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John R. Bowen: Why the French Don't Like Headscarves

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IN EARLY 2004, the French government passed a law prohibiting from public schools any clothing that clearly indicated a pupil's religious affiliation. Although worded in a religion-neutral way, everyone understood the law to be aimed at keeping Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in school. The law was based on recommendations issued in late 2003 by two prestigious commissions, one formed by the Parliament, the other appointed by President Jacques Chirac (the Stasi Commission). Their hearings and the media coverage of the issue depicted grave dangers to French society and its tradition of secularism (*laïcité*) presented by Islamic radicalism, a trend toward "communalism," and the oppression of women in the poor suburbs. Although some Muslims objected that the proposed law would violate their right to express religious beliefs and many observers doubted that a law banning scarves would seriously address the severe problems of integration in French society, the two commissions voted with near-unanimity for the law, and the measure passed with large majorities in the National Assembly and in the Senate. It went into effect in September 2004.

The debate and votes perplexed many observers. French public figures seemed to blame the headscarves for a surprising range of France's problems, including anti-Semitism, Islamic fundamentalism, growing ghettoization in the poor suburbs, and the breakdown of order in the classroom. A vote against headscarves would, we heard, support women battling for freedom in Afghanistan, schoolteachers trying to teach history in Lyon, and all those who wished to reinforce the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Given that relatively few disputes over scarf-wearing ever went beyond the classroom and that virtually no one accused scarf-wearing girls

of presenting a serious danger to French society, why was a law that would force them to choose between leaving their scarves at home or leaving school be seen as such a broad palliative for France's social ills and such an important step for women everywhere? Why focus on this issue above all others? The French actions puzzled most of the world; many people saw it as at best a misplaced concern and at worst a violation of religious freedom.

It seemed to me that the law, and its broad support, should be explained. I realized that doing so would require unpacking a great deal about France, including France's very particular history of religion and the state, the great hopes placed in the public schools, ideas about citizens and integration (and the challenge posed by Muslims and by Islam to those ideas), the continued weight of the colonial past, the role of television in shaping public opinion, and the tendency to think that passing a law will resolve a social problem. I would then need to show how all these dimensions of French memory, society, and ways of thinking combined to move the political machinery toward passage of a law during 2003–2004. But I also wished to see what we could learn about France from the debates over the law. It seemed to me that its passage was one of those key moments in a country's life at which certain anxieties and assumptions come to the surface, when people take stock of who they are and of what kind of social life they wish to have.

I begin this volume by examining the long-term institutional arrangements that govern relations among the state, religion, and the individual in France. The key term in the debates about the law has been *laïcité*, a word that is particularly difficult to translate and that I leave in French throughout the book. As a philosophy about religion's place in politics and society, it can be translated as "secularism." But the word came late to the French language, and it does not appear in the major law (of 1905) regulating the status of religions. That law only restrains the state from subsidizing or extending special recognition to any one religion. In France's very recent history, *laïcité* has become one of those "essentially contested concepts," such as "freedom" and "equality," that provide resources for arguments, not starting points of agreement.¹

Laïcité does not, therefore, serve as a useful analytical tool. It makes no sense for a social scientist or historian to ask, "Does this policy reinforce

laïcité?”—although it makes great sense for a politician to do so.² I prefer to ask how French public figures understand the proper relationships among religion, the state, and the individual, and how they justify their arguments and policies in terms of concepts such as laïcité, Republicanism, and equality. Here I practice an “anthropology of public reasoning,” which allows us to see connections among political philosophy, public policy, and common sense by studying how people deliberate about an important social issue.³

Indeed, throughout this volume I draw on French works of philosophy and sociology as guides to more widely distributed ways of thinking about religion and society in France. Making this connection may seem tendentious. I find, however, that French politicians, writers about public affairs, television “talking heads,” and philosophers are much more likely to read one another’s work, be related to one another, or indeed be the same person than is the case in most in other countries. Academics strive to write newspaper columns, politicians cite current best-sellers on domestic policy, and television producers have their newest books reviewed by academics. The mechanisms of promotion and review in France help to explain a phenomenon that everyone denounces but in which everyone participates: *la pensée unique*, a single way of thinking. Public intellectuals, editors, and producers are caught up in webs of reciprocal promotion; it would be an unusually independent thinker who could free her- or himself. Because these intellectuals aspire to become well known in the public arena as well as (or sometimes instead of) being respected as humanists or social scientists, they are subject to unusually strong channeling forces.⁴ Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of this sort of public intellectual life, it means that intellectual writings provide relatively well-organized versions of orientations that one finds in popular writings, television programs, and political speeches.

