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**Representations of individuals in discourses of laïcité from *Le Monde*:
Confirming or challenging the republican framework of identity?**

In recent decades, the notions of *laïcité* and *identity* have been subjects of controversy in France. The two concepts have become sufficiently co-associated since the 1990s to ensure each almost systematically entails the other. Findings from previous studies have pointed out harmful implications of this pervasive association for minorities in France, especially Muslims. This study examines further the ways *laïcité* and identity are interwoven by exploring who is represented (and how) in newspaper articles from *Le Monde* dealing with *laïcité*. Informed by Critical intercultural communication scholarship, intersectionality, and a Foucaultian approach to discourse, this study pays particular attention to the way identity categories are articulated with one another and in which power structures they are embedded. A selection of articles (N=239) published in the leading national newspaper *Le Monde* between 2011 and 2014 was collected for in-depth analysis. Results indicate tensions as regards the use of identity categories and representations of individuals within discourses of *laïcité*. Implications concerning the overall republican framework and the concept of *laïcité* are discussed.

Keywords: *laïcité*/secularism; identity; religion; media representations

Introduction

Ever since the debate about “national identity” organized by President Sarkozy’s ruling right-wing party in 2009 (Davies, 2009) to the recent remark about France being a ‘white race country’ voiced by a member of the right-wing Republican Party in 2015 (Agence France Presse, 2015), ‘identity’ has proven to be a controversial issue in France over the past years. The concept of ‘secularism’ (*laïcité*) has also been a subject of polemic in recent decades, especially through the attention paid to tensions between *laïcité* and Islam. Baubérot (2007) argues that the increasing representation of Islam as an opponent to *laïcité* went hand in hand with the construction of *laïcité* as a pillar of the national identity. Previous studies have pointed out the concomitant risks for minorities to feel excluded or pushed to choose between national and religious identifications because of the pervasive association between *laïcité* and national identity (Auslander, 2000; Baubérot, 2007). The notion of identity within the French context and especially in relation to *laïcité* offers a relevant window to explore intersections of power dynamics circulating within society.

Drawing on Critical intercultural communication scholarship, intersectionality, and using a Foucaultian approach to discourse, this study sets out to understand who is represented in discourses of laïcité and, with which implications as regards the notions of laïcité and identity in the French context. The critical discursive approach used in this study aims at identifying normalized identity categories and questioning the power structures they represent and in which they are embedded. For this purpose, newspaper articles (N=239) published between 2011 and 2014 were selected for in-depth analysis. The newspaper *Le Monde* was used for data collection because (i) it is recognized as a quality leading newspaper in France, (ii) has a prominent status which gives its discourse visibility, (iii) and endeavors to be an active social actor (Le, 2009; Le, 2010).

In the light of previous research on secularism in France (e.g. Auslander, 2000; Hancock, 2008; Killian, 2007), this study was conducted with the assumption that representations of Muslims and the ‘expected attribute’ of the veil would punctuate discourses of laïcité. The salience of the category ‘Muslim’ was confirmed through the data but results suggest tensions in the use of the category. This study discusses the ways, in which these tensions can be apprehended within the republican framework in which identity categories are embedded in France.

Theoretical Background

Culture: a critical discursive approach

Informed by Critical intercultural communication and a Foucaultian approach to discourse, this study takes a critical discursive approach to representations of identity in newspaper texts. Critical intercultural communication approaches the concept of culture as (i) a discursive construction (ii) embedded in historical, political, and economic power structures, (iii) which affects and is affected by contemporary discourses, popular practices, and

interpersonal relations (Author, 2014; Bennett, 2015; Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009). The field of intercultural communication has been widely (mis)used to examine identity and culture from an essentialist perspective. Recent developments within the field however indicate exciting developments and interdisciplinary collaborations to generate research ‘that provides information not about “cultures” but about the forces that stand behind cultural claims’ (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009, p. 24). This type of approach offers a vibrant critique of, and theoretical foundations to deconstruct, the contemporary culturalist phase, in which the notion of culture is pervasively used to explain and classify people’s practices. Problematizing the concept of culture enables to highlight the range of tension nodes it encompasses and that it can be used to cover. Previous studies have examined the use of culture in relation to, for instance, race (Drzewiecka & Steyn, 2012; Flores, Moon, & Nakayama, 2006), gender (Lengel & Martin, 2011), religion (Author submitted (a), (b)), and language use (Lahti, 2013; 2015).

