

France Unveiled

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“La France dévoilée”

**Presented by
Robert Slabodnik
at the 78th Annual Convention of the
American Association of Teachers of
French
(AATF)**

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Robert Slabodnik, S-WHS French teacher, recently attended the 78th annual convention of the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF) held July 7-10 in Quebec City, Canada. A teacher for 9 years, Robert was an active participant in this unique gathering of more than 850 French teachers from around the U.S. and several other countries.

Robert gave a 75-minute cultural presentation titled "France Unveiled." France recently passed legislation banning Muslim headscarves and other religious symbols in public schools during the 2003-2004 school year (while Robert was serving a Fulbright Teacher Exchange in the French Alps). With the aid of thought-provoking photos and political cartoons, he presented the issue through both an historical lens and a modern context, and discussed the arguments of those who supported and opposed the ban. Robert is recognized as one of several national experts on this issue. He is currently researching the 1905 legislation of France's separation of church and state.

The AATF, founded in 1927, is the largest national association of French teachers in the world with approximately 10,000 members. It is organized around 75 local chapters and governed by an Executive Council of 18 members. Robert recently completed a two-year term as chapter president for Washington, Alaska, British Columbia and Alberta. National Headquarters are located at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. The AATF publishes the French Review and the National Bulletin and holds an annual convention which alternates between sites in Francophone countries such as Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, France and also in the U.S. Its award-winning Web site [www.frenchteachers.org] contains a multitude of information and materials of interest to French teachers at all levels. The AATF also sponsors the National French Contest and National French Week every year.

Quebec is the largest province in Canada and is overwhelmingly French speaking. Participants in the Quebec City convention were able to attend more than 200 sessions and workshops on literature, culture, linguistics and pedagogy by eminent specialists and practitioners. The keynote speakers for the convention were journalists, Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow, authors of the popular 60 Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong. Other guest speakers were featured from France, Quebec and Canada. Over 70 exhibitors from France, the U.S. and Canada participated, as well.

The convention was filled with sessions, discussions, and animated conversations about techniques for teaching French, promoting the study of French, and things to see and do in Quebec. AATF members were treated to special events such as a dictée, a reception sponsored by the Quebec government, round table discussions on French-Canadian music and the literature of Quebec, and, in addition, were able to enjoy the Quebec Music Festival which occurred at the same time. Those who wished were able to participate in a number of excursions including an evening at a Sugar Shack where participants learned about maple syrup and dined and danced, and an excursion along the Beaupré Coast of the St. Lawrence River.

The 2006 convention will be in Milwaukee. The theme will be cinema, and the keynote speaker will be Azouz Begag, the novelist, sociologist, and currently a minister in the French government. We invite all French teachers to join us.

Robert Slabodnik is pictured with Suzanne Hendrickson, AATF Region IX Representative from Arizona.

La France Dévoilée - France Unveiled

In the 1991 Yves Robert film “My Father’s Glory,” actor Philippe Caubere plays the role of Joseph, French public school teacher. He is a staunch promoter and defender of the secular Republic who lectures to his students that the 20th century will be a fabulous century – a great century where “every man will be guided and saved by education, where all men will be respected.”

In stark, sometimes comic contrast is his brother-in-law, Uncle Jules, equally a government “fonctionnaire” or civil servant, but also a devote Catholic who regularly attends church and understands enough Latin to pray.

When the secular Joseph learns that Jules receives communion twice a month, he expresses his disbelief and outrage by excoriating his in-law in front of his wife and children: *“a 37-yr old man, who studied law, a government employee!?! My liberalism will show him how broad-minded I am.”* Yet we sense that Joseph’s refusal to attend Jules and Roses’ church wedding may prove that he is not as broad-minded as he claims.

Occasionally, the film shows these two men verbally sparring with one another over their differences, an entertaining display of wit and repartee. We hear teacher Joseph sing a ribald tune of the day about the debased “Father Dupanloup” in his balloon; Catholic Jules reproaches Joseph for doing school work on the Sabbath. Joseph tells Jules that his religion forbids him to drink wine, and the religious Jules replies *“let me convert you!”*

Though the film is largely about Marcel Pagnol’s boyhood, it manages to touch the surface of a very significant era in the history of France at the beginning of the 20th century – la guerre des deux Frances, or the war of two Frances. A war engendered by the legal separation of church and state; an ideological war between the Republic’s principles of secularism and the Catholic church’s centuries-long influence of Christian teachings.

Over one hundred years later, France is experiencing another type of war, not the war in Iraq, which they unabashedly opposed, but another war that the media has labeled as “la guerre du voile” or the war of the veil. This war culminated in the passing of a national law in March 2004, in which all religious symbols are banned from public schools.

Both religious and political in nature, the French government’s position on the war seems incomprehensible to most Americans, [as was their opposition to our invasion of Iraq]. Even John Hanford, U.S. ambassador at large for international religious freedom, sharply questioned France’s intransigence on the issue, asking *“is it really necessary to be outlawing a people’s manifestation of their own faith?”*

I had the honor of spending the 2003-2004 school year as a Fulbright Exchange Teacher in the French Alps and was witness to this war of the veil. Teaching English in a culturally diverse high school of 1,000 students, I saw one of my own Muslim female students suspended at the beginning of the year for wearing her headscarf to school; I listened to her complaints of

suffering injustice in a country that purports to be a democracy; I heard administrators, teachers and students express opposing views on the issue.

Off-campus I started to hear local merchants, café-goers, and my own neighbors talking about the war. The war of the veil was on the front pages of newspapers and magazines, and late-night talk shows vigorously debated the matter.

