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‘Culture’ as a discursive resource in newspaper articles from *Le Monde* about secularism: constructing ‘us’ through strategic oppositions with religion

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ABSTRACT

Building on research highlighting the complex webs of relations between secularism, culture, and religion, this study investigates how the concept of culture was utilized in discourses of *laïcité* from the newspaper *le Monde*. Articles ($N = 76$) published between 2011 and 2014 were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Results revealed the agency associated with the use of culture as it was strategically – rather than systematically – used in opposition to religion. Overall, culture – and the practices it defined – tended to be represented as normal and invisible. On the other hand, religion tended to be constructed as a disruption to secularism and the corresponding cultural reality. The findings therefore suggested culture could be strategically used to validate and regulate specific practices as well as representations of the imagined community. This study complements previous research on discourses of secularism by drawing attention to the strategic divisions between culture and religion, and their implications. The findings draw attention to the construction of a *secular* imagined community because of the punctual and strategic use of culture and religion as proxies for ‘us’ and ‘them’. Thus, the findings have practical implications as regards religious minorities’ identification with and belonging to the nation.

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Introduction

Named ‘word of the year’ in 2014 by the publishing company Merriam-Webster, ‘culture’ still seem to be used everywhere to discuss everything. The concept, however, remains unclear and unclarified in most discourses that use it. Critical intercultural communication scholarship highlights problems raised by the pervasive use of culture to categorize and justify individuals’ practices and values (Dervin 2011; Halualani et al. 2009; Piller 2011). Scholars urge for research ‘that provides information not about “cultures” but about the forces that stand behind cultural claims’ (Breidenbach and Nyíri 2009, 24). Drawing on such critiques, the present study examines the variety and complexity of ways in which culture is made relevant in articles about secularism from the French leading newspaper

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Le Monde. Exploring how culture is used in discourses of laïcité provides a lens to examine the type of cultural reality that is constructed through and constructive of secularism in France. This study will therefore contribute to previous research highlighting the tensions between culture and religion within secularism, especially in the French context.

Scholars have drawn attention to a bias in discourses circulating in Western countries which tend to present 'religion as a category in itself, dissociate from broader culture' (Cohen 2009, 196). Furthermore, scholars have argued that secularism tends to separate culture and religion (Bhandar 2009). Such distinction suggests power implications in defining who/what is categorized as cultural and/or religious, and how knowledge about these categories is constructed (McCutcheon 1995). Exploring the complex relations between laïcité, culture, and religion can therefore provide relevant insights into power relations circulating in society. This is especially important in France where secularism is part of the social and cultural fabric (Gunn 2004). Studies have drawn attention to the relations between secularism and national representations (Sommier 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Baubérot 2007). Secularism in France is also intertwined with discourses about immigration and integration. While some researchers argue that secularism constitutes a resource to ease interreligious relations and help immigrants integrate into society (Weil 2008), other studies have pointed out inherent contradictions of the French model that may cause further tensions between majority and minorities (Adrian 2009; Auslander 2000; Sommier 2017a; Hopkins 2015). The extent to which secularism appears in discourses constructing 'us' and 'them' in France highlights the need to examine which type of cultural reality is associated with it.

This study explores newspaper texts given the role they still play in constructing knowledge circulating in and about society (Ossewaarde 2014; Schudson 2003; Taira 2014). *Le Monde* was selected for data collection because of its prominent status in the French media landscape and its strong editorial tradition (Le 2009). Data ($N=76$) collected from this newspaper (i.e. editorials, comments, and news articles) were therefore expected to provide a variety of viewpoints and discursive strategies associated with the use of culture in discourses of laïcité. With this aim in mind, the following research question was posed:

- (1) How is 'culture' used as a discursive resource in articles from *Le Monde* (2011–2014) about laïcité?

To answer this question, articles ($N=76$) from *Le Monde* were analyzed in-depth using qualitative content analysis to identify, classify, and reflect on the use of the terms 'religion' and 'culture' in the data. The findings revealed overlaps as well as clear separations between the terms and associated practices. This hinted at the agency of using these terms to discuss secularism and highlighted the tensions involved in categorizing practices as cultural and/or religious. The analysis was reflected on in the light of the previous literature on critical intercultural communication and secularism.