A discursive approach to culture casts light on the interrelatedness between discursive practices and culture by arguing that the former are culturally-situated and the latter discursively-constructed. Thus, ‘To study culture, one must perforce study discourse’ (Shixu, 2005, p. 57) in order to understand the ways, in which, and the reasons why culture can be utilized as a discursive strategy (Piller, 2011). Using a selection of newspaper articles about laïcité published in *Le Monde* between 2011 and 2014, this study focuses on macro-level discourses and the systems of power, domination, and resistance they encompass and reproduce. This type of macro-level approach regards discourses and the knowledge they produce as historically-embedded and therefore situated, contingent, partial, and infused with power (MacLure, 2003). From a Foucaultian approach, discourse is emphasized as a situated practice through which meanings are constructed and constructive of reality (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001). The discourse/power/knowledge triad is central to this approach,

which assumes these three aspects to be interlaced and, to some extent, mutually constitutive (Foucault, 1980). The construction of knowledge and deployment of power are regarded as complex, unstable, and multifaceted processes. Power is not conceptualized as something that can be identified, pinpointed, and isolated for study. Instead, power is regarded as circulating at various discursive levels throughout society in ways that can be both enabling and constraining. (Foucault, 1977). A Foucaultian approach enable to question the production of knowledge by investigating not only what is said but also what is not or cannot be said (Hook, 2001). The approach used to examine the discursive use and construction of identity categories also focuses on questioning existing representations.

Identity

Similar to the concept of culture, the notion of identity has become increasingly visible in research and various public discourses (Gilroy, 2012). Postcolonial and feminist research traditions, in particular, have shed light on the construction of identity categories which are embedded in political, social, historical, and economic struggles (Denis, 2008). Foucaultian-oriented studies have also explored ways, in which subjects are constructed through discourses which map out identities that one can – and cannot – legitimately perform (MacLure, 2003). Most intercultural communication research has focused on *cultural identity* rather than *cultural identification*, thus overlooking ‘what it means to be a member of a particular ethnic group, and how this in itself is historically and politically situated’ (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002, p. 314). Emerging critical approaches within intercultural communication are moving away from this approach by exploring ‘processes of *production, naturalization, and normalization*’ (Mendoza et al., 2002, p. 316) of social and cultural identities. Informed by a Foucaultian approach, this study explores discourses of *laïcité* to uncover ‘the subjects who in some ways personify the discourse [...] and who have

the attributes we would expect these subjects to have given the way knowledge about the topic was constructed.’ (Hall, 1997, p. 45). Drawing on intersectionality further helps investigate and question homogeneous categories underpinned by essentialist and universalist assumptions.

Originating from black feminism, intersectionality is utilized to disrupt positions typically represented as normal or unproblematic (such as ‘man’ or ‘white’) by regarding all categories as infused with power (Phoenix, 2013). In conceptualizing identities as fluid, relational and locally-situated constructions, intersectionality counters essentialist views (Levine-Rasky, 2011). Building on this assumption, the categories and the power structures that transpire them are understood as intertwined. Exploring how individuals are positioned across several categories in specific contexts helps map out larger societal, political, and historical power relations (Phoenix, 2013). The understanding of categories and power structures being intertwined in complex but mutually constructive ways is at the heart of intersectionality (Bredström, 2006; Collins, 1998). Despite the commonalities between studies using intersectionality, various critiques, and different theoretical and operational viewpoints have been outlined. The present study draws on Brah and Phoenix’s (2004, p. 76) definition of intersectionality:

‘We regard the concept of “intersectionality” as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands.’

