

## SECULARISM, FEMINISM, AND ANTISEMITISM: THE ISLAMIC VEIL IN FRANCE

*Nelly Las*

In the course of discussions about secularism which generally focus on women's rights and Islam in France, the question of the Jews, antisemitism, and Israel has been unexpectedly added as a vital but diffuse issue in the "clash of civilizations." This is not the first time that feminism has been linked to the Jews, who are often denigrated in certain feminist theologies as "being responsible for patriarchy." Conversely, they are also denounced as responsible for feminism ("feminism, that Jewish invention"). How does this triad of apparently ill-assorted terms—secularism, feminism, and antisemitism—fit into the current French debate? These three topics have been brought together, either negatively or positively depending on one's ideological point of view, by the so-called "Islamic veil" affair.<sup>2</sup> The debate sparked by this affair is peculiarly symbolic, as it crystallizes most of the questions which have preoccupied the French for some twenty years. Hence, it goes further than any mere political controversy. It has seen the birth of new tendencies, new ideological alliances, and new confrontations. It has also brought to the surface feelings, resentments, religious conflicts, challenges to secularism, to immigration and integration, as well as a questioning of feminism. At the same time, there has been a flare-up of antisemitism, anti-globalization, and anti-Americanism, along with an "Americanization" of French ways of thinking.

Today, there is very little understanding outside the country of this complex situation in France. Today, what used to be proudly referred to as the "French exception," sounds much more like French-style "oddness." The world press observes French crises in terms of what it knows, and what it is used to, each local version interpreting things on the basis of its own national experience. France makes the headlines in the foreign papers in words worthy of Hollywood movies: "Is Paris burning?" or "The suburban intifada." Then there are those who call the ban on the *hijab* at school "secular fundamentalism" or refer to secularism as a "French religion."

These are issues which for the last fifteen years have pitted Left against Left in France, feminists against their sisters, and even Muslims of different persuasions against each other. Between the lines of these profound differences, the Jews seem to be somewhere behind the scenes, playing an underlying, if unclear, role, whether direct or indirect. They represent a point of reference in the arguments that rage in the debate, and a counterweight that can guarantee a balance relative to the religion in question, Islam. French Jews, who had successfully integrated and adapted to secularism, have unwillingly become caught up in this debate, whose real subject is the integration of Muslim immigrants in France. Hence what is taking place is a joust of religious, political, and memory symbols: *kippa* (skullcap) versus veil; support for Israel versus support for the Palestinians; colonization/slavery versus the Holocaust or Shoah; veil compared with the

yellow star; and so on. But what could have been a straightforward competition about victimization, or legitimate support for political causes based on ethnic or religious affinities, has acquired the form of a loathing of the Jews—whom the large numbers of young people from the underprivileged suburbs of French society consider to be the favored few or well-to-do.

We will examine this three-way relationship between secularism, feminism, and antisemitism that exists as part of the controversy over the Islamic veil; and we will look at antisemitism's place in French feminist arguments in this debate. It is important to emphasize at the outset that while the arguments of "feminism" and "secularism" are more or less taken into account by all the parties involved in this controversy, the "antisemitism" angle is vehemently rejected by most of those who oppose the law on the veil. This quasi-obsessive rejection deserves attention, representing as it does a more general tendency: to minimize or sometimes even deny the existence of present-day antisemitism, especially when it is of Islamic origin. It goes hand in hand with an attitude of distrust with regard to the French Jewish communal positions on secularism or women's rights—with the latter being accused of instrumentalizing these topics in their favor.

**FRENCH SECULARISM, A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW:  
RELIGIONS, WOMEN'S RIGHTS, INTEGRATION, ANTISEMITISM**

Without knowing the historical background one cannot understand the importance of secularism as a political ideal promoting freedom of conscience and equality in France. It took several centuries of struggle before the Catholic Church was finally excluded, in 1905, from civil matters, particularly school teaching. The Jews of France enthusiastically adopted this secularism, which enabled them to fully integrate into society and reach the highest positions in the State without being forced to give up their religion. Moreover, since the Dreyfus Affair, secularism looked to them like a bulwark against antisemitism, at least in the Christian form originating with the Catholic Church.

*Women and Secularism*

As far as women are concerned, secularism contributed to their emancipation as a result of obligatory schooling for girls (instituted by the 1881 Ferry Laws). On the other hand, for a long time it stood in the way of their political equality as a result of fears of "the Church's hold over women" (French women did not get the vote until 1944). The feminism of the 1970s was closely linked to secularism in its demands for sexual freedom and women's control over their own bodies. The attitude toward religions viewed them primarily as instruments for controlling women and permanently keeping them in a subordinate position.

However, the point must be made that in the context of schools in the French Republic, secularism stood not for a denial of religion, but rather for neutrality in religious affairs. The aim was to respect universal freedom of conscience in order to make coexistence possible. As a circular from France's Education Minister puts it:

All forms of discrimination—whether based on gender, culture, or religion—must stop at the school door.... This secular and national ideal is the very life blood of the schools in the Republic, and the bedrock of the duty of civic education which it proclaims and pursues.<sup>3</sup>

It took close to a century for this principle, which originally came into being to counter the Catholic Church's influence and interference in public affairs, to be taken for granted in French society. From 1980 onwards, Islam, which had never been referred to in the turn-of-the-century discussions about secularism, unlike other religions (Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish), would constitute a new pole of resistance to the practice of French secularism. The wearing of the Islamist veil was the trigger.

The reason why this was such a divisive question in France related to the hitherto repressed reality of immigrants who had not integrated successfully, and the growth of Islamic fundamentalism.