Theoretical background

Secularism, culture, and religion

On a theoretical level, secularism refers to the separation of Church and State though some symbolic association may remain between the two entities (e.g. United Kingdom,

Finland) (Taylor 2010). However, secularism encompasses numerous other aspects relevant to the organization of life in society. Freedom of religion, tolerance, neutrality, and equality are some of the core values typically intertwined with secularism (Taylor 2010). The numerous models that exist worldwide put a different emphasis on the values they regard as intrinsic to secularism and use different tools to guarantee these principles. In France, secularism (i.e. *laïcité*) sets out to reach equality and freedom of conscience using neutrality and separation as tools (Baubérot and Milot 2011). *Laïcité* is also widely associated with republican values that advocate for uniformity and the leveling of differences to achieve equality (Freedman 2004).

The emphasis placed on uniformity has been identified as a source of problems by some scholars. Bhandar (2009, 326) argued that secularism, both in the United Kingdom and France, is used 'to govern and manage difference that is perceived to violate dominant norms and values, defined in reference to the Christian cultural heritage of the nation state'. Echoing this argument, scholars have highlighted discrepancies between French society today and the founding 1905 law that only mentions the four religions officially recognized in France at that time (i.e. Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Judaism) (Saunders 2009). Scholars argue that such inconsistency, coupled with French society being implicitly shaped by Christian traditions, create significant issues for religious minorities that can feel and be perceived at odds with a secular and Christian majority (Sommier 2017a; Auslander 2000; Hancock 2008). Baubérot (2007) develops this argument further as he draws attention to the relation between the meanings ascribed to *laïcité* and society's fears and national representations. Baubérot (2007) points out that competing representations of *laïcité* correspond to competing representations and perceptions of national identity. Specifically, during the 1980s, discourses of *laïcité* have transitioned from the opposition between Catholic Church and *laïcité* to that between Muslim practices and *laïcité* (Baubérot 2007). The latter opposition is typically intertwined with national identity whereby Muslim practices are regarded as foreign and *laïcité* as French. The discursive association of *laïcité* and national identity draws attention to the complex webs of relations between *laïcité*, culture, and religion and highlights the importance of examining more concretely how these terms are connected.

A critical intercultural approach

The status of *laïcité* as a 'founding myth' (Gunn 2004, 426), its salience across discourses in France, and its relation to historical and political structures are elements that all suggest *laïcité* is part of a cultural reality. Exploring how culture is used in discourses of *laïcité* can therefore help understand the type of cultural reality that is constructed through and constructive of secularism in France. Using a critical intercultural communication framework provides a reading grid to scrutinize the variety, complexity, and agency of using culture as a discursive resource. Critical views within intercultural communication endeavor to deconstruct assumptions about culture being reduced to representations of homogenous national cultures and being disconnected from societal and historical tensions (Halualani et al. 2009; Holliday 2009). Studies from this strand of research therefore start from the premise that culture is a construction which 'exists only insofar as it is performed' (Baumann 1996, 11).

Breaking with the essentialist tradition that has strongly influenced the field of intercultural communication since the 1980s, critical approaches have brought issues of agency and power back at the heart of intercultural communication research (Moon 1996). Discourses building on essentialist views of culture have been criticized for conceptualizing culture as an object and consequently homogenizing and de-problematizing it. The reification of culture and tendency to pinpoint what it means along specific components (e.g. communication styles, practices, values, identity) dramatically overlooks processes through which culture is constructed, contested, modified, and intertwined with varied contextual and historical aspects (Dervin 2011). Critical intercultural communication research offers a relevant lens to confront the use of culturally resonant meanings by approaching culture as a construction infused with power (Dervin 2011; Piller 2011). This strand of research explores how culture is utilized, how cultural claims are normalized, and the interplay between individual agency and societal historicized pressures in performing cultures and identifications (Holliday 2013; Mendoza et al. 2002; Piller 2011).

Given the aim of critical intercultural communication, this theoretical lens is particularly well suited to investigate media discourse and understand the role of media 'not just as information selectors and gatekeepers but as narrators and producers of culture' (Fürsich 2010, 117). Researchers have drawn attention to the construction of (national) culture by the media, representations of 'us' and 'others', and power relations embedded in media discourse constructed by and constructive of culture (e.g. Anderson 1991; Sommer 2017b; Cottle 2000; Hall 1997). Furthermore, some studies have focused on the construction of culturally resonant meanings in media discourse. They have shown ways in which culture can be evoked in newspaper discourse to make meanings seem more legitimate and acceptable to both journalists and their audience (Rivenburgh 2013). By appearing more normal and natural, culturally resonant meanings are less likely to be noticed and questioned. They can therefore be used to maintain status quo and dominant representations without much challenge (Olausson 2009).

