French Secularism Is in Crisis. What Does That Mean for Muslim Youth?

Three years after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, students in the *banlieues* debate secularism and the state.

By **Karina Piser**

In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, France announced it would increase its focus on secularism in schools. (Reuters / Christian Hartmann)

On a rainy November afternoon in Grigny, a poor suburb about an hour south of Paris, 30 students at Pablo Neruda Middle School were debating *laïcité*, France's stringent concept of state secularism. Their teacher, Leïla Simon, had passed out copies of an article about a dispute in Ploërmel, a town in Brittany, where in October 2017 a government commission determined a stone cross should be removed from a statue of Pope John Paul II. Many Ploërmel residents, however, argued that the cross is a fixture of their region's heritage, and should remain.

Amid the near-constant media frenzy over challenges to *laïcité*, the Ploërmel disagreement was relatively minor. It's been overshadowed by a much bigger fight: The place of Muslims, an estimated 9 percent of the French population, in the secular Republic.

Recently, *laïcité* has been at the heart of controversies over, for example, street prayers in the Paris suburb of Clichy or whether mothers wearing a headscarf should be allowed to

accompany their children on school field trips.

That excessive focus on Islam is why Simon, 30, considered the story an appropriate way to launch a discussion among her students, the majority of whom come from Muslim families and are either first-generation immigrants or immigrants themselves. It was an opportunity to disentangle *laïcité* from its charged, politicized context—in which her students are often targeted—and to talk about it in terms of religion more generally, not just Islam.

As they examined the situation in far-off Ploërmel, Simon's students quickly realized that it paralleled *laïcité*'s presence in their own lives, notably their obligation to keep their religious beliefs out of the classroom. "It makes sense that they would keep the cross," Yaël said from the back of the room. "We're in France." He rolled his eyes. "Are they going to take down the Notre Dame too?" One of his classmates, who hadn't stopped squirming since the class began, disagreed: "It's disrespectful to other religions. That's why we don't show our beliefs at school." The momentary calm that Simon had managed to create dissolved into chatter.

"I changed my mind!" Yaël blurted out. "It's better to keep religion in private, to avoid conflict. See, now everyone is fighting!" The room quieted down as his classmates agreed. But Salima, who removes her headscarf before entering Pablo Neruda every morning as the result of a 2004 ban on "ostensible" religious symbols in public schools, dissented: "I don't want to be cut off from my religion."

A boy across the room jumped out of his seat. "But when people see the veil they think of terrorists!" All the kids laughed.

In that classroom in Grigny, students chipped away at a national dilemma: whether France's vision of equality among citizens, to which *laïcité* is central and difference is downplayed, can withstand, or should accommodate, public displays of religion. My interviews with dozens of middle-school and high-school students in the greater Paris region as well as the hundreds of questionnaires I asked pupils to complete reveal a tendency to reduce *laïcité* to the 2004 law, and therefore to see the concept as a limitation, not a freedom. But those students also largely defend the principle as a guarantee of the right to believe or not believe. Equally significant, though, is the sense that *laïcité* has been weaponized against Muslims.

Tracing *laïcité*'s evolution is central to understanding current divides. The 1905 law that separates religion from politics in France was a hard-fought rejection of the Catholic Church and has been a governing force in French politics and society ever since. The law is based

on three principals: freedom of conscience, the separation of political institutions from religious organizations, and the equal footing before the law of different religions and beliefs.

But with changing politics, demographics, and public opinion, the interpretation of the law has evolved. Religious tolerance was put to the test in 1989 in Creil, a small town about an hour north of Paris, when three girls were expelled from their middle school for refusing to remove their headscarves. The media descended on their school, precipitating a heated nationwide debate that would mark France for decades. At the time, the State Council argued that, as long as religious garb doesn't disturb the classroom or constitute "pressure, provocation, or proselytism," it could not be prohibited.

Fifteen years later, however, French parliament banned conspicuous religious signs in public schools. The reasoning was that the display of individual religious or ethnic identities in the classroom interferes with a collective "Frenchness" and disrupts a school's ability to transmit republican values.

Education-policy officials also feared that, left unchecked, students would self-segregate among ethnic or religious lines, betraying their presumed common loyalty to the French state. Many consider diversity—a visible reality of French cities, marked by individuals from the country's former colonies—dangerous in itself. The French census doesn't classify by race or religion, because such differences, especially when embraced overtly, threaten to rupture the national myth of a colorblind society.

