

*Valérie Amiraux*

**SPEAKING AS A MUSLIM:  
AVOIDING RELIGION IN FRENCH PUBLIC SPACE<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction**

Three main ways of studying Muslims living in France have developed in the French social science literature over the last two decades (Amiraux 2004; Cesari 1994). The first gives priority to a reading of the public regulation of religious pluralism and of Islam as *culte* (worship; Frégosi 1998; Basdevant-Gaudemet 1996; Galembert and Belbah 2005). A second approach focuses on observing the articulation of “being a Muslim” and acting as a citizen (Babès 1997; Tietze 2002; Venel 2004). The third, intermediary trend considers the living conditions of Muslims in France with respect to the impact of certain constraints (*la laïcité*) and the requirement that both Muslim individuals and Muslim groups adhere to the limits set by these republican principles (Roy 2005). Within this third segment of the social science literature, one also finds volumes focusing on the ways in which Muslims address specific living conditions, such as differences between generations (Khosrokhavar 1997), conditions in public institutions (Geisser and Mohsen-Finan 2001; Khosrokhavar 2004), and, last but not least, the headscarf controversies (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995; Lorcerie 2005; Babès 2005; Nordmann 2004; Baubérot, Costa-Lascoux, and Bouzar 2004). In addition, recent developments in sociology and political science emphasize the emerging profiles of religious authorities and leadership in France and Europe, or activists’ socialization, in particular among Salafī and Tabligh movements (Amghar 2005; Khedimellah 2001).

In these works, being a Muslim in France is no longer discussed as a migration issue but instead as an issue tied to the politics of citizenship. It is also conceived as an individual choice—emancipated from any type of coercion—not simply as an inheritance.<sup>2</sup> To identify as a Muslim does not imply an unchanging identity, and there are many ways to express these identifications. Most of the literature has concentrated on organized forms of religious

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2 This development corresponds to what other studies of different populations of believers also identify as a major change, in Europe and beyond (see Laermans, Wilson, and Billiet 1998).

identification and practices (thus privileging fieldwork on associations, mosques, and institutions), on organized forms of religious life. The interviews that constitute the core of this empirical data have been conducted with persons embedded in practices of exclusion or in conflicts (e.g., the building of places of worship, access to education, the wearing of the veil, the choice of a representative institution for Muslims) or persons sharing similar associative commitments. However, the majority of these publications emphasize the need to distinguish between Muslims committed to a life of worship and the anonymous ones, those individuals one hardly ever meets because they do not make an argument of their religious belief. This chapter attempts to elaborate on this point. It broadens and constructively criticizes the French tradition of knowledge by asking the following questions: Do Muslims have a life independent of their belief and their supposed belonging to a religious community in the French context? To what extent do Muslims cease to be Muslims when they are not addressed as such?<sup>3</sup> In other words, do Muslims (both men and women) exist outside of worship, and what kind of life do they lead as everyday citizens?<sup>4</sup>

It became difficult to identify who and what is at stake when people—including social scientists, but also journalists, policymakers, and the general public—talk about Muslims in France. This chapter offers a very personal attempt to be more focused in this process of defining Muslims as objects and subjects of social science research. At the same time, it retains as core material the personal experiences and narratives of five individuals who all identified themselves as Muslim believers in their discussions with me. In general in this volume, the authors offer a transversal analysis of various European contexts on the basis of empirical findings revealing the different performances of individuals who define themselves as Islamic political subjects in multiple domains (e.g., training, preaching, political commitment). The contributions also present a multiplicity of voices anchored in specific experiences but strongly tied to each other in that they raise similar questions (e.g., access to public space, conditions of participation, control of visibility, production of authority).

To take into account anonymous voices means to find one's way to women who do not wear a headscarf, men who do not wear distinctive signs (like a beard or certain clothing), and people who do not speak under an Islamic label. It means trying to take into account the daily contingencies and individual trajectories, the fears, emotions, troubles, and concerns that may

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3 This question follows up on the hypothesis that a public exists only by virtue of its being addressed and therefore must claim some degree of attention from its members (Warner 2002, 60–61).

4 How do Muslims live when they are not being examined by journalists, politicians, or social scientists? As Michael Warner (2002, 60) has argued, “Most social classes and groups are understood to encompass their members all the time, no matter what. A nation, for example, includes its members whether they are awake or asleep, sober or drunk, sane or deranged, alert or comatose.”

motivate some Muslims to keep silent and others to speak out. During our face-to-face meetings, my discussion partners in France told me their personal stories and anecdotes; they spoke of their experiences, the tests they have been going through, and the situations in which they felt directly questioned about their personal beliefs about what it means to be a Muslim. This chapter is thus grounded in specific micro experiences that I learned about through exchanges with individuals.<sup>5</sup> I met them while doing fieldwork, but they were at the periphery of that research. We met either through a joint project supervised by others (Yasmina and Larbi) or when I asked for their expertise from previous research projects (Kenza, Morad, and Lila).<sup>6</sup> On other occasions, they asked me to help them publicize their work, to give expert advice, or just to participate in events they were organizing. I found them as much as they found me. Through the course of these meetings we discussed various topics, and I came to know them better as individuals. I finally considered that their different trajectories might be presented in this chapter as illustrations of the different modalities of going public as a Muslim in French public space.<sup>7</sup> Of course, this material does not stand for the 3.5 to 7 million Muslims thought to be living in France.<sup>8</sup> It is a tiny, detailed sample that does not fit the usual definition of what a legitimate sample should consist of. They cannot be said

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- 5 As Berger and Luckmann (1967, 43) have noted, the face-to-face situation makes the other's subjectivity available through "a maximum of symptoms. In the face-to-face situation, the other is fully real." It allows the sociologist to at least move away from the anonymity inherent in typifications.
  - 6 Names have been changed for Kenza and Morad. Larbi, Lila, and Yasmina have given me permission to use their real names when referring to our discussions.
  - 7 I had several meetings which each of them except for Lila, whom I met at public events and once individually for a long interview. Some of the quotations in this text come from taped interviews, others from notes that I was taking during informal conversation. The conditions for gathering the data thus justify considering the encounters to be talks rather than formal interviews. I personally do not consider interviews to differ from conversations: both consist of meetings between two persons. This perspective is one of the important legacies of ethnography, as compared with the more formal position of political science and sociology towards conducting interviews (see Althabe 1990).
  - 8 Since 1872 the French census has not included questions on religious belief. Public statistics have never properly covered the issue of faith among migrants. Since the 1980s some private surveys have been published; they deal with "the Muslim opinion" on issues such as the Gulf War in 1991, the first veil controversies in 1989 and 1994, and, more recently, the attacks on the World Trade Center. For most of these surveys, these figures are based on the definition of a Muslim as a "person of Muslim culture," basically referring to the nationality of origin of the parents or grandparents. To make a long story short, when people wish to trace back Muslims in France, they ask for the "home country" of the first migrants or look at the family name (if you have an Arab name, there is a good probability that statistics will consider you a Muslim). Thus, these statistics do not reflect actual practices, which obviously vary according to age, country of origin, and social background.

to represent a specific type of activism, nor a typical profile of second- or third-generation Muslims.

On the basis of these five cases and in reference to the current framing of the public discourse on Muslims in France, this chapter invites the reader to consider the “swing to commitment” (Boltanski 1999) of Muslim individuals from the position of spectator to one of actor on a public stage. During our conversations, these five individuals mostly emphasized their desire to care about people rather than about politics (see Eliasoph 1998, 23–31). In France today, there is no French Muslim community, no unique voice speaking in the name of all Muslims in the country. The public discourse on them is, however, framed by dominant narratives that have emerged in particular since 9/11.<sup>9</sup> The chapter opens with an analysis of the way in which this written production contributed to defining the type of social trajectories that Muslims living in France are allowed to follow. In examining this aspect I refer to the growing number of biographies, testimonies, and narratives of suffering published recently, which have become true commercial successes. These personal histories published by men and women have become part of the public domain. They have defined patterns of attitudes and thereby helped to demarcate the boundaries separating good behaviors from bad ones. How do the five interviewees relate to this public image of their own community of belief? In the next section I discuss, on the basis of specific experiences of my five discussion partners, the way in which public speech by Muslims is grounded in the French context (Goffman 1981). As in the preceding section, it relates the production of discourses to the individual experiences of my interviewees: To what extent do they feel empathy with or reject this highly audible voice? How does it affect their own “coming out” as Muslims? In the section that follows, I elaborate on the notion of going public, as rooted in the life trajectories and narratives of my discussion partners.