It quickly came to a point where I had to ask myself: *"How can such a thing as a head scarf create such a problem? Only the French, right? But France is just as pluralistic a society as America and has shared democratic ideals with us for over 200 years. So what can explain this hot debate?"*

In what has proven to be an engrossing topic for the French and for one of its visiting American teachers, I have learned that the war of the veil speaks volumes about France. My study of this war led me to refresh my knowledge of French history after the Revolution - this included reading countless newspaper and magazine articles, several books and entertaining discussions with the French themselves.

To paraphrase authors Jean-Benoit Nadeau and Julie Barlow in their book *60 million Frenchmen can't be wrong*, one important thing I have learned in my study is that *"the French truly have their own reflex [to this issue] that is alien to we North Americans."* The French government's response to the veil was carefully crafted to suit this reflex, a culturally rooted reflex that has a complex history that strongly marks today's society.

As a fellow teacher of language and culture, it is my intention to help you understand this topic in its many layers of complexity. Through both a historical lens and a contemporary context, I hope to further shed some light on the French State's position on this matter. My main argument is that unless one understands the French State's "reflex" toward the subject of separation of church and state, one will have difficulty understanding the modern day war of the veil.

PBS seems to have beat me to the punch by airing a documentary on this very topic at the end of last August. But I remained undaunted, and proceeded with my research to provide Francophones and -philes a close-up look and appreciation of how France has struggled with the war of the veil.

Secularism à la française

If an American is going to comprehend the French debate surrounding the veil, it is crucial to remember two things.

The first is that France and the U.S. exercise two distinct types of secularism with different goals. To put it quite simply, from the early history of its Pilgrims, American secularism has always aimed at protecting religion from encroachments of the State. Conversely, French secularism has always aimed at protecting the State from an ascendancy of religion, notably the Catholic church.

The second thing to remember is that secularism is really the fourth religion of France.

The topic of secularism in France has always been closely linked with school. The French word for secularism, *“la laïcité,”* makes a French person immediately think of the rivalry between public and private schools, or even today’s Muslim veil. But secularism is also a concept of political philosophy that concerns the whole of society and not just its school system.

Françoise Subileau and Martine Barthélemy, researchers at the Centre d’étude de la vie politique française, have identified French secularism as a doctrine founded on humanist values and philosophic rationalist principles. It is an ideology the Republicans of the 19th century forged in order to build the unity of the French nation.

According to author Guy Haarscher:

“a secular society is one which respects the freedom of conscience, one in which the State guarantees the equality of rights for all of its people without any individual being discriminated for reason of his philosophic or religious choices.”

Based on this definition, how can France purport to be a secular State yet seem to infringe on the rights of individuals to display their religion?

To better understand this, we have to go back to the 17th century, to the time of an absolute monarchy legitimized by divine right. In recognition of its support for the monarchy, the French Catholic church obtained the privilege of controlling education. School was viewed as an instrument to supervise the nation’s children against the common enemy of the church and the monarchy – known as the Protestants (remember Louis XIV’s revocation of the Edict of Nantes?).

Come the French revolution in 1789, promoters of secularism also identified the school as a key crucible: it was the place of transmitting liberating knowledge, and they brought forth science and rationalism to combat religious philosophy. But even the revolution failed to establish a national school system.

Napoleon the First eventually made two decisions that would shape French society for years to follow: one was the decision to bring a semblance of uniformity to schools by remodeling its structure and content. The other has been identified as an attempt at compromise with the church, but also recognized as a means to limit church power. Napoleon's Concordat of 1801 granted the freedom of religion, and recognized Catholicism as “the religion of the great majority of the French.”

Curiously, this status remains today in the departments of Alsace and Moselle. These departments were actually German at the time of the official separation of church and state in 1905, and since the end of World War I they have retained a particular school status: religious instruction is available, though not required, in its public schools.

The Concordat provides for the public subsidy of the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran and the Calvinist churches, the Jewish religion and the teaching of these faiths in public schools. Even faculties of theology, one Catholic the other Protestant, are integrated within the University of Strasbourg.

The Concordat also makes the President of the Republic the only chief of state in the entire world who appoints clergy in the Lutheran church as well as Catholic bishops. Furthermore, appointed clergy of all four denominations receive their salaries directly from the state!

This only confirms what many of us French teachers know: the French are full of paradoxes.

Historian Alain Boyer notes that *la laïcité* became a ruling word that we can only understand by its opposition to a powerful clericalism in the 19th century, when the church sought to lead the state and impose a Christian doctrine on society. Keep in mind that the French church vigorously opposed secularism through the Restoration of 1814 and the Second Empire of Napoleon III (1852-1870) [and more recently, some say even through the Vichy government].

Throughout the 19th century the church protested the monopoly of state controlled education and eventually won concessions to open elementary schools (1833), secondary schools (1850) and finally post-secondary school instruction (1875). But in just a few short years came to power the Republicans, who vigorously sought to limit the power of the Catholic church, the traditional ally of royalists and the monarchy.

It's interesting that the word *la laïcité* did not enter the French dictionary until 1871. After the fall of Napoleon III's empire in 1870, the crush of the Paris Commune and the failures of re-establishing the monarchy, a solid Republican majority finally came to power in 1879. This led to a series of measures in favor of secularism: for example, the immediate suppression of an obligatory day of rest (Sunday), in 1879; the secularization of cemeteries in 1881; and the authorization of divorce in 1884.

