

American Multiculturalism vs. French Ethno-pluralism: The Debate over Arab and Muslim Assimilation

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Abstract

Although they have become more visible across the Western world, Arabs and Muslims remain inadequately described and poorly misunderstood. In the United States, and in France, despite their expanding numbers and their growing involvement in the decision-making process, both groups still suffer from widespread prejudice, especially the negative image conveyed about them in the media and within some political circles.

Until the 1970s, Arab and Muslim immigrants had been a neglected dimension in either American or French ethnic and religious history. But the rise in the number of such foreign-born residents in both countries added to the growing fear over the upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism and generated considerable interest and public debate on how well these groups would assimilate into the mainstream culture of their host societies and fit within a pre-established order.

This paper not only aims to cast a fresh and objective look into how American and French citizens of Arab and Muslim descent adjust to their new environment but also attempts to provide some insights into how the United States and France accommodate Islam, as both nations, because of their different immigration histories and their relatively diverging ideologies, do not have a commonality of views on how society should be structured and organized.

Two elements have been decisive for such a study: first, my experience in France as a postgraduate student at Sorbonne University, second, the research I conducted in 2004 on Arab Americans as Senior Fulbright at the Center for Arab American Studies, at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Both encounters not only helped me draw a number of conclusions regarding the respective experiences of two communities, united by common historical and cultural ties but so different as to the way they adapt to their host societies. They especially enhanced my understanding of what it really means to be Arab or Muslim in France and in the United States.

To support the research's central point, a number of questions will be addressed: Are Arab-Americans in general and American Muslims, in particular, unwilling to assimilate? Is Islam inherently incompatible with Western and Judeo-Christian values? Should policymakers see Islam as the enemy of the West? Should the prevalent anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim world be understood within the broader context of "clash of civilizations" or "war of religions", as stressed

by some scholars, or should it be considered as a “natural response” to a temporary conjuncture necessitating reconsideration and change? Finally, what role should Arab and Muslim leaders in both countries play to provide community stability and maintain their identity in an ever-changing world?

Keywords: Arab Americans, American Muslims, French Arabs and Muslims, American Multiculturalism, French Ethno-pluralism, Assimilation.

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Background

The epithets “Arab” and “Muslim” are usually muddled up and in most French people’s minds – in as much as American people’s perceptions – both terms are interchangeable. In practice, they do not even overlap as Arabs can be Muslim, Christian or Jewish, etc. Worldwide, people of Arab descent constitute only a minority. Although Islam is often associated with the Arab world, fewer than fifteen percent of Muslims are Arab.¹ If, however, most Arab residents in France are Muslim, making roughly ten percent of the overall population², in the United States, contrary to popular assumptions, the majority of Arabs are Christian, with Muslims making one-third of the Arab population.³

It is onerous to accurately estimate the total number of Arabs or Muslims who live in France⁴ and the United States simply because both countries made it illegal to compile data based on religious or ethnic affiliation. The figures provided, therefore, are based rather on contrasted gauging published by non-governmental institutions. As of 2010, according to the French Ministry of Interior (in charge of religious affairs and which does not have the right to enquire straightforwardly about religion and applies the criterion of people’s geographic origin as a basis for calculation)⁵, there are between five to six million Muslims in metropolitan France, the largest Muslim minority in Europe. Those of Maghreb origin represent eighty-two percent of the Muslim population (42.2% from Algeria, 27.5% from Morocco, and 11.4% from Tunisia).⁶

Across the Atlantic, 1,967,219 are of Arab descent, according to the 2010 Census.⁷ On the other hand, research by the Arab American Institute and Zogby International suggest that – without taking into consideration ancestry’s issue – the Census Bureau’s estimation is substantially lower than the actual number which they adjust at 3,665,789. To put it bluntly, that is roughly one percent of the American population. Most of Arab Americans are Christian (sixty-three percent), with Muslims counting merely twenty-four percent.⁸

Contrary to their French counterparts, most Arabs in America are highly educated and have better economic prospects. Whereas Muslims or Arabs in France either suffer from unemployment or typically hold low-paid manual jobs with little chance of upward socio-economic mobility. Arab Americans fare quite well compared even to the average American. With at least a high school, they

¹ Nearly one-fourth of the world population today is Muslim and, contrary to widespread attitudes, most Muslims are concentrated in Southeast Asia. As to recent surveys, there are 203 million Muslims in Indonesia, 174 million in Pakistan, 161 million in India, 145 million in Bangladesh, 22 million in China, etc. (See: <http://www.islam.about.com/od/muslimcountries/a/population>).

² Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life. “The Future of the Global Muslim Population Projections for 2010-2030.” (See: <http://www.pewforum.org/-The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population-.aspx>).

³ The Arab American Institute. (See: <http://www.aaiusa.org/pages/demographics/>).

⁴ Due to a law dating back to 1872, the French Republic prohibits performing census by making distinction between its citizens regarding their race or their religion.

⁵ See: *Le Figaro*. «5 à 6 millions de Musulmans en France.» June 28, 2010.

⁶ Michèle Tribalat. Institut National d’Etudes Démographiques (INED, 2010). (See: <http://www.fdesouche.com/tag/ined/page/3>).

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau (2010). (See: <http://www.census.gov/2010census/>).

⁸ The Arab American Institute. (See: <http://www.aaiusa.org/pages/demographics/>).

number eighty-nine percent. More than forty-five percent have a Bachelor's degree and eighteen percent a Post-graduate diploma, respectively twice the American average.⁹

The higher rates of education translate into a pattern of prestigious and remunerative employment. Indeed, seventy-three percent of working Arab Americans are employed in managerial, professional, technical, sales or administrative fields. Most work in the private sector (eighty-eight percent), whereas a mere twelve percent hold governmental positions.¹⁰

In contrast, French Arabs are doing less well and tend to be poorer, on average, than the nation as a whole. As in much of Europe and contrary to Arab Americans who have been settling since the 1880s, the French Arab community was established largely by waves of immigrant laborers in the 1960s through the mid-1970s, and had continued under family reunification provisions ever since. These populations have grown, but remained, by and large, below average in income and social status, as many of them are at best either semi-skilled or unskilled workers. Recent studies which focus on "immigrants" but refer to Muslim-related issues – describe the more than two million residents of increasingly "ghettoized" suburbs where unemployment and crime rates are disproportionately high – as forming a "*culturally distinct, socially and economically 'excluded' population.*"¹¹ In an article about the 2005 civil unrest in France, Ralph Peters, a retired U.S. army lieutenant colonel and author, wrote that France's "apartheid" has a distinctly racial aspect. In his view, "France's 5 million brown and black residents (have) failed to appreciate discrimination, jobless rates of up to 50 percent, public humiliation, crime, bigotry and, of course, the glorious French culture that excluded them through an informal apartheid system."¹²

When it comes to political participation, the gap between the two communities widens further, even though both agree on the pressing need for more political clout and more involvement into the decision making process. Here, Arab Americans who, starting from the early 1980s, decided to take their own affairs in hand, seem more visible and better represented across the political spectrum. While in France, citizens of Arab heritage feel further marginalized by their exclusion from politics – despite their growing numbers – their American counterparts hold public office almost at all levels. To cite but a few examples, five Arab Americans served in the U.S. Senate and nine in the U.S. House of Representatives, three have been governors, and more than thirty have been mayors of U.S. cities.¹³ In contrast, there have been only one full minister of Arab descent in France (Rachida Dati, Minister of Justice in Nicolas Sarkozy's first administration), and a handful of Cabinet members, but none among France's 577 members of the National Assembly, and none among France's 36,000 mayors.¹⁴

Higher official positions are equally rarely occupied by French nationals of Arab or Muslim background. A case in point, when in January 2004, President Jacques Chirac declared Aïssa

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau (2010). Op.cit.

¹⁰ See: http://www.b3cdn.net/aai/fcc68db3efdd45f613_vim6ii3a7.pdf.

¹¹ Economic data, such as employment and income, are central for studying both communities, yet they are poorly addressed as there are no official government statistics on religious affiliation in France and the United States.

¹² Ralph Peters. "France's Intifada." *New York Post*. Nov. 8, 2005.

¹³ The Roster of Arab Americans in Public Service and Political Life (see: http://www.aaiusa.org/index_ee.php/pages/arab-american-roster).

¹⁴ See: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/shows/france/info4.html>.

Dermouche the new prefect (senior state representative) of the Jura region, a bomb destroyed his car just three weeks after his nomination. A few days later, another explosion damaged the front door and glass façade of Audencia, a leading French business school of which he was head, and on January 29, a third detonation caused minor damage to a letterbox at the school of one of Dermouche's sons.¹⁵

On the whole, by many standards, Arab Americans seem to be offered worthier opportunities for assimilation, thanks notably to the American multicultural context as a whole, but also to the political activism of a socio-culturally integrated Christian Arab community. However, despite their economic and political achievements, and although the U.S. Census Bureau classifies Arabs as white alongside the European majority, a sizable number among them still believe they are not treated as whites, but more like such other minorities as Asian Americans or Hispanic Americans.¹⁶

The Debate over Assimilation: Are Arabs Unwilling to Assimilate?

