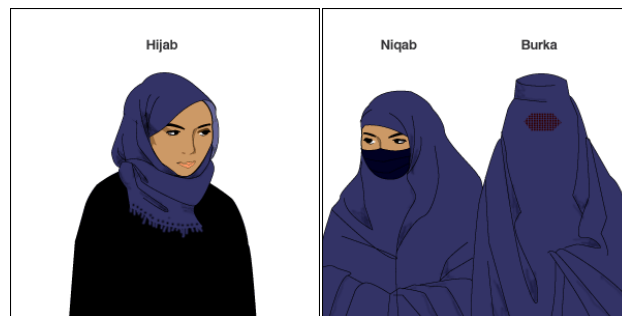
⁸ Killiam, *Islam of the Heart*, p 307.

⁹ "The Constitution of the United States" Amendment I.

difference between these types of secularism is the involvement of the state in each case. While governmental action against freedom of religion is prohibited in one, it is very real and relevant in the other.

Understanding Muslim Culture and Tradition

Figure 2: Muslim Veils



Source: BBC News, “In Graphics: Muslim Veils, Potent Sumbol,” p 1-2.

An important issue that must be addressed is the misunderstanding that Westerners experience concerning Islamic traditional clothing, its meaning, and the beliefs that define their religious significance. Each veil and article of clothing has a special meaning to the person wearing it. The images above clarify the differences between the names and types of veils that are commonly worn amongst Islamic women. Unfortunately, because many Western cultures do not fully understand the value or differences between these veils, confusion and misinterpretation ensues.

It would be beneficial for people outside of the Muslim community to become educated about the traditions of the Islamic faith, which would lead to more understanding and empathy. The background of each clothing item, its religious significance, and the woman’s perspective

concerning these garments are very important aspects of the topic to consider on all sides of the issue.

Through the lens of Western feminism, people often make assumptions about the meaning of the hijab and other religious traditions of modesty. Each wave of feminism has assertively addressed the behaviors of several different faith-based systems, but Christianity is a popular one to discuss. Feminism and religion do not often go well together, but it takes a certain fragile balance for the two to coexist.

French feminists and feminists of the western world are often harshly critical of Islamic religious traditions in relation to women, Islam in particular.¹⁰ Celebrated feminist scholars as well as those of the general population commonly take an assertive stance against organized religion as a deterrence to the equal opportunity of women. These ideas permeate the discussion today, as citizens for the secularism of society in France often claim that veils are a symbol of oppression for women, marking their apparent subservience to men. It is not often that feminists, specifically of western cultures, are very accepting of religious traditions and their apparent subsequent oppression of women.

This can be a difficult aspect of the discussion to address, as each side is passionate about their respective arguments. The issue of an outside entity actively working to “fix” what is wrong within another group, though, can only lead to conflict, misunderstanding, and subsequent problems. One must carefully consider all sides before making a judgement. This specific argument is particularly controversial and complicated, and it has been a factor in the discussion surrounding this issue for years.

¹⁰ Hashim, "Reconciling Islam and Feminism," p 7.

Mutual Respect v. Free Speech

It is also important to clearly comprehend the reasons for the tensions between the Islamic minority in France and those outside of this community. While a stubborn misunderstanding of Islamic culture remains, people cannot begin to make steps towards a society based on mutual respect and understanding. Without attempts to see from each other's points of view, cultural clashes and protests against these laws which restrict certain important religious traditions will continue.

The root of the issue lies in past actions taken by both secular French media and cultural misunderstanding. Freedom of speech is an important and controversial topic all around the world, and France is no exception. In the past decade or so, the French media and Islamic groups in France have been at odds with each other over disagreements concerning what has been printed in magazines, newspapers, and other mass-produced forms of media. Specifically, a name that has been in the global news several times now, *Charlie Hebdo* is a French satirical magazine that indiscriminately takes a variety of political topics and puts a humorous spin to those topics. Unfortunately, the writers of *Charlie Hebdo* may have taken it too far a time or two. Individuals and writers all over the world have criticized *Hebdo*'s political cartoons depicting the Islamic Prophet Muhammed. According to the Muslim faith, it is prohibited to portray this central figure in the Islamic faith in pictures and images. The issue in the disagreement between the French media and the Muslims of France lies in the fine line that separated free speech and cultural respect and awareness. *The Times*, an English newspaper, wrote an article entitled "Charlie Hebdo took offensiveness too far: French satirists didn't deserve to die but they flaunted their legal right to offend and neglected their moral right not

to.”¹¹ Nigel Biggar of *The Times* is taking the side of defending a Muslim person’s right to be free from being offended by another individual or group, though other writers have not been quite as understanding.