#### *The Question of Immigration*

Immigration was at the center of debates in France during the 1980s under left- and right-wing governments alike. Increasingly, there was talk of social exclusion and cultural differentialism ("the right to be different"). On the other hand, the rise of Islamism in the Arab countries and especially in Algeria fell on attentive ears in France. In the suburbs, the fundamentalists exercised perceptible influence, in the growing number of clandestine places of worship. The bloody Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris in 1985–1986 did not improve Islam's image among the French population. As people became more religious and as French Muslims increasingly "clung to their identity," the Islamic veil put in an appearance at junior and senior high schools and sometimes even in primary schools at the end of the 1980s.<sup>4</sup>

Around 2000, the debate was sparked off again in the wake of events which placed Islamism under the spotlight on the international scene: the 9/11 attacks which shook America, the war in Iraq, and the second Palestinian intifada, with the antisemitic attacks that accompanied them, particularly in France.

#### *Antisemitism*

The flare-up in antisemitic acts that has taken place in France since 2001 is an undeniable fact. The controversy began with the identification of young Muslims as those largely responsible for these misdeeds. To speak of this form of antisemitism today in France is a

problem, especially when the speaker is Jewish. When it comes to most current affairs issues in present-day France, whether riots in the suburbs, secularism, the Islamic veil, or women's rights, the Jews cannot provide an opinion without being suspected of *communautarisme* (loosely rendered as communalism and ethnic ghettoism), or Zionism, unless they present themselves as “anti-communalist” Jews and dissociate themselves from Israel and its policies.<sup>5</sup> The Jewish intellectuals who venture into this field are considered “communal fellow-travellers,”<sup>6</sup> and accused of nurturing the “clash of civilizations.” There is also the risk of running into the “RER D” argument<sup>7</sup> (people who fantasize about antisemitism) or the “blackmail” argument, which was used as a title for books such as *Antisemitism: The Intolerable Blackmail*<sup>8</sup> or Pascal Boniface's *Is Criticizing Israel Allowed?*<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Jews who defend secularism or women's rights, and who have opposed the Islamic veil, are often accused of backward French-style republicanism, harking back to the attitude of the French “Israelites” in the 19th century.<sup>10</sup> Frequently reference is made to Amos Gitai's film *Kadosh*, which helped to strike the balance with Islamic fundamentalism. Everybody (even the best-intentioned) treats this work of fiction as a documentary. It is the history of an ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman who has no option other than to allow herself to die because she is barren. While such a scenario could have constituted a short news item, it in no way reflects any aspect of Jewish ultra-Orthodox practice. However, the way that this film is referred to gives the impression that this constitutes the equivalent of the Islamic practices of stoning, or crimes of honor.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of the feminist debate about the Islamic veil, antisemitism is perceived in a variety of forms and arouses a variety of reactions: denial, competition about victimization, balance between the religions, the role of Jewish institutions and women's rights. Antisemitic acts carried out by young people of Maghrebi background were considered mere “incivilities” or gestures of rebellion, the responsibility for which lies with the various French governments. As a result of their easygoing policies, they were accused of having abandoned young Muslims to their own devices on the housing projects or estates characteristic of modern urban living in France. So how can Muslims be blamed when they themselves are victims of anti-Arab racism? In response to those who speak of “Judeophobia,” an equivalent had to be coined for the Muslims: “Islamophobia.” The Arabs, as the explanation goes, are at a disadvantage compared with the Jews: they are more readily identified physically, far less socialized, and are themselves “Semites.” On the whole, anti-Arab racism weighs more heavily than antisemitism in the eyes of the Left, especially if the latter is directed at Israel—seen as a legitimate target. Antisemitic acts bound up with the problems of the suburbs therefore remained a taboo which people dared not tackle head-on for fear of appearing “Islamophobic,” and stigmatizing Maghrebi immigrants, thereby contributing to racism.

The silence was broken by a number of publications which appeared at the same time in 2002 and made people aware of the extremely serious nature of the situation. The first was *Les territoires perdus de la République—Antisémitisme, racisme et sexisme en milieu scolaire* (The lost territories of the Republic—antisemitism, racism and sexism in the [French] school

setting), whose editor was Emmanuel Brenner [pseud. Georges Bensoussan]. This work was based on first-hand reports by teachers at junior and senior high schools in the Paris area with sizeable numbers of students whose families hail from the Maghreb. The book denounces the antisemitism, the sexist pressures, the difficulties of teaching the Holocaust, and other “uncivil” phenomena. Schools, however, provide just one aspect of the realities in certain suburbs where violence and gang rapes flourish—neighborhoods which even the police dare not enter. In parallel, there can also be seen the steady increase in the number of girls who wear the veil at school and in the housing projects. The fact is that in these immigrant suburbs, wearing the veil protects females from sexual harassment, since veiled girls are considered “serious,” as opposed to their non-veiled counterparts, who are deemed “easy” or “whores.”

Another book which came out in 2002 revealed to the public a hidden aspect of certain suburbs or neighborhoods, referred to as “difficult” or “sensitive.” In her book, *L'enfer des tournantes* (In gang rape hell), Samira Bellil tells the tale of the gang rapes (known as *tournantes* in the language of the suburbs) to which she was subjected from the age of 13 on, and the hell (the *enfer* of the title) lived by the girls who are subject to the law of the housing projects. As if to confirm this dreadful tale, in another housing project in Vitry-sur-Seine, a 17-year-old girl, Souhanne Benziane, was burned alive in a garbage bin by a small-time local gang leader. A few months later, in February 2003, the women of the housing projects organized a “March of the women of the neighborhoods against ghettos and for equality,” in memory of Souhanne. The march climaxed on March 8 in a demonstration of more than 30,000 people. From this march emerged a movement bearing the provocative name of Ni putes, Ni soumises (Neither whores nor submissive), whose president is Fadela Amara, a militant from the Maison des Potes.<sup>12</sup> This is closely associated with *SOS Racisme*, an organization that opposes Islamist fundamentalism and the wearing of the veil.<sup>13</sup> According to them, the veil is the most visible symptom of an attitude towards women in certain Islamic cultural circles, comprising the locking up of girls and forced marriages, with brothers and fathers exerting authority and bringing pressure to bear on the girls. To officially ban the veil, starting at school, they argue, would enable the latter to escape coercive family pressures and the tyranny of fundamentalism.

