

# French Muslim schools and the hijab

## Enforcing or reversing the stigma?

Diane-Sophie Girin

The question of garment is central in public discourse about Islam and Muslims. Headscarves, veils, *hijabs*, *niqabs* and *burqas* are ubiquitous topics in the media and in politics, especially in the French context. The title of John Bowen's book *Why the French don't like headscarves*<sup>1</sup> facetiously highlights this obsession.

There is also an abundance of academic research on women who wear the veil in France: their everyday life,<sup>2</sup> the discriminations they face,<sup>3</sup> the movements supporting their claims for equality,<sup>4</sup> etc. A significant proportion of the research focuses on education and schooling. For instance, the question of Muslim students wearing headscarves in class has been researched

by numerous scholars in France.<sup>5</sup> That topic has also gained media and academic attention elsewhere in Europe: in Belgium in 1989, when several students demanded the right to wear the hijab in a Brussels school;<sup>6</sup> in the Netherlands in 1998, when parents refused that their daughter remove her headscarf during physical education classes.<sup>7</sup> A similar case arose in Ireland in the early 2000s when two students requested permission to wear a headscarf in class.<sup>8</sup> In Germany, the issue raised did not involve students, but was instead about the teachers' right to wear a religious headscarf, in 1998.<sup>9</sup>

1 *Bowen, John: Why the French don't like headscarves. Islam, the State, and Public Space, Princeton 2006.* The book was never translated into French.

2 *Ajbli, Fatiha: „Les Françaises“ voilées „dans l'espace public/entre quête de visibilité et stratégies d'invisibilisation“.* In: *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 35 (2016), 102–117; *Amiriaux, Valérie: Citoyens, piété et démocratie. Réflexions sur l'occultation des corps croyants, l'intimité et le droit au secret.* In: *Social Compass* 65 (2018) 168–186.

3 *Hajjat, Abdellali/Mohammed, Marwan: Islamophobie. Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le „problème musulman“, Paris 2013.*

4 *Galembert, Claire de: „Cause du voile et lutte pour la parole musulmane légitime“.* In: *Sociétés contemporaines* 74 (2009) 19–47.

5 *Bowen 2006 [Anm. 1]; Gaspard, Françoise/Khosrokhavar, Farhad: Le foulard et la République, Paris 1995; Rochefort, Florence: „Foulard, genre et laïcité en 1989“.* In: *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 3 (2002) 145–156; *Vivarelli, Clémentine: L'ambivalence des pratiques laïques en milieu scolaire. La régulation de l'islam visible.* In: *Lamine, Anne-Sophie: Quand le religieux fait conflit, PUR, Rennes 2013, 95–107.*

6 *Blaise, de Coorebyter: „L'islam et l'école. Anatomie d'une polémique“.* In: *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* 1270-1271 (1990) 1–87.

7 *Korteweg, Anna/Yurdakul, Gökçe: Kopftuchdebatten in Europa. Konflikte um Zugehörigkeit in nationalen Narrativen, Bielefeld 2016.*

8 *Sai, Youcef: An exploration of ethos in Irish Muslim schools. Ethnographic insights and perspectives from parents and teachers.* In: *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 39 (2018) 29–44.

9 *Henkes, Christian/Kneip, Sascha: Von offener Neutralität zu (unintendiertem) Laizismus. Das Kopf-*