Although they have become more visible over the last few decades, Arabs in France and the United States remain inadequately described and poorly misunderstood. Until the 1970s, Arab immigrants had been a neglected dimension in either French or American ethnic and religious history. But the rise in the number of such foreign-born residents, in both countries, added to the growing fear over the upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism, has generated considerable interest and public debate on how well these groups would assimilate into the mainstream of their host societies.

This is not a paper about Islam. Our endeavor is to scrutinize a modus operandi of thinking and of expression through the respective experiences of two communities, united by a common historical and cultural heritage, but remarkably disparate as to the fashion they adjust to their new environments and to the way they respond to the challenges in order to maintain their identity in an ever-changing world.

Perhaps the best way to tackle this controversial and polarizing issue would be first to raise the following questions: What place do Arab Americans and Arabs based in France hold in the social fabric of their host countries? In other words, do they fully make part of the social landscape, or are they simply considered as aliens pursuing a dream that is beyond their reach? What should they do to challenge and overcome the stereotype many of their fellow-citizens make of them as being eternally the members of a foreign creed that is fundamentally alien to the Western experience and history? Now that we unknowingly associate them with Islam, does their Islamic identity constitute an insurmountable hindrance on the path of assimilation? Is Islam incompatible with the Western and Judeo-Christian values? Should the prevalent anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim worlds be understood within the broader context of "clash of civilizations" or "war of

¹⁵ See: Valerie Gas. "Attentat conte la voiture d'Aissa Dermouche." RFI. January 2004. (See: http://www.1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/049/article_26245-asp).

¹⁶ For more information, see N. MacMaster. "Islamophobia in France and the Algerian Problem." In: E. Qureshi and M.A. Sells, eds., *The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

religions”, as stressed by some scholars¹⁷, or should it be considered as a “natural” response to a temporary conjuncture necessitating reconsideration and change?

In effect, if the first wave of Arab immigrants to the United States who arrived in the 1880s from the province of Mount Lebanon, in Greater Syria, sought to assimilate and blend in what it was perceived as American mainstream culture, that was not the case for North African immigrants, namely Algerians who started to arrive in the early Twentieth Century. Up to 1959, this group constituted the largest non-European immigrant presence anywhere in Europe, and the great public controversy they aroused, generated perceptions of colonial “barbarians” invading the very heart of the empire.¹⁸

Besides the depiction, some newspapers made of them as being “*animals*”, “*primitive savages*”, “*rapists*” and “*transmitters of venereal diseases and tuberculosis*”, and thus a threat to metropolitan society, it became a real challenge for the French officials to break down their resistance to integration into the French society. Because, contrary to most immigrant groups like Italians, Poles, and Spanish who gradually assimilated by participating into different working class organizations and associations (trade unions, sports clubs, the Communist Party), Algerians reconstituted in France small and “micro-ghettos”, impermeable to any outside influence. Their rationale down to the Algerian independence in 1962 was founded on a project to return to the homeland and a definite refusal to strike roots in France.¹⁹

Up until the early 1980s, and even though they stood for the largest Muslim community in Europe, there was no or limited media focus on such a group named French Arabs or French Muslims.²⁰ Furthermore, not only the government of Giscard d’Estaing (1974-1981) deepened its anti-immigrant stance by adopting a wide array of measures meant to severely reduce the flux of immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa, but Arabs, despite their increasing numbers, were still an invisible community and their prayer rooms were unrecognizable as they were improvised in basements, garages, and council flats (they had none of the external architectural symbolism of the traditional mosque with a minaret and a dome).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 led to a conspicuous turning point. Both at governmental and public levels, there were no clear signs of a growing anxiety about Islamic fundamentalism beginning to penetrate mainland France. Immediately after a bomb exploded at St. Charles station in Marseilles, in December 1983, The French officials began to apprehend the threat from within, a menace better articulated by Gaston Defferre, Interior Minister and mayor of Marseille who, in 1984, told the press that religious practice until then had been apolitical, “an excellent thing... But, step by step, the fundamentalists got a foothold in the mosques, became the managers or the leaders,

¹⁷ Even though identified with Samuel Huntington in his book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Making of the World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, the current popularity of the expression “clash of civilizations” stems from an article, “The Roots of Muslim Rage.” *Atlantic Monthly*. Sept. 1990, published by Bernard Lewis, then Professor of History at Princeton University.

¹⁸ See: G. Meynier. *L’Algérie Révélée*. Genève : Droz, 1981.