### **Conditions of Speech for Muslim Citizens: Public Demands and Dominant Narratives**

Who are these individuals with whom I have been talking for the past two years? Larbi is a local imam in the second biggest mosque in Paris. He is the only one I knew before the events of 9/11. Morad is a businessman involved in local political activities in a city north of Paris. I met him in early 2002 while conducting research on discrimination against Muslims in France. I then happened to meet him regularly as I was following the implementation of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (French Council for Muslim Worship;

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9 In the French context, 9/11 opened space for public deliberation and discussion of Islam-related topics, in a positive as well as a negative sense. On the one hand, it became easier for Muslims to be heard in certain arenas; on the other, racist statements about Islam and Muslims are more explicit and easier to express than ever.

hereafter CFCM). I met Kenza during research on discrimination against Muslims in the European Union. She is trained as a sociologist. She worked for different nongovernmental organizations and public agencies in charge of “immigration affairs” before she started to work for a Catholic charity foundation, where she has been in charge of international affairs since mid-2004. Lila has been wearing a veil since Ramadan 2004, two weeks before I met her as she was organizing the press release of the work done by her association on Islamophobia in France. At that time she had just resigned from her position as a lawyer in order to work for this association fighting against Islamophobia. Last but not least, when I first met Yasmina in mid-2002, she had just completed her master’s thesis in international relations. We collaborated on a public exhibition on Muslims in different world cities which took place in Paris from May to November of 2004<sup>10</sup> She is now working at a research institute that specializes in Islamic Studies.

This group of people does not constitute the usual sample for a social scientist working on Islam and Muslims in the European Union. Indeed, they do not belong to a common associative network. They do not know each other personally, even if they may sometimes visit the same places (e.g., Larbi’s mosque) or attend the same conferences. They do not live in the same neighborhood, but all do reside in Paris or its immediate surroundings (*les banlieues* or *les quartiers*). They do not work together or send their kids to the same school. They share, however, two things. First, all are of Algerian descent and live in France. Second, they all told me that they identify as Muslims. The following text based on their personal accounts attempts to analyze the conditions framing the access to public speech for Muslim French citizens. What are they permitted to do? What type of narratives are they entitled to produce? To what extent do they behave as Muslims, and what is their perception of that behavior? What makes them speak and act as Muslims rather than keep silent? What is their position in the public realm? Who do they speak for? What do they say about their situation as Muslim French citizens?

Following Charles Taylor’s suggestion that social imaginaries are what enable the practices of a society by making sense of them,<sup>11</sup> one can only be pessimistic about the dominant perceptions about and representations of Muslims held by non-Muslims in France. In the French context, “being a Muslim” is indeed framed by dominant narratives—some of them originating from Muslims<sup>12</sup>—which have slowly contributed to the sedimentation and reification of public perceptions of the “typical life of Muslims in France,”

10 “Musulmanes, Musulmans au Caire, à Téhéran, Istanbul, Paris, Dakar [...]” was organized and sponsored by the Parc de la Villette and placed under the scientific codirection of Olivier Roy and myself (see Amiraux and Roy 2004).

11 “Social imaginaries,” according to Taylor (2002, 106), are “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings [...]: it is carried in images, stories, legends.”

12 On specific anti-Muslim discourses by Muslims, see Geisser, 2003.

feeding the generation of stereotypical representations of how Muslims think, sleep, eat, love, and look.<sup>13</sup>

As a matter of fact, anyone willing to improve his or her knowledge of Islam and Muslims in France is immediately faced with a difficult choice. One could start by reading newspapers and magazines, watching television, and buying academic books. One could also rely on the testimonies delivered, in the form of either novels or biography, by “French citizens of Arab and Muslim descent”—women, men, old, and young. To talk about Muslims in France implies that one is also dealing with the dominant typifications of Muslims in Western media coverage.<sup>14</sup> To generalize about types of Muslims (the extremist, the assimilated, the republican, the secular, etc.) implies that one is considering the actors without touching upon the persons.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, to take this distinction between types of Muslims as a starting point may facilitate discussion and reflection. Indeed, it provides one with an opportunity to speak to groups of persons that end up to being aggregated together on the basis of an external manifestation of what seems to be common to all of them. Ultimately, the public discourse circulating in the media is caught between the hammer of horrible and tragic storytelling and the anvil of religious moral propositions.

The publications that I have in mind are for the most part books and written statements published as life stories and then publicized through the appearance of the authors on television shows. These appearances and the proliferation of their stories in the press and media at large (Gamson 1998) arouse pity and eventually involve the spectator, compelling him or her to act (Boltanski 1999, 32). The messages and images address first and foremost non-Muslims. Between rumors and gossip, urban legend and invented stories, this uncontrolled public discourse on Islam has found an audience (Pew

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13 There has been a tendency to make aesthetic comments about the beauty of good and bad Muslims, which I have described elsewhere as Neo-Orientalist (Amiriaux 2005). Chaddhort Djavann, an Iranian living in France, was one of the few Muslim women interviewed by the Stasi commission, which was given the mandate by French President Jacques Chirac to write a report on *laïcité* in France. Most of the comments on her hearing only mentioned that “she [was] beautiful.” Interestingly, the same comment always comes to the fore when Tariq Ramadan is being discussed, as if it would add to the suspicions of radicalism. Olivier Roy begins his last book by discussing Tariq Ramadan’s beauty (2005, 1).

14 Typification here refers to the conventions determining what characteristics help to identify persons: “The social reality of everyday life is thus apprehended in a continuum of typifications, which are progressively anonymous as they are removed from the ‘here and now’ of the face-to-face situation” (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 47–48).

15 This is, for instance, how Nacira Guénif and Eric Macé analyzed the headscarf controversies in France. What did the headscarf say? What did it perform? By the end, the headscarf talked of individuals, but individuals were kept silent (Guénif and Macé 2004; Tarraud 2005).

Research Center 2005). In a climate in which the perceptions of Muslims in France remain largely negative, commentators assert that Muslims demand to keep a distinct way of life and remain separate from the mainstream. In this light, their alienation is seen as a direct result of the cultural isolation of some Islamic enclaves in the heart of Western Europe (Stokes 2005), of which young veiled women serve as the living embodiment. In a recent survey, 70 % of the French interviewed for a Pew Research report said that they feel concerned about the increasing sense of Islamic identity developed by Muslims living in France, and 59 % said that they think Muslims want to remain distinct. It is no surprise, then, that 78 % of the French respondents believe that banning Muslim headscarves was a good idea (Pew Research Center 2005).

A pattern of public discourse on the situation of Muslims has thus emerged more explicitly in the last five years. In addition to social science discourses, the dominance of individual experience in narratives is now accepted as representative in the public sphere. The proliferation of books based on individual testimonies reflects several changes in the way French citizens of Arab and/or Muslim descent have been asked or have decided to speak out about their own trajectories. The published personal stories I am referring to are, for instance, those by Samira Bellil (2002) on sexual violence and collective rape (*les tournantes*), Loubna Meliane (2003) on political commitment, Abd al Malik (2004) on conversion to “good” Islam, Farid Abdelkrim (2002) on his perception of the abusive French “model of integration,” Razika Zitouni (2005) on her upward social mobility, and Lila and Alma Levy (2004) on their exclusion from public schools because of their headscarves. Personal history works in these cases as proof, a demonstration, a manifestation.

In the public debates on Islam that center on secular issues, the expert becomes marginal and the individual, having directly experienced personally difficult situations, becomes the referee.<sup>16</sup> Religion is never the only focus of these authors, but they present themselves as “originating” from a Muslim family or background, and thus as having a voice to be heard and the legitimacy to speak up. So even when not mentioning religion at all in their works, these authors nevertheless have contributed to the promotion of their lifestyles as particular modalities of being Muslim in France. A good illustration of this is the process that contributed to the emergence of two images of the enemy among Muslim women during the last veil controversy in 2003/2004, which led to the vote on legislation passed in March 2004. On the one hand, a young Muslim girl alienated by men and forced by older people (mostly men) to

16 A parallel can be drawn with studies focusing on, for instance, the way in which private and sensitive topics (in particular those dealing with sexual life, violence, and harassment), which nowadays constitute the standard on many television and radio shows, also can be considered to open access to speech to citizens who are normally excluded (e.g., gays and lesbians, women, blacks, and, more generally, all visible minorities). See Cardon, 1995; Gamson, 1998.

wear a headscarf. On the other hand, a young, beautiful, and sexy girl from a migrant family, denouncing the headscarf as a major threat to women's emancipation in France's suburbs.<sup>17</sup> Suddenly, after fifteen years of intense discussion and fluctuation between total silence and intensely passionate public drama, hundreds of girls wearing an Islamic headscarf became a public problem for the nation. A consensus quickly became clear among the usual host of political groups and talk shows: only a law could rescue the poor girls wearing a headscarf. Nothing in Samira Bellil's book relates to Islam. Nevertheless, journalists explicitly drew a link: "It is a history of collective rape, of *tournantes*. These mechanisms do not date back to yesterday, but are an archaic and miserable madness, based on machismo, Islam, immigration, and disoriented parents who disorient children."<sup>18</sup>

This art of storytelling is not based only on pathological and extreme situations; rather, it also presents "common experiences": episodes of normal life in the French peripheries which can be paralleled with other trajectories in similar settings. Kenza, one of my discussion partners, is in her forties. She refers to this literature as books that speak to white French citizens. It is a necessary path to information for those who do not live in these neighborhoods ("les quartiers"). "Real life is not what they think it is. But, after all, everything is politics: all these women who wrote about their lives, whether Meliane or Bellil, they ended up being used by politicians" (Kenza, informal discussion in a Paris coffee shop, June 2005).

