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## Article

# From One Islam to Another: A Paradoxical Agency of the Entry into Female Students' Careers

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**Abstract:** The European continent appears as a new transcultural environment at the heart of globalization in which religious subjectivities are developed. I observe this more specifically in the socioreligious trajectories of the descendants of Muslim migrants. This paper focuses on the mobilization of Islam in its social manifestations among female Muslim teachers in Muslim private schools, in comparison with the Islam of young female students at university. Research with the professors allows us to question the religious activity of the interviewees and how they develop a long-term lifestyle, including in a context marked by stigmatization, against the backdrop of the results of our previous work on the emancipation pattern of the “sisters in Islam”. This analysis is based on a comparative approach that aims to capture a new way of being in the French society, in a religious frame of reference that is being reinvented.

**Keywords:** Muslim female students; Muslim female teachers; Islam of the Youth; agency; self-accomplishment; “religious activity”; Muslim lifestyle; private Muslim schools

## 1. Introduction

This article examines the role of religious mobilization of Muslim women teachers in France and how they engage over time through their professional projects, in comparison to the religious effervescence of groups of “sisters” and their religious militancy that I observed in my previous research among female university students. To understand what is happening among practicing female teachers, I use field biographical interview materials produced by ongoing research in private Muslim schools (Hanafi et al. 2018). In my previous research, I formulated the hypothesis that the connection to Islam of female students in several large French cities (mainly in Bordeaux, Marseille, and Grenoble) can be analyzed through the prism of the experimental dynamics of youth, articulated in the modern process of individualization and subjectification of belief. The reconstruction of the socioreligious trajectories of the practicing students, based on a corpus of biographical interviews, enabled me to reconstruct different phases during which they developed a religious effervescence that was expressed through values of mutual aid and solidarity within the networks of “sisters” developed upon their arrival at university. I observed this process as a mode of emancipation that broke with an essentialized vision of the “practicing woman”, especially with her “veil” (Göle [1993] 2003; Babès 1997; Nordmann 2004; Scott [2007] 2017). It is interesting to underscore that the dominant media and cultural representations which tended to highlight daughters of immigrant parents from the Maghreb in public high-schools before the veil affairs polarized the debates about them. Usually presented as models of integration, the polemical emergence on the right or not to wear the veil in the French public sphere, and especially at public schools, has upset these reassuring representations. The socioreligious trajectories of these students blur the usual readings of emancipation, generally thought of as being in opposition to religion (Silvestri 2008).

My research is based on semistructured interviews with forty female Muslim students (Hanafi 2011) and twelve female Muslim teachers in private Muslim schools in eastern France (Hanafi et al.

2018). For this paper, field data are used to analyze how female teachers make a professional life choice in accordance with their religious lifestyles. Thanks to an ethnographic approach and interviews, I question their worldview and their entry into a professional career, and I compare it with the female university students' experience of Islam. The female teachers in private Muslim schools share with the students an experience of gender assignment in their socioreligious trajectories. But unlike female students who experienced Islam in the sorority, female teachers experience Islam as a way of life in a long-term perspective. Despite their diplomas, they face rejection and stigmatization when they enter a professional career with their headscarf. The question of the veil is raised more particularly after 2015 and the terrorist attacks in Paris. Islam largely has become a security issue (Kepel 2015). Thus, a negative perception of the visible signs of a Muslim presence associated with threat is pointed out by Bobineau and Lathion (2012), and shown, for example, in the 2009 Swiss referendum on the ban on minarets. Göle confirms it in her European survey. Her investigation into the controversies surrounding Islam shows a convergence on a European scale of ways of wanting to govern it in countries with different legacies of their relations to religions in the public sphere (Göle 2015). She questions the intricate "fear of Islam" within European societies and "secular" politics through a recurrence of conflicts crystallized in the visibility of religious symbols in the public sphere. The recurrence of controversies sheds lights on the expression of the process of secularization in European societies, including countries with a different history than the French case, characterized by the State on the one hand, and immigrant Muslims from ex-colonies on the other hand. For example, Pirický analyses the context of Slovakia, where after the fall of communism in 1989: "Muslim converts there are still regarded as strange, and veiled Muslim women even as dangerous" (Pirický 2018, p. 109).