¹⁹ See: N. MacMaster. “The Rue Fondery Murders of 1923 and the Origins of Anti-Arab Racism.” In: J. Winderbank and R. Gunther, eds. *Violence and Conflict in the Politics and Society of Modern France*. Lampter: Mellen, 1995, pp. 149-160.

²⁰ See: F. Gaspard. *Une Petite Ville en France*. Paris : Gallimard, 1990, p. 168.

and began to make propaganda and to proselytize. This is dangerous because they can act as intermediaries when bombings are perpetrated.”²¹

Interestingly, casting a penetrating glance into Defferre’s political discourse reveals a second but equally important anti-Muslim theme, the Arab or Muslim unwillingness to integrate or to assimilate. For across the media and within political and academic circles, the pivotal question was no longer one of controlling the immigration flow from Arab and Muslim countries, but has shifted to a profound disquiet toward those considered as the “inassimilable stock” and the “racially different other”. According to Defferre, contrary to other immigrants (namely Italians and Spanish) who had assimilated, become naturalized and now “occupy important position, almost everywhere”, “Arabs”²² and Algerians, more specifically, reconstituted large extended family networks, “groupings after the several dozen people who, in addition, wear traditional clothing and live according to the customs of their country. They roast in the yard, etc.”²³ Articulating a shift toward widespread and overt forms of racism, he added that the laws of Islam in the sphere of marriage, divorce, gender roles, and family life “are in contradiction with the rules of the French Law.”²⁴

The new visibility of Muslims, fostered by the construction of purposely built mosques of which the most controversial was inaugurated at Montes-la-Jolie in 1981, was perceived by almost all major political parties and the general public as an “invasion” and an “aggressive” assertion of the Muslim faith, even though there was no significant change in the number of Muslim immigrants. The worst case scenario of a takeover by radical Islamists and which presented all Muslims as potential terrorists, would not only tighten control around the Arab community, but would further legitimize racist and xenophobic sentiments, a new mobilizing issue of which the still uninspiring National Front would emerge as the uncontested champion. As a consequence, because of the growing homogeneity in the political discourse around the use of anti-immigrant rhetoric as a key electoral card, the National Front, which astutely knew how to substitute a traditional biological racism with one based on cultural differences, moved, within a few years only, from an insignificant party into a central player on the national scene.

Today, the situation of Arabs and Muslims on the other side of the Atlantic is not substantially different. Even though it is the fastest-growing faith in the United States, Islam remains either widely misunderstood or simply viewed as foreign, mysterious, and even threatening to the nation’s “Judeo-Christian heritage.” In fact, attempts to target Islam as an alien creed and portray Muslims as the members of a cult based on hatred of the American society and associated with terrorist activity abroad and inside the United States, did not emerge after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. Years before the shock, scholars such as Samuel Huntington of Harvard and Bernard Lewis of Princeton, and publicists like Daniel Pipes and Steven Emerson were envisaging the likelihood of clashes between Islam and the West.

Said Karina Rollins, editor of *The American Enterprise*, a neoconservative public policy

²¹ *Les Temps Modernes*. March-May, 1984, pp. 1567-1574.

²² Muslim immigrants were called « Arabs », a stereotype that bore Orientalist assumptions, when in reality many originated in non-Arab societies such as Turks, Kabyles or Berbers, Pakistanis, etc.

²³ *Les Temps Modernes*, op.cit.

²⁴ Ibid.

magazine:

“The Cold War is over, but the battle of good vs. evil rages stronger than ever. At some point in the future, the human thirst for liberty and self-determination may sweep even the Islamic world. But today, a fresh enemy is at civilization’s gate, and it’s time we recognized him.”²⁵

Since 1994 and the airing by Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) of Steven Emerson’s documentary, *Jihad in America*, Arab and Muslim Americans have been looked at as suspects. In his article “America’s Muslims Against America Jews,” Daniel Pipes, director of the neoconservative think tank, Middle East Forum, and Bush’s nominee, in 2003, to the U.S. Institute of Peace, went so far as to suggest that Muslims constituted a monolithic bloc, intrinsically anti-Semitic and driven by hatred.²⁶

Criticizing American Muslim groups for not distancing themselves from terrorism and anti-American sentiments in their countries of origin, Pipes pointed out Islam’s universalizing and missionary impulse and the threat this might represent to religious pluralism in America. “The ambition to take over the United states is not new,” he argued, “(t)he first missionaries for militant Islam, or Islamism, who arrived here from abroad in the 1920s, unblushingly declared, ‘Our plan is we are going to conquer America.’”²⁷ To him converting Americans has always been the central purpose of Muslim existence in the United States, the only possible justification for Muslims to live in an “infidel land.”