However, what rekindled the flames of the debate over the veil in the political arena was the statement made by then-interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy on April 19, 2003 at the Congress of the Union of Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF) in the suburb of Le Bourget.<sup>14</sup> He reminded his listeners that photographs for ID cards had to be taken without a head covering. The upshot was an outburst of anger by the Islamists.

A number of cases which were splashed all over the media would add fuel to the fire of this debate. One such case was that of sisters Alma and Lila Levy. These two Muslim girls, whose father is an atheist Jew, and the mother of Kabyle origin, resolved to brave the ban on wearing the veil. They then lodged a complaint after they had been expelled from school. The whole story was perfect grist to the mills of the “scoop hunters.” The girls

appeared on all the current event programs on television, and even brought out a book of interviews.<sup>15</sup>

It was against this background that in July 2003, President Jacques Chirac appointed a Commission to consider the application of *Laïcité* (the secularism principle), chaired by Bernard Stasi, France's Ombudsman.<sup>16</sup> This commission, comprising teachers, researchers, jurists, and politicians, held hearings involving a whole gamut of individuals representing France's civil society, political parties, and religious authorities. Some of the sessions were held open to the public.

A large number of pamphlets, articles, and books have been written for or against the ban on the veil at French schools, and in particular about the Stasi Commission's work. The emphasis in our research is on French feminist viewpoints and their arguments about this question, as well as its link with antisemitism.

#### **FEMINIST POINTS OF VIEW ABOUT THE VEIL: UNIVERSALISM VS. MULTICULTURALISM**

In the debate about the possibility of a law on the Islamic veil which flared up again between 2002 and 2004, the feminists played a more active role than in previous years.<sup>17</sup> But although most of them considered the veil a symbol of male domination and women's oppression, they remained profoundly divided over whether it should be banned in schools, and especially over whether a law was needed. However, this debate provided an opportunity to test out a number of feminist theories about patriarchy, religion, and sexual liberation.

##### *Feminists against the Veil*

For most French feminists, the principle of secularism has always been a *sine qua non* of women's liberation, even though secularists did not originally consider the equality of the sexes as a priority. They think that all the monotheistic religions are patriarchal and treat women as inferiors. It should be noted that religious feminism or the feminist theologies which are fashionable in the United States or Germany occupy a very marginal place in France. However, when it comes to Islam, all the issues become clouded, and additional ones—colonialism, Third Worldism, anti-racism, and antisemitism—come into the foreground. Secular French feminist logic of the universalist and even differentialist variety have given birth to a stance which opposes the Islamic veil as a “symbol of women's oppression.” Most French feminists have adamantly adopted a position in favor of the law concerning the veil in the name of secularism.

As Elisabeth Badinter has written,

If these girls are allowed to wear the veil at school in the name of tolerance or a pseudo-liberty, on what grounds will the burqa be refused tomorrow? What must

be understood is that if this symbolism of the female body perceived as a diabolical threat is accepted, then that will be the end of the equality of the sexes.<sup>18</sup>

Or to quote from the article published in *Le Monde* by two feminist militants, Anne Zelinsky and Anne Vigerie, under the title “Laïcardes<sup>19</sup> puisque féministes” (Over-the-top secularists because we’re feminists):

True, in a sense the veil is no more than an epiphenomenon, the tip of the iceberg. The iceberg itself is the policy in which the “networks of Allah” have managed to take over immigrant groups, and their young people in particular. As a result of their financial resources, they offer help with school and assistance to families having problems, persuade elected representatives that youngsters who have been Islamized will be less delinquent....<sup>20</sup>

Some, like Julia Kristeva, although they oppose the wearing of the veil, are less radical and advocate a more pedagogical approach<sup>21</sup>:

This heritage (of feminism) is something that we should be able to convey to the young Maghrebi girls of the suburbs. To work with the young Arabs of the suburbs in order to get them to turn their backs on fanaticism. To talk about religion at school in order to deconstruct religion. To do this, outreach—almost missionizing—is required.<sup>22</sup>

There are others, like Héléne Cixous,<sup>23</sup> who worried about the effects of the law before it had even been voted on:

The problem is the question of the law. It will have to be brilliant in order not to make things much worse. But I am completely against the veil. The problem is that I do not know how they are going to manage. Teachers would have to constantly educate people. Contradictions would have to be addressed.... The fact is that the veil has changed its nature; it has become a fundamentalist flag. It is an out-and-out political gesture.<sup>24</sup>

Most of these anti-veil feminists take under their wing or support Muslim women in their struggle against Islamist fundamentalism and its offshoots. They acknowledge that Islamism is often at the root of the antisemitism currently flourishing in France. They do not make this their own struggle, but they are aware of the problem. When they are asked about current antisemitism, they often see in it an offshoot of Islamism or an import from the Middle East conflict.<sup>25</sup>

As for Muslim girls living in France, while most of them wish to integrate into society and do not want to wear the veil, they do not all believe that others should be banned from doing so. Some of the more militant ones are involved in movements such as *Pour un Islam laïc* (For a secular Islam) or *Ni putes, Ni soumises* and oppose the wearing of the veil, pointing out that in Algeria and other Islamic countries, the Islamists oppress women who refuse to wear it. Such women have had acid thrown at them or have even been murdered. Women of Algerian or Iranian origin who in their own countries were

compelled to wear the veil or the chador ask French women *not* to give in to pressure against secularism. One such case is that of Chahdortt Djavann, an Iranian woman who published a book in which she testifies to the burden of this obligation, particularly when it is imposed on young girls.<sup>26</sup>

Those Muslim girls who do wear the veil are largely motivated by religious constraints, whether of their own accord or in order to obey their families. For the latter, this modesty garment, which conceals their bodies, provides them with their fathers' and brothers' consent to go out in public. Thanks to the headscarf they can go out, study, and work. Others are "veil militants" and wear their hijab like a "banner of Islam." In a number of cases, it is more than merely an identity and religious marker, symbolizing a *political* stance.