The topic of veiling is also featured prominently in the research about Islamic Schooling.<sup>10</sup> Scholars mostly note that both teachers and pupils are allowed to wear headscarves in Islamic schools. Authorizing religious symbols can be a way to demonstrate the religious nature of the school or display an Islamic ethos. For John Bowen, what is Islamic about an Islamic school is that it allows pupils to behave daily as Muslims. In these spaces, it is considered normal to perform the daily prayers at their prescribed times, to fast during the month of Ramadan, and to wear a hijab. In contrast, these behaviours are viewed as suspicious – when they are not simply forbidden – in all other schools, especially secular public schools.<sup>11</sup> Hewer agrees: „a Muslim school is not one in which ‚Islam‘ is taught as a discrete subject called ‚Religious Education‘, but rather one in which the whole of education is seen within a faith-centred integrated system.“<sup>12</sup> Sharing, among other things, a specific dress code can foster a feeling of unity and a sense of belonging amongst the student body at an Islamic school: „Pupils can feel themselves in solidarity with their peers, and this extends to the Ummah or global Muslim community, beyond school as well“<sup>13</sup>. A feeling of continuity can also emerge from the „coherence between the

home, the mosque, and the school and this is accentuated through the dress code“<sup>14</sup>.

Building upon the analyses quoted above, and now that we’ve established that the emergence of Muslim schools in France arises in the context of a long history of controversies around the headscarf, we will attempt to determine what role the *hijab* plays in private Muslim schools in France. The notion of visibility is pivotal in public discourse, as it serves both to redefine the stigma attached to Islam, and to operate a shift within the concept of *laïcité*. What is the stance of Muslim schools on the issue? Can they be a refuge for pupils who wear a headscarf?

### 1. *Public schools as the historical cradle of „laïcité“ and neutrality*

The secularisation of the French school system was at the heart of the conflict that opposed the Roman Catholic Church and the French State during the 19th and part of the 20th century, in what historians call the „school war“. The Third Republic (1870–1940) was able to take hold of national education, which until then was under the dominion of the Catholic Church. Akan writes, „the main ‚constitutive‘ elements of *laïcité* were the education laws of 1881, 1882 and 1886“<sup>15</sup>. These laws established the secularisation of the curricula and the obligation of religious neutrality - applied to the teachers (in their appearance, behaviour and teachings). They did not originally apply to pupils. Akan notices that „the goal of public education was to provide a *laïc* education to all students regardless of their religious beliefs or garments.“<sup>16</sup>

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tuch zwischen demokratischem Mehrheitswillen und rechtsstaatlichen Schranken. In: *Leviathan* 38 (2010) 589–616.

10 We will opt for the phrase „Muslim school“ rather than „Islamic school“ in the French context, as a direct translation from the vernacular terminology: „*école musulmane*“.

11 *Bowen John*: *L'Islam à la française*, Steinkis, 2011, 336.

12 *Hewer, Chris*: *Schools for Muslims*. In: *Oxford Review of Education* 27 (2001) 515–527, 523.

13 *Driessen, Geert/Merry, Michael*: *Islamic schools in North America and the Netherlands*. In: *Woods, Philip/Woods, Glenys*: *Alternative education for the 21st century*, Palgrave 2009, 105.

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14 *Ibid.*, 106.

15 *Akan, Murat*: *Laïcité and multiculturalism*. The Stasi Report in context. In: *The British Journal of Sociology* 60 (2009) 237–256, 245.

16 *Ibid.*, 243.

The education laws paved the way for the separation of Churches and State in 1905, and the progressive extension of the rules of neutrality to all public servants. Nevertheless, the Republic never sought a monopoly in the field of education, and the right to private schooling was always guaranteed. Starting from 1959, independent private schools even gained the right to benefit from public funding, by signing a „contract“ with the State after five years of operation. Such funding covers almost entirely their operational costs, on the condition that they follow the national curricula, hire formally trained teachers, and accept students without discrimination.