Assaults on Islam and attempts to reinvent a “religious” Cold War dubbed as the “Green Scare”; and Muslims targeted as the enemies of the West were not the declared targets of neoconservative ideologues alone. They made also part of a huge campaign launched by Islamophobic leaders of the New Christian Right who never miss an opportunity to question the compatibility of the Islamic faith with the American values. Even though implicitly denounced on several occasions by President Bush to whom “Islam, as practiced by the vast majority of people, is a peaceful religion, a religion that respects others,”²⁸ and later by President Obama in his outreach address to the Muslim World, when he declared: “I consider it part of my responsibility as President of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam whenever they appear,”²⁹ their much-publicized remarks not only revived tensions in the Arab and Muslim worlds, but also fuelled an already growing anti-American sentiment. Remarks such as the one made by Franklin Graham, son of televangelist Rev. Billy Graham, who called Islam “an evil religion” inherently at odds with American values, or that made by Rev. Jerry Vines who called the prophet “a demon-possessed paedophile,”³⁰ to cite but a few, are illustrative of the radical Religious Right view of Islam, fundamentally based on the rejection of the “other.”

²⁵ “Why They Hate Us?” Editorial, *The American Enterprise*. December 1, 2001.

²⁶ D. Pipes. “America’s Muslims against America’s Jews.” *Commentary*, May 1, 1999.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Statement to reporters during a meeting with U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan. The Oval Office, Washington D.C., Nov. 13, 2002.

²⁹ Obama’s Speech in Cairo, delivered on June 4, 2009. (See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office-university-6-remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>).

³⁰ S.J. Freedberg. “The War within Islam.” *The National Journal*. May 10, 2003.

To Daniel Pipes, finally, the real danger to the American democracy and to the American religious pluralism did not emanate from the pro-Israel Christian Right. More specifically, American Jewish organizations should not devote considerable resources and energy targeting the New Religious Right while virtually ignoring the rise of “*Islamist fascism*”. He warned:

“The real and present danger is by no means the pro-Israel Christian Coalition but the rapidly anti-Semitic Muslim Arab Youth Association; not Jerry Falwell but Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman³¹; not those who wish, at the very worst, to convert Jews but those who, with every means at their disposal, intend to do them harm, who have already acted on those violent intentions, and who if unchecked will surely do so again.”³²

American Multiculturalism vs. French Ethno-pluralism

“Unlike any other country, America is defined by its spirit and human values, not by its ethnic background. We are the only truly secular country in the world,”³³ wrote once Anne Wortham, one of the most perceptive American sociologists. Such claim may be legitimate in so far that, besides the presence of a socio-culturally integrated and a politically active Christian Arab community, the American multicultural context appears exceptionally convenient for Muslims. To some extent their status is better than their European counterparts as they enjoy the constitutional advantages offered by the “land of the free”, especially wider political freedoms, greater economic rewards, and the protection of their worship by the federal and state constitutions.

France-based Muslims, by contrast, are still laying claim to legitimacy alongside the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communities. In effect, the debate over how France and the United States accommodate Islam or how Muslims adapt to life in a secular society seems to have deeper implications as perceptions on both sides are grounded at the core of a long history of confrontational but also peaceful existence. Because of their different immigration histories, and, to a certain extent, diverging ideologies, France and the United States do not have a communality of views on how society should be structured and organized.

This is mirrored in the way both countries deal with their Arab and Muslim communities and the place they have reserved for them within the fabric of their respective societies. On April 2003, the French government created the French Council for the Muslim Religion (*Conseil Français du Culte Musulman*) -- a body that represents all Muslims in negotiating on practical problems of their religion with the French State.³⁴ By and large, the council is part of the

³¹ In 1993, Sheikh Abderrahman masterminded the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York which resulted in the killing of six persons and the injuring of more than a thousand.

³² D. Pipes, “American Muslims against American Jews,” op. cit. Noting that the Christian Right have been staunch supporters of Israel. This commitment stems not from guilt over past Christian sins against Jews but from a theological doctrine widely shared in fundamentalist and Pentecostal circles known as “Dispensationalist Premillennialism.” In this view, a complete restoration of the nation of Israel, including the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, is a prerequisite to the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of his millennial reign.

³³ “The Melting Pot, Part 2: America’s Cultural-Institutional Core.” *Modern Thought*. November, 2001.