The 2004 act, often referred to as the "Islamic headscarf law," marked a turning point in the national conversation about *laïcité*, and the issue has only become more divisive since. Many contend this law helped to transform the state's stance from a neutrality toward different faiths to an active attempt to rid the public space of religion entirely. What was once a purely legal principle became a value at the heart of struggles over diversity, integration, and national identity. That reckoning largely centers on Muslim communities living in the *banlieues*, the impoverished suburbs of France's major cities, and how they fit into the country's belief in a universal French identity.

Many—from the far right's expected xenophobes to the left's defenders of Enlightenment values—fear that new religious forces are preaching against French ideals and promoting a violent interpretation of Islam. This has fueled panic over "communitarism"—the dark underside, many allege, of a creeping "Anglo-Saxon" multiculturalism. Many French are afraid that minority communities won't fully integrate or adapt their identities to a Republican, secular ideal. In an eerie echo of the colonial *mission civilisatrice*, or civilizing

mission—the theoretical justification for France's violent and unresolved past—public institutions must again ensure individuals assimilate into a secular culture.

The spate of terrorist attacks that struck French soil in 2015 and 2016, beginning with the killing spree at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015—which left 12 dead, including eight members of its editorial staff—brought new urgency to addressing the "communitarist" threat. While the death toll at Charlie Hebdo was lower than that of subsequent attacks in Paris and Nice—130 and 86, respectively—it had symbolic resonance. Two brothers, French nationals, who had grown up in France and were educated in the French system, declared war on a publication that many felt embodied French free expression.

The day after the attack at Charlie, the nation paused for a moment of silence in solidarity with the victims. Reports emerged that some students, primarily those who identified as Muslim, refused to participate, or even said that the magazine, which had published caricatures of the prophet Muhammad, had it coming. Those incidents were limited—some several hundred nationally—but the media jumped on them.

The students' refusal to embrace *Charlie*—an intentionally offensive, satirical magazine—was "intolerable," said then–Education Minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, as she announced a series of measures to double down on Republican values in schools. There was, the reasoning went, a deficit of *laïcité* in the public-education system, especially in the rough neighborhoods of the *banlieues* where Islamism was seen as deepening its footing.

Grigny is, by all measures, one of those areas: It's poor, notorious for high crime, and the majority of its residents are immigrants, many of them Muslim. To boot, it's the hometown of Amedy Coulibaly, the jihadist who killed four at a kosher supermarket two days after the assault on *Charlie Hebdo*.

For some teachers, that "bad reputation" disproportionately influenced the government's response to the attacks, perpetuating a growing hysteria over Muslim youth. Romain Geffrouais, a high-school history teacher in the Paris suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine, believes that the education ministry "misdiagnosed the problem" by linking some students' hesitance to embrace *Charlie* as a perceived deficit of *laïcité*. In turn, that was seen, also disputably, as part of the same phenomenon that encourages youth to radicalize. As he saw it, the government demanded he "impose a sort of republican morality" on his students in order to "civilize them," asking them to "disengage from their religion, as if their beliefs were negative in and of themselves"—as if those beliefs rendered his students "dangerous."

In December, some in the education sector levied a similar criticism at the current education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, who, in a speech to mark the anniversary of the 1905 law lamented that teachers often "feel alone" when faced with "infringements on *laïcité*"—for example, if a student brings up their religion to contest a science lesson. Accordingly, he announced the creation of "*laïcité* units" in public schools, beginning in the working-class Paris suburb of Créteil, to manage such incidents.

A [scathing article](#) in the French daily *Libération* called Blanquer's approach "symptomatic of a falsified *laïcité*…that can only nourish Islamophobia in France"; Geffrouais said the move reflected the "permanent suspicion" that *banlieue* youth are "constantly trying to convert their classmates to Islam."

In contrast, far-right firebrand Marine Le Pen called Blanquer's remarks an "ideological victory" for her xenophobic National Front party.

I asked Geffrouais, over coffee at his high school, whether his students rejected or, in the education minister's words, "infringed on" *laïcité*. He laughed. "*Laïcité* has been completely perverted to center on Islam, and my students know that," he said. "They're not against *laïcité*. They're against the uses of *laïcité* that go against them" and perpetuate the daily inequities that many of them have come to expect. His students are routinely stopped by police—in 2016, he recalled, patrols circled the high school, and students' bags were searched; studies show that individuals with names presumed to be North African or African face systematic and sharp discrimination in access to [credit](#), the [workplace](#), and the [housing market](#). Some sociologists point to a pattern of discrimination in [schools](#), too.

Other teachers in comparable environments applaud the government's approach. Edward Barka, who teaches philosophy in the port city of Le Havre, called his students' refusal to express solidarity with *Charlie* "an absolutely intolerable violence," adding that, "even within the bounds of freedom of expression, it's illegitimate." The majority of his students are of North African descent, Muslim, and, as he sees it, "confuse the demands of their religion with those of the Republic." The push to reinvigorate Republican values and emphasize *laïcité* was thus an absolute necessity. But "it isn't easy," he sighed, because many of his students "see it as a way to accuse Muslims."