The Republican government's strategy was to avoid a civil war and to favor the "evolution" of a secular lay spirit, rather than impose a series of laws. The "crucifix affair" is just one example. In 1882, they asked if crucifixes should be removed from public schools. The state called for the law to be applied:

"not as a law of violent struggle, but as one of the grand organic laws which are destined to live harmoniously with the country, to enter the morals and become part of its heritage."

Interestingly, crucifixes were still found in public schools shortly after the end of World War II.

Jules Ferry was Minister of Education in the early 1880s. For Ferry, access to science, not religious belief, was the necessary condition for democracy's progress. He succeeded in passing **the great law of March 28, 1882, which made primary education in France free, non-clerical and obligatory.**

This was exactly the non-clerical school in which elementary school teacher Joseph taught in the film "My Father's Glory." The war of two Frances now becomes more clear: Joseph the secularist Republican at odds with Jules, his Catholic brother-in-law.

Twenty years later, Emile Combes was elected President in 1902. A freemason and former seminarian, he undertook a merciless struggle against religious orders in France. He closed their schools and eventually forbid instruction by its members, who fled to other countries as a result.

Should you visit an active abbey or monastery in France today, you have only to inquire with a religious member as to the status of their community around 1905. Many were closed because private schooling was often the means by which religious communities earned their daily bread.

(In fact, today's war of the veil isn't the first time the Republic has confronted visible religious signs. In 1904, girls were excluded from schools because of the size of the crosses worn around their necks.)

During this time, the government used a combat vocabulary to remind people of the patience and strong will for the Republican idea of the secular nation state to triumph over the Church. Over time they referred to themselves as the "Secular Defense," the "coalition," even the name "Republican Front."

Even today's media uses words that hearken to this combative era, with titles like: "*Investigation on the enemies of the Republic*," "*the war of the veil*" and the defense of secularism as a "*battle ground*." One national deputy has said he prefers to face a crisis today in enforcing a law, with some friction and difficulties, over facing a "*civil war*" tomorrow.

Paradoxically, many modern secularists who support a law banning religious symbols do not hesitate to use religious vocabulary in their own speech. Take, for example, the use of the word "sanctuary" to refer to public schools. Though used to denote a place of refuge or protection, the word is rooted in the meaning of "a sacred place or shrine." It is a subtlety of speech like this that reminds us just how strongly the legacies of church and state remain in the conscience of French society.

Strict separation of church and state finally came with the controversial law of 1905. Article 1 states: "*The Republic assures liberty of conscience. She guarantees the free exercise of religion.*" Article 2 states: "*la République ne reconnaît, ne salarie, ni ne subventionne aucun culte – the Republic does not recognize, nor pay, nor subsidize any religion.*" Curiously, the word "secularism" does not figure in this historic law. In fact, the term "secular" only appeared in the 1958 Constitution of the 5th Republic.

As a result of the law, churches, synagogues, temples and cathedrals built before 1905 at the taxpayers' expense now became, and remain, the property of the state and the cities. It's interesting to note that in modern France, should a church building be rented to another group, the rental fee is payable to the commune (city), not the church!

French historian Emile Poulat summarizes it this way:

"What is "separation" [of church and state], really, in which the State guarantees the free exercise of religion, yet reserves control over the majority of religious buildings that cover the landscape? There is no separation of possessions or property. It's as if a married couple decided to divorce yet wanted to keep sleeping in the same bed. They are forever condemned to get along with one another."

One of the first complications the state faced on this law of separation were religious parades occurring outside places of worship. Many mayors declared: "No religious processions in public spaces." Between 1906 and 1930, 139 arrests were appealed and only three were unsuccessful.

Of course, one of the particularities about French secularism is that most, but not all, of the country's 9,000 private schools (a vast majority of them Catholic), are not financed independently but receive close to 80% of their money from the state. They are under contract with the state to teach a required curriculum and to adhere to nation-wide standardized testing. This status was achieved in 1959, known as the Debré Law, under the conservative government of Charles DeGaulle.

Demolition of Secularism?

Some writers have said that the demolition of secularism began in 1989 when Minister of Education, Lionel Jospin, was confronted with the issue of the veil at a middle school in Creil, northern France. Three girls wore headscarves to their school and the principal would not let them in, which started a national controversy. Even a request by the King of Morocco that the girls not offend the French population by "brandishing such a distinctive feature" seems to have proven ineffective.

At the time, Jospin refused to set a policy on headscarves and asked France's Conseil d'Etat, or Council of State, to make a ruling.

The Council declined, saying it was up to the individual school administrators to decide whether or not to allow scarves:

Three years later in 1992, the Council of State seemed to reverse itself, and set a precedent by canceling the "interior rule / règle intérieure" of the Montfermeil middle school, which had refused entry to two students who wore the veil.

The rest of the 1990s saw the French government wrestle with the veil issue. Analysts say that the murky responses or indecisiveness stemmed in part from judges who felt an old colonial guilt, the trauma of the Algerian war. Supposedly, they were convinced that colonization was a huge and abominable undertaking of dehumanization, that they were scared of further undermining specific minority cultures within France.

In any case, the Council of State never declared itself for or against the veil, only on procedures that had not been respected, such as automatic school suspension or expulsion as decided by school principals. As one high school principal recently summed it up before the 2004 law:

"In our national education system we receive orders for how to do everything, except how to address the veil. We have been taken hostage for some time now because we don't want to see the veil in school, yet nor do we want to shut out girls who wear it. For to refuse girls entry to school means depriving them of contact with others and doubting the liberating power of a public education. We have been excluding when we should be integrating these girls."