Informed by a critical discursive approach, the present study looks for contradictions, ambivalence, and nuances related to the use of culture in relation to *laïcité*, and sets out to understand implications in terms of tensions circulating in society.

Data and method

Articles ($N = 76$) published in the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* between January 2011 and December 2014 were analyzed for this study. Founded in 1944, *Le Monde* is widely regarded as the leading newspaper in France. It embodies an editorial, intellectual (sometimes also perceived as elitist), and independent press within the French media landscape (Eko and Berkowitz 2009; Le 2003). Because of its status and endeavor to be an actor in the public sphere (Le 2009), *Le Monde* tends to publish editorials and opinion papers presenting a wide range of views on current topics. Using data from this newspaper therefore provides opportunities to identify competing discourses on the topic of *laïcité*.

As a prominent topic, *laïcité* is widely covered in *Le Monde*. Several steps were taken to ensure that the dataset was relevant and aligned with the aim of this study (i.e. focus on the use of culture). First, *Le Monde's* database was used to collect all of the articles ($N = 895$) published in the newspaper between 2011 and 2014 and containing the word *laïcité*. Second, data were organized based on their connection to the topic of *laïcité* (see the

appendix for a detailed overview of the criteria used). Finally, articles ($N = 76$) from the 'closely related' and 'moderately related' categories and in which issues of religion, culture, and associated practices were explicitly discussed were selected for in-depth analysis. These criteria were used based on literature highlighting the tensions between culture and religion in Western and French discourses about secularism (Sommier 2016; Baubérot 2007; Bhandar 2009; Cohen 2009).

All articles were published between January 2011 and December 2014. This time frame was selected to examine recent discourses of *laïcité* following the much-studied 2003–2005 period and preceding the year 2015 marked by terrorist attacks in France. Articles used for analysis are in French but presented in English in this article, which can raise methodological challenges (Nikander 2008). Original texts and their translations are therefore systematically presented together in the discussion part to ensure transparency.

The qualitative content analysis was used to code data through a systematic, iterative, and transparent process (Schreier 2013). This study pays attention to linguistic cues and textual articulations through which meanings about culture are organized, prioritized, and hierarchized within discourses of *laïcité*. Using qualitative content analysis made it possible to read data very closely and identify patterns as well as singular elements (Schreier 2013). The analysis was predominantly data-driven. While the main categories (i.e. culture, religion, *laïcité*) were established prior to data analysis and derived from the aim of this research and literature, all of the subcategories were formed inductively on the basis of the meanings identified in the data. In practice, all the newspaper articles ($N = 76$) were read by the author and segmented at the sentence level for analysis. Each sentence of each article was organized in a table and arranged within subcategories. A close and iterative reading of all the articles enabled to refine these subcategories, enhance accuracy and avoid overlap or approximations. This systematic process considerably enhanced the congruence between the content of the data and the analysis.

In line with the theoretical underpinnings of this study, findings emerging from qualitative content analysis were read through a discursive and critical lens as a way of (1) identifying what was categorized as cultural and (2) reflecting on the construction of knowledge about 'culture' and implications regarding power relations in relation to secularism in the French context.

Findings

Crafting cultural resonance

Throughout data, culture was evoked in different ways besides using the term itself. Statements that had similar denotations and implications as the term 'culture' were used to describe individual-level (i.e. clothes, food, celebrations) as well as societal-level practices (i.e. values, laws, celebrations). Cultural resonance was constructed by hinting at elements represented as relevant to the nation and to individuals identifying with it, thus hinting at the *imagined community* (Anderson 1991). Cultural resonance was therefore evoked by referring to structures in and through which 'we' exist, or by talking about practices assumed to be shared by members of the imagined community. Results thus pointed out a multifaceted set of strategies used to craft and utilize cultural resonance. These strategies echoed Holliday's (2013) *grammar of culture* that underlines the interplay between

individuals and larger structures, and the power relations embedded in the deployment of cultural meanings. In the data, references to macro-level aspects were typically conveyed by talking about ‘society’, ‘public sphere’, or ‘public domain’, as in the following quote:

La société française, fortement déchristianisée, a progressivement perdu l'habitude de voir des expressions religieuses dans la sphère publique. (Le Bars, 5 April 2011, news article)

French society, strongly dechristianized, has progressively lost the habit of seeing religious expressions in the public sphere.