It is everybody's daily life made available, and comparable, to others' lives. This aspect helps the broader audience to identify with and be touched by these stories. Indeed, the expression of intense and authentic suffering, such as that in Samira Bellil's book, appears to be a way to tell one's story while respecting diversity and accepting others' lifestyles. Her book played a key role in the generation of a dominant framework for understanding relations between boys and girls in specific urban ghettos. As pointed out by Dominique Mehl (2003), the accumulation of situations as diverse as possible and marked by extremes is one way to organize the liberalization of public space. Individuals come with their personal trajectories and cannot be judged on that basis.<sup>19</sup> The literature fixes the scenario of paradigmatic lives: it establishes the official representation of how one lives as a Muslim woman (with a migrant background) in France (Mucchielli 2005, 111). This representation enters the political realm if it is defined as "a struggle over people's

17 Vincent Geisser has a label for each of these figures: *beurette voilée* for the veiled girl, and *beurette libérée* for the good, emancipated Muslim French citizen. See [http://lmsi.net/impression.php3?id\\_article=215](http://lmsi.net/impression.php3?id_article=215).

18 "C'est une histoire de viol collectif, de tournantes. Ce sont des mécanismes qui ne datent pas d'hier, une folie archaïque et misérable, sur fond de machisme, d'islam, d'immigration et de parents déboussolés, déboussoleurs" (*Libération*, October 7, 2002; quoted in Mucchielli 2005, 26; my translation into English).

19 In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, many women wrote books to testify about male oppression.

imaginations, a competition over the meaning of symbols” (Eickelman 2000, 123).

These books based on personal trajectories deal with issues that previously were not considered to be of interest to the public or were considered to be too private and intimate.<sup>20</sup> Their existence, however, opens up the Pandora’s box of the role of symbolic figures and models to follow. “I am here to testify and this is for free. I don’t want anybody to follow me,” explains Abd al Malik (2004) in his autobiography. When a person gains social legitimacy by publishing his or her individual story, there can be no criticism of the narrative: the way an individual tells his or her story is never put into question, though the author can be criticized for his or her conclusions, the analysis of the story, and/or the eventual impact it had (Guénif and Macé 2004). Bellil’s story became the symbol of women’s daily tragic life for the entire nation.

The targeted audience includes different components, characterized by direct knowledge of similar experiences (the nominal addressees), possible empathy with the situation (the implied addressees), and general ignorance of the topic (the targeted public of circulation) (Warner 2002, 54). Public visibility in television talk shows and magazines of these (presumed) Muslims speaking for themselves results in a somewhat disruptive and invasive presence. It also has collateral effects; in the case of Bellil, for example, she was quickly associated with the movement led by Fadela Amara (Ni Putes Ni Soumises, or “Neither Whores Nor Submissives”), which in the same period organized a national march all around the country, which ended in Paris on March 8, 2003 (Amara 2003).<sup>21</sup> In this context, a movement such as Ni Putes Ni Soumises, of which Loubna Meliane is a member, also contributed to the emergence of a new aesthetic of what a good, young, emancipated, and republican Muslim French citizen should look like, and how she should conduct her sex life.

It is probably one of the least savory aspects of this recent French controversy over the headscarf that it was less concerned with religion or with belief than with the stigmatization of good and bad behavior, particularly as it

20 Some words can be pronounced in public, others cannot. In public situations such as conferences and interviews, a number of Muslim leaders would prefer to speak of the “NPNS” (using the initial letters) rather than of the “Ni Putes Ni Soumises,” just to avoid saying the “bad words” of the association’s name, which means “Neither Whores Nor Submissives.”

21 Amara’s book (2003) is to a great extent an autobiography, as well as a presentation of the movement. The Ni Putes Ni Soumises movement began in February 2003 after a young girl (19-year-old Sohane) was burned alive in Vitry sur Seine in her housing estate’s garbage area. The movement started with a march by five girls and two boys, who for five weeks walked across France in order to denounce the terrible living conditions of women in the *quartiers*. Following this *Marche des femmes contre les ghettos et pour l’égalité*, the Ni Putes Ni Soumises have been engaged in different initiatives but were in particular extremely important in the debate surrounding the discussion of the law banning religious symbols from public schools.

pertained to the relationship between men and women. The idea that women might wear a headscarf because they believed in its meaning and its symbolism simply never arose. And this perception of it had a strong political impact. The uniform reading of the Islamic headscarf in terms of oppression, alienation, and male domination played a key role in shaping people's imaginations and increasing the consensus in favor of the ban. The competition over the meaning of symbols opposed the "good," emancipated Muslim women (under the somewhat neocolonial supervision of central feminist figures) and the dominated ones. By considering the headscarf a symbol of women's oppression, most of the French historical feminist leadership adopted a neocolonial attitude towards veiled Muslim girls: "If you don't know why you should take off your headscarf, I'll tell you." To some extent, Orientalist typifications became the hallmark of institutional French feminism on the headscarf issue: Women of Muslim descent are beautiful; the veiled ones should definitely be emancipated from patriarchal domination and be given autonomous management of their entire body. This neocolonial representation of what Muslim women should do for themselves even led to the idea that they may not be able to defend themselves.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, both Muslim men and women must confront the patriarchal attitude of the French state, which attempts to impose certain behavior and rules, as if Muslims in France are not able to decide for themselves what is best for them. "May we think on our own?" Morad once asked me in February of 2003, while he was still involved in the preparatory work that ended up with the election of the CFCM. His decision to join the members of the preparatory group for the CFCM stemmed from his desire to be physically present in a room where

"all representatives are addressing the minister as if we were still in the colonial period. They barely speak correct French, and they just go there to be in the pictures with President Chirac. They are not interested in being heard or listened to. They just want to be there. With their names on the official documents and the header of the minister."

Morad and Kenza belong to the same age cohort (in their forties). Morad came to France in the 1980s to study mathematics at a university. Kenza was born in France. Notwithstanding their different trajectories in the French political system, they share a cynical view of the way French public space produces leading figures with whom Muslims and the children of migrants should identify. They also share a very cautious attitude towards the way politicians view these public figures as potential to gain votes. Yasmina and Lila belong to the same age cohort (late twenties). Both were born in France. When they consider the dominant narratives in the media, they adopt a more tolerant attitude, a mixture of forgiveness and compassion. Like Larbi, the imam in the north of Paris, they do not contest the validity of the testimonies, and they

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22 A good illustration is the *Elle* magazine launch of the petition addressed to President Chirac (see Tarraud 2005).

insist on the positive effect that the publication of such sufferings must have had on their victims. All five, however, distance themselves from the potential for identification and minimize their own potential for becoming a model for other Muslims. This is completely unlike the discourse of, for instance, Muslim student organizations such as *Étudiants Musulmans de France* (associated with the *Union des Organisations Islamiques de France*), which continue to insist on the importance of being a perfect Muslim, a “role model,” a source of inspiration for younger Muslims, and not a source of criticism by non-Muslims.<sup>23</sup>

The nature of these testimonies affects its audience at different levels. Most important, it ceases to be impersonal. As Yasmina explained when speaking about her situation as a guide for groups and individuals visiting the La Villette exhibition on Muslims in different cities, the presence of a public imposes constraints on speech. She elaborated on her uneasiness as she was, on the one hand, working on the organization of the exhibition and, on the other hand, part of the exhibition (as a member of the Muslim community and as a participant in a video of the exhibition, in which she explains the meaning of being a Muslim in Paris today on a 4 x 4 m screen).<sup>24</sup> She felt like she was serving as a representative of something she never thought she would have to talk about outside of her circle of relatives and friends. As Taylor (2002) has argued, the way a public is addressed says much about the footing every participant to the interaction stands in with the addressees. As a matter of fact, Yasmina was also in a relationship with these strangers—not understood as wandering outsiders but as already belonging to her world, as a “normal feature of the social” (Warner 2002, 56). The call to publicly share one’s views may be experienced as a moment of intense vulnerability or as an occasion for strongly defending positions. During the six months of the exhibition, Yasmina met “a great sample of the Muslim population living in France.” She stated that she felt “a lot of emotions doing this job as a guide and mediator. For instance, a Muslim woman, a convert, came several times to visit and asked me to go with her on pilgrimage.”