³⁴ The CFCM was set up by Nicolas Sarkozy, minister of interior at the time, which the state now officially recognizes as a discussion partner for religious issues. The council, however, is merely a private non-profit association and has no special legal standing, nor is it universally accepted as being representative of the opinions of Muslims residing in France.

government's project to mainstream Muslims in the French culture and to give them "a place at the table." Likewise, it has been quite recently (September, 2003) that the first Muslim high school, the *Lycée Averroes*, opened in the city of Lille. The school, which would uphold the strict French rule on "secular" teaching and follow the national curriculum, is intended to provide Muslim youth with the same core education that celebrates the republic's values as public schools.³⁵

Undoubtedly, with more than six million people making roughly ten per cent of the French population, the community's religious needs could not be under-estimated. Yet, the simple idea of building a mosque, somewhere, inflames passions among the public and drives local and national political leaders into a collective hysteria. This is despite the fact that there are more than 1,500 mosques and Muslim prayer rooms in France, compared to 40,000 Catholic buildings, 957 temples and 82 synagogues, with only a handful which have domes and minarets.³⁶ The case of the Cergy mosque which, while still in construction, had already galvanized passions and led one local opposition politician to warn that its minarets might rise higher than the town's church steeples.³⁷

On the whole, the feeling that the French integration model does not work quickly or as well for Arabs and Muslims as it did once for other waves of immigrants represents a profound challenge for France's long inherited ideology of Republican citizenship. Deeply hostile, as it might seem, to the kind of multiculturalism and recognition of ethnic minority rights found in the United States or in Great Britain, French republicanism is based on the Jacobin tradition of France "one and indivisible" (*La République une et indivisible*) which had been constructed mainly under the First Republic (1792-1804). According to this universal ideology which emphasized the equality of all citizens within the state, there could be no intermediate bodies or poles of allegiance that might detract from the uniform relationship between each individual citizen and the state. So any articulation of group interests should be discouraged.

In such scheme of things, and in the name of the so-called French ethno-pluralism, some French thinkers like Alain de Benoist, reject the view that Europe can come closer to the United States in order to strengthen Western civilization. Rather, they call for France to defend its civilization from multicultural meltdown and the homogenizing forces of global American media, or what they call the "Coca-Colonizing" and "McDonaldizing" effects of the United States popular culture.³⁸

Interestingly enough, France and the United States do not share the same views on the dynamics of civil society only. They also seem to diverge as to the type of relationship that should exist between Church and State. For, unlike the United States where in terms of Alexis de

³⁵ Consisting of three classrooms and a science laboratory on the third floor of a mosque, the goal of the school is to provide Muslims with an alternative to public education, like those that French Catholics, Protestants and Jews have long enjoyed. Courses are taught in Arabic, Islamic culture and history are offered as electives and Quranic studies are assured for only one hour a week. There is no requirement that the students be Muslim, though all of them are, or that the girls go to school veiled. Like other private schools, if it meets all these requirements, it is eligible for state aid after five years.

³⁶ Best estimates of an interior ministry source in "L'Islam dans la République." *Haut Conseil à l'Intégration*. November 2000, p.36.

³⁷ G.S. Smith. "Minarets and Steeples: Can France Balance Them?" October 1, 2003. (See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/01/international/europe/01M056.html>).

³⁸ See: Alain de Benoist. "L'Amérique qu'on aime." *Element*, no. 116. Spring 2005.

Tocqueville, "... from the beginning politics and religion were in accord, and they have not ceased to be so since,"³⁹ France, no doubt as a result long history of religious violence (including the Religious Wars, 1562-1598), favours strict separation between the two as a way to guarantee that religious competition and religious proselytizing do not spawn ataxia in the public sphere.

Notwithstanding, if the purpose of separating Church and State in the United States was principally meant to avoid interference of the government in church matters and to protect, ultimately religion from the state, in France, it was exactly the reverse. The purpose of separating Church and State was to protect the new French democracy from the Catholic Church, at the time socially and politically dominant, and staunchly opposed to the establishment of a secular democracy. To Gilles Kepel, no doubt the most prominent specialist in France of the question and who regards Islamic revivalism as an extremely grave threat to Republican assimilation, strict separation of Church and State has been part of the French Constitution since 1905. In his well-known book, *Allah in the West: Islamic Movements in America and Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), he asserted: "French political tradition actively combated any form of regional, ethnic or religious identity which could weaken the link between the individual and the state."⁴⁰

But nothing better than the so-called "headscarf affair"⁴¹ could further showcase the debate over Muslims' integration and the way they cope with their new secular environment. The event started in 1989, after three schoolgirls of North African descent were expelled from their high school, Gabriel-Havez in Creil (north of Paris), on the grounds that the veil or *hijab* was a provocative religious symbol in breach of the 1905 "*laïcité*" law protecting the secular, non-religious nature of state education. So what started as a local row snowballed into a nationwide debate as the "affair" gave way to a whole complex of issues confirming French Muslims as perpetual outsiders in French society. For many commentators in the media and across the political spectrum, the young girls were steadfastly being manipulated by invisible forces or forces acting behind-the-scenes to challenge and subvert the foundations of the Republic, namely the principle of separation of church and state.⁴²