### **OPPOSITION TO THE LAW: "RADICAL FEMINISM" FORMS AN ALLIANCE WITH RADICAL ISLAMISM**

Opposition to the law on the veil may be variously motivated but its most militant opponents base themselves on a series of concepts newly imported from American universities. These fashionable labels include "post-colonialism," "ethnicity," "identities," "subalternity," "whiteness," "paternalism," "western universalism," etc.<sup>27</sup>

One of the most intractable opponents of the anti-veil law is Christine Delphy, a founder of the French women's liberation movement, and a theoretician of radical materialist feminism. In her famous article, "L'ennemi principal" (The primary enemy), she analyzed the oppression of women and the mechanisms of male domination, which she ranked above all racial or ethnic forms of oppression. Since the veil affair, she has become the advocate of veiled girls for whom she militates in the framework of an association called Une école pour tous et pour toutes (A school for everyone), which has links with the Collective of Muslims in France (an organization close to the Islamist philosopher and ideologue Tariq Ramadan).<sup>28</sup> Delphy argues that an Islamic threat is being fabricated, in a process whereby Muslims are criminalized—a campaign which is "relayed by the media, which have given the affair an importance out of all proportion."<sup>29</sup> The claim is one of saving women against their will, and there is an assumption of female stupidity resulting from a paternalistic outlook. Opposition to the veil, she believes, is the result of "colonial and racist arrogance" on the part of the French.<sup>30</sup> The latter prefer to see women being oppressed elsewhere, where "the Arab Other" lives, so that they can enjoy the illusion that things in their country are fine, as if there were no rapes, no battered women in the best parts of town. Anyway, she says, rape is a "Gallic invention." And what do these French people want of young Muslim girls? They want them to break with their traditions and their families. In other words, they are being asked to be "disloyal" to their heritage.

This question of "loyalty" is remarkable, because it considers that Muslim women who combat the oppression of Islamism, such as Iran's Chahdortt Djavann, Talisma Nasreen (sentenced to death in Bangladesh by a *fatwa*), Samira Bellil, who wrote about the hell of



the gang rapes, or the militants of *Ni putes, Ni soumises* are, in effect, traitors to their community.<sup>31</sup> Instead of defending these women, who wish to free themselves from what feminist logic views as the most archaic patriarchal traditions, the Delphy-style French feminists fight to allow young girls to wear a veil at school, in order *not* to counter an utterly patriarchal tradition. Their opposition to the expulsion of veiled girls from school is certainly understandable, but their rejection of those campaigning against the veil that oppresses them is difficult to fathom.

#### *Antisemitism in the Debate over the Veil*

Where does the the question of antisemitism fit in here? The many texts published in defense of veiled girls often refer in some way to antisemitism or Zionism, either to deny the link or to confirm it.

The first question that must be asked is whether there is a clear dividing line between pro-and anti-veil feminists when it comes to their positions on antisemitism. Clearly, one should not equate antisemitism with the “pro-veil” alliance with Islamism or vice versa. For example, observant Jews, especially France’s Chief Rabbi Sitruk, do not support the new law on secularism, which has implications for wearing a kippa and other applications of Jewish religious precepts.<sup>32</sup> Many Muslim women who do not wear the veil also object to its prohibition, and would rather that their co-religionists be allowed to choose for themselves. There are also libertarian pro-prostitution feminists who protest against the banning of the veil because they believe that nothing should be imposed on women, even something which is considered a form of subservience.<sup>33</sup> But in the background of debates since 2000 about the law on the veil, and especially since the Palestinian intifada, there has been a change. Positions about the Islamic veil have increasingly come to reflect attitudes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Antisemitism frequently tends to be viewed in that context.

### **TWO CONTRASTING FEMINIST APPROACHES TO ANTISEMITISM**

When it comes to attitudes to antisemitism, militant French feminism displays two trends which are often linked to positions on Islam. These trends can be clearly distinguished in two politically committed French-language feminist magazines, *Prochoix* and *Nouvelles questions féministes (NQF)*.<sup>34</sup> Although they are both left wing, they are in conflict with each other, particularly over the question of antisemitism. The magazine *Prochoix* is edited by Caroline Fourest<sup>35</sup> and Fiametta Venner.<sup>36</sup> Its mission is defined as “opposing all the wrong choices”: racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, sexism, and homophobia. This feminist tendency views the fight against forms of fundamentalism as the top priority, and takes action to fight racism and antisemitism. Along the same lines there are anti-veil women Muslims, such as the members of *Ni putes, Ni soumises*, who state publicly that the fight against antisemitism is their fight also, and reject the instrumentalization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. So, too, does the SOS Racism movement with which they are

associated. They also took part in the drafting of the “Manifesto for a new feminism,” which places the fight against all forms of fundamentalism at the top of their current priorities. In the same spirit, a more general manifesto has been launched on the Internet and picked up by *Prochoix*: “To be of Muslim culture and against misogyny, homophobia, antisemitism and political Islam. To rediscover the strength of a vibrant secularism,” signed by French Muslims who reject Islamic fundamentalism. But we are still very far from a large-scale movement. While some optimists talk of a “silent majority,” for the moment such statements are very much in the minority.