The Climate

There seem to be several general reasons to explain the renewed debate surrounding this war of the veil. The first comes from the ultra-secularist camp, which has been accused of assembling its troops around a new cause - Muslim fundamentalism. Their secular attack has countered the positive tone toward religions as expressed by Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin.

In a March 2003 interview for Le Point magazine, Raffarin called for *"a secularism which expresses individual liberties, not a negative secularism. Let's not be afraid of religions."* He seems to have been supporting views of Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy who, a week earlier, had said *"we must rid secularism of the foul smell of past sectarianism and fanaticism."*

The second would seem to be a much less respectable reason: the anti-veil crusade could well be the mark of anti-Muslim racism. Since 9/11, Islamophobia has been freely expressed and has been a rich topic for controversial writers such as Michel Houellebecq, Oriana Fallaci, and even Brigitte Bardot. In October of 2002, at the city hall of Evry, there was an exhibit dedicated to Israel. One panel had to be removed shortly after the opening, as it had the following to say about Arabs:

"Harsh and undisciplined, as much a friend of plunder as he is an enemy of work, the Arab pillages and lays waste, uneducated, having no law other than the Koran and backward traditions more or less debased."

A third reason has been described as an internal crisis of thought on behalf of the political left and the Socialist party, the party in power throughout the 1980s and most of the 90s. They have been accused of having supported multiculturalism à la française. Multiculturalism was popularly preached by SOS-Racisme in the 1980s and recently, people like Jack Lang and Bernard Henri-Lévy affirm to having been "naïve" on the issue of the veil.

The Debate

Today there are multiple debates behind the veil: a theological debate for Muslims to cut through; a social debate on what secularism should be like in school; and an even wider social debate on French identity. I think the latter two debates are for the Republic and each of its citizens, as well as all of you assembled here today.

In the fall of 2003, the public debate took the form of the Stasi commission, named after Bernard Stasi. Jacques Chirac set up the commission in July to study how France's secular ethic should be applied. It was applauded as a move to satisfy a changing, increasingly diverse France without compromising secularism. Shortly before creating the Commission, Jacques Chirac said he saw no interest in a law forbidding the veil.

To give you an idea of the scope of work undertaken by the Stasi commission, the Archbishop of Paris and Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger called it "*a profound psychoanalysis of the French conscience.*" Others have simply called it a catharsis of the Republic.

Several high-profile instances seem to have spurred the creation of the commission. A young Muslim woman fired by her private company was reinstated to her job by French courts in December of 2002. In January of 2003, two Parisian officials called for a revision of the 1905 law separating church and state as they questioned the use of public funds to help the construction of mosques.

Later that spring, a female lawyer who wanted to take an oath in front of an appeals court with her head covered was denied. Also in the spring, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy reminded the Union of Islamic Organization in France (UOIF) that the veil is prohibited on national photo identification papers - the large assembly immediately booed him.

And just several weeks before the commission's creation, a veiled woman was refused entrance to the French Senate's hemicycle (chamber), being told by security that "the veil is forbidden inside."

Twice a week for over two months, the Stasi commission heard from over a total of 140 "witnesses." They came from all walks of life and ranged in faith from free masons and Muslims to representatives of the Orthodox Church, Buddhists and Jews.

Naturally, the commission heard from both advocates and opponents of a law banning the veil and other religious symbols. But what caught public attention were the witnesses who testified to the stretching of rules of the lay Republic, not just by Muslims but by other religious faiths, as well. Women refusing medical examinations by male doctors, students refusing to pass oral exams with a teacher of the opposite sex, students refusing to read Voltaire because he was atheist, and middle school students wearing PLO scarves.

Others included kippas worn in high schools and by hospital interns, public swimming pool hours adjusted to admit Jewish or Muslim women only, and innumerable medical certificates releasing veiled girls from physical education classes. One case that shocked many was the refusal of some Muslim fathers to shake the hands of female school principals.

In any event, members of the Stasi Commission were all too unanimous to say that if a firm decision had been laid down in 1989, the situation would not be where it is today.

"NON" to legislation

As early as 2003, teachers, secularists and feminists launched a petition on the theme of "Yes to secularism, no to laws of exception", arguing that the secular school should receive everybody.

Manuel Valls, PS deputy from Essonne and mayor of Evry said:

"We cannot earn respect for the nation's values and the Republic by a ban. Secularism is a struggle that cannot be regulated by law. It can only properly function as a value shared by all. To lawfully forbid religious signs - and let's not hide from the fact that it's essentially about Islam - would be to make a symbol out of the veil. Such intransigence would only accent the separation between French Muslims and the rest of the people and would pressure some to educate their children in fundamentalist Islamic schools."

Alain Bertho of the Communist Party said:

"Those who advocate by law such tools of liberation do not realize that they risk becoming tomorrow's tools of oppression. Secularism is the neutrality of the State with respect to people and not the ban of the expression of personal choice."

Some argued that largely subsidized, Catholic schools peacefully prosper in France yet don't have to fear hanging crucifixes in their classrooms. In other words, how do you explain to a young Muslim that she has to take off her scarf while she has no possibility of recourse to a school where she can hang her own religious symbol?

Indeed, many say that by excluding veiled girls from school, they risk sending them back to fundamentalist communities that exacerbate the situation than if they were at school.

Alain Madelin of the Liberal Democrats said a law would be a sign of weakness for the Republic. *"Exclude? Wait and see the development of Koranic schools under contract with the state"* [just like Catholic schools are "sous contrat d'association"]. Currently, there is one private Muslim high school in Lille - Lycée Averroës - with an enrollment of some 10 girls.