Policy and Culture

Diving even deeper into the background and roots of the tension and discourse between these populations and schools of thought, one must consider the cultural motivations of those who oppose and those who support these laws which regulate and prohibit the wearing of certain religious garments. The type of secularism in France is unique in its history and in the way that it manifests itself in French daily life today. The general perception of secularism and its existence in society in this state lends to the reasons why the French people and legislators might have established the laws that are in place today which were the focus of this study.

In the United States the culture and constitution dictate that citizens have freedom *to* religion; whereas, in France, the people have freedom *from* religion. The difference is key: in America, the government cannot keep people from practicing their religion openly unless, of course, the action harms another individual. In France, legislation restricts people displaying specific religious behavior or symbols in certain public settings so that those who are not religious do not have to be exposed to unwanted, unwarranted religious beliefs and thought. Essentially, the legislation protects people from religion and beliefs to which they do not wish to be exposed.

The freedom from religion allows people to live a secular life, free of the feeling of infringement from ideas that do not align with choice of lifestyle or accepted beliefs. In the

¹¹ *The Times*, “Charlie Hebdo took offensiveness too far,” p 1.

United States, the existence of god is a popularly held belief as 89% of Americans consider themselves believers in god, and people have the choice to make it known to others that they, for example, believe in god.¹² In France, one's personal beliefs should not be evident to those around him or her. Even more so, these beliefs should not play a role in public or political activities, and the government of France has taken steps to make sure that this is the case.¹³ The general rule of secularism is expected to be maintained so that no one feels the unwanted effects of another's religion.

Recent Events

Recent events have certainly complicated the issue for people who identify as religious, more specifically, Muslims. The violence enacted by self-proclaimed soldiers of Islam has contributed to the fear and misled beliefs of non-Muslim people concerning this particular faith. This phenomenon has only made life and the peaceful practice of Islam more difficult for those who identify with Islam in its most traditional sense. There will always be extremists in any group, religious or otherwise, who do not accurately represent the whole; and the extremists of Islam have created a misconception amongst Westerners, predominantly, that their behavior is indicative of that of all Muslims. The multiple attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*, the violence the world witnessed in Paris in November of 2015, and other instances have made more of an impact on the global media and thus overshadowed the true actions of peaceful Muslims.

The consideration of recent events both in France and around the world is important to understanding the perspectives of outsiders on the Islamic faith. While the media immediately draws attention to terrorist attacks on western states, the conclusions that viewers make could

¹² Gallup, Inc., "Most Americans Still Believe in God," p 1.

¹³ Decherf, "French Views of Religious Freedom | Brookings Institution," p 1.

influence and skew their perception of accurate events and situations. Studies show that when Islam is portrayed in the media, it is almost done in a negative manner, especially in comparison to other religions in the media.¹⁴ This consistent exposure to destructive renderings about one faith is dangerous when considering how far one it might cause one to stray from more accurate information. In bringing light to this situation, hopefully the language of news sources can change to be more neutral and contribute to a more truthful representation of Islam.

Reasons for Regulation of the Veil

Having read and discussed several reasons for this regulation of religious symbols, it has been difficult to pin down the exact motivation of law makers and voters in France for their insistence on keeping religious clothing of all types out of certain public settings. Some argue wanting to avoid an ethnic clash, or hoping to keep differences in culture from separating students, ideologically.¹⁵ Others use feminism, the goal of gender equality, and the argument that they would be liberating girls who would otherwise be forced to wear the veil; and many in the French population and specifically those who originally created the laws regulating such religious symbols and facial coverings cite the reasoning of national security and the necessity of being able to see one's face.¹⁶ While there are a variety of reasons used to explain such governmental regulation of religion and secularism, the general population of France and their lawmakers continually return to the reasons listed above to justify the laws put in place to contain and control religion and how it can manifest itself in French society.

¹⁴ Bridge Initiative Team, "New Study Analyzes Media Coverage of Islam Over Time," p 1.

¹⁵ Killian, *Islam of the Heart*, p 310.