Laïcité, identity, and media representations

The most commonly held source for *laïcité*, the French model of secularism, is the 1905 law that established the separation between the Churches and the State. Other interpretations argue that *laïcité* dates back to the French Revolution or refer to the 1958 Constitution, which declares ‘France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic’ (French Constitution, 1958). The supposed origin, meanings, applicability, and scope of *laïcité* are source of many interpretations and contestations in French public debates (Ognier, 1995). As different representations of *laïcité* have always existed, dominant discourses have changed as representations of the nation and intertwined value systems also evolved (Barthélemy & Michelat, 2007). Studies have highlighted the increasing association of *laïcité* and national identity in France as well as abroad (Baubérot, 2007; Laoukili, 2005). Such persistent representation has been problematized by Baubérot (2007, p. 131, my translation) who argues ‘this representation of *laïcité* as a “French exception” [...] risks turning *laïcité* into an identity property of “real French” to which “new French” with an immigration background have to pledge allegiance to become “truly” French.’

Laïcité and identity are also intertwined through the overarching system of citizenship in France which builds on values such as republicanism and universalism, and is sustained through education and assimilation (Brubaker, 1992; Freedman, 2004). Baubérot (2007) associates the prominence of republican elements in discourses of *laïcité* with dichotomous views of *laïcité* opposed to either or both Islam and multiculturalism. Previous studies have drawn attention to the Christian bias that underpins *laïcité* and the tensions this may create for other religions. Auslander (2000, p. 288) argues:

‘The requirement that people bear no distinctive sign of religious belonging and yet that they inhabit an everyday life that is rhythmmed by the Christian calendar forces observant Muslims and Jews to make a choice. They can be either good French citizens and bad Muslims or bad Jews, or vice versa.’

Tensions between religious and national identifications echo colonial logics of domination that expected colonized to ‘be white or disappear’ (Fanon, 1967, p. 100). The racially-based colonial system of exclusion-inclusion is relevant to contemporary discourses in France in which ‘The social construction of ‘otherness’ does not refer only to racial identity, but also to cultural identity, and religious affiliation.’ (Jugé & Perez, 2006, p. 208) Intersections between race, culture, and religion in representations of *us* and *them* highlight the relevance of exploring identity categories within discourses of *laïcité*. Benedict

Anderson’s (1991) powerful concept of *imagined community* provides a relevant analytical tool as it brings together notions of identity, nation, culture, and their discursive construction in traditional printed media. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of media discourse in negotiating meanings of *laïcité* by, for instance, pointing out how it tends to precede political discourse (Baubérot, 2013), how it can maintain dominant representations of *laïcité* by evoking collective national memories (Author, submitted (a)) or by using culture as a legitimization strategy (Author, submitted (b)).

Material and Methods

Le Monde

The media identity of *Le Monde* has been explored in previous research which have emphasized the prominent status of the newspaper within the French landscape. In his historical account of *Le Monde*, Eveno (2001, p. 22) even argues: ‘For a press historian to claim that *Le Monde* has been for more than half a century the reference newspaper for most of the French elites can pass as tautology’. *Le Monde* is often characterized through its claimed independence from political, religious or economic powers (Eveno, 2001), its editorial tradition (Eko & Berkowitz, 2009) and quality reporting (Le, 2010).

Previous findings about the newspaper's self-representation help understand its editorial stance and positioning at the national, European, and international level. Le (2009, pp. 1741-1745) argues that *Le Monde* sets out to be 'a social actor in its own name' (in contrast with 'the traditional journalistic role of news provider') and is 'not only a place where some public sphere's interactions can take place, but also that *Le Monde* is a full participant in public spheres with its values and positions.' Even though studies recognize *Le Monde*'s propensity and endeavor to deploy novel ideas (Le, 2009; Thogmartin, 1998), the newspaper's orientation and framing have been interpreted as illustrations of French journalistic, intellectual, and cultural tradition (Berkowitz & Eko, 2007; Thogmartin, 1998). A study of *Le Monde*'s editorials on Russia during the second Chechen war for instance indicated the role played by the newspaper as a national storyteller whose discourse is shaped by and constructive of 'the cultural common ground on which French national identity rests' (Le, 2002, p. 398)

Though other newspaper outlets in France can offer relevant insights into intersections between laïcité and identity (e.g. Charlie Hebdo from a satire perspective, regional newspapers from local viewpoints, or national newspapers with explicit political orientations such as *Le Figaro* or *Libération*), *Le Monde* was selected because of its acknowledged leading position and endeavor to be a prominent voice in public debates. Examining discourses from *Le Monde* does not – and is not meant to – offer insights generalizable to the society as a whole but is used to help uncover what discourses navigate from the position of power specific to this newspaper.