Gerard Aschieri, president of the FSU (Federal Union of National Education) said his organization is opposed to a law banning religious signs:

"Those favoring a law are leaning on a certain number of incidents sometimes blown out of proportion, while forgetting that education has been able to reduce such incidents...but everybody knows that by "religious signs" it's really the veil that is targeted, while others like kippas and crucifixes, or those marking an ideological engagement, don't even raise indignation."

Indeed, national education reports have indicated that the actual majority of schools manage the veil issue much more realistically than the media and certain intellectuals will admit. In the majority of instances, a case-by-case management finds a practical compromise with Muslim girls - incidents are managed peacefully and with discretion. One principal of a school of 1,500 has some 60 girls wearing the veil. He says he wants *"the values of the Republic to win through dialogue and not expulsion."*

According to former Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, there were 1,256 cases of veiled girls at the start of the 2003 school year, of which 20 were considered "difficult" and four of which led to student expulsion. He then asked: *"So are we going to ask all French children to remove their baptismal medals just because four girls were expelled?"* He remains outspoken in his opposition to the law.

Not surprisingly, most religious groups were opposed to a legal ban on religious symbols. Pastor Marcel Manoël of the Reformed Church of France deplored that the veil issue had become *"a mountain out of a molehill."*

Representatives from the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches addressed a communal statement to Chirac voicing their opposition to a law against the veil. Jean-Pierre Ricard, president of the French conference of bishops, did not want to see any one group stigmatized, and recalled the hard position the Church faced in 1905. He suggested that Islam be given time to adapt: *"A law not only risks promoting the sentiment they are not liked but also that religions are to be put aside."* He and many others saw no problem laying aside new legal religious holidays for Aïd el Kébir and Yom Kippour.

The surprising exception to this position taken by different faiths was that taken by the Union of Islamic Organizations of France (UOIF). Many in the government view the UOIF with mistrust because they see it as a springboard for Muslim fundamentalism.

In fall of 2003, UOIF acknowledged that they were in favor of a law that would ban the veil and other signs, even though they've lobbied against the idea since 1989. According to UOIF, if the veil were forbidden it'd be easier to argue with the young girls from a theological point of view. Muslim theologians could invoke the concept of "darouat" or "the state of necessity", which in Muslim law requires believers to submit to civil laws when they contravene religious prescriptions. Prior to the legalized ban on religious signs, the ambiguity on the veil had put the UOIF in an awkward position for many years because they were unable to invoke the respect of a civil law.

31 Varieties of the Veil

Abaya, burqa, hidjab, niqab, tchador, or foulard - the veil takes on many different forms and names throughout the Muslim world.

To understand the views of those who favor legislation, it is perhaps best to first try to understand what the veil represents, why young Muslim women are wearing it at all. The key word here is "try" because personal motives for wearing the veil are as numerous as the interpretations surrounding the veil. As author Jacqueline Costa-Lascoux has said: *"There is a sociological and psychological diversity to the wearing of the veil."* To even want to sum up all of its meanings into one is too simplistic.

Just as some might dare seek a visible body piercing or wear a G-string that is visible above the waistline, there are some girls who have said they wear it as an expression of rebellion, usually against the will of their parents.

Others wear it to assert their identity. Young people of the third or fourth generation who are born in France are often perceived as "whites" in North Africa while in France they're "Arabs." However, since the Republic has always advocated an assimilationist rhetoric, "minorities" have never officially existed (e.g. an official French census does not ask citizens for their ethnic or country of origin, nor their religious affiliation).

Thus, as some adolescents try to piece together the semblance of an identity there arises a stunning paradox: the veil now serves to distinguish oneself from the crowd, when traditionally it served the opposite. As one journalist wrote: *"one can easily say about these young people 'Je me voile, donc je suis' - I wear the veil, therefore I am.* So for some, the veil has come to abandon its first function, to hide from the stares of others and now instead attracts them.

Perhaps most controversial are the girls who wear it to make their bodies appear sacred and to protect themselves from sexual aggression or physical abuse within their community or even family. In this case, the veil serves as a "pass protection" from men. A recent in-depth Vanity Fair article written by Marie Brenner reports that when the veil is worn for this reason it can tend to class girls into one of two categories: those who don't wear it are considered sluts ("les taspés") while those who do are saints. The perceived sluts are sometimes the targets of physical violence, including rape.

The Vanity Fair investigation reveals that thousands of young Muslim girls are trapped in strict Muslim families and forced into wearing the veil, forced into arranged marriages and sometimes are brutalized for seeking the freedoms that the Republic offers.

But then there are some sociological studies that currently show girls are rarely manipulated by Islamic associations or their parents. Often they choose the veil as a personal choice, just as a student will choose to color her hair red or get her belly button pierced. Many girls claim "C'est mon choix" (It's my choice), bringing to mind the title of a popular television show.

At the beginning of my Fulbright Teacher Exchange assignment, I came to know a young woman born in France of Algerian parents. I will call her Fatiha, not her real name. She was in my première STT class, the academic track that has the lowest prestige in France - a track that is too often full of teens born into immigrant families.

By all measures Fatiha is an average student who struggles with several of her classes. Though Arabic is the language spoken at her home, she was one of my top students in English and has studied it for six years. At the time, she was currently under way with her fourth year of Spanish. Perhaps typical of any teen, her interests include playing soccer, watching tv (she loves the series "Smallville," "Charmed," and "ER"), going to the movies with friends, eating at MacDonalds and at Turkish kebab restaurants.