References to ‘society’ were common in the data and tended to suggest a sense of depersonalized togetherness assumed to be shared at the national level. The following quote illustrates the discursive association of ‘society’, ‘laïcité’, republican values that emphasize uniformity to achieve equality, and the idea of ‘living together’:

Dans le cas de cours obligatoires et non optionnels, ou d'examens exceptionnels, c'est aux autorités religieuses de s'adapter en permettant des dérogations. Et non à la société de s'adapter à eux. Non pas par volonté d'imposer une laïcité stricte, mais parce qu'il n'est pas possible de céder à toutes les demandes sans désorganiser la vie en commun. Entre le ramadan, Pessah et, pourquoi pas, Carême ou des fêtes hindoues, plus aucun examen ne pourrait avoir lieu. (Fourest, 15 April 2011, opinion piece)

In the case of compulsory and non-optional courses, or exceptional exams, it is up to religious authorities to adapt by allowing dispensations. And not up to society to adapt to them. Not in order to impose a strict laïcité but because it is not possible to give in to all requests without disrupting life together. Between Ramadan, Pessah, and why not, Lent or Hindi celebrations, no more exams could take place.

This quote hints at dichotomous views of ‘us’ and ‘them’ through the opposition between society and religious authorities. References to ‘society’, ‘life in common’ and underpinning values contribute to indicate what common practices and behaviors are expected to be, both at the societal and individual levels. Thus, the previous quote illustrates ways to delineate what *our culture* is (and is not) without mentioning the term ‘culture’. In the two previous quotes, ‘society’ and ‘life in common’ are presented as emptied or separated from religion. This opposition often came back in data and will be discussed more in-depth later in this article.

Representations of the imagined community, its values and practices, were also conveyed in more explicit and romanticized ways in the data, as illustrated by the following quote:

Première nation culturelle du monde, la France séduit avec sa vie sucrée, son style de vie, sa liberté, son égalité, sa fraternité, et ses corollaires : sa justice sociale, son ode à la femme libre et digne, sa laïcité, sa passion des droits de l'homme, son invention du développement durable et de la paix d'humanité. (Roucaute, 18 May 2012, opinion piece)

First cultural nation worldwide, France charms with its sweet life, its lifestyle, its freedom, its equality, its fraternity, and what comes with it: its social justice, its ode to free and honorable women, its secularism, its passion for human rights, its invention of sustainable development and of humanity peace.

In the previous quote, the personification of France as an entity that ‘charms’ because of ‘its’ values and practices is constructed through and constructive of solid understandings of national culture. The reification of France is intertwined with representations of Frenchness that pinpoint what French culture and identity entail. By referring to macro-level

structures, practices and societal values are constructed as tangible objects that become meaningful categories for individuals to identify with and mobilize in order to perform their cultural identity (Holliday 2013).

Culture as legitimation strategy

Culture could also be evoked in the data by being taken-for-granted. In such cases, the invisibility of culture and of the practices it described contrasted sharply with the salience of religion. The following quote is an extract from an article addressing the ongoing debate about whether veiled mothers should be allowed to participate to school activities. One of the mothers interviewed by the newspaper tells the following story:

Dans l'autre école, une mère avait été sollicitée par les parents délégués pour les aider à préparer le goûter de Noël ; la directrice lui a demandé d'enlever son voile. (Collas, 20 September 2014, news article)

In the other school, a mother was asked by delegate parents to help prepare the Christmas refreshment party; the head of school asked her to take off her veil.

Following that quote, the article focuses exclusively on the veil by presenting official reasons to exclude the mother and reactions to that decision. Nowhere in the article is the fact that the mother was helping organize a *Christmas* refreshment party discussed. Thus, the different meanings ascribed to both practices appear through the different attention they are given in the article. The wearing of the veil is a salient issue categorized as a religious practice and problematized in respect to laïcité. In contrast, the topic of the *Christmas* refreshment party is not tackled in the article. It is taken-for-granted and represented as unchallenging to laïcité as well as to the functioning of the school. These different discursive treatments suggest a twofold assumption whereby (1) Christmas is presented as a cultural rather than religious celebration, and (2) culture is conceptualized as normal and unproblematic. The cultural resonance of Christmas is suggested by its representation as a practice that is accepted and acceptable within the framework of laïcité. The invisibility of Christmas (which contrasts with the salience of the veil) constructs it as unproblematic, taken-for-granted, and embedded in a normal cultural order.