*Nouvelles questions féministes* is edited by Christine Delphy, who in recent years has fought all forms of racism, while evading the question of antisemitism. In a recent issue of her magazine, which she devoted to the topic of “Sexism and racism, the French case,”<sup>37</sup> there are no articles about antisemitism as a form of racism or oppression. The only passing reference is in a quotation of Alain Gresh, who emphatically rejects the element of antisemitism in the debate about the veil.<sup>38</sup> The reason for this attitude is that, like Gresh, Delphy thinks that antisemitism is a phenomenon of the past:

European antisemitism disappeared with my generation, before and after the war.... The exclusion of young people of Muslim origin is the new antisemitism.... Israeli government policy, which is defended by the Jewish institutions, is responsible for Israel and the Jews as a whole being mixed up. This is the upshot of the fact that the State of Israel calls itself the “State of all the Jews.”<sup>39</sup>

### **ISLAM, THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, AND THE JEWS**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict plays a central role in the difficult and sometimes hostile relations between North African Muslims and Jews on French soil. Moreover, most of the religious figures in French Islam, in addition to identifying with the Palestinians, have prejudices concerning the Jewish religion. A recent study of Muslim immigrants in France has shown that Muslim religious observance often leads to or reinforces antisemitic prejudices.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, in the cassettes by populist Islamist preachers, the Jews are presented as infidels, tight-fisted usurers, perfidious through and through. The Holocaust is presented as nothing but a Jewish conspiracy.<sup>41</sup> Hence, it can be assumed that the veiled girls whose religious education is often provided through the medium of these cassettes are influenced by anti-Jewish prejudices as well as Holocaust “revisionism.”

Paradoxically, however, the Holocaust, which is distorted or played down when it concerns the Jews, is used by the Islamists and the veiled girls as a victim-based analogy to justify wearing the veil at school. While some compare the debate over the veil to the Dreyfus Affair, the Islamists reappropriate the themes of the Jewish genocide in order to swing public opinion in their favor.<sup>42</sup> When the possibility was first raised of banning it, back in 1989, some women commented: “they start by banning us from wearing the veil, and we’ll finish up in the crematoria.” In 2003, at the annual UOIF<sup>43</sup> congress in Le



Bourget, the possible banning of the veil was compared with the forced wearing of the yellow star: "Today Muslim women are forbidden to wear the veil, just like not so long ago people were forced to wear the yellow star."<sup>44</sup> The pro-veil demonstrations also provide an opportunity for antisemitic speeches and slogans delivered by fundamentalist imams.<sup>45</sup> They are attended by well-known antisemites and Holocaust deniers, who use these events to give vent to their anti-Jewish hatred. An example is Ginette Skandrani,<sup>46</sup> who (although Jewish herself) was expelled from the Greens for her militant Holocaust revisionism.

Typical of the current situation is the fact that even the most outspoken Islamist antisemitism fails to convince French intellectuals who defend Islam and relate only to the classical right-wing form of antisemitism. This is the reason why books which bear witness to the antisemitism that flourishes at certain French schools are vehemently attacked. Those who raise the issue find themselves accused of having imported the "war of civilizations" into France. Prominent Jewish Leftists like Alain Gresh have airily dismissed the evidence concerning antisemitism in French schools as lurid and simplistic<sup>47</sup>. The same perspective informs the signing by some left-wing intellectuals and feminists of a call issued on January 19, 2005 under the heading "We are the natives of the Republic.... For the post-colonial anticolonialism convention....," which rejects any accusations of Maghrebi antisemitism in the suburbs as reactionary and racist:

The immigrant youngsters are accused of being the bearers of a new antisemitism. In the guise of the never-defined term of "fundamentalism," the populations from an African, Maghrebi or Muslim background are now identified as the Fifth Column of a new barbarism that would threaten the West and its "values." Fraudulently camouflaged under the banners of secularism, of citizenship and feminism, this reactionary offensive is gaining control over minds and reshaping French society.... Discriminatory, sexist, racist, the anti-headscarf law is a piece of emergency legislation that stinks to high heaven of colonialism."<sup>48</sup>

### **WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR FRENCH JEWS?**

Generally speaking, the call by the "Natives of the Republic" and the many other pamphlets which ardently defend Muslim youth from the "difficult suburbs" and the wearing of the veil, attack Jewish "communitarianisme" as a narrow, particularist defense of Jewish communal interests. Jewish philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, who from the very outset has never concealed his unwavering opposition to veils at French schools, is an especially popular target.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, some French intellectuals display a paradoxical attitude: although they claim to be radical atheists, they feel an attraction, not to say something of a fascination with Islam, which they struggle hard to explain and excuse. We saw this in the case of Christine Delphy, who fights tooth and nail to defend veiled girls as if they were the standard bearers of a new form of feminism. It is true of Alain Gresh, who provides us with a positive interpretation of the Quran while constantly reminding us of his atheism.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, the Jews are not given the benefit of any leniency. Their attachment to Israel acts as an irritating factor and arouses mistrust. While these intellectuals do not consider themselves at all antisemitic in the classical sense of the term, they nevertheless do not feel the slightest sympathy for self-proclaimed Jews, who they call “ghettoized” or “communal,” and even less for the State of Israel, considered as “guilty” by definition. In most cases, they wholly ignore or deny current antisemitism.

As a representative example, we have opted to look at a number of extracts from *Dieu.com*, a work written by the French feminist Danièle Sallenave, published in 2004 by Gallimard. The book gives us an opportunity to observe the strange oscillation between atheism, feminism, and Islam that we saw earlier in the case of Christine Delphy and Alain Gresh. Sallenave is an atheist who seeks to demonstrate that the three monotheistic religions are all dangerous hotbeds of obscurantism. However, from its first pages onwards, the author bends over backwards to defend Islam as against Christianity and Judaism, while admitting that the Muslim condition suffers “from serious breaches of the equality of the sexes and the law.” She hastens to make the point that in the case of the Jews, and particularly in Israel, things are no different, if not worse. Among other things she bases herself on the cinematic work of fiction, *Kadosh*, and on the text of a rabbi praising feminine modesty. Thus far, this is hardly original since nobody denies that patriarchal religions hold female modesty very dear. The surprising aspect comes when she uses a quotation from the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. In doing so, she is undoubtedly aware of its metaphorical and philosophical scope: “Woman is the condition of contemplation, of the intimacy of the House and of the dwelling.” She even goes as far as to juxtapose this with a quotation from the Muslim fundamentalist Hani Ramadan,<sup>51</sup> who, she points out, “publicly justifies the stoning of the adulterous woman.” In order to strike a “balance” between Jewish and Muslim “obscurantisms,” selecting Levinas—the famous French Jewish philosopher of ethics and Otherness—is an extraordinary choice to illustrate her misleading parallel. This exercise in crass simplification, which involves lumping various religions together on the basis of an “egalitarian” imperative, has the goal of disqualifying the Jewish religion or presenting it in a negative light.