After the third day of school, Fatiha was suspended for a week by the principal because she stood firm in her belief on the right to wear her headscarf to school. According to Fatiha, wearing the headscarf is a choice to protect her from the status of "woman-as-object." Since 9/11, she thinks that being a Muslim in France is to be suspect, even worse when one wears the veil. Nevertheless, she embraces the headscarf as an integral part of her religious faith. She wants to succeed in her studies and put a stop to prejudices such as Arabic = school failure = Islam = oppressed woman. She at one point asked me if Americans are as racist as the French.

I will always remember Fatiha for her strong opinions, for her willingness to engage in class debate, and for what happened to her at the time of *la rentrée* in France of 2003.

Psychologist José Morel Cinq-Mars asserts that the veil in France today stems from a logic all its own:

"The type of veil that seeks to hide the female body seems to correspond to a resurgence of machismo, which one could define as a fear and hate of the feminine. The willingness to veil women - a trait of all monotheistic religions - can translate as a fear of the all-powerful feminine and an irrational distrust of the ability of women to excite a man's senses and to drive wild.

When a man has been raised in a culture where he only sees veiled women, to discover one who is unveiled has the same effect as a strip-tease dancer on a man who is used to seeing western clothing styles. It doesn't matter what culture a man is from. What is exciting is the unveiling, the forbidden or impossible that is now allowed to be seen.

Furthermore, some women who wear the veil think of men as being powerful rapists. Happiness, then, is being able to live from the shelter of such male desires. Some thus choose to wear the veil for a sense of peace. It's a radical way to escape the game of seduction. But the veil is a symptom of the failure to learn how to co-exist. It is a bad response to a good question: how do you deal with the desires of another when you don't even want to arouse nor respond to them?"

Sociologist Leïla Babès points out that there is hypocrisy in our Western cultures on the subject of veiled women:

"Why do we respect religious sisters or devout Catholics who are veiled or wear a head cover to church? From early depictions of the Virgin Mary to modern extravagant bridal gowns, the veil is loved and appreciated in the West through painting, song and literature. It gives a sense of the sacred to the sexual. But do secularists curse these representations? Do they find shocking a bride's veil delicately lifted up in church for a ceremonial first kiss?"

Author Costa-Lascoux has said that France should follow the Anglo-Saxon model and completely banalise religious expression or accommodate it. That is, accept it so as to avoid sequestering it in the homes and religious communities.

Either way, she and many others are unanimous in saying that the Republic needs to make secularism better understood by its citizens - provide better training for teachers, teach the philosophy of the Rights of Man, teach a pluralist history of religions in schools. Teaching colonial and post-colonial history, for example, would permit students of Muslim origin to feel as part of French history and to value the role Muslims have played in the Republic.

"OUI" to legislation

Those who have argued for legislation to ban religious symbols have proposed arguments that range from young girls becoming socially isolated, to Muslim fundamentalists who are trying to chip away at secularism.

Hanifa Cherifi, mediator for the national education system, affirms that before being an attack on secularism, the veil works against the integration of the youth who wear it. In today's secular France, a young veiled woman will have problems integrating, in school today and in a professional life tomorrow. CNED - the National Center for Distance Learning - has become the school of many Muslim girls who have been rejected by regular schools yet who are still subjected to academic obligations.

Chahdortt Djavann, an Iranian immigrant and author of the widely popular "Bas les voiles!" (Down with the veils!) writes that in a ghetto milieu which ignores Republican laws, where children of immigrants haven't learned or seen them, *"to put on a veil is a sign of submission to aggression. To accept the veil is to recognize de facto the legitimacy of violence towards women."*

Toki Saïfi, Secretary of State for long-term development, says the young generation of Muslim immigrants has "regressed." Of Muslim origin though no longer practicing herself, she is fiercely opposed to the veil:

"In the second generation, this phenomenon wasn't known. My mother who is 70 tells me: "this isn't Islam. We did everything to free ourselves, from the weight of traditions, and now I see a total regression on the status of women."

It is widely recognized that the first generation of Muslim women in France in the 1970s rarely wore the veil. Yet their daughters seem to have "rediscovered" it. Is it a matter of pious faith or a sign of fundamentalist Islam? Simple faith, say most girls.

But Leïla Babès, professor on the sociology of religions at the Catholic University in Lille, says the veil has become a political instrument of Islamic fundamentalism, that the veil masks a fundamentalist Islamic attack against secularism:

"The rise of the veil is not specific to France, not even Europe. It's even the same in Muslim countries around the world, where fundamentalism has been on the rise for some years now. The phenomenon had only to cross the Mediterranean."

She is not alone in voicing concern that the veil hides a larger issue, that of radical Islam. Prime Minister Raffarin insisted that the March law was needed to defend French institutions against "encroaching extremism."

It's true that more non-Muslims are converting to the religion, some 50,000 in the last 10 years, according to a government report. Whether one returns to the faith or converts, identifying with Islam poses a problem for some young people. French security forces have started to perceive young male converts as potential terrorist recruits.

For example, in an adjacent town to where I taught as a Fulbright Exchange teacher, two brothers aged 18 and 20 were arrested in December 2003. They supposedly had received terrorist training in the foothills of Mont Blanc and also in Afghanistan. They were on put trial in the Netherlands in the summer of 2004.

