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### Stuck in a revolving door : secularism, assimilation and democratic pluralism

Jansen, H.Y.M.

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## Concluding Remarks

Let me try to bring together four points that seem essential to me when looking back at this study. Firstly, I reflect on some uses and abuses of referring to the memory of Jewish 'assimilation' in the French nineteenth century today. Secondly, I specify what I think we could learn from reading Marcel Proust's *Recherche* in the context of today's questions surrounding the position of migrants in Europe. Thirdly, I briefly summarise, in more general terms, the critiques of assimilation and secularism as I have developed them over the course of this book. And fourthly, I address the question of what alternatives could be developed. Here, I try to redefine the relationship between 'secularism', 'religious neutrality' and 'liberal democracy'. Finally, I bring up some future research issues.

### 1. The 'assimilation' of the French Jews as a memory for today

Some years ago, a strange episode aired on the local television channel in Amsterdam. In a moment of inadvertence, the city councillor for education, Rob Oudkerk, was filmed talking to the mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, under the impression that he was speaking off the record. He could clearly be heard saying the word 'Kutmarokkanen' [fucking Moroccans], a word that has since become notorious (and common) in the Netherlands. My attention was drawn by the immediate reaction of the mayor, who said: 'maar het zijn wel *onze*

Kutmarokkanen' [but they are *our* fucking Moroccans]. Oudkerk's insensitive neologism must have taken a very short-circuited route through Cohen's mind, for his reply referred to a slogan reportedly invented during World War II, which held that the 'rotmoffen' [shit krauts] should keep their hands off 'onze rotjoden' [our shit Jews].<sup>1</sup>

Cohen's reaction exposes an important factor related to the incorporation of migrants into European societies, which is the memory of the fate of the European Jews in World War II. Migrants not only bring their own memories, but they also 'land' in a public culture and, hence, in a specific field of memories. The fate of the Jews in particular has left deep traces that influence present-day thinking about minorities in the European context in ways that are difficult to evaluate because they are not always explicit and that result in highly diverse attitudes.

Over the last years, a significant change has occurred with regard to the role of these memories. In the 1980s, at a demonstration against racism in France, it could still be written that 'juif = immigré', and campaigns against the discrimination of Muslims would sometimes refer to the exclusion of the Jews. In 1993, looking back at the Rushdie Affair, Talal Asad made a comparison between the situation of Muslims in contemporary Europe and the position of the Jews in post-Enlightenment France as Arthur Hertzberg had described it: 'This 'new Jew' had been born into a society which asked him to keep proving that he was worthy of belonging to it' (Hertzberg 1968: 365-66; quoted in Asad 1993: 306).

Presently, however, there is an increasing resistance to comparisons between the current position of Muslims (or, more generally, migrants) and the position of Jews in the past and/or present, because such comparisons are considered to be often too quick, too abstract and too morally loaded.<sup>2</sup> It is sometimes also argued that these comparisons result in a blindness to the totally different historical context and that they entail a form of moral blackmail intended simply to cover up abuses within migrant communities. Perhaps this has indeed partly been the case, which may have prevented some from having the courage to address these abuses.

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is famous but it was not widespread during World War II (see De Haan 1997). Ineke Sluiter (2005) traces its precise origins and the many ways in which it has been referenced over the last years.

<sup>2</sup> This is especially the case if we refer to the most traumatic moment in the modern European history of the Jews, as we quickly tend to do because these memories are so present. As an example I want to mention here the heated discussions in the Netherlands after the popular Dutch historian Geert Mak compared some iconic aspects of the portrayal of Muslims in Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh's film *Submission part I* with that of Jews in *Der ewige Jude* (Mak 2005: 69-70). For a quite radical example of the resistance against comparison, see Trigano (2003).