Methods

Data was collected and analyzed inductively to keep the process as open and free of assumptions as possible. Articles (N= 895) published between 2011 and 2014 in *Le Monde*

were collected from the online newspaper's archives using the keyword *laïcité*. The first step consisted in reducing data by reading through all of the articles collected and selecting the ones directly related to *laïcité* (N=239) for in-depth analysis. Data was analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) which allows for in-depth inductive analysis (Marsh & White, 2006). The analysis was data-driven as it aimed to capture statements providing knowledge about *laïcité* and identity categories. Data was coded by the author by repeatedly reading through it and identifying meanings, values, and topics in relation to which *laïcité* and identity were tackled. This inductive and iterative process enhances the rigor of qualitative analysis by forcing researchers to reflect on their growing understanding of data (Marsh & White, 2006). The data was analyzed in the language, in which it was written. Excerpts presented in this article were translated from French by the author and are systematically presented together with their translations to ensure transparency.

The time period chosen for this study follows the 2003-2005 period punctuated by much polemic on the topic of *laïcité* in France and precedes the tragic events that marked 2015. Consequently, the years 2011-2014 offer both a view into the negotiations of meanings following tensions, and information regarding the discursive grounds on which further debates in 2015 drew. Using a recent set of articles (2011-2014) from the newspaper *Le Monde*, this study poses the following questions:

1. Which identity categories are used in discourses of *laïcité*?
2. How are these categories articulated with one another and within the larger framework of *laïcité*?

Results

The use of identity categories throughout the data suggest various tensions about individuals as well as the system under which these identities are constructed. The discussion focuses

initially on those cases in which the tensions surface, before raising the common elements revealed by the analysis.

Muslim veiled women: Between victims and culprits

Representations of Muslim women wearing the veil offer a wide range of contradictions and tensions regarding categorization and laïcité. Results of this study indicate that veiled Muslim women sometimes appear as enemies whose practices need to be controlled. At other times, they are represented as victims who need to be protected. Victims of what or whom encompasses further disparities.

Previous studies have presented how discourses about the veil in France are frequently intertwined with discourses of gender equality (Selby, 2011; Thomas, 2006). This lens is often used to depict veiled Muslim women as victims of either or both their religion and husbands or religious male counterparts while presenting secularism as a way to enforce gender equality. In data, the notion of gender equality explicitly appears in relation to political arguments as in the following quote:

Se posant en défenseur de la laïcité, notamment à l'école, M. Valls a aussi insisté sur l'importance de ce principe pour garantir l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes. (Le Bars, 7 July 2012)

Acting in defense of secularism, especially in school, Valls also insisted on the importance of this principle to guarantee equality between men and women.

It is also used in opinion papers embedded in a 'universal feminist' rhetoric:

Mais soyons clairs : dans la religion musulmane, le voile doit être porté parce que les cheveux, voire même le visage de la femme peuvent tenter l'homme et inciter au péché. Je n'ignore pas que nombre de femmes portent le voile par conviction, mode ou convention. Certaines le portent également parce qu'elles y sont obligées et que, si elles ne se soumettent pas, sont traitées de mauvaises musulmanes ou de filles dévoyées. Je pense que la loi doit protéger celles qui refusent de le porter. (Badinter, 28 March 2013)

But let's be clear: in the Muslim religion, the veil must be worn because hair, even women's face, can tempt men and incite them to sin. I am aware that many women wear the veil by conviction, fashion, or convention. Some wear it also because they have to and if they do not obey are called bad Muslims or degraded girls. I think the law must protect those women who refuse to wear the veil.

Results indicate that discourses about laïcité, Islamic veil, and gender equality are underpinned by 'universal feminism' (also called 'Western feminism'). 'Universal feminism' approaches 'woman' as a homogenous category and places Western standards of womanhood at the center, thus dismissing the plurality of needs, experiences and oppressions experienced by women of different religious, racial, and social backgrounds (Braidotti, 2008; Salem, 2013). The narrative that constructs Western experiences of womanhood as universal and therefore dominant relies on the representation of non-Western women as 'constrained, victimized, poor, ignorant as opposed to Western women who are educated, modern, and free to make their own choices' (Salem, 2013, para. 6).

