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**I.H.T. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR**

## **Laïcité or Discrimination?**

**By DAVID D. LAITIN**

In less than two weeks, Eric Besson, the French minister for Immigration, Integration and National Identity, will open a colloquium on “National Identities, European Identities” with leading European ministers and intellectuals in attendance.

The event stems from a campaign promise of President Nicolas Sarkozy to reinforce republican values through an open public debate. Besson, having accepted this portfolio, seeks to promote a national consensus on a France that is open to immigration, non-discriminatory and resolutely secular (*laïque*).

It is the value of *laïcité* that reveals the real foundation of the debate.

We know from European history that in the 15th century, in Constantinople and in Grenada, a clear boundary separating the Muslim and the Christian world was set. With the wars of religion in Europe ending in the 17th century, and clerics banished from civic life in France more than a century ago, it seemed to most French that the politics of religion was ancient history.

Yet the massive number of Muslim migrants into France in the past half-century, some of whom retain allegiance to radical clerics, has reopened the religious book in a new and troubling way.

The bombings in Madrid and London by radical Islamists were the wake-up call. The treatment by Islamic radicals of the Danish cartoonists mocking Islam was widely seen as a threat to Europe’s open societies.

But the fears go well beyond these extraordinary events. In France, the wearing of head scarves by girls in school has been portrayed as a Trojan Horse that would Islamicize all of France. Even the sales strategies of fast-food chains (whether in certain locations to serve only halal hamburgers) make headlines in the sober *Le Monde*, as if these restaurants are also a threat to French values.

Thus the real question of the debate: Are the French integrating their approximately five million Muslim citizens into the laïque society they so deeply value?

Yet for all the passion the question evokes — and partly due to Constitutional constraints against collecting data on the ethnic and religious identities of its citizens — we have almost no information on the extent to which French republican ideals are effective in integrating Muslims into society.

Research on the difficulties faced by Muslims in France is inconclusive. Most Muslims in France come from North Africa, and even the best studies cannot determine whether the economic difficulties they face is due to the fact that they are Muslims, or that they are Arabs, or that many have family links to a country that had fought a bitter nationalist war against France.

Past ethnographic research faces a different methodological hurdle. It reveals degradation in those suburbs that today are predominantly Muslim, but we do not learn whether the escape from these banlieues has been slower for Muslims than for other similarly situated children of migrants.

To overcome these methodological confounds, I have identified a population that migrated to France mostly in the early 1970s with national origins in Senegal, who share language and history, but are divided by religion — about one-third Christian and two-thirds Muslim.

A survey of more than 500 second-generation migrants from this Senegalese population, controlling for the level of education of the first migrant of the family, reveals a significant economic disadvantage suffered by the Muslims. This difference cannot be explained by any factor other than something having to do with their religious heritage. The question is how this heritage affects income.

To answer this question, I designed a correspondence test in collaboration with ISM Corum (Inter Service Migrants-Centre d'Observation et de Recherche sur l'Urbain et ses Mutations), a nonprofit organization specializing in such studies.

In it, three fictional C.V.'s were created: one for Khadija Diouf (whose name could be identified as a Muslim), one for Marie Diouf (who could be identified as Christian), and a third for Aurélie Ménard (who could be identified as a rooted French person with no assumed religion). Diouf is a family name well-known in France to reflect Senegalese origins. All were applicants for similar jobs requiring advanced secondary education and several years experience.

On education, experience, age, gender, quality of neighborhood of residence and on French citizenship they were all comparable. Khadija had worked for Islamic Relief and was a member of Muslim scouts; Marie had worked for Catholic Relief and was a member of Catholic scouts.

We then sent out job applications for advertised positions, pairing Khadija vs. Aurélie for one set of the jobs and Marie vs. Aurélie for a perfectly matched set of jobs. (We could not have directly compared Khadija and Marie as the employers would surely have detected a test).

The results were clear. There was no statistical difference between Aurélie and Marie in terms of call-backs from the firms, although Aurélie did better and it probably would become significant if the number of applications were greater. However, Aurélie did three times as well as Khadija in getting call-backs, and this meets the highest standards of statistical significance.

There is no doubt: Anti-Muslim discrimination in at least one sector of the white-collar French labor market is surely holding back Muslim economic success in France.

My collaborators in this research — Marie-Anne Valfort of the Sorbonne and Claire Adida at the University of California, San Diego — and I still do not fully understand the mechanisms that drive the discrimination our research has identified. Nor do we know whether French republicanism is any more or less successful than its alternatives — say, British multiculturalism. But we can say with some confidence that in regard to the integration of Muslims, French republican ideals of a religion-blind society have not yet been met. This finding should not be kept off the agenda for the debate on the identity of France.

*David D. Laitin, a professor of political science at Stanford, was a guest professor in the “Equal Opportunity” scholar-in-residence program of the French-American Foundation and Sciences-Po.*