On March 15, 2004, after a protracted and gruelling debate and to settle down the question once and forever, President Jacques Chirac, based upon the recommendations of the "Stasi Commission,"⁴³ signed what came to be called as the "French law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools."⁴⁴ It forbids pupils from wearing "conspicuous" signs of belonging to a religion, wearing any visible symbol meant to be seen. Prohibited items would include

³⁹ H. Mansfield and D. Winthrop, eds. *Democracy in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁴¹ On the "affair" see A. Perotti and F. Thépaut. "L'Affaire du Foulard Islamique." *Migrations Sociétés* 2.7. January 1990, pp. 61-68; A.G. Hargreaves. *Immigration, "Race," and Ethnicity in Contemporary France*. London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 125-131; F. Gaspard and F. Khosrokhawar. *Le Foulard et la République*. Paris: Découverte, 1995.

⁴² See: D. Decherf. "French Views of Religious Freedom." U.S. – France Analysis Series. July 2001.

See: <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/cusf/analysis/relfreedom.htm>.

⁴³ An investigation commission which Chirac set up in July 2003 to examine how the principle of *laïcité* should apply in practice and which, on December 11, 2003, published its report ruling that ostentatious displays of religion violated the secular rules of the French school system.

⁴⁴ « Loi encadrant, en application du principe de laïcité, le port de signes ou de tenues manifestant une appartenance religieuse dans les écoles, collèges et lycées publics ». (Translated: «By virtue of the law applying the principle of secularism, the wearing of signs or uniforms showing any religious affiliation at public primary and secondary school»).

headscarves for Muslim girls, yarmulkes for Jewish boys, turbans for Sikh boys and large Christian crosses. It allows, however, the wearing of discreet symbols of faith such as small crosses, Stars of David or Fatima's hands. The law concerns only public primary and secondary schools. It does not concern other public spaces, nor does it concern public universities or other establishments of higher education.

According to those who approved the ban⁴⁵, besides the fact that the headscarf stood for female subjugation, wearing such a symbol outrageously violated the secular principle outlined by the 1905 law on "*laïcité*", and ran counter the goal of schools to function as places of neutrality and critical awareness. They also saw the law as, first and foremost, a protection against oppressive patriarchal authority of radical fathers and brothers. Suffice to read Samira Bellil's book, *Dans l'Enfer des Tourmentes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), (*In Gang Rape Hell*), proponents of the ban said, to discover the harsh reality of those Muslim girls who, because they refused to wear the headscarf and adopt a dress code in the poor suburbs, were regarded as "prostitutes" and subjected to gang rape.⁴⁶

The "headscarf affair" was a critical juncture in the unfolding of France's relationship with its Muslim minority. Not only it shook the very bedrock of the French society, but it also served – according to some French Muslims who refuted any allegation accusing them of plotting to thwart the nation's secular heritage – to promote the image of France that restricts personal freedom. A tendency broadly shared across the American public opinion which could not understand how the wearing of such personal symbols in public schools could violate the principles of religious freedom. This is echoed in the diverging perceptions – in both countries – of the kind of relationship likely to exist between Church and State. For the Bush administration which publicly criticized France for practicing a too rigorous separation of church and state, the law was simply inappropriate as

"all persons should be able to practice their religion and their beliefs peacefully, without government interference, as long as they are doing so without provocation and intimidation on others in society."⁴⁷

But according to French officials and many supporters of the ban, public schools were plainly the bulkiest remaining but most robust institutions for the systematic moulding of all children, regardless of their ethnic origin, into the universal values of the Republic. French public schools, they argued, have long been areas where a new civic identity could be nurtured, free from

⁴⁵ According to a February 2004 survey by CSA for the daily, *Le Parisien*, 69% of the population favored the ban, against 29% who were opposed to it. For Muslims living in France, the same survey showed 42% for and 53% against, and among Muslim women, 49% approved the proposed law, and 43% approved it. (See: <http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displayStory.cfm?story-id=2404691>). More significantly, a January 2004 survey for *Agence France Presse* showed overwhelming support among the teachers with 78% in favour of the ban. (See: http://www.laic.info/Members/webmstre/Revue_de_presse.2004-0204.2241/view).

⁴⁶ This is, among others, the daily combat of a recently founded feminist organization, "Ni Putes, Ni Soumises" (*Neither Whores, Nor Submissives*) which was supportive of the law and which rallied in Paris, on March 8, 2003, more than 30,000 people for "The March of Women from the Projects Against Ghettos and for Equality" (*La marche des femmes des quartiers contre les ghettos et pour l'égalité*).