The crafting of cultural resonance has implications regarding culture as a legitimation strategy. Echoing previous research on culturally resonant frames (Olausson 2009; Rivenburgh 2013), the findings suggest that culture was sometimes utilized in *Le Monde* as a discursive resource to validate practices. The following quote illustrates how culture or culturally resonant meanings could be used to covertly codify what constitutes acceptable behaviors:

qu'elle [étudiante renvoyée d'un cours à l'université à cause de son voile et réintroduite par la suite] était dans son droit, mais en même temps que tout le monde peut tirer avantage d'une attitude de discrétion et de respect mutuel, ce qu'il est aujourd'hui convenu d'appeler laïcité. [...] Il faut ensuite expliquer aux jeunes que les religions sont parfaitement respectables, tout autant que l'athéisme ou l'agnosticisme, mais que la diversité de l'éventail culturel de la société française invite à une certaine discrétion dans la manifestation des croyances et valeurs de chacun. Cela n'empêche nullement d'en parler, y compris dans la sphère publique, mais en se gardant de tout défi et de gestes arrogants posés à la face du monde. Les émissions religieuses de France 2 et de France Culture le dimanche matin sont un bon exemple de ce qui est possible. (Pitte, 9 August 2013, opinion piece)

she [a student expelled from a university class because of her veil and allowed back in later on] was in her right, but that, at the same time, everybody can profit from a discreet attitude and mutual respect, which is nowadays called *laïcité*. [...] We must also explain to young people that religions are perfectly respectable, as much as atheism or agnosticism, but that the scope of cultural diversity in French society invite to a certain discretion in expressing one's beliefs and values. By no means does this prevent from discussing religion, including in the public sphere, but without being challenging or despising to the world. Religious programs on France 2 [TV channel] and France Culture [radio channel] on Sunday mornings provide good examples of what can be done.

Legitimate and illegitimate behaviors are described throughout this extract. The argumentation is constructed around the opposition between what can be done and what should be done: 'in her right, but ... everybody can profit', 'religions are perfectly respectable ... but that the scope of cultural diversity in French society invite to certain discretion', 'by no means prevents from discussing it ... but without challenging or despising the world' my emphasis. Throughout the text, what *can* be done refers to expressions of religion and what *should* be done refers to neutrality in society and the existing cultural order. Evaluative comments pinpoint and reinforce the representation of religion as a disturbance to a functioning society. *Laïcité* is defined as 'discreet attitude and mutual respect' and the system in place is described as a 'good example of what can be done'. On the other hand, religious attitudes are assumed to be 'challenging or despising to the world'.

The emphasis put on 'discretion' as a valued and legitimate attitude hints at the suggested invisibility of the dominant group whose practices seem to be taken-for-granted in several articles from *Le Monde*. This echoes criticisms about the emphasis placed on uniformity by *laïcité* and the republican framework in which it is embedded (e.g. Hancock 2008). Scholars have also problematized the republican framework as an instance of color-blindness (Jugé and Perez 2006). In the previous extract, the opposition between the white secular male as the norm against which the veiled Muslim woman is judged is salient. However, the hierarchy entailed by this opposition is downplayed because of the use of '*laïcité*' and 'French society' rather than explicit mentions of race, religion, and gender. The opposition is constructed in the text but also appears between the author (a white secular man) and the subject of which he talks (a veiled Muslim woman). Similar to other articles in the data, the power to construct knowledge about the custom and experience of wearing the veil belongs to a secular non-Muslim voice. This echoes Asad's (2005) analysis of discourses about the headscarf in France which, he argues, focus on what the veil represent for non-Muslims rather than what it means for women wearing it. This extract therefore illustrates the discursive construction of subject positions through the use of culture. On the one hand, the white secular man becomes invisible because he is *cultural*. On the other hand, the veiled Muslim woman is made visible by being defined through her religion, which ultimately constructs her in opposition to the secular order.

Strategic uses of culture

Discrepancies appeared in the data about the practices constructed as cultural and as religious. Not all practices were systematically nor continuously categorized as one or the other. Nuanced and complex understandings of what culture and religion entail appeared through the use of phrases such as 'Muslim culture' (*culture musulmane*, Le Bars 15 March

2013, news article), 'Islamic culture' (*culture islamique*, Cheb Sun & Ndiaye 8 February 2011, opinion piece), their use in the plural form 'nannies of Muslim cultures' (*des nounous de cultures musulmanes*, Liogier 28 March 2013, opinion/analysis piece), as well as explicit double categorizations such as 'cultural and religious differences related to Islam' (*les différences culturelles et religieuses liées à l'islam*, Le Bars 4 January 2011, news article).