Actual situations of conflict were difficult and sometimes violent (not physically violent), though she immediately added that they were quite rare.<sup>25</sup> Most of the questions and intense discussions were related to women in Islam; this was the case for both Muslim and non-Muslim visitors who

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23 This comment is based on different interviews conducted among students of the *Étudiants Musulmans de France* movements in Paris and Bordeaux between November 2004 and July 2005.

24 The exhibition began with television screens showing different Muslims in different contexts of the exhibit and explaining what it means to him or her to be a Muslim in the context in which he or she lives. The visitor could thus first listen to Yasmina on television and then meet her in the exhibition.

25 In all, 65,000 people visited the exhibition. Yasmina remembers not more than seven very tense situations.

“were all continuously asking me about the Quran: What does it say on the veil, on marriage, on sex, on adultery [...]. Oh, you cannot imagine how people, Muslims or not, think of the Quran. As if it were a recipe book! But on the other hand, it means they all are looking for more information and want to improve their knowledge. It forced me to get back to books and to prepare for all these questions. [...] In some situations, people came to ask me advice. I also had to respond to very aggressive Muslim boys who told me I was not a good Muslim because I was not wearing a headscarf.”

When she started the job, Yasmina had a clear idea of how she would personally relate to her work:

“I thought, ‘OK, I am a Muslim, but people do not need to know what I do as a Muslim.’ In the course of my job, I felt more and more an urgent need to act and to commit myself to helping people improve knowledge of their religion and helping non-Muslims to stop reducing us to a community of fanatics.”

In particular, she felt an urgent need for more information about and communication with young men and women whom she saw as

“abandoned to the authority of incompetent so-called imams and who say stupid and untrue things. I remember this young guy, in his twenties. He came to me with very aggressive comments about my way of being a Muslim. He had seen me on the TV screen, and he accused me of giving a bad image of Muslim women. Again it was about me not wearing a headscarf.”

After discussing the Quran and the hadith with him, Yasmina ended up talking about more personal matters:

“I told him directly: Don’t you think you have a problem with your desire and your sexual attraction for women? You should do your *ijtihad* ... At the end of it, I thought, ‘My goodness, mothers should really educate their sons about the way they look at women.’”

Because she was constantly asked, in particular by young men, to justify her behavior, the way she dressed, what she ate, her makeup, the imperative action appeared to Yasmina to be

“the next step in my life as a Muslim. It is as if I were told: OK now, act! Think of others instead of reading books and going alone to conferences. This job and the exhibition definitely changed my views on the situation and on my potential contribution to improving it.”

Yasmina’s experience expresses many things, but the most striking one is perhaps related to her discovery of the suffering and moral abandon of the persons who accused her of not properly behaving according to standards defined by local self-declared authorities. Albeit differently, Lila, trained as a lawyer, is also concerned about “racism and discrimination motivated by the fact that you are a Muslim.” During her studies at law school, she decided to

contribute professionally to the fight against discrimination in the framework of a small local association, the Collectif Contre l'islamophobie en France,<sup>26</sup> which was created in 2003 in Saint Denis in the suburbs of Paris. Up to Ramadan 2004, she had not worn the headscarf.

“Indeed, ironically, I had no direct experience of discrimination caused by my belief in Islam. The only experience I had took place when I was still unveiled. I had just finished with a job interview in the 16th arrondissement of Paris and was on my way back to the city when I crossed paths with a man who told me: ‘What are you doing here, you with your Arab curly hairs?’ What surprised me at that time was the ‘normal look’ of this guy. I would rather have expected it from a skinhead or somebody of that type. Clearly, since 9/11, if you show that you belong to Islam it triggers negative comments.”

By showing her concern for unfortunate people without having been a victim of such acts herself, Lila reoriented her whole life. She quit her job as a lawyer, which may represent some sacrifice in terms of earnings. (She is now paid by the legal aid association that works together with the Collectif Contre l'islamophobie en France.) Whereas Yasmina was a spectator of the suffering of others, Lila frames the suffering of an individual person into a legal argument, making it a “case.” Lila, as a spectator, nevertheless “can point towards action by putting herself in the position of having to report” on what the victims tells her (Boltanski 1999, 19). The metaphor of the theater for public space is extended with the figure of the spectator, with the position of those who observe and act (e.g., Yasmina and Lila), on the one hand, and, on the other, with those who observe without being willing to be seen as Muslims (e.g., Kenza), who act as a representative for the CFCM (e.g., Larbi), or who choose to play a “clandestine” role, pretending to be a representative of an association of which he is not a member (Morad).

They all related to me individually that they had suffered from the spectacle made of Islam and Muslims in France, on television talk shows, in books, in politicians’ discourses, in their daily interactions with actors in the public sphere. Kenza’s phone conversation with the director of her daughter’s school is a good example of situations in which the meaning attributed to being Muslim reaches a level that comprehends “community concerns.” Kenza’s daughter goes to a public school in the center of Paris. Once, while working at home, Kenza received a phone call from the director of the school, precisely at the moment of the parliamentary discussion preceding the vote in March 2004 on the law on *laïcité*.

“‘Why is your daughter excused from gym course, and why is she not going to the swimming pool with the rest of her classmates?’ When I heard this question, I immediately thought, ‘This woman has never seen me, she cannot imagine that my daughter is not going to these lessons because of medical problems, and she certainly has the image of me wearing a burnous! Or a headscarf.’ ... That was con-

26 For more details on the association, see the Web site <http://islamophobie.net>.

firmed when, after having explained the reason why my daughter had the medical certificates for exempting her from sports training at school, the head of the school started to speak about her last trip to Morocco. Through this discussion, I just realized how unnatural it is for my daughter to be good at school.”

Kenza’s choice about how she directs her discourse on being a Muslim in France differs from those made by Lila and Yasmina. While she was studying sociology and working in public offices dealing with migrant populations, she tried as much as she could to draw publicity to issues and to act against certain forms of racism or in support of policy aimed at helping Muslim populations. She felt close to socialist party proposals. Her itinerary is now one of a frustrated activist, focusing exclusively on protecting her privacy (and her daughter’s life) from external aggressions. In these three cases, decisions about and motivations for discourse are anchored in the individuals’ emotions. What makes people act or react to injustice, racism, or unfair treatment is based on their position as spectators of this injustice and racism. But even as simple spectators, people cannot avoid being emotionally invested, even by proxy, in the suffering of others. They are not strategic options in a rational-choice perspective.

### **Performances or Ascriptions?**

A scientific silence still seems to surround the so-called invisible majority of Muslims. Indeed, a common feature of the five individuals discussed in this chapter is the contingency of their commitment to accomplish something good and therefore help others (both Muslims and non-Muslims). Circumstances affect individuals’ trajectories of commitment: a particular event may change its course, be it an event of a strictly private nature or one by proxy (e.g., 9/11, racism). Moreover, when it comes to the public expression of one’s private religious convictions, the French context is especially difficult. This difficulty is not so much embedded in the principle of *laïcité* as it is anchored in the perceptions that individuals have of its meanings. One positive aspect of the discussions preceding the vote on the law banning conspicuous religious symbols from public schools, which was passed on March 15, 2004, lies in the improved knowledge of its content among French citizens at large (Baubérot 2004; Gresh 2004).

When it comes to religious belief, the dominant representation of *laïcité* is articulated in the notion that nobody knows who you are or who you believe in (or whether you believe at all). As one young interviewee told me as I was holding a collective round of discussions at an occupational high school: “That’s *laïcité*, Madam. You shouldn’t know what people believe in. You don’t know it. And you don’t even see it.”<sup>27</sup> So how can we identify Muslims

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27 “C’est ça la *laïcité* m’dame, c’est q’tu dois pas savoir c’que les gens y croient. Tu peux pas l’savoir, en plus tu l’vois même pas” (Muslim girl born in France,

if they are not visible? Does being visible necessarily make one a public actor?