⁴⁷ See: J.O. Goldsborough. "Separating Church and State." *San Diego Union – Tribune*. January 5, 2004.

any anti-democratic influence of any religion, in other words, veritable “mills of citizenship” and “Frenchness”.

In *toto*, while it is intricate to predict what kind of relationship that might exist between Islam and the West in the near and farther future, both French and American Arab and Muslim communities seem today decided to react to the clouds of suspicion hanging over them, as they realized that they had little influence on the policies of their host countries. But they need, first, to voice their concerns through the mainstream political organizations, if they want to gain national visibility and recognition.

This seems fairly achievable for Arab Americans and American Muslims as they now have become aware that they could exert greater political pressure if they invest in building grass-roots political structures and, most of all, overcome their ethnic, religious, and cultural differences which, so far, have complicated their ability to reach political cohesiveness. Notwithstanding their small numbers (representing less than three per cent of the American population) Arab and Muslim activists are convinced that if they vote as a bloc, they could make the difference in key electoral swing states where they are concentrated, such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Mexico, Florida and Wisconsin.⁴⁸

Another reason for persuasive political participation and adequate contribution to organized fund-raising groups, known as Political Action Committees (PACs), is their perception that the Patriot Act, passed in 2001, hinders their civil liberties and allows their communities to be unfairly targeted by law enforcement. Their disappointment with Bush’s handling of the national security affairs after the shock of 9/11, not only buttressed the *desideratum* for a power transmission from elite to grass-roots organizations, but also produced a major shift in strategy. Now convinced that no candidate will be likely to change the American Middle East policy and Washington’s full and uncontested support for Israel, fighting against rejection and negative stereotyping has become a rallying cry for the disparate Arab and Muslim communities, and the single most important issue for every single Arab and every single Muslim who directly or indirectly experienced discrimination.

On their part, despite the existence of a web of strong historical bonds that links France and North Africa, French Arabs and Muslims still find it difficult to break the vicious circle around them and get acceptance in the country they now call home. Less organized as they obviously lack the political experience and maturity of their American counterparts, they have no choice but to struggle to legalize and protect their status alongside similar lines to the country’s Jewish and Protestant minorities.

Paradoxical, as it might seem, the lack of recognition and the widespread anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice are further nurtured by a steadfast refusal, on the part of policymakers, to recognize and seriously tackle the real needs of such “ghettoized” communities and especially the disaffected youth among them, commonly referred to as *Beurs* (Arabs). For, the real problems are not religious or simply related to security matters, as many might allegedly suppose, they are rather social and economic and the row over the “headscarf affair” was but an outright distraction from the

⁴⁸ This is at least what they think they did in Florida, in 2000, claiming that their support for George W. Bush made the difference in favor of the Republican candidate who, thanks in part to the 40,000 Arab and Muslim voters, ended up winning the state by slightly more than 500 votes in the final recount.

integration process. Added to that, the adverse role endorsed by the French media in the dissemination of anti-Muslim stereotypes⁴⁹ served only to fuel an already heated context and exacerbated tensions by creating an atmosphere of exaggerated feeling of insecurity. The contention over the wearing of the *niqab* (full head covering) in public places, and its banning in 2011, is another case in point.⁵⁰

Conclusion

To conclude, it seems fair to ascertain that while they utterly consider the founding of Arab and Muslim advocacy organizations as a giant step on the path of interfaith dialogue and a major vestige in the course of integration, France's and America's Arabs and Muslims yearn for more than acceptance. They aspire for respect, respect for their culture, respect for their faith, and respect for them as human beings. In such a case only, could they develop sincere relationships based on mutual respect, act as bridge communities, help boost understanding between the different cultures, and why not serve as the moving force behind the wind of change in their home and host societies.

Over it all, as the nomenclature "global village" has become more supportive of democratic changes in government, time has become ripe for Muslims finally to attain what centuries of internal oppression and subsequent colonialism have prevented them from accomplishing. So far, Muslim policymakers in the Arab World have hidden behind religion to justify oppressive cultural choices. But Islam does not belong to any one country or region. It is committed to diversity.

⁴⁹ Noting that France's Islamophobia is just a more subtle form of racism. Overt anti-Arab prejudice is no longer acceptable and is even punished by the law, so now it is masked as an analysis of Islam, with the conclusion that Muslims are a menace to France.

⁵⁰ See: Steven Erlanger. "Parliament Moves France Closer to a Ban on Facial Veils." *The New York Times*. July 13, 2010.

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