The „war“ seemed to be over, but in 1989, a new „adversary“<sup>17</sup> appeared, in the form of three young girls, who refused to remove their headscarves in a public school in the North of France. What was only a marginal, isolated incident generated a great public debate on whether the obligation of religious neutrality should apply to students.<sup>18</sup> Similar raging controversies repeated in 1994 and 2003, leading to the vote of a new law in March of 2004, which stated that „in public elementary schools, middle schools and high schools, the donning of signs or dresses by which the students ostensibly [ostensiblement] manifest a religious adherence are banned. The school regulation reminds that a dialogue with the student precedes the start of a disciplinary procedure.“<sup>19</sup>

The bill resulted in the exclusion of 44 Muslim girls wearing a headscarf<sup>20</sup> at the begin-

ning of the following school year. This number does not include the girls that were over sixteen years old and not entitled to compulsory education anymore. Some of them simply did not return to class and disappeared from the school system. Others left public schools and resorted to homeschooling, tolerant private Catholic schools, or the few existing Muslim schools.

## 2. *The emergence of Muslim schools*

Muslim schools came into public existence at the time of the headscarves controversy, even though there were only three of them in all of France at the time. They quickly became a talking point, as they were seen as one of the possible alternative options to public schooling for students who wore the hijab. Some opponents to the 2004 law argued they opposed the exclusion of these students because they feared it would lead them to self-segregate and withdraw into their religious identity, to isolate themselves from society by resorting to these religious schools. Bowen mentions that paradoxically, the politicians who backed the law also admitted that any girls refusing to remove their head-covering could always attend Muslim schools: „Thus, some public officials find themselves in the awkward (at least logically awkward) position of saying that girls must attend class bareheaded so that all citizens will learn to live together, and then saying that those girls not wishing to do so could always make use of Muslim schools (were such schools to exist).“<sup>21</sup> According to Jean Baubérot, the ban on ostentatious religious symbols, „was discouraging Muslim girls from entering the public education system and encouraging them to

17 *Baubérot, Jean* (Hg.): *La laïcité à l'épreuve*, Religions et libertés dans le monde, Universalis 2004, 25.

18 *Gaspard/Khosrokhavar* 1995 [Anm. 5]; *Rochefort* 2002 [Anm. 5].

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Chérif, Hanifa*: Application de la loi du 15 mars 2004 sur le port des signes religieux ostensibles dans les établissements d'enseignement publics, 2005, 35.

Three Sikh boys are also considered to have been collateral victims of the law.

21 *Bowen* 2006 [Anm. 1], 13.

seek an alternative in private schooling<sup>22</sup>. For Akan, the law resulted in a complete oxymoron: „Students who have chosen to be a part of the public education system are discouraged in the name of ‘laïcité’ with the consequences of quitting or following curriculum from outside with the help of civil society organizations or turning to private schooling<sup>23</sup>.

Fifteen years later, there are now 52 Muslim schools in France. They still represent a very small percentage of the overall private schooling offer (7500 Catholic schools, 1300 non-religious, 100 Jewish schools and a few evangelical christian schools<sup>24</sup>). Most Muslim schools are independent schools, only seven of them are partially subsidised. In contrast, 97% of all private schools are funded by the State.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. *Islam and the hijab as stigma*

In our analysis, we will rely on the concept of stigma, defined by Goffman<sup>26</sup> as something that disqualifies a person, something that prevents a person from being fully accepted by society. He defines three types of stigma: „First there are abominations of the body [...]. Next there are blemishes of individual character [...]. Finally there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contami-

nate all members of a family.”<sup>27</sup> Islam and Muslim identities in Europe and especially in France fit in the last category. According to Cesari: „Any analysis of Muslim religious practice has to take into account a particular challenge for Western Muslims: namely, the meta-narrative on Islam. The importance of public opinion and its impact on identity-formation in general hardly needs to be proven. More than any other religious group, however, Muslims seem not to be the masters of their own identity in their adopted countries. An essentializing discourse on Islam, existing on every level of society, is imposed on them from the micro-local to the international level. This narrative, which is largely based on the idea of a conflict between Islam and the West, portraying Islam as a problem or an obstacle to modernization, has forced all Muslims, from the most secularized to the most devout, to examine their beliefs and think about what it means to be Muslim.”<sup>28</sup>

In this context, the practice of veiling specifically is stigmatised in France.<sup>29</sup> According to Beaugé, practicing Muslim women feel the effect of the politicisation of the veil in their everyday lives, through multiple experiences of stigmatisation and many restrictions in their education or in the workplace. He concludes that the practice of the hijab in France comes at a high social and moral cost.<sup>30</sup>

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22 Akan 2009 [Anm. 15], 245.