Sallenave’s next exercise supposedly involves exposing a “Jewish plot”: while coming across a tract condemning the veil on the Internet, she declares that it probably comes from pro-Israel Jewish women. It is always the Jews, the defenders of Israel, she pretends, who use the argument of “women’s rights,” “women’s dignity,” and democracy in their speeches, while the condition of women and of democracy in Israel are in a parlous state.<sup>52</sup> They “instrumentalize” the women’s question for their current “unconditional” defense of Israel.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, she compares the fear of radical Islam following September 11 to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, as if the numerous terrorist attacks in the name of Islam were fictitious or were a hoax like the *Protocols*.

In the light of such statements, one might as well ask why this obsessive need on the part of a secular, atheist feminist to defend Islam, whose misogynist excesses she

recognizes. What is the source of her need to consider the defense of women's rights by Jews as being manipulative and instrumentalized? Danièle Sallenave repeats that she loathes antisemitism, even though, it should be noted, she often adopts its tone, its themes, and turns of phrase. She abhors all religions, including Islam, whose major shortcomings she does not deny. But Islam is like the beloved unruly child who is forgiven everything. It is this irrational attraction which she felt during the time she spent in Gaza, when for the first time she heard the muezzin's "singsong" voice:

No Westerner can remain insensible to it; something unsettling comes from it, a dangerous echo of holy wars and at the same time an enigmatic calming... I am still one of those westerners on whom Islam regularly produces an effect of surprise and shock...<sup>53</sup>

### **CONFLICTS BETWEEN FEMINISTS OVER THE VEIL QUESTION**

Many militant French feminists have become aware of the danger represented by some feminists' association with Islamism. Claiming to wear a number of hats—those of the Third World, "Islamic feminism," and "the natives of the Republic"—these groups have managed to penetrate the anti-globalization movement by targeting an uneasy post-colonial conscience, economic exclusion, and white racism. This gave them a progressive stamp of approval, enabling them to push on with their goals of fighting modernity, and above all, combating feminism, while defending a "feminism of Islam." Risking division, the anti-veil feminists, on the initiative of the *Ni putes, Ni soumises* movement, decided to initiate a "Manifesto for a New Feminism," in which they would make the struggle against fundamentalism their top priority. On International Women's Day, March 8, 2005, they refused to march with the veiled girls in their procession, arguing that "there is no feminism which derives from women's submission (even if it is voluntary)." As a result, their own demonstration took place on March 6, with "new feminism" banners reading "In order to show what is at stake, if only symbolically. In order to try to stop fundamentalist entryism dead in its tracks."<sup>54</sup>

The enactment of the law against visible religious symbols at school (March 15, 2004) failed to put a stop to French feminist dissensions over the veil. In the pro-veil pattern that we have attempted to sketch, although there is no clear-cut dividing line between the different tendencies, the question of antisemitism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict undoubtedly plays a role. People who mix with fundamentalist Muslims cannot but be influenced by their anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist attitudes. While those (male and female alike) who defend them refer to Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism, they literally cover up antisemitism—reducing it to an instrument or means of blackmail designed to defend Israel and its policies. On the other hand, the majority of the women who oppose the veil and Islamic fundamentalism while at the same time fighting racism, are more aware of antisemitism and more moderate with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>55</sup>

It should therefore come as no surprise that most of the secular French Jewish organizations such as the CRIF and the Union of French Jewish Students (UEJF) have come out in favor of the law banning the veil at school, even though the kippa was included in the list of conspicuous religious symbols.<sup>56</sup> As a result, these Jewish institutions have come to be viewed by opponents of the law as its primary instigators and responsible for “sexualizing” the Muslim menace, through books like *Les territoires perdus de la République*. Subtitled *Antisémitisme, racisme et sexisme en milieu scolaire*, this book sparked the particular wrath of the defenders of the veil, who among other things accuse it of having “established a correlation between the spread of the Islamic veil at state schools and the rise in sexist and antisemitic violence.”<sup>57</sup>

The triad of secularism, feminism, and antisemitism, whether denied or confirmed, is very much part of the debate about the Islamic veil. As we have pointed out, the Jews are not the main players in this debate, but some intellectuals—including highly respectable ones—are prepared to accuse them of having deliberately promoted this issue in their own interest in order to provide fuel for their theses of an “Islamist threat” or “clash of civilizations.” The ultimate goal of the “conspiracy” is, supposedly to strengthen Israel and Zionism.

#### POSTSCRIPT

It is worthwhile to emphasize the changes which have occurred in France since June 2006 when this article was written, in relation to secularism, Islamism, feminism, and antisemitism. One important element was the election in May 2007 of Nicolas Sarkozy as President of the French Republic. Formerly as Minister of the Interior, he had expressed opposition to Islamic fundamentalism and promised to fight against all forms of antisemitism. In spite of Sarkozy’s election, the resurgence of antisemitism is still felt as well as the impact of radical Islamist ideologies.