According to Jacques Millard, elected deputy the National Assembly, this is part of a disturbing trend:

"The veil is just a façade for something that goes deeper. Gender equality is being challenged – refusing to have a female teacher if you're a male – refusing to go to the school pool because you'll have to undress – and not being able to pray during classes – a whole mental process is being launched. But all French citizens must learn that there is a religious and a public realm. And public life is ruled by laws of the Republic, not religious laws."

Communist Party member and sociologist Alain Touraine recently said:

"We cannot ignore the repeated attacks against the rationalist principles and the equality between sexes. Our priority is to act against attacks which confirm the inferiority of women and the erosion of what allows us to live together."

Islam Made in France

The leader of prayer in a Muslim mosque is known as an “*imam*” and only about 10% of imams in France are citizens – and studies suggest that only about half of all imams speak French. Most imams come from Arab countries, where some have been trained in radical Islamic views that clash with France's secular laws.

Part of the current social problem is a dearth of domestically trained clerics to lead congregations of French-born Muslims. Consequently, mosques usually rely on imported imams or self-proclaimed clerics who sometimes espouse fundamentalist beliefs.

In April of 2004, the imam in a suburb of Lyon was expelled for advocating wife beating, stoning and other medieval-like Islamic views. He was one of at least five imams who have been expelled in the past year for radical teachings. Interior minister Dominique de Villepin said:

"The government cannot tolerate the public statement of views that are contrary to human rights, attack the dignity of women and call for hate or violence."

As a result, the French government has been pushing for its own moderate "French Islam." For some 10 years, it has helped sponsor three training institutes where future imams can spend eight years in school: two to master Arabic, four for theology and two to memorize the Koran.

One of the institute directors, Iraqi native Zuhair Mahmood, says that 75% of the funding now comes from French Muslims: "These new imams should be able to preach in French and know France very well so that they can help Muslims integrate into society."

He points out that there are some politicians who still have a colonialist view, one of superiority over Islam, and think they can choose which kind of Islam should suit the Republic: "*Some want us to say that the head scarf is not part of our religion, but we refuse this,*" he says.

Stasi recommendations

A week before the Stasi commission made its recommendations to the president, surveys showed that approximately 69% of French people were in favor of a law prohibiting religious symbols in schools.

The Stasi Commission made 26 recommendations to President Chirac on December 11th. Of these, President Chirac said he would only consider a law banning ostensible religious signs in public schools and a law forbidding patients to refuse medical treatment by a doctor of the opposite sex.

The French senate and national assembly passed the law in March, which focused solely on banning religious signs in public schools. Not surprisingly, it was widely understood to target Islam and the veil. Thousands took to the streets charging it as discriminatory, an attack on freedom of religion and a form of racism. They defended the veil as a personal choice, not an obligation forced on them.

The Veil elsewhere

In the United Kingdom, whose Muslim population is approximately 3%, there is no ban on religious symbols in the public sphere. As a result, one sees policemen and women wearing Sikh turbans and Muslim headscarves. Great Britain even passed a law in the 1970s that exempts turban-wearing Sikhs from wearing helmets while riding a motorcycle!

In Germany, where Muslims also comprise an estimated 3% of the population (mostly Turkish), the veil is permitted in schools for students, teachers and public employees. However, within the past year the debate has reached a point where some regions have started to ban it for Muslim teachers.

For Spain and Italy, Muslims represent less than 1% of the population and the veil is authorized in schools. However, Muslim immigration belongs to men in these countries and demographic experts say they are like where France was in the 1960s and early 70s. The problem of the veil could very well manifest itself when financial stability allows wives and daughters to rejoin their husbands and fathers.

In Belgium, the veil is generally accepted in public schools, although principals can issue their own rules on the matter. As for the Netherlands, which has one of the largest percentage of Muslims for a western European nation (5%, many Indonesians), the veil's presence is decided by the school principal and there is a current debate on the subject.

In comparison with a larger Europe, it seems that the issue of the veil is most crucial in France. Why isn't it as large a problem elsewhere? According to Le Monde reporter Henri Tincq, there are three general reasons:

- 1) Muslim immigration is notably inferior in these countries compared to France, where estimates put the Muslim population at 8%. Some demographers predict that by 2020 France could be 25% Muslim;
- 2) historically, other nations have experienced less social conflict between religion and the state;
- 3) other immigration policies have simply proven more effective than in France.

The heart of the problem?

According to L'Express magazine journalist Bisma Lahouri (who is of Algerian origin), the crux of the matter is how do the French live peacefully with a large group that is essentially North African and Muslim? There exists in France a conflict where two groups of people don't understand each other. There are the French, be it the state or the school, saying the minority should bend to the majority, not the reverse. Critics say that unfortunately, expecting the minority to conform to the majority pretty much sums up the French notion of assimilation.

There is a memorable chapter from the recent PBS documentary titled Young, Muslim and French. It shows scenes from the October 2001 soccer match between the French national team and Algeria - a first ever encounter for the two where emotions evidently were running

high. It was a match that represented a reconciliation of sorts between the two countries - the colonizer and the colonized.

Despite the attendance of France's Prime Minister and other politicians, young French Algerians booed the French national anthem. Twelve minutes before the end of an imminent French victory, the field was invaded by hundreds of young men carrying Algerian flags. The government members in attendance were in shock. Most of France quickly realized these people were not happy and the government's inertia was perceived as the failure of 30 years of immigration policy in France – a tremendous blow to the French establishment.

Many people say that the veil isn't the real question, that politicians have invented this new law to distract public opinion from the real problems: unemployment and poorly conceived public housing projects. In fact, the plight of children of immigrants who are being asked to integrate when they are already third generation and were born here is heavily criticized.