However, on some occasions, culture and religion were constructed in opposition to one another. Such dichotomous views were especially prominent in articles dealing with crises or addressing feelings of threats and uncertainty. Thus, culture was sometimes used in data as a resource to negotiate tensions by confirming and reinforcing what defines *us* and what does not. Using culture to support specific views and achieve specific aims underlined the agency of arguing for or against the categorization of practices as cultural. The following quote illustrates such strategy. The extract comes from an opinion piece written by an Imam who 'advocate[s] for moderate religious visibility' (Oubrou 3 October 2013, opinion piece) and criticizes the importance given to the veil. In the article, the Imam explains that 'in [his] opinion, covering one's hair, for Muslim women, is an ambiguous and minor requirement' (*Selon moi, se couvrir les cheveux, pour la musulmane, relève d'une 'prescription équivoque et mineure'*, Oubrou 3 October 2013, opinion piece). In the following quote, the Imam describes further the practice of veiling among younger Muslim generations:

Une tendance. Des filles qui portent le foulard avec un pantalon serré, ou des vêtements moulants ou transparents, laissent à penser que le sens initial du foulard se perd peu à peu. Il est devenu une tendance un « objet culturel ». (Oubrou, 3 October 2013, opinion piece)

A trend. Girls who wear the veil with tight pants, or skin-tight clothes or transparent clothes, suggest that the original meaning of the veil is disappearing little by little. It has become a trend, a 'cultural item'.

The description by the imam of the veil as a *cultural* practice can be interpreted as a way to challenge the practice of veiling and to support his argument that it is an unnecessary custom. This extract underlines the strategic and multifaceted uses of culture since, here, representing the veil as cultural does not validate the practice but on the contrary discredits it.

In another opinion paper, the author criticized the categorization of the veil as a cultural item by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA):

En brisant le consensus sportif pour respecter le port du voile comme élément culturel, les pays du Golfe ont obtenu une victoire écrasante sur l'universalité. (Fourest, 13 July 2012, opinion piece)

By breaking the sports consensus in order to respect the wearing of the veil as a cultural element, countries of the Persian Gulf have obtained a smashing victory against universalism.

In this extract, the opposition between the veil as a *cultural* practice and *universalism* hints at Western-centric views that define universalism according to Western cultural, ethical, and secular standards (Cohen 2009; Sayyid 2000). The editorialist seems to criticize the categorization of the veil as a cultural item because of the threat it poses to *our* culture.

The two previous extracts draw attention to the agency of categorizing practices as cultural to achieve specific aims. In the first quote, the use of culture strengthens the argument that the veil is unnecessary while in the second quote criticizing the

categorization of the veil as cultural is used to delineate the limits of *our* culture. Thus, the veil as a cultural item can be rejected by being presented as *unnecessary* (because it is cultural and not religious) or as a *threat* (to *our* cultural reality). Both previous quotes contrast sharply with representations of Christmas traditions in the data which become acceptable within the French secular context as they become cultural. The different outcomes of using 'culture' in texts suggests that being represented as cultural is not enough to belong to the cultural reality in which *laïcité* is embedded. Instead, findings suggest that elements categorized as cultural have to fit existing and accepted cultural representations. This indicates solid and static views of the cultural reality in which *laïcité* is embedded and to which new elements cannot therefore be added (Dervin 2011).

Appearing legitimate by fitting existing cultural representations suggests a vast network of tensions related to (1) displays of religiosity standing out from the *normal cultural* order as well as (2) performances of such *normal cultural* practices. Using culture in discourses may contribute to normalize the practices it refers to while also mapping out what being cultural and performing culture entails. The construction of practices as cultural therefore seems to be both enabling and constraining. This study draws attention to the use of culture within discourses of *laïcité* as a way of regulating practices falling in- and outside of the cultural realm by constructing knowledge about, and therefore regulating, what being cultural entails. Results underline the way culture can be evoked in discourses of *laïcité* as a strategic discursive resource to validate specific meanings, practices, and individuals within the corresponding secular and cultural reality.