A common development has emerged over the last two decades: Islam and Muslims are said to have become more visible. They certainly have received rather negative publicity; but although this process has been accelerated since 9/11, it was not instigated by it.<sup>28</sup> Morad kept telling me that his main motivation for abandoning his position as a teacher in a public school was that he wished to help his own community find jobs and training opportunities. He therefore switched to working with computers and opened his own company. How do Muslims living in non-Muslim contexts experience such movement? What does visibility refer to in their case? What is public in all that?

Visibility and publicity have become fashionable words. But where do they become visible, and what makes them visible? Beards and veils are perhaps the most easy markers for recognizing Muslims walking in the street—just as membership in an Islamic association or one's presence in a mosque makes one a Muslim in the eyes of French sociologists. Yet this does not mean they are the only Muslims we should consider. Can belief be traced in behavior? If one fasts, is one then a Muslim?<sup>29</sup> What about money and religion, economy and religious belief?<sup>30</sup> If one does not eat pork, is one then a Muslim?<sup>31</sup> The practices linked with religious beliefs are social acts that give a sociological dimension to belief. This connects practices not only with rituals, but with making decisions, raising the children, being part of a work environment, socializing, voting, and so forth; that is, religious beliefs should be traced in situations other than exclusively denominational ones, even if as motives they are always inferred rather than observed (Lenclud 1990). No one believes in the same way as another, even within the same realm of significations and symbols. Moreover, as in the case of the five persons at the core of this research, practice and convictions vary from one individual to another, even though such variations are not always well accepted. So investigating beliefs as part of the social positioning of individuals also means looking at the degree of pluralism accepted within a given community of belief.

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18 years old, Malian parents, during a focus group in a classroom, professional high school, Mantes la ville, April 5, 2005).

- 28 Some events appear to be more central than others in sustaining the emergence of specific representations in European public opinion. The Iranian revolution was one of these central episodes, launching in particular a specific iconography of how Muslims look. This process of “publicization” continued through other events, wars, terrorist attacks, and suicide bombings; 9/11 was just one of them.
- 29 In certain neighborhoods, non-Muslims fast during Ramadan (see Ville 2004).
- 30 For an ethnographic and more anthropological point of view on the halal business, see the study by Laurence Bergeaud-Blackler, 2004.
- 31 In a study I am conducting in public schools and public services providing the people with catering services, the emergence of the category of *sans porc* or *pas de porc* kids.

The reference to the notion of “visibility” has some methodological consequences. The identification and localization of Muslims remain almost exclusively associated with the existence of organized (institutionalized) visible structures, mostly based on authoritative relationships. When visiting these places, individuals perform as Muslims, for insiders and outsiders. Of my five discussion partners, three have been or are still members or such structures. Larbi is a leading imam in a mosque and the head of a cultural-religious center. Morad was for six years the president of a local association of Muslims that he helped to create. Lila is a founding member of the association against Islamophobia. Yet, neither Yasmina neither Kenza go to mosque in Paris. Both prefer to visit churches. One’s profession to be a Muslim and one’s performance do not correspond to similar identifications. Indeed, identifying Muslims on the basis of their membership in a Muslim association does not give much information about the nature of their commitment. It rather ascribes people an identification to a religious group. On the one hand, it gives priority to organized forms of belonging that of course trace the existence of the belief in the real world. On the other hand, it focuses only on the margins of European Muslims’ performances as Muslims. Thus, one important issue is the relation between performing as a believer (showing one’s belonging to a religious community) and declaring one’s faith (believing). Second, is it possible for religion to exist outside its institutional definition? In other words, is a Muslim in France allowed to follow other paths to exist as a citizen than the one performed by the visible institutional sites linked to his or her religion?

Moreover, visibility is an interactive phenomenon. A person becomes visible to others in a context in which the codes of behavior and patterns of attitudes are quite precisely determined. Wearing a headscarf makes one visible to people who do not share its meaning, in a society where it does not refer to common cultural and religious values. By wearing a headscarf, Muslims girls perform as Muslims.<sup>32</sup> But wearing a Muslim headscarf in public schools makes one visible in France in a different way than it does in the United Kingdom.<sup>33</sup> It also makes one visible in a Muslim society in which

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32 Here I should add that most of the veiled Muslims interviewed about their experience of wearing the headscarf in non-Muslim contexts expressed a wish for an “invisible headscarf,” meaning one not noticed by others and not producing a distinction. I thank Anne-Sophie Lamine for having reminded me of this paradox.

33 For instance, since April 2001 the Metropolitan Police in London have accepted hijab as a uniform option for Muslim women serving in the police force as part of a broader message that Muslim values are valued within the force. This may be different since the terrorist bombings in July 2005, but it also depends on local appreciation. In Nottingham, for instance, a police chief asked his four thousand officers to wear green ribbons (“good fair ribbons”) to express solidarity with Muslims fearing persecution after the July bombings in London (see *Times*, August 12, 2005).

the public status of religion has come under the control of the political world and in which, therefore, symbols that deviate from state-defined orthodoxy in terms of religious behavior are publicly stigmatized. This is the case in Turkey, for instance. In the post-9/11 (and post-3/1 and post-7/7) context, most Muslims living in Europe insist on discretion and respect for their belief in the private sphere: they do not want to be visible. The gap between those who are effectively visible and those who are not is growing. The majority of Muslims living outside Muslim societies prefer invisibility and silence, whereas a minority engages on the path to visible, somewhat spectacular (in a horrific sense), and noisy actions.<sup>34</sup> In itself, this does not reveal any specificity of Islam and Muslims: generally speaking, the activists engaged in defense of a cause or the promotion of interests are always a minority. The fact that a majority of Muslims do not wish to make of their religious identification anything special beyond privacy informs about the discrepancy with the public media and political discourse overemphasizing religious determination for explaining actions and discourses of “Muslim populations.”

The emphasis on institutions to understand religion is certainly related to two factors: the specificity of the French context of secularization and the way the theoretical discussion on public space was shaped. Public space cannot only be conceived of as a pure site for deliberation on abstract issues. Its theatrical dimension, the dramatic dimensions of some scenes that occur on public stage is something that should be taken into consideration when thinking about the division between intimacy, private life, and the public positioning of Muslims. The fact that in some situations, one may be invited to play a role that is not related to one’s convictions and political stance may well happen. For instance, in November 2002 my discussion partner Morad decided to accept the proposal made by one Islamic Tabligh association to take part as their representative in the group sessions preparing the implementation of the CFCM. In private, Morad describes himself as a “normal Muslim”: “I have values, I believe in certain principles, I want to raise my kids as Muslims. But I would find it difficult if my wife would say she wished to wear the veil. I just feel that things need to be done by persons who have skills, not by the usual illiterates” (interview in Saint Denis, December 2002). Morad is not a follower of the Tabligh, nor did he join them in order to sit as their representative. He just considered it an opportunity to be present and active within the negotiation process. A charismatic speaker, a good specialist of the juridical aspects related to the discussion on Islam in France, he also felt “the moral obligation not to leave people who would not have been able to make their voice heard because they don’t have the knowledge or just because they don’t speak French well enough.”

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34 In generational terms, both categories include young men and women, better educated than their parents, using new languages, having developed skills in different domains of knowledge and technology, and having access to the media and the political realm (see the chapter by Annalisa Frisina in this volume).

Morad played his part, following both his own personal agenda (getting to know the minister of the interior, becoming an insider) and defending the position of the association. This idea of putting oneself on a stage to perform a role and play a scene was the reason why Kenza decided to withdraw from politics. Her decision intervened in a very tense context emerging after the election of the first CFCM in 2003. Many choruses started to sing in the name of the “unrepresented Muslims” in public space, the most active ones being the *musulmans laïcs*.<sup>35</sup> These new voices demand a clear distinction between politics and religion, but one that does not require sacrificing one’s private religious convictions. These profiles of activist are not radically new in the French context.<sup>36</sup> What is new is their wish to come back as central actors, including “Muslim” in their label. To them, religion is not an obligation, but rather a free option that any individual, male or female, can choose to adopt or to abandon in the course of his or her life. My five discussion partners share this sentiment. From the outside, this secular/religious distinction resembles the private/public one. It appeals to the idea that going public imposes constraints and rules to be respected (e.g., conventions, laws, codes, and symbols specific to the French context), while at the same time not canceling all cultural peculiarities of the individuals nor reducing believers to the ritual dimensions of their faith.