There are other reasons for being careful about making comparisons. They could lead to an increasing imagery of Muslims as a sort of contemporary 'victims-in-waiting', the term Ronald Schechter and Michael Bernstein use when criticising the teleological historiography of the Jews in Post-Revolutionary France (see Transit I). An imagery of Muslims as (future) victims, either of xenophobia or of a hard line, unreflexive and dogmatic secularism, may encourage strong ethno-religious boundaries rather than help overcome them.

It would also be unhappy if pointing to a certain precariousness in the contemporary relations between Muslims and other citizens of European countries would further encourage the increasing pessimism about migration. This pessimism could express itself as a sort of reflexive fear concerning the *inassimilabilité* of some Muslim migrants, this time not racially motivated, but historically: a fear that the confrontation of secularist majorities and Islamic minorities will, in the long run, inevitably lead to conflict. The emergence of such an affective under-layer 'of fear' might lead to the further reinforcement of the boundaries of Fortress Europe. Internally, it may also lead to stronger pressures on minorities to 'integrate' or, increasingly explicitly, to 'assimilate'. A comparable fear, though not often expressed as such, may actually already underlie anti-immigration policies and the sometimes exaggerated pressures on migrants to perform as actively participating citizens.

This might lead us to argue, then, that the history of migration has always been accompanied by certain amounts of violence and discrimination, and that there is a certain risk in dramatising this. As Gérard Noiriel and others have argued more generally, it would help to stop dramatising problems in the context of migration as 'ethnic conflicts', or perhaps even 'religious conflicts' and to consider their socio-economic, media, and political aspects instead (see chapter one).

However, bringing up the memory of what has been called Jewish 'assimilation' does not have to lead to a dramatisation of contemporary migration, nor does it necessarily anticipate an actual course of events (in the way of an overly teleological perspective). Rather, it could enable us to trace the modern origins of the dramatisation of difference itself, and make us sensible to a certain risk in this dramatisation. Tracing the genealogy of Jewish assimilation in post-Revolutionary France gives us insight, or so I have tried to demonstrate, precisely into certain deeply historical layers of the way difference has been dramatised in European modern history. It might even help teach us how we might present our contemporary views about diversity and migration in a less dramatised way.

*A particular layer of distrust*

In my study of the *Recherche* and of the concept of *laïcité* as it was conceived by the neo-Kantian pedagogues from the Third French Republic, I have tried to show that intercultural distrust in culturally mixed European societies may have had more complex sources than racism or xenophobia alone. These sources should also be located in attempts to remove ethno-religious difference from the public sphere by either privatising or interiorising religion. An analysis of these sources may help to develop a critical perspective on today's combined problematic of the incorporation of migrants and the place of culture and religion in the public sphere. As such, it may form a complement both to empirical perspectives and to those perspectives put centre-stage by the contemporary media, which emphasise the precarious position of women, sexual minorities and Jews under the strain of Islamism and/or patriarchal cultural practices.

Tracing assimilation and secularism's intersection in European thought can make us sensible to a *layer* of distrust towards Muslims dependent on the idea that public aspects of religion are something from the past and should be privatised. This interpretation of religion is at least partly based on the modernist assumption that religion can only be made compatible with democracy and liberty when it is interiorised in such ways that it either can (and will) fade away to be replaced by a secular morality and ethics, or that it at least can be made compatible with individual autonomy.

This may lead critics not to problematise concrete practices and beliefs because they consider their contents objectionable (unlawful, undemocratic or indecent), but instead to criticise more general aspects of Islam and the people adhering to it. The most common critique questions those religious practices that transgress the boundaries of what we consider the public sphere. These religious practices are then considered to be signs of a belief that is not up to the standards of a *modern* religion.