## 2. A Subversive Islam of the Youth

Women practitioners are then seen by dominant media and cultural representations as negative role models, and they experience the imposition of secularism all the more badly as they interpret it as an injustice, an injunction to assimilation that had already silenced their parents<sup>1</sup>. With regard to the latter, the main reason for the frequent mention of an integrated Islam is their invisibility, as if to better highlight the "illegitimacy" of its presence and of the manifestation of religious affiliation among their descendants (Sayad 2006, p. 188). In the French context, the various cases related to the wearing of veil in the public-school system since the case of the Creil<sup>2</sup> schoolgirls in 1989 have paradoxically contributed to making the religiosity of women, descendants of migrants, invisible. If the religious commitment of female students, driven by a quest for meaning, is not reduced to the question of the headscarf alone, it still continues to stir up passions in France as much as ever today. These passions even constitute on a European scale and a central knot in the controversies surrounding Islam in societal debates (Göle 2015, p. 25). If the headscarf is disturbing for a large European audience, I hypothesized that it is not so much because of the female students' refusal to conform to a normative model, but due to their determination to redraw its contours from a religious as well as an academic rhetoric. This perspective makes it possible to highlight a subversive use of religion in the process of empowerment, which is in implementing agency, specifically in family relationships, whereas, among Muslim female teachers in private religious schools, this question is reflected in their way of living Islam according to a vision of self-accomplishment in society, including with a headscarf at work.

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<sup>1</sup> The silence, or supposed silence of parents, contrasts significantly with the "noise" of young people seeking visibility of social and political struggles in the public space, such as the 1983 Youth March for Equality and Against Racism, or the 2005 sociopolitical movement (Bowen 2014, p. 2005). These examples of movements that have punctuated social life since the 1980s illustrate the opposition, in a sense, to the silence imposed on them to a discourse aimed at restoring officially the voice of the descendants of Muslim migrants who take part in debates to demand inclusive citizenship.

<sup>2</sup> Creil is the French city where the first veil case started at the H. Chavez high school.

[...] I always had the idea that the woman wearing a veil should stay home ... well now at least I don't have this idea anymore (laughs) but in any case I would like my girl pupils not to have that idea in their minds! (Primary school, Lyon)

Youth is characterized by a phase of experimentation with individual religiosity, whereas the entry into adulthood becomes for female teachers an age of self-accomplishment where religious commitment appears as a signifying marker that guides their personal and professional life over time. Hervieu-Léger's typology of the different forms of communalization in voluntary groups of believers gives meaning to our analysis, in particular to situate the religious mobilization of female teachers. Until then, we had observed this process among the students interviewed. However, among female teachers, "this spiritual activity presents itself, in its most general definition, as a systematic effort of an individual to increase its own capacity to produce the meaning of its own existence, and to implement the self-accomplishment that is its goal"<sup>3</sup> (Hervieu-Léger 2001, p. 152). In this perspective, we propose to capture the stakes of the social transformations at work in the religious engagement of female teachers. This can lead us to apprehend the specific sociabilities that are realized in the professional project. These Muslim women claim a self-accomplishment in adhering to the project of a confessional establishment that structures their commitment in this path. Historically, the movement of Islamization of young people in working-class neighborhoods takes shape in the aftermath of the strong mobilizations of the "March for equality and against racism" in France in 1983. The Islam of young people born and socialized in France became a refuge for identity-building for many of them, in a dynamic of reversal of the stigma. Young people's Islam is understood in particular through the prism of the conflictual relationships that boys have with public actors (schools, institutions, etc.). In a daily life marked by marginalization and discrimination, some youths eventually resort to an Islam. This process or "re-Islamization" is studied by Kapko like a "remedy" to improve their image (Kapko 2007, p. 46), while Shirali questions the rigorist view of marginalized youth in their complex relationship to democracy (Shirali 2007, p. 101). In her view, the quest for self-esteem oscillates, for a minority of young people, between social and political marginalization and a commitment to radical Islam. Largely absent from this analysis, the girls came under the light in the conflicts related to headscarves, since the first of those, in the Creil high school in 1989. These conflicts still provoke strong emotional controversies<sup>4</sup> today because they convey representations of the "French integration" of minority females, usually referred to as positive and distinctive from the stereotypes toward males (Brion 2004; Delphy 2008).