But the philosophies, laws, histories, and attitudes about the role of the state in religious life do not explain why the appearance of Muslim schoolgirls wearing headscarves became a recurrently divisive issue. It is not exactly right, for example, to say that religion remains entirely “private” in France. Leaving aside the legacies of Catholicism, we note that the French state and municipal governments have endeavored to aid Muslims in building mosques, to provide graveyard space for Muslim

burials, and to create a highly public quasi-state Muslim council. In doing so, they give official recognition to Islamic bodies. The state will certainly recognize and subsidize Islamic private schools by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. As we shall see in the next two chapters, this degree of state involvement in religious affairs is part of the French tradition. Why, then, did scarves in schools create a scandal?

It was not, of course, the scarves in and of themselves. This book's title is intended to be provocative, not sociologically precise. Many French women wear some sort of scarf, and many Muslims wearing Islamic dress are French. But these bits of cloth came to stand for certain fears and threats at several specific moments and because of several historical processes and events. In the second section of this book, I trace the gradually developing public presence of Islam in France. The story begins with colonial rule in North Africa, picks up the pace in 1989 with the first "headscarf affair," and moves to a still higher velocity in early 2003, when a bandwagon (or steamroller) heads toward passage of the law. This part of the story is largely about politics: about how anxieties over domestic and international threats combined at certain times to produce a set of opportunities for politicians. At three such moments, in 1989, 1993–1994, and 2003–2004, the headscarf became a convenient, and prominent, symbol of external and internal dangers to France.

The story is also about the lives of the women and girls who wear Islamic headscarves and who confront fluctuating public opinion about who they are and what their headscarves mean. The story is only incidentally about Islam, however. Although elsewhere I examine Muslims' debates about the proper understandings of Islam in France, this volume is an anthropology of French reasoning about Islam, politics, and public life, designed to understand broad French responses to what became (for better or worse) a symbol of Islam.⁵

In the final section, this quest takes us to three major anxieties in France, each linked to the headscarves by politicians, intellectuals, and media producers. It is a particularly intriguing feature of the headscarf debates that although "defending *laïcité*" was cited as the major justification of the law on religious signs, the arguments carried out in the media linked the scarves to more concrete social concerns. I highlight three such concerns: the growth in "communalism" at the expense of social

mixing, the increasing influence of international “Islamism” in France, and the denigration of women in the poor suburbs.

During the early 2000s, public actors linked each of these concerns to the public presence of Islamic headscarves. In doing so, they drew on deep-seated philosophical assumptions about what French society ought to be and equally deep-seated fears about what it had become. I examine both the assumptions and the fears as they have become part of public reasoning. I draw on French works of sociology or political theory to interpret televised exposés about Muslim threats, and I learn from those exposés about the emotions lying under the surface of the philosophy.

My approach has been that of an anthropologist, or at least of the kind of social anthropologist that I have become. I prefer to look for naturally occurring arguments, presentations, and debates, and to draw out of those events certain ways of acting and reasoning that can help account for other actions. I also interview those who are involved in these debates and events, and I read their works. For these purposes, I think about interviews as approximations to naturally occurring events (rather than as windows into attitudes, for example). I try to prompt someone to speak on a familiar topic, on the assumption that the response will include ways of speaking that the speaker also uses in more natural settings. But I prefer conversations to interviews, events that occur because of a social connection already established, which include casual chats and dinner-time conversations but also arranged conversations such as the extended interview about headscarves included in chapter 4.⁶

These interviews and conversations highlight collective narrative habits, which shape the ways in which members of a society attempt to resolve problems.⁷ For example, I am often struck by the tendency of French public figures to frame the discussion of nearly any important social issue in terms of its long-term history. You must look back to Philippe Auguste or Henri IV, Robespierre or Rousseau, they say, before you can understand our society and our values. The current French ambassador to the United States, Jean-David Levitte, once told me that the difficulty in explaining the new French law to Americans was that to do so he had to retell, each time, so much of French history.