It is not self-evident that public, visible religious practices should lead to distrust. It was more understandable that this link was made in the nineteenth century, because, as we have seen, collective religious practices were immediately associated to questions of 'peoplehood' or 'nationhood', which appeared to legitimise a distrust of the civil loyalty of its practitioners (chapter three, four). But today, as I argued in *Transit II*, *full secularisation* - as the eradication of all public, cultural aspects of religion - is no longer an actual expectation. Nor is *full assimilation*. The nation-state has become less 'jealous' and national majorities have become less anxious about hybridity, multiple identifications, and 'sloppy' or light identifications with diverse groups at once—or with hardly any at all. However, in chapters five and six, I also

analysed how certain nineteenth-century expectations have been inherited by the dichotomous conceptual schemes of today's discourses of assimilation and secularism. This is the case, for example, when it is argued that we could (and should) achieve 'de-ethnicised' citizenship, or when we expect pupils attending public school to learn to 'autoconstitute themselves as a subject' by suspending their relation to their inherited beliefs (see chapters two and five).

These expectations are based on several myths about European modernity, and as their ability to define European identity in contrast to the religious world outside increases, so does a blindness to the non-neutrality of our own public spheres, political cultures, and activities as citizens. Although the institutional context has become much more differentiated, contemporary secularism and assimilation remain indebted to modernism's metaphysical legacy, insofar as secularism idealises the individual's immediate access to God (or to Reason), and insofar as assimilation relies on the assumption that the individual, as a 'de-ethnicised' citizen, can have immediate access to the culturally and religiously neutral state. In both cases, mediation and the plurality inherent in it risk being dismissed as 'premodern', 'ethnic', or 'particularist', when they could actually be helpful in overcoming our lingering hope of gaining access to a reality untainted by power differences and the muddle of human interaction (see chapter two, three, transit II and chapter five).

Admitting a certain precariousness to the powerful return of this nineteenth-century heritage in the context of the arrival of migrants with practical ways of 'doing religion' might lead us to look for alternative frames. If there is a memorial task for multiculturalism in trying to open up majorities' conceptions of national or European identity, as Rainer Bauboeck argues and as I agree, then we should not concentrate on criticising nationalism alone, but also on analysing and criticising the intertwined heritage of secularism and assimilation. Sticking to this heritage is perhaps as problematic as nationalism, for it forms a contribution to exclusion that we can make while keeping our good consciences intact.

## 2. Getting stuck in a revolving door anno 2006

I would now like to reflect on what I consider the crucial Proustian contribution to this memorial task of multiculturalism. It is related to cultural memory as it plays a role in intercultural contacts. In my reading of Proust's *Recherche*, I have tried to trace why and in which ways intersected expectations of assimilation and secularisation contributed to the development of a structural and ephemeral othering of Jews in the French nineteenth century, which led to explicit, but also to more implicit forms of exclusion.

Reading the *Recherche* has taught us the long-term effects, contained in the micro-fibre of society, of incorrect institutional expectations with regard to equal citizenship. These expectations led to pressures on the Jews to transform their 'public difference' into 'private difference'. Yet Proust's novel enables us to scrutinise how the officially declared public irrelevance of ethno-religious backgrounds, founded on religion's presumed privacy and the state's religious neutrality, did not lead to a corresponding irrelevance of these backgrounds in society and politics. Instead, a cultural memory of difference, whose public effects had become unspeakable because of the relegation of Judaism to the private realm, resulted in slippery semi-public differences and boundaries, as we saw, for example, in the behaviour of Marcel's grandfather (see chapter three). These differences were constructed after the specific institutional context of modernist Republicanism had rendered visible differences suspect.

The semi-public status of Judaism played a role, I have tried to show, in creating a form of segregation that should not be considered the result of racist or exclusionary intentions alone. Thinking this was the case would prevent us from seeing that the way public differences and inequalities did not vanish into a 'private' realm but turned into stereotypes, was a result of the delegitimisation of public difference within Republicanism itself. We saw that this mechanism caused a sort of unpredictable distrust, which in turn led to a process of creeping exclusion instead of inclusion. In short, the attempt to make ethno-religious difference invisible caused the opposite to happen.