In the data, representations of veiled Muslim women as victims build on the premise that they would not wear the veil if they had a choice. Informed by 'universal feminism', this assumption brings together representations of non-Western women as dependent and oppressed, and the conceptualization of religion as an inherently patriarchal form of domination (Salem, 2013). Representing the veil as constraining and oppressive justifies the need for laïcité and for the limits posed to wearing the veil. The coercing nature of the veil is also used to draw the line between representations of Muslim women being victims or culprits. In discourses where Muslim women are assumed to willingly wear the veil, they are positioned no longer as victims but as enemies whose apparel crystallizes value-laden societal tensions. Despite differences between victims and culprits, both representations legitimate the exclusion of the veil. On the ideological level, the veil is discursively opposed to laïcité and the overarching republican framework advocating universalism and equality. On the practical level, the veil is dismissed by being forbidden in specific venues. The extent to which the veil

should be banned was a regular topic of discussion in data and echoed Asad's (2005, p. 5) analysis of the veil being addressed through what the facial apparel signifies to the majority rather than how it is experienced by Muslim women. Such dynamic is illustrated in data by the use of polls such as the following:

Cette décision a fait réapparaître les fractures entre partisans d'une laïcité « stricte » et ceux d'une laïcité « ouverte », alors qu'un sondage BVA montre qu'une majorité de Français souhaitent l'extension de l'interdiction des signes religieux dans les lieux en contact avec des enfants. (Anonymous, 29 March 2013)

This decision made divisions between supporters of 'strict' and 'open' approaches to secularism visible again. Meanwhile, a BVA poll reveals that a majority of French people wish for the ban of religious signs to be expanded to venues with children.

Drawing on 'universal feminism', discourses in the data about the veil and gender equality hint at values such as independence and individualism, which are typically associated with representations of a modern woman in Europe (Dwyer, 1999). Intersections in the data between laïcité, modernity, universal feminism, and assumptions about religion being inherently oppressive for women, de-legitimize veiled Muslim women both as *members of the national imagined community* and *women*. In the data, wearing the veil can be represented as an act of submission for women as well as a refusal to adhere to national values such as laïcité. The intersection of overlapping values contributes to position veiled Muslim women outside of the imagined community, represented as secular, modern, and made up of independent individuals.

However, in a few instances in the data, laïcité is acknowledged as a potential source of problems rather than solutions for women displaying religiosity, such as:

la loi de 2004, les débats qui l'ont accompagnée, les ressentiments qu'elle a pu susciter chez une partie de la communauté musulmane ont surtout ouvert la voie à toute une série de crispations sur la visibilité du voile islamique dans la société française. Et transformé en cibles privilégiées les femmes musulmanes, premières victimes d'actes et de propos anti-musulmans, selon les associations spécialisées dans la lutte contre l'islamophobie. (Le Bars, 15 March 2014)

the 2004 law, the debates that surrounded it, the resentment it may have created among some of the Muslim community have above all opened the way to a whole series of tensions about the visibility of the Islamic veil in French society. And these factors have transformed women Muslims into favorite targets by being the first victims of anti-Muslim acts and speech according to associations specialized in fighting anti-islamophobia.

This type of argument differs from traditionally dominant discourse about laïcité and the veil in the data. The emergence of these commentaries may open up a discursive space for new reflections on laïcité, religion, and identity. Revealing potential pitfalls of the system may help discern more complex and fluid approaches to religious practices across discourses and media representations. Questioning outcomes of laïcité gives room to acknowledge the practice of veiling and go beyond the dichotomous views of ‘modern secular’ and ‘archaic religious’. Tensions in the representations of veiled Muslim women and the evolutions that they may suggest, however, seem to be limited due to the persistence of the prejudiced views of religion (and religious individuals).

Religious identities and conceptions of religion

Representations of religious individuals in the data hint at larger negative conceptualizations of religion. Results indicate that religious identity can be depicted more negatively than other identity categories could. Several negative connotations are associated with representations of religion, religiosity or religious identity and expression. Religion is often assumed to be *something of the past*, as formulations about its ‘return’ suggests:

C'est là un indicateur supplémentaire de l'indéniable retour, qu'il soit loué ou déploré, de l'Eglise dans la société temporelle et même dans la sphère politique, au sens de la vie de la cité. (Hopquin, 7 February 2014)

This is another indication of the undeniable return, be it praised or regretted, of the Church in the temporal society and even in the political sphere, [political] understood as the life of the city.