Intercultural moments and expressions of cultural racism

Discussions in the data about whether certain practices are cultural or religious ('*culturelles* ou *cultuelles*'), and overlaps between culture and religion suggest that drawing the line between both is a discursive choice rather than an automatic a-priori decision. The selective and strategic use of culture to justify and legitimate specific practices illustrated the agency of ascribing cultural or religious categorizations in specific contexts for specific purposes. These discursive choices echo the notion of *intercultural moments* mostly used in relation to interpersonal communication. Contrarily to positivist research which takes a differential and solid approach to what constitutes intercultural communication, the notion of *intercultural moments* is used to explore ways in which individuals *do* intercultural communication by occasionally making cultural differences visible and relevant to their interactions (Bolden 2014). This study suggests that a similar phenomenon may be observed with macro-level discourses in which culture is made relevant in different ways and for specific purposes.

Results also suggest that culture was often used in data to validate already existing and accepted practices, therefore reinforcing representations of dominant – and sometimes religious – practices as normal and legitimate within the framework of *laïcité*. Ways in which culture was used to (covertly) codify behaviors and practices hint at the evaluative component of culture through which practices can be accepted or dismissed (Said 1991). Findings suggest that 'culture' and cultural resonance often referred to an existing coherent and meaningful order, which underlines the role of 'culture' as a discursive resource to construct impressions of 'common sense' while highlighting practices identified as potentially disrupting. Culture thus seemed to be constructed in opposition to disorder and

elevated as a way to maintain stability by (1) identifying and excluding from its realm potential objects (and subjects) of disturbances as well as (2) regulating what performing culture means.

Findings reveal the extent to which culture could be taken-for-granted so that its 'canons are invisible to the degree that they are "natural," "objective," and "real"' (Said 1991, 9). This process echoes essentialist and reified views of culture which were also present in the data. Processes of essentialization are critical to the use of culture as a discursive substitute for race (Wren 2001). This resonates with the findings that highlighted the strategic oppositions between culture and religion and suggested dichotomous views of us and them. Expressions of *cultural racism* build on the premise that culture is something people *have* (rather than *perform*) and that transpires through their practices. Expressions of cultural racism tend to replace biological argument of inferiority and thrive because of the apparent absence of power struggles associated with the concept of culture (Lentin 2004). Dismissing culture as a construction permeated with tensions thus poses the risk of judging differences and related power-asymmetries as normal and inevitable rather than constructed and disputable (Titley 2004). Findings from the present study indicate ways in which culture could be mobilized in discourse to assert differences between religious and cultural practices, and sometimes construct the *cultural* way as the *normal* way. Findings therefore hint at the way strategic and complex intersections between culture and religion share similarities with covert expressions of racism. As such, this study complements previous research on cultural racism, particularly the ones looking at similar intersections between culture and religion (e.g. Garner and Selod 2015; Saeed 2007).

The strategic opposition of religion and culture, and the intersection between culture, religion, and racism, is especially relevant to the French context where immigrants from North Africa and their offspring are nowadays often referred to as Muslims rather than Arabs or North Africans (Fellag 2014). Findings also bear relevance for other European countries where the category 'Muslim' has gained visibility (Brubaker 2013). Findings from the present study help understand implications of these categorization shifts and relation to the construction of a *secular* imagined community.

Tensions between culture and religion in discourses of secularism

The different elements revealed in the analysis (i.e. essentialist views, strategic uses of culture and oppositions with religion) indicate ways in which culture can be used as a discursive resource to validate and regulate representations of the secular imagined community in covert and powerful ways. That is, findings show how 'culture' can be used to state who we are and what defines us, and can therefore contribute to processes of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, this study contributes to the fields of critical intercultural communication and Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS) that focus on deconstructing discourses in which culture is made relevant and on uncovering associated power relations (Piller 2011; Shi-xu 2016). Meanings attached to culture and religion in relation to secularism can affect who and what is perceived as belonging to the cultural reality in which *laïcité* is embedded and of which it is constructive. Thus, the categorization of practices and individuals as cultural and/or religious has concrete implications regarding who and what is accepted within the secular imagined community. Strategic oppositions

between culture and religion in relation to secularism raise a number of questions about minorities' identification with the nation, status within the country, ability to practice one's religion, perceptions from the majority and so on. Findings on such issues from previous studies (e.g. Amiraux 2016; McLoughlin and Cesari 2016; Statham 2016) draw attention to the possible concrete exclusionary outcomes of using culture and religion as proxies for 'us' and 'them'.