A sign of the radicalization of Islam in France is its link to the question of women’s rights and to France’s secular image. Five years after the French Parliament passed legislation banning Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in state schools, the problem has now extended to the right to wear the *burqa*—cloaking the entire body from head to toe—and the *niqab*—covering the face save for the eyes. This was one of the triggers for the public debate launched by Minister of Immigration Eric Besson on the question of “national identity,” in which citizens from across the country were invited to discuss “what it means to be French.”<sup>58</sup> Opposition parties criticized the initiative as a political exercise designed to boost support for the Right ahead of regional elections in March 2010. Others have condemned the debate as a way of targeting Muslims in particular, who might be judged inassimilable with regard to the values of the French Republic.

The majority of feminists support a ban on full-body veils in public places.<sup>59</sup> For Sihem Habchi, a French woman of Algerian origin, currently president of the group *Ni putes ni*

soumisses (Neither whores nor submissive), “the burqa is a violent symbol of the oppression of women... contributing to the separation of populations.” This opinion is shared by Fadela Amara, the group’s founder and first president, who was appointed to the Ministry of Urban Affairs by Nicolas Sarkozy.<sup>60</sup> In the eyes of Elisabeth Badinter, “wearing a veil is opposed to the principle of fraternity in that it symbolizes ‘the refusal to meet the other, the refusal of reciprocity.... in the same way as we fight against sects, Nazism and antisemitism, we must fight radical Islamist ideologies.” (Badinter and Habchi were interviewed by a Parliamentary panel which also heard from supporters of the veils.)

The link between antisemitism and Islamic fundamentalism was raised again during the trial of the gang members who tortured and murdered Ilan Halimi because of his Jewish origins (police found Islamic and pro-Palestinian literature in their home). Support for Hamas was also striking in the backlash against the December 2008 “Cast Lead” operation, in which Israel responded to missile attacks on its citizens by Hamas which now governs the Gaza Strip. The result is that the number of antisemitic acts in France doubled within the first nine months of the year 2009 in comparison with the same period in 2008. In the words of Brice Hortefeux, Minister of the Interior: “704 antisemitic acts have been recorded, among which are insults, physical assaults, attempts to destroy buildings or antisemitic inscriptions.”<sup>61</sup>

While the link between antisemitism and radical Islamism seems evident enough, other voices, such as Jacques Attali (a well-known Franco-Jewish intellectual), have denied to the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* that antisemitism exists in France, even within its Muslim community.<sup>62</sup> “I think it’s propaganda, Israeli propaganda....” Attali said. The president of CRIF, Richard Prasquier, answered:

We have the good fortune of living in a country where the authorities and the political parties vigorously reject antisemitism. Unfortunately, in certain neighborhoods—which Jacques Attali apparently does not go to—we are witnessing an increasing trend toward a climate of abhorrence of Jews which expresses itself through insults and, quite often, through physical aggression.<sup>63</sup>



## NOTES

*The author would like to thank Prof. Robert Wistrich for his expert help in editing this essay.*

1. This expression is often found on neo-Nazi sites, but is also used by fundamentalist Muslims who conflate “feminism,” “western,” and “Jewish.”
2. Also referred to as the “Islamic scarf affair,” the term used during the first affair in 1989. Since 2000, the term “veil” (*voile*) has most frequently been used in France to refer to the *hijab*. These different terms have a more political meaning, insofar as those who oppose the law prefer “[head]scarf” (*foulard*), which is less symbolically charged.
3. From the Bayrou Circular, 20 Sept. 1994.
4. The first headscarf affair goes back to the beginning of the 1989 school year.
5. Vincent Geisser, “Les institutions juives et le foulard,” in *La politisation du foulard en France, en Europe et dans le monde arabe*, edited by Françoise Lorcerie (Paris: Harmattan, 2005), 104.
6. The best-known include Alain Finkielkraut, Raphaël Dray, Marc Knobel, Shmuel Trigano, and Georges Bensoussan. Pierre-André Taguieff, who is not Jewish, is referred to as “external support.” See Lorcerie, *La politisation*, 104.
7. The reference is to a non-Jewish girl who complained that youngsters from the suburbs, who thought she was Jewish, subjected her to an antisemitic attack in the RER D suburban railway system. The incident received emotive coverage by the media and had all the political circles up in arms. Eventually it turned out that the girl had invented the attack and pretended that it had taken place.
8. Vv.aa., *Antisémitisme, l'intolérable chantage* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2003).
9. Pascal Boniface, *Est-il permis de critiquer Israël?* (Paris: Broché, 2003).
10. Geisser, “Les institutions juives et le foulard.”
11. See note 63 and the paragraph just before the postscript.
12. “House of Pals,” social center for youngsters created in some suburbs by the SOS Racism movement which adopted the slogan “Don’t touch my pal” (*Touche pas à mon pote*).
13. SOS Racisme is a French association set up in 1984 to combat all forms of racial discrimination. It is close to the Socialist Party.
14. Set up in 1983, today the UOIF is an umbrella organization of over 200 associations which are very active in working class neighborhoods. Close to the Muslim Brotherhood, every year it organizes a meeting of more than 30,000 in Le Bourget.
15. Alma Levy, Lila Levy, Yves Sintomer, and Veronique Giraud, *Des filles comme les autres: au delà du foulard* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).
16. The Stasi Commission, which issued its conclusions on 11 December 2003, recommended that a law be enacted forbidding religious signs at school: headscarf and beard for Muslims, turban for Sikhs, skullcap for Jews, and large cross for Christians. The law was voted by the General Assembly in March 2004.