One recommendation that the Stasi Commission made to President Chirac was the eradication of urban ghettos or cités. When the media reports on these public housing projects, it is too often about violence, drugs and crime. What is less reported is that up to 30% of the young people here are unemployed, more than twice the national average. Even more sober is the fact that France's prison population is more than 50% Muslim.

Before the law was passed in March, many French people said that legislative action would need to be accompanied by efforts that address social integration, social mobility and housing. If little effort is made, then the government only reinforces the idea of victimization that many Muslims are claiming.

A joint letter by leaders from the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches reminded Chirac that Islamic identity is most often found in the ghettos, which France has allowed to develop in the suburbs of cities. This is why any law will have no "efficacité" unless it is accompanied by measures that aim at strengthening social bonds for the citizens of the Republic.

In the December 2003 speech that outlined his consideration of the Stasi Commission's report, President Chirac addressed the young people of immigrant families by denouncing *"the persistence, indeed the worsening of inequality between difficult neighborhoods and the rest of the country which lies about the equality of opportunity."*

Chirac spoke of the need to *"break the wall of silence and indifference which surrounds discrimination."* He finished his remarks by saying that *"equality of opportunity has always been the fight of the Republic. For me and the government, it is a major challenge and a requirement. We have a lot of progress to make."*

La Rentrée 2004

Last September in France, approximately 240 young women came to the first day of school wearing a veil. Among them, 170 immediately accepted to remove it at the request of their principal. For the remaining 70, dialogue between school administrators and concerned families was the first step.

According to my principal at Lycée Guillaume Fichet, back-to-school time was a smooth affair, despite a certain anxiety among the teaching staff. This anxiety was heightened by media attention and the fact that almost all politicians were speaking about the issue.

My French teacher colleagues were unanimous in saying everyone more or less shared the goal of enforcing the national law and that they were committed to a message of inclusion, not exclusion.

To simultaneously complicate matters, militants took hostage in Iraq two French journalists. The Islamic Army of Iraq demanded that France revoke its legislation against religious symbols.

Paradoxically, French Muslims rallied behind the government's decision to rest firm in their decision on the legislation. By classic public demonstrations as only the French can do, French Muslims essentially told the hostage-takers that they should stay out of France's domestic affairs. Olivier Roy, a leading French scholar of Islam said:

"We have seen an extraordinary display of national unity by the Muslim community here saying, 'First, we are French.' They may disagree on the law of the veil but they are saying, 'This is our fight and don't interfere.' This is a pivotal moment in the unity of our country."

Concluding thoughts

As any French teacher here who has been familiar with France for at least the last 20 years can attest, the France we thought we knew is no longer the France that is. With an estimated 5 million Muslims (most of Algerian origin), France has the largest Muslim community in Western Europe. Regrettably, these French Muslims are seen as "Muslims" and no longer as "French."

Historian Emile Poulat has said the following about the war of the veil: *"The more we talk about it, the less we know what it's all about."*

Some say that France should not fear the assertion of identity by some of its people. Yet to say this is to disregard the French reflex toward its various communities ever since the revolution. It is a reflex that Spanish journalist Miguel Bastenier has described as "the Republican steamroller."

Dominique Moïsi recently said that in France the citizens of the Republic do not belong to communities, they belong to the Republic. Unlike the United States, the French state created the nation, and its different communities, regions, ethnic groups, language groups, even the

Catholic Church, were all seen as obstacles to a centuries-long process of centralizing state power.

I contend that unless one understands the history that created this steamroller reflex, one will have difficulty understanding the position of the French State on the subject of the veil.

Authors Nadeau and Barlow argue that the concept of the common good strongly exists in France because the French value the good of all above the individual good: *"The intérêt general can cancel out civil liberties, so it can lead to the best or the worst."* This has created a strong ethic of public service to citizens and has been integral to centralization of the State's power.

Nadeau and Barlow also say that the French State has always been openly anti-sectarian. To quote from their book:

"The State is not opposed to religious sects, per se, but it does regard any attempt to build a community life around religion with suspicion, as such ties may rival ties to the French State. People around the world may view this as rabid intolerance, but they are overlooking the national obsession the French have with assimilation. After the revolution, assimilation meant breaking ties to local cultures (Breton, Occitan, Basque, etc.), but today its objective is to break immigrants' ties to foreign cultures."

Yet this is exactly what many young French Muslims like my student Fatiha question. She told me the following:

"The veil is associated with a foreign country, so here I come with my "foreign, Algerian, background." But they shouldn't talk about assimilation... Why should I 'assimilate' when I was born in France, I have French papers, I speak French, I go to French schools. Why are they talking about assimilation?"

"Apparently, because my parents weren't born here, I should try to assimilate. But assimilation goes both ways; if I have to assimilate then people have to accept me. Being born here, having French papers, I don't understand why I should have to assimilate."

As one imam was reported to say: *"French society rejects our young people, they cannot assimilate and find a place. To take refuge in Islam is to acknowledge they cannot find their place."*

A century after its "war of two Frances," France is confronted with considerable growing pains again. Is secularism threatened in France today? Is it a radical Islam or schoolgirls who wear their headscarves that threaten Republican ideals? Or is it the inequalities, the discrimination, unemployment, the cités, the marginalized immigrants and their children who are excluded from social reforms?

Faced with such questions, it's good to recall the words of Jean Jaurès, a leader of the French socialist movement in the early 1900s:

"The French Republic must be secular and social. She will remain secular because she will have respected her social dimensions."