23 Ibid., 253.

24 Billon, Annick: Rapport fait au nom de la commission de la culture, de l'éducation et de la communication sur la proposition de loi visant à simplifier et mieux encadrer le régime d'ouverture des établissements privés hors contrat, Sénat 2018.

25 Moisan, Catherine (Hg.): Repères et références statistiques sur les enseignements, la formation et la recherche, Rers 2013.

26 Goffman, Erving: Stigmaté. Les usages sociaux du handicap, Paris 1975, 7.

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27 Goffman, Erving: Stigma. Notes on the management of spoiled identity, New York – London – Toronto 1963, 4.

28 Césari, Jocelyne: When Islam and Democracy meet. Muslims in Europe and in the United States, New York 2004, 21.

29 Ibid.; de Galembert 2009 [Anm. 4]; Hajjat/Mohammed [Anm. 3], 2013; Beaugé, Julien: Stigmatisation et rédemption. Le port du voile comme ‘épreuve’. In: Politix 111 (2015) 153–174; Ajbli 2016 [Anm. 2].

30 Beaugé 2015 [Anm. 29], 154.

#### 4. *A qualitative investigation among principals and founders of Muslim schools*

This research relies on a qualitative approach. Our data for this article derive from field interviews and ethnographic work conducted in France from January 2017 to March 2019. We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with the founders and headteachers of nine Muslim schools recruited through snowball sampling (n=9). Some of them receive children starting at pre-school level, and some go up to secondary school. Our research focused on the primary school level (the French equivalent of British year 2 to year 6), as it is a neglected area of the research around Muslim schooling in France.

We asked the school founders and principals about the genesis of their schools, and about the everyday school life. The question of the hijab was always discussed, with specific questions about the dress code for pupils.

The schools are located in seven cities, located in the suburbs of Paris, in the South West and in the East of France. They were all founded between 2001 and 2016. In order to ensure the anonymity of the schools, we chose to refer to them with letters (from A to I; Tab. 1).

The interviews were complemented by ethnographic observations. We attended the classes of School A and School C for 15 to 20 days each in order to observe the everyday activities of the pupils, the teachers and the school board. We took notes throughout the day and completed them at the end of each day in order to keep a thorough record. The focus of our observation was the religious and pedagogical specificities of each class we attended. The semi-structured interviews with the founders and headteachers were entirely transcribed and later encoded with the software Nvivo in order to reveal reoccurring themes. The same method was used with the field notes.

#### 5. *Results: Are Muslim schools a refuge for pupils who veil?*

All the schools that we visited are mixed (co-educational) and on average, there are as many girls as boys. In the nine elementary schools of our sample, we were met with three different cases concerning students wearing headscarves: authorised, prohibited with exceptions, and banned (Tab. 2).

School	Location	Date founded	Levels	Number of pupils
School A	59 km from Paris	2012	Year 2 – Year 10	188
School B	678 km from Paris	2013	Preschool – Year 6	160
School C	13 km from Paris	2015	Year 2 – Year 12	150
School D	575 km from Paris	2001	Preschool – Year 6	100
School E	7 km from Paris	2013	Preschool – Year 6	190
School F	39 km from Paris	2013	Final year of Preschool – Year 6	100
School G	33 km from Paris	2009	Year 2 – Year 12	250
School H	575 km from Paris	2016	Preschool - Year 5	100
School I	678 km from Paris	2013	Preschool – Year 6	150

Tab. 1: Researched French Muslim schools

School	Rule regarding veiling for primary school pupils
School A	prohibited
School B	authorised
School C	authorised
School D	authorised
School E	prohibited with exceptions
School F	authorised but the school was considering prohibiting it
School G	prohibited
School H	authorised
School I	authorised

Tab. 2: The schools and their rules regarding veiling

### 5.1 When the hijab is authorised

In five of the schools we studied, pupils were allowed to wear a veil. The headteachers insisted during the interviews that headscarves are neither obligatory nor prohibited, which leaves the choice up to the pupils and their family.