Religion also tends to be represented as a practice that causes problems and *jeopardizes the existing order*, such as ‘the bursting of religion in day-to-day life’ (*irruption du fait religieux dans la vie quotidienne*, Le Bars, 15 July 2013). Within discourses of *laïcité*, religion is often discussed in relation to problems affecting several spheres of society, from working life (‘Conflicts because of religious motives increase in companies’ *Les conflits pour motif religieux se multiplient dans les entreprises*, Kahn, 20 March 2013), political news and events (‘a presidential campaign marked by topics about religion – especially Islam – bursting in’ *une campagne présidentielle marquée par l’irruption de sujets liés aux religions - à l’islam en particulier*, Le Bars, 4 May 2012), general atmosphere (‘The level of tension between the municipality and the Muslim community of this 50,000-inhabitant city complicated the celebration of Eid al-Fitr [...] the end of Ramadan’ *Le climat de tension entre la municipalité et la communauté musulmane de cette ville de 50 000 habitants a compliqué la célébration [...] de l’Aïd el-Fitr, la fin du ramadan*. Bourabaâ, 9 August 2013). Religion can also be represented as something that can be *scary*, and ‘be based on objective worries’ (*reposer sur des inquiétudes objectives*, Le Bars, 25 January 2013). The assumption that religion as an identity category is negative also appears through the need to further define it:

l’ouverture des rencontres qui regroupent plus de 200 associations, 450 salles de prière et drainent chaque année plus de 100 000 visiteurs, souvent de simples musulmans pratiquants, dont beaucoup de nationalité française. (Vincent, 2 April 2013, my emphasis)

the opening of meetings which bring together more than 200 associations, 450 prayer rooms, and with over 100,000 visitors every year, often simple practicing Muslims, many of whom have French nationality.

The variety of negative representations associated with religion in the data may indicate a general consensus on religion being negative. Previous studies have examined the relation between connotations attached to religion and national identification (Casanova, 2009).

Those findings echo this study’s results about negative overtones of religion and

representations of France and French individuals as secular. The use of statistics in the data supports the portrayal of a secular imagined community:

Les années passent et la France se sécularise. Selon un recoupement d'études récentes, s'ils étaient 80 % à se dire catholiques en 1966, ils ne sont plus que 51 % en 2007. Aujourd'hui, peu pratiquent : à peine 5 % vont régulièrement à la messe, des gens âgés. Si le protestantisme reste stable, revendiqué par 2,1 % des Français, comme la religion juive, 0,6 %, l'athéisme progresse. En 2012, 35 % de la population et 63 % des 18-24 ans se disent « sans religion ». (Joignot, 3 November 2012)

Years pass by and France becomes more secular. According to a grouping of recent studies, if 80% [of the population] called themselves Catholics in 1966, only 51% did so in 2007. Today, few are practicing: barely 5% regularly attend Mass, [they are] the elderly. If Protestantism remains stable, claimed by 2.1% of French people as their religion, as well as Judaism, 0.6%, atheism grows. In 2012, 35% of the population and 63% of the 18-24 age group describes themselves to be 'without religion'.

From communities to hyphenated identities

The recurrent flagging of 'communitarianism' as a threat is embedded in the republican framework that promotes centralization and uniformity to organize life in society (Brubaker, 1992; Freedman, 2004). For religious groups to claim themselves as communities is typically presented as a step to ostracize themselves from the nation (Caeiro, 2004). The salience of this discourse clashes with recurrent representations in the data of religious minorities as communities punctuated by descriptive phrases such as 'Muslim community' (*communauté musulmane*, Le Bars, 7 July 2012), 'Jewish community' (*communauté juive*, Le Bars, 20 December 2011), 'Muslim circles' (*les milieux musulmans*, Le Bars, 2 June 2012), 'the most practicing part of the community' (*la partie la plus pratiquante de la communauté*, Le Bars, 1 April 2014).