The visibility of Islam in the public space produces what Beraud and Portier analyze, with regard to Catholicism, as a manifest "displacement of the targets" to Islam at the beginning of the 1980s with the politics of secularity (Beraud and Portier 2015). These affairs polarize society and reconfigure the opposition lines between a France historically molded by secularism in relation to the domination of the Catholic Church. The dominant paradigm of secularization at a time of world disenchantment does not sound the death knell of religions but reflects profound changes in the French religious landscape. Deregulation predominates at the very heart of established religions among the youth, such as Evangelical Protestants, Orthodox Jews and, more recently, young Muslims. The disaffiliation from the Catholic Church and the lack of Church involvement are also reflected in a clear increase in minority religions. Sociologists identify a gap of religious institutions in the French landscape, as well as a vitalism of minority religions in a world of globalization with a strong propensity toward ethnicity, religion, and religious lifestyle. We note the significant increase from 1.5% to 10% Jews and Protestants in the total population in France. The increase of Muslim affirmation in the reinvention of a

<sup>3</sup> Original quotation in French translated by G. Bonacci.

<sup>4</sup> See the controversy over the veil of the current female student President elect of the National Union of French University Students (UNEF in France) in 2018.

self-Islam is more specifically the result of a movement of revival, on both a national and international scale, in secularized spaces (Dieckhoff and Portier 2017).

This pluralism has redefined the lines of the French religious landscape in recent decades. This is observed in Islam with the process of acculturation of the youth and the formation of individual and collective identities in an associative religious fraternity. The stakes around the veil in school and the refusal of young girls to remove it, in a plural logic of self-expression and emancipation, bring to the fore new figures of Islam in French society. Yesterday's anticlericalism has given way today to a "secularism" of mobilization in response to religious demonstrations in schools, against demands structured by the new needs of citizens of the Muslim faith (Roy 2005).

Research interviews with female students show that girls' religiosity is not based on an identity inherited from previous generations or a "canonical" norm but on the bonds of solidarity that girls forge in sorority at a period of their life that constitutes a critical moment in the construction of personal identity (Dubar 2000, p. 178). Religious mobilization thus appears as a "matter" of youth engagement carried by a social order contesting authority, where the interviewees develop the expression of a "critical consciousness," in the sense proposed by Gramsci<sup>5</sup>. My previous works highlighted the subversive nature of religious engagement in sorority, which is opposed to a family tradition as evidenced by the interview with Faïma. Tensions between her and her father arise over the visibility of signs of her religiosity as opposed to the "discretion" that the father imposes on himself as an immigrant worker. Moreover, Faïma's religious militancy aims to shake up gendered power relations: "in the name of what right, could girls not be initiated like boys into the Qur'an and its tradition?" (21 years, Preparatory class for business school and L3 Foreign languages, Bordeaux). The religious militancy of girls disrupts power relations in families through a new way of being. They develop an argument drawn as much from a scholarly religious repertoire as from secular rhetoric nourished by their academic references. The interviewees' process of connection to Islam, associated with religious militancy in the sorority, contains a subversive character that becomes, for them, a way of breaking with the legacy of the injunction to have to go unnoticed. The participation of girls in *halaqât* (clubs with a theological dimension) provides a space for the recognition of religious subjectivities that builds solidarity against multiple forms of domination (Hanafi 2017, p. 679).

The religious affiliation of the interviewees is reflected in a critical reading of the foundations of the imposition of patriarchal authority and gender oppression that are developed in religious militancy. Authority and oppression are identified when the girls orient themselves in graduate studies,<sup>6</sup> while they leave, at least temporarily, the family sphere for their studies.

"We are Muslims by inheritance because we do not choose. We don't eat pork, we don't drink alcohol (and again!), we do Eid and Ramadan. But since I've been in Bordeaux, I've had like a revelation. The Islam I had was my mother's Islam, traditions! It's not true Islam ... well, God only knows!" Rafika (18 years, L1 Physics-Chemistry, Bordeaux)

"It was later that I understood religion, when I came to college! In high school, I knew not to eat pork anymore. But it was at university that I began to read the Qur'an and texts on religion, on the prophet. It wasn't my parents who gave me an Islamic upbringing. It was done by myself." Iliana (31 years, Master2 Law, Bordeaux)

<sup>5</sup> In the sense that the development of one's own autonomous "world view" that implies belonging "to a determined group, and precisely to the one which gathers the social elements sharing a similar way of thinking and acting". This phase of "critical consciousness" is therefore the concern of a group and not a collection of isolated individuals (Gramsci 1983, p. 135) [French quotation, translated by G. Bonacci].

<sup>6</sup> It is reflected in access to scholarly knowledge of religious texts, attendance at religious initiation courses offered at the mosque of major cities in France, often in parallel with learning the Arabic language, and for some, wearing a veil according to circumstances and contexts.

They develop an argument drawn as much from a scholarly religious repertoire as from a secular doxa nourished by academic references. The polemics by the medias on the headscarf is thus put into perspective by an interviewee.