Kenza’s recent choice (2003) to retreat from any form of political commitment is the result of a multifaceted decision. She had experiences in different political forums, right and left, with similar outcomes in both cases:

“I agree to be an activist if I am entitled to talk. The problem people of my generation are facing is that we are not accepted in the competition, whether it be political

35 Many initiatives were launched under this label: the Conseil Français des Musulmans Laïcs (the French Council for Laïc Muslims), led by Amo Ferhati and Tokia Saïfi (the latter used to be a minister in a previous Chirac government, both are members of the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire [UMP] party); the Convention laïque pour l’égalité des droits et la participation des musulmans de France (Laïc Convention for Equality of Rights and Participation of Muslims from France), under the presidency of Yazid Sabeg, another prominent figure of the UMP and a businessman who in 2004 authored a report on affirmative action and discrimination in employment (directly inspired by the Jewish Representative Council for Jewish Institutions in France [i.e., the Conseil représentatif israélite de France]); the Mouvement des *musulmans laïcs* de France (Movement of Laïc Muslims from France), founded by Rachid Kaci and Djida Tazaït. Kaci belongs to the ultra-liberal side of the UMP party. Tazaït was an activist for the Green Party and for a time was elected to a European deputy position for the same party. She created a local association for young Arabs based in Lyon, the Independent Laïc Movement, and the Coordination for Democrat Muslims. See Frégosi 2004, 2005.

36 Earlier in the 1970s and 1980s, similar profiles could be found in civic movements, human rights and antiracist associations, leftist organizations. What is more surprising is their rightist orientation while they would have been rather committed in left parties in the 1980s (see Geisser 1997).

or social. So long as we stayed in our cellars and our neighborhoods, we were tolerated as citizens. Now that we want to speak up, now that we have skills and competencies, and equality finally amounts to something, we are labeled as Muslims to make us feel that we are not yet there. In particular when it comes to public agencies: they see Muslims everywhere! One should stop that. People need to be looked at differently.” (Kenza, discussion in May 2004)

The articulation between religious self-definition (regardless of how regularly one practices) and politics can take various forms. In some cases, it serves the interests of an individual willing to be elected or chosen as a representative within political parties. It also can be purely strategic and opportunistic. Morad explains his decision to take on a Tabligh disguise also as his desire to promote his personal interests in getting access to prominent figures of the ruling party (e.g., Nicolas Sarkozy and the members of his cabinet). His main motivation remains his local political career (“I will end up as a mayor”). Morad plays the gambler’s game. He went up to the office of the minister, negotiating with him a position at the *Union pour un Mouvement Populaire* (UMP), “frightening him. In his department [a neighborhood of Paris], I told him: ‘Mister Minister, you’d better not treat us badly. We can make a difference with the ethnic electorate! You have to deal with us now’” (discussion in *Le Bourget*, April 2003).

But it can also reflect general discomfort related to the public stigmatization of Muslims, to the greater tendency to see an Islamist behind every Muslim, or even to the difference of treatment between Jews and Muslims. The omnipresence of an unhappy public discourse on Islam and Muslims interferes with positioning oneself as a Muslim in a network of activism, among Muslims as well as in other types of civic and political activities. In that sense, expressing oneself as a Muslim on public occasions depends also upon the existence of positive or negative perceptions in the immediate surroundings.

The desire to act as a laic Muslim in the French public sphere is common to the generation that is around forty to fifty years old, and can be summarily described as the former “*beur* generations” (the ones that went to the streets in the 1980s to defend equality for the children of immigrants and mostly kept away from mobilization in religious terms).<sup>37</sup> They have strong anti-Islamist positions and denounce all associations and initiatives that can be suspected of having links with Muslim Brotherhood or radical movements. In that sense, they can be compared to the secular/Muslim line that divides the Turkish communities living in Germany (see the chapter by Gökçe Yurdakul in this volume). To them, religion should not be made a visible sign for recognition and distinction. It should be kept a private choice. They position themselves as representative of an elite that wish to get recognition for its competence, speaking out their religious feelings more in cultural terms. They consider

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37 Some other movements emerged that define themselves as movements of nonbelievers.

themselves as the voices of the silent majority of Muslims in France, those who do not feel attached to the newly created CFCM. On the French scene, they demand an increase in the number of antidiscriminatory practices and policies, but also improved protection of the public image of Muslims and an active fight against all forms of Islamism and radicalism (most of them were in favor of the March 2004 law on religious symbols). They also claim to represent the common and anonymous Muslim, the one who is never shown on television because his or her life does not correspond to the dominant stereotypes. The emergence of this new category of Muslims has attracted attention: they indeed represent the alliance of supposedly antithetic identities (i.e., Muslim and republican), and claim the right to live this identity publicly, making no secret of it (Morad), but also without using it systematically as an entry ticket to politics (Kenza).

This positioning, defended in particular by Morad and Kenza, questions the coexistence of plural forms of believing and belonging to a religious family. Grace Davie's famous distinction, elaborated on the basis of her study of British society, perfectly conveys the tensions that each of my five speakers experienced at certain stages: You may believe, but not belong. This is illustrated by Kenza's life history. She defines herself first as an Arab and a Muslim, and has an unusual family history. Her family has lived in France since the end of the nineteenth century. She was born in Marseille. Her mother died when she was six years old, and she was raised by the second wife of her father ("my second mother," as she calls her). She has three brothers and was educated in a private Catholic school.

"My father kept telling me not to go to the Arab part of Marseille. He said Arab men make no distinction between streetlamps and women. We lived in a part of Marseille where we were alone in our situation. The women of my family have always been extremely committed politically. My mother joined the resistance against the French military in Algeria. All of the women in her family went to school and university, married whomever they wanted to. So when I started my studies in sociology, I was not perceived as an eccentric but as a very normal girl."

Living in Paris, raising her child alone—"You know how men are. My daughter's father got tired all of a sudden when she was born. So I told him: 'I don't need you.'"—she defines her belonging to Islam not in terms of practice.

"I never enter a mosque. I hate those places. I'd rather go to churches. And I take my daughter with me. That's where I pray. They are to me normal places for praying. After all, I spent my entire education in Catholic institutions, so I could not betray those who have contributed to my education! So I tell my daughter that we are visiting these places out of courtesy." (Paris, June 2004)

Assuming a clear distance from the institutions of the religious Muslim community in France, Yasmina, coming from a very different background, shares a similar relationship to other denominations, in particular to parochial

Catholic communities. During Christmas of 2004, while she was earning money wrapping up gifts in a luxury shop in Paris, she had her lunch everyday beside the chapel of the closest church. Talking about how she came to be interested in getting to know her religion better, she spoke of the various encounters she had with people from other faiths (including Buddhists and Jews) who helped her to move towards more spirituality in her daily life. Working in the center of Paris, she goes to the closest church during Ramadan to sit, pray, and meditate during her lunch break. She wears a medallion representing Maria, which she always hides when visiting her family.

“They would ask me too many questions and would not be able to understand me. They are not that spiritual, even as Muslims. They would all think I’m weird. But I bring my nephew [age four] to church, and I explain to him the meanings of the architecture, of the paintings.”

In France, at a strictly institutional level, there can be no doubt about the primacy of the polity and the marginal character of the public role of religion. As an individual, one’s choice of worldview becomes optional, with religion being pushed out of the political center. But at a personal level, it is also anchored in emotions and affects that may connect an individual to other traditions and cultures (Yasmina and Kenza), without pushing them out of their community of belief. Kenza constantly repeats to her daughter that she is not like her classmates. When dealing with religious beliefs, institutions appear to be the way to domesticate a system of symbols, practices, and messages that otherwise would escape (Favret-Saada 1994). It is true that the institutionalization of Islam in France through the creation of the CFCM makes it socially viable and politically acceptable. But at the same time, the public visibility of Islam becomes a problem in French society not so much in terms of its institutional existence, as when it is “carried by corporeal performances and self-presentations rather than by textualized forms of subjectivities and discursive practices” (Göle 2002, 183).