The one-sided use of 'community' highlights the way it can place individuals outside of the majority. The naming of religious minorities as *communities* contrasts with the French secular imagined community constructed as universal and inclusive, and not named as a community. The invisibility and legitimacy of the secular imagined community over other

(especially religious) communities can be maintained in the data through the use of polls that only report opinions of the ‘majority’:

Rarement la défiance envers l'islam aura été aussi clairement exprimée par la population française. 74 % des personnes interrogées par Ipsos estiment que l'islam est une religion « intolérante », incompatible avec les valeurs de la société française. Chiffre plus radical encore, 8 Français sur 10 jugent que la religion musulmane cherche « à imposer son mode de fonctionnement aux autres ». Enfin, plus de la moitié pensent que les musulmans sont « en majorité » (10 %) ou « en partie » (44 %) « intégristes », sans que l'on sache ce que recouvre ce qualificatif. (Le Bars, 25 January 2013)

Rarely has distrust towards Islam been so clearly expressed by the French population. 74% of people surveyed by Ipsos [French polling institute] argue that Islam is an ‘intolerant’ religion, incompatible with values of the French society. More radical number still: 8 out of 10 French people consider the Muslim religion tries to ‘impose its functioning mode to others’. Finally, more than half think that Muslims are ‘for most’ (10%) or ‘for some’ (44%) ‘fundamentalist’, without this term being clearly defined.

Even though the newspaper discourse nuances such opinion polls, with the last sentence for instance ‘without this term being clearly defined’ (*sans que l'on sache ce que recouvre ce qualificatif*), it sustains representations of a secular imagined community exclusive of Muslims by maintaining the voice of the majority as the voice of the imagined community. The republican system inherently supports such imbalance when reporting opinions as it does not allow census, and therefore polls, based on religion or race (Cervulle, 2013). The a-religious and a-racial voice is therefore the only visible and legitimate one.

Despite persistent negative representations of religion; religious individuals; and religiosity, these are however sometimes recognized and problematized:

ces polémiques ont fini par instiller dans l'opinion publique, et chez nombre de responsables politiques, une certaine méfiance vis-à-vis des religions. Le culte musulman était certes le premier visé, mais l'ensemble des autres confessions semblent en avoir pâti. (Le Bars, 9 February 2012)

those polemics ended up instilling in the public opinion, and among numerous political representatives, a certain distrust towards religions. The Muslim religion was certainly the main target but the rest of the other faiths seem to have suffered from it.

Some variations can also be noticed when it comes to positioning Muslims, which may suggest evolutions as regards representations of the secular imagined community. The use of hyphenated-like identities can be seen in the data where the religious category ‘Muslim’ is associated with the national category ‘French’. The expressions ‘Muslims of France’ (*Musulmans de France*, Bourabaâ , 9 August 2013) or ‘French Muslims’ (*Musulmans Francais*, Joignot, 3 November 2012) are visible across data.

The emergence of these compound identity categories can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, they can be seen as a strategy to go beyond the universal categorization used to flatten out differences. Previous studies have highlighted universalism as a western-centric value that maintains status quo and associated white privilege, color-blind racism, and power structures inherited from historical, colonial times (Jugé & Perez, 2006). The use of hyphenated-like identity in the data may be a discursive strategy to extend the limits of the national imagined community by making visible who it encompasses. Using hyphenated-like identities can challenge the fixed identity framework that may not correspond to flexible multifaceted processes of identifications performed by individuals. On the other hand, within a republican universal framework of identity, the use of hyphenated-like identities can be analyzed as a way of pointing out differences in ways that exclude some individuals whose features and practices are represented in parallel to (and not intertwined with) the imagined community.