This collective habit leads public figures to emphasize (or invent) continuity over rupture. By framing the many concerns surrounding head-

scarves in terms of the history of *laïcité*, for example, French public figures can claim to speak for a France of long-term structures to which newcomers must adapt. Furthermore, nearly all French public figures claim that the French share certain basic Republican values, including the equality of men and women and the removal of religion from the public sphere. To argue that these values be shared is a valid political project; to argue that they have been shared by all French for a long time is to occlude some very recent debates about women's rights and the public role of the Church, not to mention the intense divisions in post-war French public life over politics, religion, and social equality.⁸

I began research in Paris in early 2001. My research has continued through world-shaking events directly implicating Muslims and the United States: 9/11, the attack on Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq. These changes have affected how people have reacted to me as an American. Whereas at the beginning of my research, Muslims would be more likely to speak with me than with a French researcher (I was less likely to be a police agent, and I shared with many of them the status of outsider), I am sure that some Muslims in Paris looked on me with greater suspicion after the Iraq invasion. Two things helped me: that I had begun research prior to those events, and that I already was credentialed as a scholar of Islam. Muslims in France were and are very interested in learning about Indonesia, where I had done my previous fieldwork, and I could give lectures and classes on Indonesia and on Islam in the United States. I continue to give public talks as part of my research; among other benefits, it makes the research more a joint effort to learn about Islam in pluralistic societies than a one-way relationship between researcher and subjects.

My relationships with non-Muslim French scholars, officials, and friends have perhaps been less directly affected by these recent events. I have had little difficulty calling on people to talk about the issues discussed here; indeed, public figures have valued the project of trying to explain to a wider audience how and why the French have taken the steps they have taken. At times in this book, I refer to the works of colleagues both as sources of knowledge and as indicators of French ways of approaching these complex topics. I do not think that this dual appreciation of their work in any way lowers its scholarly value or lessens my appreciation of its perspicacity. We all write from within our back-

grounds and our circles of reference and readership. I hope that these excursions into their work are taken in that way.

Many books and articles have been written about the headscarves, about Islam and Muslims in France, and about *laïcité* at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I mention many of these works in the chapters that follow, but in particular I draw on studies of Muslims in France by Jocelyne Cesari (1994, 1998), Nacira Guénif-Souilamas (2000), Gilles Kepel (1987), Farhad Khosrokhavar (1997), Paul Silverstein (2004), and Nancy Venel (2004); studies of *laïcité* by Jean Baubérot (2000, 2004), Émile Poulat (2003), and Olivier Roy (2005); Alain Gresh's (2004) treatment of the headscarf issue; and comparative studies by Jocelyne Cesari (2004), Adrian Favel (2001), Joel Fetzer and Christopher Soper (2005), Riva Kastoryano (2002), Gilles Kepel (1997), Michèle Lamont (1992), and Nikola Tietze (2002). I am immensely grateful to have been able to rely on this scholarship and that of many others. The present work seeks to do something a bit different, however, which is to focus on French ideas and concerns in the light of new challenges.⁹

I am often asked what I think about the law of March 15, 2004 (as it sometimes is referred to, rather officiously, in France). I am gratified when, after I have talked about why and how the law came to be passed, people are still unsure what I think. I see my role as a friendly critic. On the one hand, I wish to show how the law's advocates have drawn on long-term ways of thinking about the state, religion, and the individual in France, and how they have responded to very real concerns about how a newly diverse population can live together in one country. On the other hand, I underscore the political pressures to "do something" and do it quickly that rose to new heights in late 2003, the ways in which televised and print coverage played to popular fears, and the extraordinary symbolic weight given to a scarf worn on the head by a small number of schoolgirls. My interest lies in explicating the reasons and the mechanisms more than in rendering a simple judgment "for or against." In juxtaposing reasons and fears, debate and exposés, I would hope that the reader finishes this volume with a sharper sense of how publicity, philosophy, and politics can combine to produce a law, and that he or she remains, as I hope to remain, an informed skeptic.