This idea of freedom of choice resonates with Roy's concept of globalisation of Islam.<sup>31</sup> According to him, the individual interpretation of religious norms was transformed and reformulated into a syntax that is now more coherent with modern values.<sup>32</sup> „The norm remains undisputed but has to be chosen.”<sup>33</sup>

In some of these schools, the possibility to wear a hijab is emphasised as an advantage over public schools and is highlighted in the communication of the school (for example with pictures and videos on social media) in order to attract new families.

Following Goffman's terminology, we could say that these schools are reversing the stigma. What is prohibited in public schools, and deemed oppressive in society at large, is pre-

sented here as a freedom of choice: „It is possible for signs which mean one thing to one group to mean something else to another group, the same category being designated but differently characterized.”<sup>34</sup> These schools hereby normalise the hijab and counteract the demonisation of those who wear it. The inversion is total, as almost all the women who work in these schools wear a hijab. This inversion generates a new norm, specific to these spaces, and operates a complete shift from the religious neutrality expected from both teachers and pupils in public schools.

Along with performing ritual prayers, eating halal meat at the school canteen, and using specific religious vocabulary in greetings and during classes, wearing the hijab from a young age contributes to the inculcation of a specific habitus,<sup>35</sup> a proper behaviour,<sup>36</sup> or what Iram Khawaja calls „Muslimness”<sup>37</sup>.

31 Roy, Olivier: *L'islam mondialisé*, Seuil 2002.

32 Tremblay, Stéphanie: *Les écoles privées à projet religieux ou spirituel – analyse de trois „communautés” éducatives – juive, musulmane et Steiner – à Montréal*, Montréal 2013, 70.

33 Roy 2002 [Anm. 31], 108f. our translation.

34 Goffman 1963 [Anm. 27], 46.

35 Mahmood, Saba: *Rehearsed Spontaneity and the Conventionality of Ritual. Disciplines of „Ṣalāt”*. In: *American Ethnologist* 28 (2001) 827–853.

36 Sedgwick, Mark (Dir.): *Making European Muslims. Religious Socialization among Young Muslims in Scandinavia and Western Europe*, Routledge 2015, 3

37 Ibid.

However, although Muslim schools initially developed out of the need for headscarf-wearing pupils to get around the law, we observed in our fieldwork that girls wearing a hijab were a minority in the primary school levels. Only a few of them were wearing it all day long and in every class.

## 5.2 When the hijab is unauthorised with exceptions or banned

The headteacher of School E told us that he established his own „laïcism”, meaning that he imitated the harshest proponents of French-style secularism (often deemed Islamophobic) by adopting a restrictive policy on headscarves in his school. The younger girls are prohibited from wearing a hijab, except on well-argued request of their parents: „So what we did is that, in the texts, we wrote that, anyway, the hijab becomes mandatory from puberty! It’s the first thing. So there is no point for first, second or third year pupils to wear it. For pupils from the fourth or fifth year... some of them might reach the legal age, it is possible for parents to ask, by way of derogation, on their request. For all other classes, any type of headcovering is prohibited.”

The authorisation is restricted to cases of duly motivated parental requests. The headteacher was inspired to introduce this rule by his personal philosophical reflections on Islamic garment. In 2004, when the law banned headscarves from public schools, he was personally invested against it (he wrote an essay about it and received media coverage at the time), but his views evolved, and he now believes the hijab has lost its meaning in the current context. He prefers to place the emphasis on the values of modesty. On the one hand, he refers to Quranic arguments (the hijab is not mandatory before puberty), while on the other he reflects about the symbolic impact of a young girl wearing a hijab in Western countries. According to him, Muslims will see it as „cute”, while it can be perceived as a symbol of oppression by non-Muslims, and thereby foster hostility.