### **Going Public as an Everyday Citizen**

Is there a path that enables one to consider Muslims as participating, as being excluded, as elaborating strategies in order to gain access to the public sphere, independent of institutional structures? International frameworks of course interfere with national and local representations of Muslims. Since 9/11, for instance, the dichotomy between good and bad Muslims as competing categories has emerged more strongly as a central archetypal construction dominating the political international arena (Bonney 2003) and determining policymakers’ decision-making.<sup>38</sup> Nationally, non-Muslims’ perceptions of Muslims

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38 The categorization of “good and bad Muslims” may remind one of “good and bad nationalism.” “At the core of each instance, as it is generally understood, is

are very much influenced by the way specific controversies unfold. In France, since 1989 the headscarf controversies have constituted the epicenter for the pattern of conflicts involving Muslims. The notion of a “public” therefore has to be considered in its complexity and as encompassing at least three levels of meaning. First, it refers to the idea of a concrete audience. In our case, a legitimate question could be to inquire about the existence of a “Muslim public.” This is the audience Yasmina met during her job at La Villette, the persons whom Lila is trying to defend and protect. Second, the notion of a public entails a reference to a social totality (e.g., France as a nation). This is the political space in which Morad projects his future career as mayor of a city north of Paris, where he lives. Third, it refers to a public coming into being in relation with the circulation of discourses (written or not). For instance, public space is also a space where different discourses of identity circulate, compete, and sometimes clash with each other (Bayart 1996; Calhoun 1991). It is a space where some collective identities are accepted and tolerated more easily than others. Some are never accepted. In this respect, Kenza explains that

“one day, my daughter returned home, saying somebody at school told her she was a ‘dirty Arab’ (*sale arabe*). Some weeks before, a boy at school told another one that he was a ‘dirty Jew’ (*sale juif*). In the latter case, the school administration and the parents demanded that the boy be punished; he was sent to the discipline committee. In the former, they just asked me not to say anything.”

In their perspective, being a Muslim and expressing it in public has a cost, sometimes with social and economic consequences, and even physical ones. Larbi was arrested in August 1994 on the order of the then minister of the interior, Charles Pasqua. He was charged with threatening the republic and supporting Groupe Islamique Armé and Front Islamique du Salut activists in France. He was sent to jail, where he stayed one month. Soon, an important campaign of support was organized by scholars, academics, and journalists who were familiar with his activities in the mosque. Once he regained his freedom, he was asked not to leave the neighborhood for five months. In that context, he launched his social and cultural activities, adding to the ritual religious activities an array of conferences to take place once a month on Saturdays. Over the last ten years the Saturday afternoon conferences of the Rue de Tanger mosques have become an institutional gathering where Muslims and non-Muslims, religious authorities, academics, and opinion-makers make presentations and hold discussions in front of an audience of men and women, younger and older persons, whether French-speaking or not. The

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an ethnic solidarity that triumphs over civility and liberal values and ultimately turns to horrific violence.” Nationalism could be replaced by Islamism. Calhoun (2002, 150) continues: “To treat nationalism as a relic of an earlier order, a sort of irrational expression, or a kind of moral mistake is to fail to see both the continuing power of nationalism as a discursive formation and the work—‘sometimes positive’—that nationalist solidarities continue to do in the world.”

topics covered are as varied as the protection of youngsters from drugs, equality and justice in democratic societies, what can be done against AIDS, the reform of Islam, and solidarity in a global world. Larbi usually acts as the host and stays out of the discussion, which lasts most of the afternoon; he reintegrates his role of imam in the very last minutes in order to make concluding remarks. Larbi has created his own, sometimes extremely controversial, public forum of discussion, in which he appears at the beginning and the end of the meeting to perform a sermon.

“What my time in jail changed for me was my relation to politics. Not to culture or French civilization. I have asked myself, ‘Why did France do that to me?’ I think the answer is pretty much linked with reciprocal ignorance. I often say to my fellows that France and Islam coexist only geographically. The challenge to all of us, Muslims and non-Muslims, is to transform this geographical proximity into a historical proximity. That is to say, building up something together. To produce history. Giving a true meaning to history. And that can only happen with meetings, opportunities to come together and discuss. Otherwise, you stay in your tiny little corner, and I’ll never know you. And if you don’t know me, you’ll end up having wrong ideas and projections of who you think I am.”

There are, of course, different ways of showing one’s identity as a Muslim. It may be done in the framework of recognition of a faith-oriented perspective: “We Muslims demand our rights as believers.” The discourse is in this case a plea for the equality of all citizens. This is pretty much the position assumed by Larbi within his mosque, which was first accommodated in the 1970s in a small Paris church (Ménilmontant). Another type of discourse among Muslims in France insists on the right to be treated free of stigmatization: “You don’t need to address my Muslim identity.” Morad, for instance, defends his right to be treated as a citizen with no marker. Laughing, he mentioned once on the phone a comment by his son (five years old at that time), refusing to go to Arabic courses and arguing, “Papa, I am not an Arab!” This position is grounded in the interaction with a secular and republican laic tradition. A third position is the one held by individuals who are sometimes also members of associations and who defend the standpoint of “We are not the same as you.” They articulate a will to have their rights as believers recognized, but argue in favor of recognition by state authorities and non-Muslim French citizens of the specificity of their history and moral values. In the more radical version, it may even end up with a minority community discourse. None of my discussion partners is defending that position, even if Lila’s activism can be related to it. The commitment behind the banner of “fight against Islamophobia” belongs to a strategy of denunciation, accusation, claims-making, naming of adversaries, and a definition of the self that gives meaning to the actions of the Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en France. In parallel, the decision to act as a collective should be conceived of as part of the institution of a specific public order. In this perspective, going public means that one accepts to perform on a stage, a theater where dramas are shown and where actors accept to perform

according to certain rules. In the fight against Islamophobia and religious discrimination, the case is easy as it is mostly a discourse based on a strong dichotomy between victims and criminals articulated along a line of acts that goes from injuries to murder. The fact that discrimination is mostly defined in legal terms seems at first to be a facilitator. But as Lila says, “We cannot limit our activities to the legal arena. It is also a political fight” (interview, November 2004).

The ability to share grievances with other communities, other groups of victims remains in fact open and for now unsolved. The “fight against Islamophobia” discourse remains quite isolated, in the field of the broader antiracism discourse (Lila keeps saying that SOS Racisme, a key nongovernmental organization in the fight against racism, demonstrated hostility towards the Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en France on many public occasions, accusing them of being fascists), but also more largely in the television and press arena. For instance, no alliance or even comparative perspectives have for the moment been elaborated with anti-Semitism and the situation of Jews in France. On the contrary, Lila but also Kenza and Larbi pointed out, albeit differently, their frustration about seeing Muslims and Jews considered differently when the issues of racism and exclusion for religious reasons come to the fore.<sup>39</sup>

Going public is also made possible by the opportunities offered by the context and the institutional landscape. Therefore, the notion of public space needs to be explored by keeping in mind at least two dimensions. It is first a public space for visibility where social actors play their public role, represent themselves in front of the others. In a way, it is the sensitive dimension of public space, the one that gives opportunity to all participants to consider otherness. The experience of pluralism is indeed central in debating Muslim identity in non-Muslim societies where social control on religion-related practices is relatively smooth. Pluralism among Muslims is something hardly discussed among Muslims themselves. Yasmina, for instance, had the following experience when she was organizing a visit to the Grande Mosquée de Paris with a guided tour provided by the Algerian mosque administration:

“The man who was guiding the group of persons I had brought to the mosque was not very well prepared. Among the visitors, I had brought some particularly difficult students almost excluded from school, and they gave him a hard time during the visit by being noisy and making stupid comments. But I felt offended when he told me in front of them that I was not a good Muslim because I had just said to one of the students—who then repeated it to him—that eating halal food was not an obligation.”

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39 This is a central postcolonial issue in the current French context. On the “victims competition,” see Chaumont, 1997. On the postcolonial context, see Liauzu, 2005.

The debate over being a good or a bad Muslim is seen by my discussion partners less in terms of theological good and bad behavior than in relation to a broader assessment of what effects on others good practices can produce. It therefore appears to be extremely difficult to precisely assess the deep significance of the decision to work as a lawyer in a Muslim association: Is the motivation based on the sense of community and can it be at the same time related to a commitment to social justice, therefore carrying a political meaning? Here the reader should not be confused between what my discussion partners say about their own commitment (whether it is Muslim, whether it is public) and what the sociologist qualifies as such. In most of the interviews, they make no distinction between what seems to be conceived of as irreconcilable proposals in the French republican context. The same question remains open while trying to identify the motives of Larbi's preaching, the reason why Morad prefers to employ Muslims and the children of migrants, or when Yasmina helps to organize interreligious dialogue conferences. Acting backstage, my five discussion partners avoid politics and even proclaim their inability to affect others' life courses. Even when they express their awareness of the broader public debate on Islam in France, they remain at a distance from it or at least minimize their potential effect on it. Nina Eliasoph's work on parents volunteering in anti-drugs groups is enlightening here, as she evokes similar attitudes of "silencing public-spirited political conversation" that she considers to be a paradoxical

"way of looking out for the common good. [...] Volunteers work embodied, above all, an effort aimed at convincing themselves and others that the world makes sense, and that regular people can really make a difference. [...] Community-spirited citizens judged that by avoiding 'big' problems, they could better buoy their optimism. But by excluding politics from their group concerns, they kept their enormous, overflowing reservoir of concern and empathy, compassion and altruism, out of circulation, limiting its contribution to the common good." (Eliasoph 1998, 63)

In the French context, some Muslim associations try to organize their own arena for discussing the articulation between being a Muslim and being a citizen of a non-Muslim society. The Union des Organisations Islamiques de France is one of these; Tariq Ramadan's networks also act in a similar manner. But in the eyes of my discussion partners, these initiatives are excessively based on the interested motivations of leaders. In a way, they do not take it for genuine.