“Some others think the veil should be worn all the time! For me, it’s a “do it yourself religious”. I will adapt the veil to my lifestyle because I am aware that Islam is not antagonistic to modernity. That’s why we have to make a good distinction between traditions, custom and Islam!” (Nadira, 26 years, Master2 in Sociology, Bordeaux)

These religiosities coincide in the interviewees’ socioreligious trajectories with a phase of what I call a “butterfly attitude”, like a “pick and choose” approach. A new paradigm would therefore be possible: The referent to Islam would most often come from a choice rather than as “inheritance” (Hervieu-Léger 1999). This approach is observed in a process of communalization, a characteristic way of being in modernity. It is part of a transformation of religious attitude following a “halal zapping”, into a new paradigm that does not escape a more general tendency, within and outside institutional frameworks, in a competitive context of religious goods. The interviews reveal a plurality of resources for this purpose, which girls mobilize outside the family inheritance repertoire alone. Female students recognize themselves in a “market” Islam (Haenni 2005) where the religious quest is to seek personal well-being rather than the strict application of a credo of the Islamic norm. We observe new subjective and militant appropriations, that produce feminist discourses of equality and claims for social justice. Others turn to the network of humanitarian aid through various charities. The “experimentation” process of the students interviewed<sup>7</sup> is part of an individualization of religious behaviors characteristic of modern lifestyles, in the broader context of juvenile religiosities that cannot be understood as a normative model in time and social space (Hervieu-Léger 2001; Bidart 2006; Lefebvre 2010; Roudet 2012). This approach suggests a field of research with a heuristic scope on the exploratory dynamics of youth correlated to religiosity.

While the young female students interviewed are characterized by a phase of experimentation, the religious commitment of the teachers appears to be a marker of the meaning of their entry into adulthood. Our research has highlighted the ramifications of this engagement in teachers’ discourses as opposed to the religious zapping that characterizes youthful effervescence. The typology drawn by Hervieu-Léger is relevant to our purpose. The description of the different forms of religious experiences of voluntary groups of believers sheds light on our analysis, in particular to designate the religious mobilization of female teachers as a “spiritual activity” that is part of a long-term process, including their professional activities, as opposed to the zapping of religious goods. I observe it in the trajectories of practicing teachers. The context of my previous research on the Islam of female students did not allow us to identify a long-term commitment of their religious militancy.

### 3. A Paradoxical Agency

I realized that religious militancy, in the sample of the survey of 2018, in private Muslim schools, is no longer oriented towards self-assertion, but towards action within a Muslim community. The female teachers interviewed formulate discourses of guided mutual assistance—as well as a community of shared values in the Islamic religion. This way guides their personal and professional lives according to an ethical line of conduct. This is what leads female teachers to argue about the meaning of their professional commitment to better helping private Muslim schools to develop, even though salary conditions are not very rewarding for university graduates.

Their participation in a multitude of charitable work related to teaching (organization of gala evenings for a call for donations, mobilization of professional networks, academic support for students,

<sup>7</sup> On this subject, Lefebvre develops an analysis of the different ages of life of Saint-Augustin and his religious youthful exploration (2010). The author also summarizes the most recent work on the characteristics of the religiosity of youth, in particular through a phase of effervescence that echoes the one we see in female students (2011).



etc.) reflects a deep desire to promote a relentless commitment to personal achievement that conveys the values of mutual aid and solidarity. It is in this perspective that the teachers say they want to contribute to the construction of the denominational school project. These Muslim private schools, most of which are located on the “educational priority areas”, mobilize an emotional register that animates the interviewees with the idea of fully living their religious commitment by sharing a quest for self-accomplishment in a work context where some of them say they feel “useful”.

“[...] I absolutely wanted to work in schools located in priority education areas [ZEP in French] because I came from there, uh; I absolutely wanted to, uh, here ... feel useful [...]” (Primary school, Toulouse)

“[...] in the private sector, when you see everyone caring about everyone, you can’t be the person who doesn’t care and I think it fits me in terms of personality too. I have a great need to work in a friendly, supportive establishment. And that, I have the impression that it’s not possible in the public schools” (High-school, Nice)

If the headscarf is not negotiable among the teachers who wear it, unlike students, it is interesting to note an argument that is based on a feeling of injustice. A teacher interviewed in Strasbourg expressed it in these terms:

E. “I was thinking, “You can’t do this to me”! I’m talking about a kind of youthful ardor.

Author: [...] when you were led to take the veil, was that in response to a revolt?