Discussion

Difference

Results indicate the persistent construction of religious identities – especially that of Muslim – as a threat, a problem, or a question. The representation of minority identities through these frames is intertwined to the emergence of what Appadurai (2006) calls

‘predatory identity’ and ‘predatory narcissism’. Appadurai argues that the notion of *difference* is the fundamental problem which minorities embody as they remind majorities of the gap ‘which lies between their condition as majorities and the horizon of an unsullied national whole, a pure and untainted national ethnos.’ (2006, p. 8) Appadurai’s argument finds a particular resonance when exploring identity categories within discourses of *laïcité* because of their embeddedness in the French republican system, which sets out to reach equality through the levelling out of differences (Brubaker, 1992). Multiple tools are available to attain such a goal, school, assimilation, and possibly, *laïcité*. Constructing (religious) minorities as a problem leads the majority to grow ‘an understanding of itself as a threatened majority’, which Appadurai (2006, p. 51) argues, is ‘the key step in turning a benign social identity into a predatory identity’. The notion of difference seems to underlie most of this study’s findings. Tensions concerning identity categories highlight challenges about (i) whether to acknowledge differences in society and (ii) how to verbalize them within a strict republican framework of uniformity. ‘Difference’ seems to be treated as being inherently problematic, against which Xu (2013, p. 394) argues ‘[d]ifference is not the problem for communication; the problem is the attitude of the interlocutor toward difference and the other’. Findings however suggest that the construction of difference as inherently problematic within the French republican framework may be moderated in the data by the use of hyphenated-like identities. The use of such emerging categories needs to be examined further by investigating where they are used, by whom, and with which connotations.

The secular imagined community

Discourses of *laïcité* in the data tend to be strongly imprinted by the secularization paradigm and the assumption that being modern encompasses being secular (Casanova, 2006). This particular assumption especially appears through the negative connotations of religion, and

values of independence and individualism which underpin representations of veiled Muslim women. Intersection between values embedded in the secularization paradigm and ‘universal feminism’ therefore seems to be a significant aspect in the choice of identity categories and representations of individuals. However, tensions perceived in the data where *laïcité* is questioned and hyphenated-like identity categories are used may indicate a shift away from the secularization paradigm and solid understandings of culture, religion, and *laïcité*. These zones of tensions may create discursive space to introduce dynamic approaches of individuals’ practices and identifications that would be more in line with the complexities of contemporary *liquid multiple modernities* defined by constant changes and transfers (Bauman, 2013; Lee, 2006). The presence of tensions in the data and their potential to open up new discursive spaces also hint at the media identity of *Le Monde* as a newspaper that endeavors to play an active role in the public sphere (Le, 2009).

This study indicates that the *secular imagined community* is constructed through intersections between positively denoted values that have national resonance such as *laïcité*, modernity, and ‘universal feminism’, and their opposition to negative representations of religion as a concept and identity category, as well as the one-sided use of ‘community’. Intersection of these values provides information as regards the expected attributes of the secular imagined community, while informing what attributes are dismissed. Besides building significant barriers between individuals, the suggested discursive exclusion of religious individuals from the imagined community undermines *laïcité* by contradicting its mission to enforce equality between individuals regardless of their religion or absence thereof. Representations of the secular imagined community as well as notion of predatory identity only insidiously appear in the data but echo the much more vocal, explicit, and successful rhetoric of the far-right National Front party.

Conclusion

This article has examined relations between laïcité and identity by exploring who is represented (and how) in newspaper articles from *Le Monde* tackling laïcité. Findings indicate tensions as regards the use of identity categories and their relation to the notion of laïcité and larger republican framework. Results suggest that on several occasions in data the republican framework that supports uniformity may be slowly challenged and re-negotiated to mirror more complex and hybrid everyday life experiences. Yet, different connotations attached to secular and religious identity categories suggest gaps between individuals, especially those who belong to the *secular imagined community* and those who are positioned outside of it. Intersections between values embedded in ‘universal feminism’ and the secularization paradigm may contribute to maintain representations of an imagined community whose expected attributes are those of modern secular individuals.

Results highlight the use of hyphenated-like identities and suggest the emergence of new discursive spaces to address religious practices and identities from a more liquid stance than that allowed by the republican universal framework in which laïcité is embedded. These findings echo previous studies about the media identity of *Le Monde* as an active and vocal actor in the public sphere. Future research should investigate discourses emanating from media of different genres and status. Reception studies could also help clarify how tensions identified in this study are perceived by readers. Further research on the topic is especially relevant since the data used for this study stops at December 2014. That is, a few days before the attacks on Charlie Hebdo and the kosher superette in January 2015 and a few months before the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015. These dramatic events heighten the need to investigate the discursive construction of identities and their interplay with the notions of culture, religion, and laïcité.

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