¹⁶ Nanwani, "The Burqa Ban: An Unreasonable Limitation on Religious Freedom or a Justifiable Restriction?" p 1.

III. Methodology

Institutional Review Board Certification Process

Working through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) took time as this was my first international research project and I interviewed people for the data collection portion of the project. My approval letter is referenced in the Appendix. The IRB approval was necessary due to the nature of the project as I was conducting interviews concerning religion and politics with a community that was already experiencing marginalization within their country. It proved to be difficult to find and stay in contact with leaders of this community, but not impossible. I started by researching and finding the local mosque and reaching out to leaders specified on their website. As an outsider to this community, I made sure to be particularly careful not to overstep my bounds and risk offending anyone. My contact at the local mosque was very friendly and understanding once I was able to explain the nature and purpose of my project.

Each document necessary for IRB approval had to be completed in both English and French as well as reviewed by someone fluent in both languages. I was able to reach out to professors at my institution to help me through various documents and procedures while I was seeking IRB approval. For example, the approval process for international research requires the acknowledgement and authorization by an equivalent ethics committee in the external site, which was, in my case, France. I spoke with several administrators and professors at my institution as well as emailed various seemingly similar organizations, but was continually told that no such equivalent existed. Aspects of the approval process such as these were time consuming, but necessary. Nearing the end of my semester abroad, I finally received the approval I needed to conduct the interviews and collect data for my research.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in French (or English, if the interviewee so preferred). The questions are provided below. I chose to conduct interviews with four Islamic individuals of differing genders who had also spent time or had lived in France. The goal was to avoid visitors and tourists, as only Islamic individuals who had lived in this state for an extended period of time would truly feel the effects of the social and legal restrictions on religious articles of clothing. The interviews were short, typically under 30 minutes, and each consisted of the following questions:

Questions of Eligibility

1. How long have you lived in France?
2. Do you have French citizenship?
3. Have you been of the Muslim faith for your entire life?

Interview Questions

1. Please explain your views concerning modesty.
 - a. Do you prefer more traditional clothing such as the veil (hijab) or the burqa?
2. Describe your first reaction to the French legislation banning the veil/burqa in public places and employment.
3. Do you feel restrained or restricted by this legislation?
 - a. Do you feel that your ability to practice your religion freely has been restricted?

I was able to thoroughly improve my ability to speak French before reaching out to potential participants and beginning the interview process, and I was surrounded by French professors who were willing to review my documents that I needed to even begin the research; so

the list of questions, consent forms, and other necessary documents had been thoroughly checked by qualified individuals. I eventually reached out to a leader of the Islamic Community of Calvados. We corresponded via telephone for a while until I was able to send him my translated consent documents to distribute to potential participants.

The information directly in response to the questions listed above was important, of course, but I really was curious to hear the follow up and clarification of their responses. I used these questions to prompt a discussion with the participants concerning the focus of the study. When the participants elaborated on their responses, the information was both more valuable and interesting as it contained their genuine perceptions and concerns.

I found that the responses to these questions were varied. In the early stages of this project, I found it difficult to find willing male participants. This could be explained with multiple hypotheses: perhaps they were uncomfortable speaking about such a sensitive topic with a foreigner, or they felt uncomfortable meeting with a female who was unknown to them. It is also possible that, in comparison, the willingness of the female participants speaks to the nature of the issue and the truth of my original hypothesis: the women are more concerned with speaking out against the legislation that restricts their ability to wear traditional or clothing with an originally religious purpose. It was difficult to even explain my questions fully before the female participants began responding.

I met with each participant in local coffee shops and took notes as they described their feelings concerning the law in France. While I did have an audio recorder, I chose to take notes as well as it kept me focused on their answers and on track with my questions.

IV. Discussion/ Data Analysis

Introduction to the Data

Islamic men and women in France are facing discrimination and hate as terrorist individuals who claim to be a part of the same faith carry out acts of violence, in turn, spreading social fear of those who identify as Muslim. With already existing governmentally sanctioned cultural limitations concerning religious symbols, it is becoming increasingly difficult for peaceful religious followers to practice their faith without scrutiny from outside. The contortion of these traditions, beliefs, and values had not only sparked frustration but also a passion to correct misconceptions about this culture. Body language, vocal inflections, and other indicators made the participants' opinions clear: the veil is a choice as well as a beautiful part of a unique culture, and to squander it will elicit a response.

