

"The headscarf (1989) and burkini (2016) affairs reflect a particular relationship between the French Republic and Islam". Discuss.

France is home to the biggest population of Muslims in Europe, in 2017 there were an estimated 5-6 million Muslims living in France (The Local fr, 2017). Despite Muslims making up such a large part of the French population, Islam is often framed as a 'problem' in contemporary French politics. In this essay, I plan to explore the incompatible relationship between Islam and the French Republic focussing on the Headscarf and Burkini affairs. The values of the French Republic play a significant role in the life of religion in a secular country, as a central value to the French Republic is 'laïcité,' or secularism. The definition of 'laïcité,' as a value is very subjective but remains to express the separation of the State from the Church and other religious organisations, and in this way, Islam is a threat to the secularism, which is so integral to the French Republic.

The Headscarf affairs of 1989 were a series of events which marked a shift in the relationship between Islam and the French Republic, the first being, when 3 Muslim girls were barred from their school in Creil because they refused to remove their headscarves on entry. After much controversy, the Conseil d'Etat was employed to advise how to best solve these reoccurring problems. They declared that wearing the headscarf was "not by itself incompatible with the principle of secularism, insofar as it constitutes the exercise of freedom of expression and freedom of manifestation of religious beliefs" (Direction des Affaires Juridiques, 1989). They continued in stating that the problem arises when the wearing of religious symbols becomes, "ostentatious." As the advising body, the Conseil d'Etat gave the advice to act at one's own discretion, negotiating on a case-by-case basis. What is important, however, is how one decides to define 'ostentatious' and how this affects anyone of religious background. Ostentatious, is defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as, "attracting or seeking to attract attention, admiration, or envy often by gaudiness or obviousness." The use of the word 'ostentatious' denotes that there is an expectation from the Conseil d'Etat that a headscarf would, or

could, be worn for attention seeking purposes. This ‘attention seeking’ is presented as a threat because it distracts from the Republican values that French citizens are expected to uphold. Since so many young Muslim girls were targeted by this declaration, it is important to consider whether these superior governing bodies acting in France, such as the Conseil d’Etat, are inherently Islamophobic. It raises the debate of whether wearing a headscarf is intentionally political and ‘attention seeking’ or whether the French Republic have politicized it. The headscarf affairs are presented as a threat to the Republic as the display of religion in public is a distraction from secularism. The approach the Conseil d’Etat and consequent governing bodies have taken in dealing with this issue demonstrates the ideology that the two cannot co-exist, and consequently, that Islam is incompatible with the French Republic.

The headscarf has become a symbolic reference point in Islamophobic acts stemming from the 1989 Headscarf affairs but continues to be an important aspect of French Republican public thought. It continues to be a taboo symbol, illustrated in the 2016 Burkini Bans. On a beach in Nice, the French police forced a Muslim woman to remove her clothing, following the recent burkini bans. The Prime Minister at the time, Manuel Valls, supported the Police’s decision to make her remove her clothing and stated that the burkini was “not compatible with the values of France and the Republic” (Kroet, 2016). This event draws on the narrative that Muslim women are objectified and placed at the centre of Islamic discourse in France. The value of laïcité and its legal effects affect women more than men, particularly young girls, as seen in the headscarf affairs. Nicky Jones talks about this issue in her Law Journal: ‘Beneath the veil: Muslim girls and Islamic Headscarves in secular France’: “Some Muslims also felt that they were being unfairly targeted by a ban that seemed only to apply to them rather than to any other students” (Jones, 2009: 49). This idea of there being a gendered approach to Islam in France creates increased tensions between the French Republic and Islam. There is an evident incompatibility between Islam and French republicanism expressed by leaders in France such as Manuel Valls, but these incompatibilities are fabricated in a way that objectifies women and reinforces the patriarchy in France. Both the Headscarf Affairs and Burkini bans centralise the experience of Muslim women in France and show a specific inequality concerning gender.

The Republican tradition is something that France is clinging onto through the rebranding of ‘neo-republicanism,’ and in an ever-shifting political scene it is interesting to see who claims which Republican values in defence of their parties and political views. The Front National has begun to embrace liberal Islamophobia in defence of the Republic. Liberal Islamophobia, “Apparently rejects but in fact displaces and conceals traditional racism and overt prejudice by constructing a pseudo-progressive binary and narrative” (Mondon & Winter, 2017: 31). The Front National frame Islam as a threat to Western values and build on the narrative of ‘the West Vs the Rest.’ This discourse continues to express the idea that Islam is a threat, a discourse rooted in the war on terror and the events of 9/11. By adopting this narrative, France is reinforcing the idea that Republican values are superior to Islamic values and that there is, therefore, an incompatibility between them. In 2012 interior minister Gueant, “explicitly endorsed this view, announcing that he considered some civilisations superior to others” (Wolfreys, 2013). This trend of increasingly explicit assertions of superiority of French Republican values over religious values characterises the incompatibility between Islam and the French Republic.

To conclude, both the Headscarf Affairs and the Burkini Affairs signal the incompatibility between Islam and the French Republic. The Headscarf has become a symbol to represent how the two cannot coexist under Republican values, which conflates a clash of cultures and a refusal to integrate. The French Republic would rather encourage assimilation to the Republican values that already exist and in turn encourage Islamophobia, whether indirectly or not, and the rejection of religion, in support of *laïcité*.

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