In considering individual, everyday citizens, I share Calhoun's perspective on "the people" in his critique of Habermas's constitutional patriotism: "It is crucial to understand not simply which constitutional arrangements are in some abstract sense good, but what makes them have force for specific people" (Calhoun 2002, 153). It is also a question of individual identity, which produces passions that escape conventional categories of the political. The situations in which individuals experience injustice (Lila and Kenza by proxy, Larbi more directly) evoke anguish and hardship, which possibly will

lead them to commit to somebody or some cause (Morad for the “community,” Yasmina for improved understanding of Islam and Muslims). Situated arrangements poses as a starting point the claims made by individuals (Boltanski and Thévenot 2000). For the Muslims quoted in this chapter, public space or the public sphere is essentially about discourse and interaction. Members of a society may join together in the public sphere, performing through debates and conversations (Calhoun 2002). Participation is therefore not exclusively based on personal connections, and remains open to everybody. It is supposed to include everyone within the field at stake (Warner 2002). Public space is thus a scene of performance, a stage where individuals perform a role that may be composed of several profiles. This refers to situated practices: working on the coming to public of Muslims takes as point of departure the observation of situated practices. Public space is an arena where one fights for the defense of one’s identity and its related positions, but it is also a place where one performs in front of a public (Cefaï 2003)—as Yasmina did during the exhibition at La Villette and Larbi does during the Saturday conferences he organizes in his mosque. Leaving the floor open to people whose views he may not share, Larbi nevertheless keeps for himself the concluding remark and plays his authoritative role of preacher and moral guide for the Muslims sitting in the conference room, encouraging them to be “active citizens and active, enlightened Muslims” (personal observation during a conference in June 2003). This towering position does not systematically result in communication between divergent voices or opinions expressed in different registers (e.g., religion, faith, and theology facing political and secular questions). The absence of communication among Muslims themselves is absolutely dominating the public dimension of the debate, not only in Larbi’s mosque. “People may live side by side and have no sense of closeness fostered through privileged knowledge of everyday details [...]. Rather they may feel trapped together as strangers who know nothing of each other’s inner worlds” (Jamieson 1998, 8).

Connecting these remarks with the dominant narratives mentioned earlier, I would argue that the borders delimitating what is private and what can be publicized seem to have been displaced. Dominique Mehl (2003) evokes a process through which social deliberation is defined by the private space of personal conversation. Society speaks to itself in this articulation between private and public. This is facilitated by the increasing number of discussions touching upon personal stories, upon affective and emotional episodes. Everybody knows the other exists. However, the direct confrontation of minds and divergent opinions never takes place. Comparison is made possible between different lifestyles (Bouzar and Kada 2003) and modes of behavior, thereby rejecting or establishing norms. These singular narratives speak and echo each other. Public space appears as a space for experiencing and testing

difference in the way one lives as a Muslim.<sup>40</sup> Public presence brings value to singular voices, illustrating various paths of authentic ways of living. This “extreme individualization of examples” (Mehl 2003, 492) takes place in a moment of unprecedented exposure to public stories through the mass media (Jamieson 1998). The idea behind this narrative form is, “I am not the only one in this case. My life is the same as hundreds and thousands of others.” The content is thus considered to be representative. But on the question of knowing whether the discussion encourages reflection among Muslims in France, the answer is rather that it facilitates the superimposition of opinions. “In these public spaces, identities and lifestyles are performed, contested and implemented” (Yavuz 2004, 223).<sup>41</sup>

### **Conclusion: Invisible but Publicly Active Muslims**

Based on the life experiences and challenges that Larbi, Morad, Kenza, Lila, and Yasmina related to me, this chapter focused on individual voices. Haphazard as such a choice must remain, it helps to describe the many forms taken in a process of commitment as Muslims in France. Insisting on particularities, on snapshots, rather than relying on the feeling of security that comes from working on association, is of course a slippery option for an author. Highlighting the silent Muslim majority occurred to me a necessity, even if it remains difficult to grasp. I thus do not want to generalize my findings. Rather, I make a claim for singular experiences, for the need to describe individual itineraries.

In public space that remains fundamentally secular, four aspects are central in the five itineraries. The first one is that the classic division of social worlds into private and public is insufficient to gain an understanding of the multiple and fragmented aspects of individuals’ everyday lives, even though reading public space as a theater and emphasizing the notion of stage and performance remain of relevance in case studies. The second one stems from the observation that public engagement cannot be limited and restricted to an associative membership. From one moment to the next, through changing one’s place or situation, the meanings given by individuals to their self-definition as Muslims vary. Each of them is able to articulate different means to become engaged. They may have as an objective for discourse and action the “Muslim public” (e.g., Larbi when he is preaching, Yasmina when she is

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40 Pluralism does not exist unless it is concretely experienced, such as on the day of Eid ul-Adha, when different communities of Muslims meet for the first time in front of the slaughtering house, and do not bring all the same animals to slaughter.

41 This point recalls Mehl’s observation (2003) about the nature of discussion in television programs dealing with intimate issues. Rather than a proper discussion including divergent views on different ways of life, the shows explicitly rely on a superimposition of different opinions and lifestyles.

explaining what Islam is to youngsters visiting the exhibition, Lila fighting against Islamophobia), non-Muslims (Kenza arguing with her daughter's teachers, Yasmina organizing interreligious conferences), or a local community (Morad employing Arab Muslims from the area in which he lives when he launched his firm) as a framework for justifying their commitment. The ways each of them define the representation of his or her commitment do not end in a unique imaginary, even if in linguistic terms Islam may appear to the external observer to be a similar link to a common social and cultural imaginary.<sup>42</sup> In these diverse situations, being a Muslim and acting and speaking as such do not mean the same thing from one person to the next, from one place to the next, from one moment to the next. The third aspect regards the need to take a broader view of the activist's individual trajectory, seeing it not so much as a linear career, but rather as an experience primarily developed on the basis of interactions that may create breaks, generate affects (in all directions), or provoke a shift from one type of discourse to another, from commitment to silence (Kenza), or the other way around (Yasmina and Lila). The fourth aspect concerns biographical dimensions and the need for careful description in order to map the complexity of the repertoires and discourses that an individual can draw from to tell his or her story.

This chapter reflects an ambiguous configuration in which Muslims in France currently find themselves. On the one hand, they have made their coming out in the sense of demonstrating their ability to make their voices heard in a context of political interest in their involvement.<sup>43</sup> This development is not restricted to the French context, but can be seen in the so-called growing international visibility of Islam on the international and national scenes: "Islamic social movements represent the 'coming out' of private Muslim identity in public spaces" (Yavuz 2004, 223). On the other hand, hostility towards Islam is growing; the public discourse relayed by the media is ill-informed and contributes to the diffusion of stereotypes and reductionist views of the religion and its believers. In this context, a focus on individuals is the only level that enables a description of situations where one can pose the question "What does it mean to be a Muslim?"

The silent majority, the invisible Muslims, those who "do adapt without problems" (Roy 2005, 166), should not be too quickly reduced to "absentees of public space" just because they have no words and no organization to represent them (Mehl 2003, 495). In this chapter, I illustrated how some individuals have chosen different forms of commitment that do not follow the expected associative structures. They represent other ways of having a voice. By the end of this chapter, some echoes of the silent majority of Muslims

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42 The idea of Islam playing the role of a link for an imaginary bond is advanced by Nilüfer Göle, for instance, when she speaks about the tie between "sozial entwurzeltel Muslimen," or "socially uprooted Muslims" (2004, 17).

43 I used the wording "coming out" once in an interview for the newspaper *Libération* and received a phone call from Larbi the next day, congratulating me on the adapted wording.

living in France have reached us. How do individuals autonomous from the sphere of institutionalized religion have their intimate and private convictions go public? The sample at the core of this text was supposed to open up readings about Muslims in France which escape organized, institutional, and visible frameworks, illustrating how one comes to terms with plurality within one's community of belief.

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