Interviews

I conducted three interviews with people who subscribe to the Islamic faith, and their responses were not entirely what I expected. I spoke with one man and two women, all of whom were living in France or had been there for several years already.

Subject One: Male, middle aged, lived in France for five years already

Subject Two: Female, 18-25, living in France

Subject Three: Female, 18-25, living in France

Subject Four: NA

The female participants were not shy. The moment that I asked the first question concerning French law and the restrictions of religious clothing, their tone and attitude changed.

Each of the two women with whom I spoke began speaking much more quickly and fervently than at the beginning of the interview. When we began to delve into the root of the discussion, each female participant began using passionate hand gestures, their posture and gaze became stronger and full of intention, and their voices got louder. Their body language and way of speaking inferred that they felt very strongly about the issue at hand.

Subject Two was certainly the most passionate of my three participants. She spoke clearly and quickly about her opinions of the French law and demands of the secular culture of today. She shared with me stories about women that she knew personally who were forced to stay home from work or school because their faith and loyalty to its teachings meant being confined within the walls of their own home.

The two female participants did differ slightly in their responses and manner of speaking. While Subject Two was certainly the most outspoken of the three, the second female participant (Subject Three) was more soft-spoken. She expressed and briefly explained her position on the issue of legal regulation of clothing, religious or otherwise. Her responses to my questions were not quite as fervent as her predecessor's, but she still made clear her desire to oppose the laws in France that affect her ability to wear certain modest garments.

The most surprising was certainly the one male participant. While my expectations did not focus primarily on the responses of the men, this individual's attitude concerning these laws were still unexpected. He did not seem concerned about the restrictions on religious paraphernalia in the country in which he lived. He explained to me that he did not care what the government did or did not do concerning regulation of religion in French society. I thought at least that some level of concern would be evident, but this participant did not convey any distress

concerning this issue in the slightest. If anything, he seemed to have embraced the secularism of French culture that the people of this state had so widely accepted as the norm.

Personal Reflection/Analysis of Bias

While the United States and France share certain democratic structures and political ideas, each respective state's approach to religion is fundamentally different. While the government in both states is officially secular, the difference in the types of secularism is key.

Reviewing this data, the initial questions, and the work that was done during the planning stages made me realize that I myself went into this project with expectations and bias. Reading through them now, the questions are leading the participants to respond in specific ways. Initially, I had not realized how blatantly evident my opinions were in the presentation of my interview questions. I expected the women to more fervently defend their right to wear clothing items that comply with their religious beliefs and standards. In my experience discussing this topic with other students as well as working class adults, female Muslim individuals have always explained their position to me clearly: it is her choice to wear the veil, and she celebrates it with pride.

V. Results

While there were problems that I encountered concerning the interviews themselves, I found that it was certainly clear that it was and is the women of the Islamic community who care about defending their ability to continue certain religious traditions such as the inclusion of the hijab and the burqa in their wardrobes. Being restricted from the ability to express their faith freely has only led to problems within and outside of this community. While I had done research and read various articles on this issue beforehand, it was still a very different experience to hear about the issue directly from the women who have been and currently are experiencing the reality of the issue firsthand.

While this is a relatively complex issue, it is clear that the subsequent retaliation is seen predominantly as female. An outsider to a school of thought can only obtain a certain level of understanding those within it, and our western culture and ideas have led many to misunderstand the plight of these individuals. Only three interviews conducted over a short period of time will not solve the issue at hand, but the data and information that I obtained can certainly help me start the discussion with others concerning this issue. The interviews that I conducted with these followers of Islam certainly made clear the position of the women of this community in that they will not ignore a government and legislators who restrict their ability to simply express their faith quietly.

Talking to these individuals and reading various scholarly articles on the issue were very different experiences that yielded very different understandings of this issue. Seeking out specific articles about this topic of course generated sources from the very outspoken few, but having the opportunity to speak with the average person and member of this community showed

that the resistance to these pieces of legislation includes so many more than just those who speak out against it publicly.

Of course, oppression can indeed be present in certain situations, but a blanket assumption of all cases being male dominance in the home and the coercion of women to abide by these standards does the women of Islam a disservice.