E. No, not at all!

Author: What made you wear the veil at one point?

E. Now with maturity (laughs) uh I would say to myself it’s a youth robbery and I stay dressed with my scarf (laughs). But well, it was a little bit ... I would say, childish on my part ... I have a strong character ... but I felt it was simply unfair, simply unfair. And so I continued to train myself, to train alone, to give courses because of course when you have done such long studies [she holds a Ph.D. in Physics] you don’t want to lose everything you know”. (High school, Strasbourg)

In the mirror of her negative experiences, she expresses the feeling that she has crystallized, through the headscarf, many conflicts by refusing to remove it. This situation reveals an intertwining of the different forms of oppression (Vincent 2003). It should be noted that gender assignment is also an experience of power relations through their socioprofessional marginalization because of their headscarf. This teacher measures sacrifice at the expense of professional opportunities. This is what the interviewee points out as her contract with a private Catholic school was not renewed a few years earlier, following a conflict with parents mobilized against her veil. She experiences this situation as a humiliation that does not reflect a judgment on her professional skills but on her appearance. Further, this event makes her react against a feeling of injustice which, under the guise of defending a conception of citizenship, imposes an “ethno-nationalism” (Scott [2007] 2017) even in a private establishment under contract with the State, and therefore not subjected to the Act of 15 March 2004<sup>8</sup>. While she acknowledges that it could have been otherwise, this injunction to the invisibility of the markers of her religiosity produces in her a rigidity of principle to defend a freedom of belief in French society. She thus explains her refusal to remove her headscarf in the private Catholic high school in response to the imposition of a standard of behavior that she considers to be part of a restrictive conception of secularism.

<sup>8</sup> The Act of 15 March 2004 bans the wearing of “signs or dress through which pupils ostensibly indicate which religion they profess in public primary, middle and secondary schools”.

This experience actualizes what she calls a “robbery” which, in her words, means a “youth robbery” with her headscarf in the context of the 1980s. As a student at the end of her thesis, the doors to higher education were closed because of her veil. She developed her professional orientation in the network of mosques. This teacher clearly expresses that she has put on hold her professional life agency even as she embarked on a path of social success. The headscarf presented as a life choice by teachers does not fail to signify a socioeconomic reality of marginalization among veiled women who are not protected by their diploma.

If the process of connecting the interviewees to Islam associated with militancy in the sorority contains a subversive character, it is a way for them to break with the injunction to have to go unnoticed. While it is undeniable that the religious mobilization of female students is subversive at the level of family relationships, the religious commitment over time of female teachers is observed at the socioeconomic level. Nevertheless, these Muslim teachers are moving into a confessional network where they can conceive a Muslim lifestyle in French society without fear of being rejected because of their belief, or their headscarf.

#### 4. Conclusions

My previous research had not allowed us to fully measure the impact of the religious mobilization of female students in their professional career projects, whereas interviews with female teachers in private Muslim schools illustrate this. The interviewees claim a freedom of commitment that is no less paradoxical in view of the sacrifice it entails in their professional career plans. According to Becker, who writes on “commitment” (Becker 2006, p. 191), this concept may be appropriate to identify ambiguity and coherency in the behavior of Muslim female teachers during the process of entering into the career. Despite religion, it is also a professional opportunity for them in a labor market that excludes them because of their headscarf. Objectively, they know that they will not be able to work in public schools with their headscarves and their only prospect will be to work in private Muslim schools or in the associative networks of mosques.

Thus, it can be said that practicing female teachers experience a paradoxical emancipation. The reassuring setting of the Muslim private schools where they work must not, however, mask an economic insecurity that locks them in a precarious status with their headscarves. It should be mentioned that among the interviews with Muslim female teachers, the headscarf issue will condition their teaching careers in a highly stigmatized professional environment. The latter has a significant impact on their careers, and this is particularly true for women who opt for teaching in private Muslim schools. Those represent a context that does place them in an emotional security. They can share a social life without having to justify their Muslim lifestyle. This is particularly explicit for female teachers who talk about a “religious atmosphere” in a context of self-accomplishment. They do not feel stigmatization because of their veil, neither suspected of Islamist proselytism by their other colleagues or the children’s parents. Nevertheless, they are school education professionals whose mission is to enable children to move on to the next grade.

It remains to be seen, however, one may wonder whether the politic of secular does not condemn them to a socioeconomical stigmatization that paradoxically locks them into professional networks of a community nature, whereas their willpower displayed is precisely that of wanting to participate in the race for goods and success, with their university degrees.

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