School A and G are even stricter, and strictly forbid primary school pupils from wearing a headscarf, without any exception. The cofounder and headteacher of School A says: „In our pedagogical project, (he hesitates) girls, in primary school, they don’t wear the veil. We clearly tell the parents that the Islamic law doesn’t require young girls to wear the veil. [...] In primary school, it is out of the question that girls wear a veil.” Again, a religious argument was used here in hopes to convince the parents of the logic of this policy.

The principals of these schools told us that, often, the decision of banning the headscarf for pupils was not accepted by the families at first. It contradicted their idea of what a Muslim school should offer. For some parents, the possibility for their child to wear hijab at school had been one of the essential reasons why they had chosen a Muslim school. So the principals who chose to ban it had to „educate” the parents first, to convince them of the „common sense” behind this decision.

School F is currently thinking about adopting a similar ban after a harsh inspection from the Ministry of Education. The headteacher asked herself during our interview: „We have not reached a final stance yet [...] Shall we instead request for parents not to make preschool, first and second year pupils wear a headscarf? We are considering it...”

The conception of *laïcité* and the requirement of neutrality promoted by these three schools are similar to what has been implemented in public schools since 2004. Somehow, the law that was highly unpopular in Muslim communities, that provided the foundations for a movement against islamophobia<sup>38</sup> and that is presented in the literature as the catalyst for the

38 de Galember 2009 [Anm. 4]; Amiraux, Valérie: „L’affaire du foulard” en France Retour sur une affaire qui n’en est pas encore une. In: *Sociologie et Sociétés* 2 (2009) 273–298; Hajjat/Mohammed 2013 [Anm. 3].

multiplication of Muslim schools,<sup>39</sup> is now applied in one third of Muslim schools to primary school pupils.

### 5.3 Performing respectability: embodying the „good“ Muslim, who follows a reformed version of Islam and adheres to the „values of the Republic“

The reasons behind the restrictive approaches (where headscarves are prohibited with exceptions or banned) fit into four categories. First, it can be a way to show respectability and to distance oneself from the stigma attached to the veil. It is a way to showcase the integration of the national norm and to reassure the authorities on the topic of radicalisation and fundamentalism. It is remarkable in the case of School F that is thinking about changing its policy after a difficult inspection and threats of closing down the school.

Secondly, it can be a strong indicator of the sociology of the school's founders. In School A, two out of seven of them are also working in public schools. Altogether they wanted the Muslim school that they founded to be as close as possible to the national curriculum and the public approach of education. During our interviews they often alluded to the principle of *laïcité*, even if, as an independent private school they are not subjected to it.

Thirdly, there is the perception of hostility and the idea to remain a „discrete Muslim“<sup>40</sup>. The principal of School D explained to me that

although she wears the hijab herself: „it (the hijab for little girls) is not something that I encourage, far from it! For me there is no point, it is not something that you can see at this age [...] I mean, we are stigmatized enough, it is not necessary to lay it on thick.“ The choice of wording clearly indicates the idea of the stigma and the necessity to distance it in times of hostility. This reminds us of the attitude of defensive cowering adopted by the stigmatised individual when entering a mixed social situation.<sup>41</sup>

The fourth reason refers to the Islamic legislation. It is a discussion about the definition of religious norms between devout. In two cases, principals justify their policy with the claim of a reformed Islam in opposition to an inherited Islam. It resonates strongly with the research on the ways of being Muslim in the 21st century in the West.<sup>42</sup> For them it is one of the mission of the Muslim school not only to educate children but also their parents by encouraging them to rethink their religious practices and beliefs in the geographical and historical context (France, during and after a wave of terrorist attacks)<sup>43</sup>. These founders and principals claim the necessity of a reformed Islam especially on the topics that are drawing attention to Muslim schools. Particularly where there might be a contradiction between the shared foundations of education in public schools and what is defined as an Islamic education, for example the teaching of music, coeducational lessons of swimming and the theory of evolution.