17. The first “headscarf” affair in 1989, and then in 1994 following the Bayrou Circular (see n. 3).
18. Elizabeth Badinter is a universalist feminist philosopher, author of *Fausse route* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2003).
19. The term “laïcarde”(from *laïc*, secular) is supposed to have pejorative overtones (excessively secularist), but is a description which the article’s authors claim as applying to themselves.
20. *Le Monde*, 30 May 2003.
21. Psychoanalyst, writer, university professor at Paris 7.
22. Nelly Las, interview with Julia Kristeva, Paris, Nov. 2003.
23. Writer, university professor at Paris 8 and Collège de philosophie.
24. Nelly Las, interview with Hélène Cixous, Paris, Nov. 2003.
25. From Nelly Las’s conversations with many French feminists of differing persuasions.
26. Chahdortt Djavann, *Bas les voiles* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003). “When I was ten I wore the veil. It was the veil or death. I know what I’m talking about....”
27. In particular, Edward Said, *Orientalism*, French translation (Paris, Edition de Seuil, 1980, 2005).
28. Swiss Muslim academic and theologian, Tariq Ramadan is the grandson of Hassan el-Bana, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the son of Said Ramadan, the founder of this movement’s Palestinian branch.
29. Christine Delphy, “Antisexisme ou antiracisme? Un faux dilemme,” *Nouvelles questions féministes* [henceforth, *NQF*] 25, no. 1 (2006): 59.
30. Christine Delphy, address at the meeting of “Une école pour tous et pour toutes,” Le Trianon, Paris, 4 Feb. 2004.
31. *NQF* 25, no. 1 (2006): 73–74.
32. Such as exams held on the Jewish Sabbath, and the parallels drawn between the veil and the *kippa* (skullcap worn by men). Chief Rabbi Sitruk has not come out in favor of a law banning the veil at school.
33. Anne Souyris, “Des prostitué-es et des femmes voilé-es: les victimes, c’est les autres.” Souyris is president of Femmes Publiques, Agir Prostitution Les Verts website.
34. *Nouvelles questions féministes*, *Revue internationale francophone*, is currently published in Switzerland by Éditions Antipode.
35. Caroline Fourest is the author of *La tentation obscurantiste* (Paris: Grasset, 2005); *Frère Tariq* (Paris: Grasset, 2004); idem and Fiametta Venner, *Tirs croisés* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2003).
36. Fiametta Venner, *OPA sur l’Islam de France, les ambitions de l’UOIF* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2005).
37. *NQF* 25, no. 1 (2006). This issue was entitled “Sexisme et racisme: le cas français.”
38. Alain Gresh, *L’Islam, La République et le monde* (Paris: Fayard, 2004). Gresh is the co-director of the left-wing newspaper *Le monde diplomatique*.

39. Delphy interview.
40. CEVIPOF, *Français comme les autres? Enquête réalisée sur les citoyens d'origine maghrébine, africaine et turque* (Paris: Presse de Sciences-po, 2005).
41. Tape recorded text by the UOIF's star preacher, Hassan Iquioussen, entitled "La Palestine, histoire d'une injustice," distributed by Tawhid Publishers. This transcribed text was published in *Le Figaro*, 28 Oct. 2004.
42. Houria Boutelkja, Catherine Grupper, Laurent Levy, and Pierre Tévanian, "Une nouvelle affaire Dreyfus" in *Le foulard islamique en questions* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2004).
43. Union des organisations islamiques de France.
44. "How is it possible to compare the (enforced) wearing of a stigmatizing sign to the banning of a sign of submission?" Quoted by Caroline Fourest and Fiammeta Venner, *Tirs croisés* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, Livre de poche, 2003), 274.
45. Speech by Mohamed Latrèche, president of the Parti des musulmans de France (PMF), at a pro-veil demonstration in Paris, 17 Jan. 2004. *ProChoix*, no. 28 (Spring 2004).
46. Ginette Skandrani, co-founder of the Verts (greens), was thrown out of her party in June 2005 because of her virulent antisemitism and her revisionism (she contributes to the revisionist Internet site AAARCH, and is close to Mohamed Latrèche's Parti des musulmans de France).
47. In Alain Gresh's view, the accounts in *Les Territoires perdus de la République* convey "a lurid, simplistic, caricatured image" of the situation in these schools.
48. [http://toutesegaux/free/fr/article.php3?id\\_article=90](http://toutesegaux/free/fr/article.php3?id_article=90).
49. Alain Finkielkraut, Elisabeth Badinter, Régis Debray, Elisabeth de Fontenay, and Catherine Kintzler, Manifesto, "Profes ne capitulons pas!" (Teachers, don't capitulate!), *Nouvel Observateur*, 26 Nov. 1989.
50. Alain Gresh, *L'Islam, la République et le monde* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).
51. Hani Ramadan, Tariq Ramadan's brother, runs the Geneva Islamic Center.
52. Danièle Sallenave, *Dieu.com*, 61.
53. *Ibid.*, 113–14.
54. Caroline Fourest, "Sortir de la confusion avant que l'intégrisme ait raison du féminisme," *Prochoix*, no. 32 (Mar. 2005).
55. At a public demonstration of support for the Geneva Accords, Fadela Amara, president of the Ni putes, Ni soumises movement, even declared publicly: "Palestine is in my heart, Israel in my conscience."
56. CRIF is the representative board of France's Jewish institutions; UEJF (Union des étudiants juifs de France), the French Jewish students union.
57. Vincent Geisser, "Les institutions juives de France et le foulard," 103.
58. Sarkozy's declaration about the burqa: "The problem of the burqa is not a religious problem. This is an issue of a woman's freedom and dignity. This is not a religious symbol. It is a sign of subservience; it is a sign of lowering. I want to say solemnly, the burqa is not welcome in France."

59. They have diverging opinions concerning the necessity of a law.
60. For Muslim-born Fadela Amara, the burqa is “a sort of tomb for women.”
61. Brice Hortefeux’s speech at a conference on antisemitism (13 Dec. 2009) organized by the Organization of French Jewish Managers (Association des Patrons juifs de France).
62. *Ha’aretz*, 16 Oct., 2009. Jacques Attali was the adviser of the Socialist President François Mitterrand.
63. Quoted by Veronique Chemla, “No Anti-Semitism in France?” *American Thinker*, 1 Jan. 2010.