Strategic, rather than systematic, oppositions between culture and religion in the data revealed the complexity, variety, and agency of using culture in discourses. Representations in the data ranged from dominant views of secularism embedded in Christianity and whiteness to more nuanced overlaps between culture and religion. This study therefore uncovers ways in which dominant discourses about secularism were produced and reproduced while also identifying traces of resistance where culture was not used from an essentialist viewpoint but associated with more liquid representations of the imagined community. The range and type of discourses identified in the data offer some insights into the status of *Le Monde*. The diversity of discourses and multifaceted uses of culture echo to some extent the aim of the newspaper to position itself as a significant actor in the public sphere thanks to its editorial tradition (Le 2009). This envisioned position is, however, moderated by some of the findings. Indeed, despite some resistance to essentialist and differentiated representations of culture and religion, discourses from *Le Monde* tended to maintain status-quo representations of the secular imagined community, especially in relation to problematic and controversial topics. The propensity of *Le Monde* to reproduce dominant views of secularism positions the newspaper as a voice of the powerful cultural and secular center, and at odds with religious minorities maintained at the periphery of the secular imagined community. These findings therefore provide insights into the limits of media being constructive of culture by drawing attention to the existing representations and power structures they may sustain.

Conclusion

This study explored the use of culture as a discursive resource in newspapers articles about laïcité from *Le Monde*. The analysis revealed various strategies through which culture was made relevant. Cultural resonance was mostly crafted through covert strategies using terms such as 'society', 'public domain' or 'living together'. Culture was therefore often invisible and taken-for-granted in the data, suggesting that culture was understood as normal and tended to be decoupled from power relations. However, findings revealed the agency of using culture as it was often evoked strategically in discourses of laïcité. As a discursive strategy, culture seemed to regulate practices and to construct subject positions falling within and outside the cultural and secular realm. The categorization of practices as cultural appeared to be both enabling and constraining because of essentialist underpinnings and of the construction of culture as normal and invisible. Findings therefore suggested that the normalizing power of culture pertained to displays of religiosity that would interfere with the *normal cultural* order as well as to expressions of such *normal cultural* practices. As such, the use of culture in discourses of laïcité contributed to represent the imagined community as primarily secular.

These findings add to research conducted from a critical perspective within the field of intercultural communication by indicating varied ways in which culture may be

strategically used and the scope of power implications. More specifically, findings from this study contribute to research on *interculturality*. Strategic, rather than systematic, uses of culture in discourse hints at the notion of *intercultural moments* that draws attention to the way individuals construct *intercultural* communication through interpersonal interactions. This study complements previous research on this topic (e.g. Bolden 2014) by underlining the way *intercultural* communication can also be constructed in macro-level discourses.

In addition, legitimization of certain practices categorized as cultural and the use of essentialist views suggested similarities with covert expressions of racism. Strategic oppositions in the data with 'religion' hinted at occasional dichotomous views of *cultural us* and *religious them*. This echoed previous research discussing intersections between culture, religion, and race (e.g. Garner and Selod 2015; Saeed 2007) as well as research pointing out shifts from ethnic to religious denominations in French public discourse (e.g. Fellag 2014). Findings from this study therefore offer novel insights into dynamics related to *interculturality* and covert expressions of racism.

Finally, these findings echo and contribute to CDS by deconstructing the dominant narrative about *laïcité* and about the secular imagined community. Furthermore, this study reveals the agency of using 'culture' to fulfill specific purposes. Thus, this study draws attention to discourses of secularism from *Le Monde* as being cultural in the sense that they are 'a primary site of power operation and use' (Shi-xu 2016, 3) where representations about the imagined community as primarily secular are negotiated.

Overall, this study draws attention to the pervasive and multifaceted uses of culture as a discursive resource. The scope of this study is limited given the dataset and methodological framework that were used to examine a specific context in-depth. Findings therefore urge for further research to be conducted across time and context to understand more precisely the uses of culture as a discursive resource and implications as regards the representations of 'us' and 'them' it helps convey.

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Appendix. Criteria used to organize data

- Closely related to laïcité (239/895 articles – 26.7%)
 - (i) Laïcité is the main focus of the article, whether it is the only topic in the paper or is articulated with another theme.
 - (ii) Typically, laïcité is defined or discussed and not just mentioned.
- Quite related to laïcité (141/895 articles – 15.7%)
 - (i) Laïcité is not the main focus of the article.

- (ii) Laïcité is associated with the main topic in a significant way; or, laïcité is given significant visibility/space in the news item.
- (iii) Laïcité can be defined or discussed, or can just be mentioned.
- Loosely related to laïcité (515/895 articles – 57.5%)
 - (i) Laïcité is briefly mentioned.
 - (ii) Laïcité is not necessarily significantly associated with the main topic(s) of the news item.
 - (iii) Typically, laïcité is not defined or discussed.