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39 Bras, Jean-Philippe/Mervin, Sabrina/Amghar, Samiret u. a.: L'enseignement de l'Islam dans les écoles coraniques les institutions de formation islamique et les écoles privées, Rapport IISMM et EHESS 2010.

40 A controversial expression used by the President of the Foundation for French Islam in 2016. See *Khemilat, Fatima*: „La redéfinition des frontières de l'espace public à l'aune des controverses sur le voile: émergence d'une ségrégation respectable?“ In: Questions de communication 33 (2018) 43–64, 52.

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41 Goffman 1963 [Anm. 27], 17.

42 Cesari 2004 [Anm. 28], Amiraux 2018 [Anm. 2], Roy 2002 [Anm. 31].

43 Since 2012 and the attacks of Mohamed Merah against military and Jewish pupils, France has been the subject of numerous terrorist attacks. 2015 was the most violent year with 154 victims in January (attacks against Charlie Hebdo, a policewoman and a kosher supermarket) and November (simultaneous attacks in the Stade de France, concert hall Le Bataclan and Parisian bars).

These efforts are part of a movement to redefine Islam, by distinguishing culture from religion. The headscarf is precisely one of the topics used by principals to advocate for a renewed understanding of what it means to be Muslim in France. The headmaster of School A explained to me: „Our children will be French citizen, first and foremost. Before anything else. Religion is private. It's for me. The important thing for our children is to understand their religion well. Religion is not traditions. It is not imitation. If I decide to wear a veil it is because I am convinced. I believe in it... But if it is to please parents, relatives, to endure social pressure, then that's something else!” (cofounder and principal of School A).

With this stance this headmaster wants to promote a private conception of religion, in accordance with the theories of „individualisation”<sup>44</sup>. The relation to the hijab should be individual rather than based on the affiliation to a family or a community. The wearing of a headscarf should be a chosen and not an imposed practice<sup>45</sup> or the simple perpetuation of tradition.<sup>46</sup> This stance also illustrates the idea to produce a „French Islam”<sup>47</sup> where citizenship plays a major role in the redefinition of the religious norms.<sup>48</sup>

For the principal of the School E, the main goal is to transmit values over habits:

„I called the parents in, of course parents are happy to be in a Muslim school: the girl is four or five years old and she wears a headscarf” so that she gets used to it. „So we explained to the

parents” when you say that you are getting her used to it, you condition her to look like her mother, but what did she really understand about the concept of modesty? „There are millions of women that are not covering their hair and they have a very strong sense of modesty! They know their boundaries, they know how to move in society, they know how to impose limits to men, and yet they are not Muslim! So what's more important? Conforming to a shallow normative framework or trying to transmit values to children? Including boys by the way!”

Here the Islamic norm is redefined in order to favour individual considerations over traditions, in the light of the deconstruction of gendered norms.<sup>49</sup> According to Roy, the novelty of Islam in western countries lies precisely in the insistence on the notion of values, at the expense of the law.<sup>50</sup>

This discourse on the necessity of the „individualisation” of Islamic norms is a sign of the socialisation of the founders and headteachers of the three „restrictive” schools. They studied at university level, deployed theological, philosophical, anthropological references and produced their own sociology of Muslims in France during our interviews, distinguishing enlightened Muslims from the mass of working class Muslims. In return, their own claim of a spiritual rather than an inherited Islam can be seen as a good sign of their social position.<sup>51</sup>

## 6. Discussion

Muslim schools offer specific teachings, like Islamic Religious Education, which are not available in the secularised public education system.