VI. Conclusion

There is a movement sweeping across Europe with the goal of finding a social balance between religion and secularism. It started in France and is still influencing the people who live there. In many places all over the world, this debate about spirituality and its place in social settings is an old one; democracies take different approaches to allowing religion and protecting citizens from unwanted exposure to the spirituality of others. The conflicting nature of the relationship between faith and government in France is a complex one. While the government and state as a whole are officially secular, laws and law-makers still actively seek out ways to keep religion out of the public sphere. All the while, the Muslim community in France is calling these laws discrimination and persecution.

The difficulty that outside cultures experience in understanding the traditions and beliefs of Islamic people has caused problems in their ability to coexist with each other. Assumptions about oppression and the meaning of certain traditions is just a part of the root of our misunderstanding of the people in this community. Most commonly, the issue of thinking that, in all situations, men force the women to cover up in such modest clothing leads to the misconception that all situations of burqa-clad women only contributes to the complexity of this issue. Those outside of the Islamic community must take steps to better understand all sides of the issue and the significance of these traditions to those who find deep and meaningful value in practicing and observing them.

While the issue of finding a compromise between a secular society and religious groups only continues to grow more and more difficult, it is possible to find that balance and create a world where everyone feels accepted and safe. Whether it be through education about various cultures and traditions, tolerance of religious practices, or initiating conversation about these

issues, people can build a more tolerant society that allows all peoples and cultures to successfully and safely observe their religious practices while also maintaining a faith-blind governing system.

The most effective way to achieve a goal of understanding and tolerance would be to empathize. Indeed, faith plays a significant role in the lives of many people in American culture, yet it seems to prove difficult for a large portion of them to put themselves in their Muslim neighbors' shoes. In France as well, the culture of secularism goes back deep into their history, to which the people of France hold dearly. If everyone took the time to see the issue from a different perspective, the world might just make progress towards peaceful coexistence. For myself, specifically, it was enlightening to find the need to step back, recognize my own bias, and take a look at the topic with fresh eyes. The lessons that a person can learn from simply talking to people and cleansing one's self of pre-conceived notions can make a difference for everyone.

Appendix:

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



EAST TENNESSEE STATE
UNIVERSITY

Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects □Box 70565 □Johnson City, Tennessee 37614-1707
Phone: (423) 439-6053 Fax: (423) 439-6060

IRB APPROVAL – Initial Expedited Review

May 10, 2016

Alexandria Exley

Re: An Investigation into the Socio-Political Dissonance between the French Government and the Islamic French Minority **IRB#:** c0416.1s **ORSPA #:**

The following items were reviewed and approved by an expedited process:

- New protocol submission xForm, Literature, PI resume, Informed consent English, Informed consent French, Email to potential participants English, Email to potential participants French, Interview questions English, Interview questions French, Grant application

The following revisions were received and approved as part of the requested changes:

- Requested changes xForm, Informed consent document - new French translation, Revised email to potential participants (English and French), Revised interview questions (English and French), Eligibility screener (English and French), protocol changes, translator attestation letter, email correspondence about existence of French ethics committee, external site permission letter (Association Islamique...)

On **May 5, 2016**, a final approval was granted for a period not to exceed 12 months and will expire on **May 4, 2017**. The expedited approval of the study *and* requested changes will be reported to the convened board on the next agenda.

The following **enclosed stamped, approved Informed Consent Documents** have been stamped with the approval and expiration date and these documents must be copied and provided to each participant prior to participant enrollment:

- Informed Consent Document (Eligibility questions English (stamped approved 5-5-16); Eligibility questions French(stamped approved 5-5-16); Informed consent English (stamped approved 5-5-16); Informed consent French (stamped approved 5-5-16); Recruitment email English (stamped approved 5-5-16); Recruitment email French (stamped approved 5-5-16))



Accredited Since December 2005

Federal regulations require that the original copy of the participant's consent be maintained in the principal investigator's files and that a copy is given to the subject at the time of consent.

Projects involving Mountain States Health Alliance must also be approved by MSHA following IRB approval prior to initiating the study.

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others must be reported to the IRB (and VA R&D if applicable) within 10 working days.

Proposed changes in approved research cannot be initiated without IRB review and approval. The only exception to this rule is that a change can be made prior to IRB approval when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the research subjects [21 CFR 56.108 (a)(4)]. In such a case, the IRB must be promptly informed of the change following its implementation (within 10 working days) on Form 109 (www.etsu.edu/irb). The IRB will review the change to determine that it is consistent with ensuring the subject's continued welfare.

Sincerely,

Stacey Williams, Chair

ETSU Campus IRB

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