Linda, 18, removes her headscarf at the entrance to her high school in the 20th arrondissement of Paris, a district with a significant Muslim population. One day, she wore a large headband, settling on a compromise: covering her hair in a way that wasn't "ostensibly" religious. She, like many of her friends who tried to do the same, ended up in the principal's office, faced with a lecture on *laïcité* and the dangers of proselytism in an era

of homegrown radicalization in France.

She's soft-spoken and giggly, but immediately gets riled up. "They're asking me to leave an integral part of me at home, when at school we're supposed to be ourselves, we're supposed to be able to speak freely," she told me, sipping a hot chocolate. "It's hypocritical."

Linda repeatedly mentioned her frustration with the ahistorical manipulation of *laïcité*, which, she said, was designed to "unite people, not to exclude them. Now we see the opposite." For her, the idea of the state's neutrality toward religions implies that all citizens are equal before the law, regardless of religious belief—not an erasure of difference.

Amina, 13, a middle-school student in Grigny, identifies as Muslim and doesn't wear a headscarf, though she doesn't see why there's so much tension over a "piece of fabric." She told me *laïcité* is clearly deployed against Islam, adding that "preventing us from practicing our religion shows that we're not really free in France."

She disagreed with the argument that, absent the 2004 law, students would self-segregate on ethnic or religious lines. "There's no communitarism here," she said. She doesn't care if her friends are Muslim, Jewish, or atheist, or if they dress to show it. Besides, she reasoned, once school's out, the ban disappears. The government sees that distinction as critical to maintaining a school's role as a "sanctuary," but Amina found it illogical: "It's strange to separate your life at home with your life at school—we don't need two different lives just because of our origins or beliefs."

I asked Jean-Pierre Obin, who, as a high-ranking education official, authored a [report](#) that was central in the creation of the 2004 law, if there was a way to explain to Muslim students, especially girls who wear the headscarf, that the ban wasn't designed to target them. "That would be complicated," he told me. "Because the truth is the contrary. The law was made in response to a religion that manifested itself in an ostentatious way—the Muslim religion—which has a strong proselytizing dimension." For him, the mere display of Islam constitutes a form of proselytism, so banning the religion's signs and symbols insulates a school from outside influences. Furthermore, the logic goes, it frees girls from the supposed pressure that compels them to wear the headscarf in the first place.

Curiously, many of the students I've interviewed see the law as a protection, but invert Obin's logic. Amina's classmate, Farah, 13, who also identifies as Muslim, insists that without the ban, "girls who wear the headscarf would be harassed at school." The law, in her eyes, protects religious minorities from a discriminatory majority—not, as Obin reasoned, the other way around. While one group of students argues that the 2004

legislation distorted the concept of *laïcité* to curb Islam, scores of other students I've interviewed see the law as a defense against the quotidian discrimination they have perhaps internalized.

But that only tells part of the story. Most of France is attached to the idea that religion is a personal affair that has no place at school. There's evidence of a general French disdain for religion; a [poll](#) from October shows that 61 percent of the French population thinks religion "does more harm than good," and the majority [defines itself](#) as atheist or non-religious. "It would make me uncomfortable to see someone else's cross, and at school we're here to learn," said Asli, 13, who also identifies as Muslim.

Linda hates that argument the most: Yes, religion is a personal affair—and that's why she finds it unacceptable that she's obligated to hide it: "It's an argument that goes in circles."

Amina isn't satisfied with any explanation: "If the school is so *laïque*, why is there a Christmas tree by the entrance? They told me it was for decoration, but I'm not stupid." She and her classmates laughed.

France, according to its constitution, is "one and indivisible." In a [recent article](#) for French news site *Mediapart*, Jean Baubérot, a preeminent scholar on the history and sociology of *laïcité*, recalled when, during a conference on minorities at UNESCO, the French representative proudly claimed, "Minorities do not exist in France." An academic sitting next to him in the audience laughed, and said, "Yes, like in Iran, where there aren't any homosexuals."

Manipulating *laïcité* to promote an increasingly dogmatic view of the singular French Republic only papers over a plural reality and perpetuates tensions and discriminations rooted in the country's colonial history. The impulse to cast young Muslims of the *banlieues* as hostile to *laïcité* is a dangerous generalization that overlooks the complexity of their views as well as their frustration that a principle designed to unite is so often used to exclude them from a conception of what it means to be French.

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