44 Sedgwick 2015 [Anm. 36], Roy 2002 [Anm. 31].

45 Roy 2002 [Anm. 31], 109.

46 Mahmood, Saba: Politique de la piété. Le féminisme à l'épreuve du renouveau islamique, Paris 2009, 83–86.

47 Bowen, John: Can Islam be French? Princeton 2009; Roy, Olivier/Amghar, Samir: „L'islam de France”. In: Confluences méditerranée 57 (2006) 49–55.

48 Frégosi, Franck: Les contours discursifs d'une religiosité citoyenne: laïcité et identité islamique chez Tariq Ramadan. In: Dassetto, Felice (Hg.): Paroles d'islam. Individus, sociétés et discours dans l'islam européen contemporain, Paris 2000, 205–221.

49 Rochefort, Florence/Sanna, Maria E.: Normes religieuses et genre, Paris 2013.

50 Roy 2002 [Anm. 31], 15.

51 Altglas, Véronique/Wood, Matthew (Hg.): Bringing back the social into the sociology of religion. Critical approaches, Leiden – Boston 2018, 103

Some of them are spaces in which girls who wear a hijab can have access to education. Allowing pupils to wear headscarves, along with encouraging them to perform the ritual prayers, eat halal meals in the school canteen, and use a specific vocabulary in greetings and during classes, are a number of ways in which Muslim schools contribute to inculcating a specific habitus.<sup>52</sup>

However, not all nine schools in our sample allow their pupils to wear a hijab at the primary school level. They each fall somewhere on a spectrum that goes from authorising hijab without any restriction, which reverses the stigma associated with it, to banning headcoverings, hereby reinforcing the stigma, with the intent to promote a „progressive Islam“, or even a „French Islam“, released from such traditions as the veiling of young girls, that are perceived as oppressive.

All of our respondents are limited in their approaches by a „constrained discourse“<sup>53</sup>: the ones that allow elementary school pupils to wear a headscarf cannot use strictly Quranic arguments, as they would not be admissible by the authorities in the current setting of

laïcité. According to Portier,<sup>54</sup> the concept of French-style secularism has evolved towards notions of security, especially regarding visible, practicing Muslims. That's why the schools of our sample that do allow hijabs, deploy arguments on free will, first and foremost. The veil worn by pupils is never justified as a religious obligation, but rather as a childish and innocent practice of imitation.

As for the schools that ban the headscarf, they too are subjected to a „constrained discourse“. They cannot merely rely on the concept of laïcité to convince the parents that their policy is valid. That is why they also refer to Quranic and Islamic notions in order to appease contestation, arguing that the veil is not compulsory until a girl reaches puberty, and should never be a matter of obligation or simple imitation, but rather freely chosen.

In both cases, religious arguments are handled carefully, and never used on their own. In view of the literature on Islamic and Muslim schooling, we may wonder whether this euphemisation of religious discourse is specific or exclusive to the French context.

### ***Diane-Sophie Girin***

*PhD candidate at École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE), Paris Sciences et Lettres (PSL)  
Groupe Sociétés Religieuses, Laïcités UMR  
8582 (EPHE-CNRS)  
CNRS – Site d'Ivry-sur-Seine  
27, rue Paul Bert  
94 204 Ivry-sur-Seine Cedex*

*diane-sophie.girin@etu.ephe.fr*

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52 *Mahmood* 2001 [Anm. 35].

53 *Malogne-Fer, Gwendoline*: Les sciences sociales au secours des Églises protestantes. L'exemple du „mariage pour tous“. In: *Dargent, Claude/Fer, Yannick/Liogier, Raphaël* (Hg.): Science et religion, Paris 2017, 125.

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54 *Portier, Philippe*: Le tournant substantialiste de la laïcité française. In: *Horizontes Antropológicos* 52 (2018) 21–40.