We have seen how Proust narrates the emergence of a constellation of Judaism, Catholicism and Republicanism in terms of essentialised group identities precisely at the moment of their presumed disappearance: the expectation of 'national assimilation', rather than softening them, led to entrenched political positions related to group identities. Unnecessarily strong positions were developed that only made it more difficult for mediating positions to emerge, and, at an individual level, for those connected to specific groups to take up a divergent position within them.

In some respects, the *Recherche* could be read, today, as an anticipation of a possible future. In a sense, the long-term results of expectations around assimilation, as they were witnessed by Proust, can at the moment only be anticipated with regard to Muslim immigrants. Muslims—or persons with Muslim backgrounds—are not yet much represented in the middle classes and even less so in the elites, even though Muslims have been living in significant numbers in parts of Europe, including France, since the 1930s. We have not yet witnessed what will happen to Muslim identity when it will generally be defined, by second or third generations of immigrants and by majorities, as something from the past or as 'just' a religion, an individual adherence to an 'Islam de France' or perhaps a 'European Islam'.

Proust's contribution, in my view, is to have unravelled, in his narrative of assimilation, why we *cannot* provide a guarantee to members of ethno-religious minorities that, once they conceal or lose their visible, public, cultural-religious practices, they will no longer be considered as belonging to 'ethnically particular groups' by majorities. Identifications by majorities on the basis of a cultural memory of past differences do not need to be strong ones; indeed, it are precisely *ephemeral* identifications that can create unspeakable but also non-transgressable boundaries resulting from the delegitimisation of public difference in general. This is why, from the start of the process, we should be extremely careful about delegitimising public differences, including religious ones.

Similar problems to those narrated by Proust might occur today: the construction of new identifications (in the first place by majorities) around being 'Muslim', in which the absence or suspected hiding of ethno-religious attachments is precisely what leads to the 'return' of difference (in a context that has delegitimised such difference in advance). The crucial Proustian insight that we should not forget is that it is uncertain whether the members of majorities will trust Muslims' transformation into 'de-ethnicised' secular individuals, or whether they will possibly be subtly (or not so subtly) screened for 'signs' of 'diasporic nationalist' sympathies—a term coined by Esther Benbassa (2003)—particularly under today's conditions of terrorist threats. We might at least anticipate that something like a reified 'return' of publicly relevant Muslim 'identities' could occur, just as such a 'return' of Judaism occurred in the France of the Dreyfus Affair (see chapter four).

Evidently, at the intersubjective and social levels, a lot more 'assimilation' might be required than our institutions officially demand; the headscarf affairs, whose scope far exceeded the question of whether they could legitimately be worn in 'public' places, testify to this. More generally, the affairs concerning 'conspicuous religious signs' offer important material for a diagnosis that moves beyond the usual juridical-political debates to determine when religious people should be allowed to wear these signs. We also have to read secularism's partly self-created 'conspicuous religious signs' from the perspective of the future of assimilation.

Excluding people from public offices and from parity of participation in public institutions invites a sliding scale. Once the people that diverge have been systematically excluded from serving or even participating in the public sphere, they may be excluded from other parts of society as well. At the moment, we see this all over Europe, where women wearing headscarves are not only excluded from official positions representing neutrality in an explicit sense (such as the office of judge), but also, to some extent, from working in 'representative functions' for private organisations.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Long-time residents often argue that they 'just do not want to be confronted with people's religious beliefs in public'. But in saying this, most do not make a distinction between functions that should officially symbolise 'neutrality' and people they may encounter on the street corner. Nor do they all realise that their own clothes might also not be completely neutral. Here, a particularly telling example may be taken from a recent discussion in the Dutch daily quality newspaper NRC Handelsblad, after it published an article about a woman from a Turkish background who wears a headscarf and who encountered barriers related to the scarf in finding a job as a lawyer.

Some of the letters sent about this article to the editor (December 31, 2005) stated that the woman's problem was probably not *just* the scarf, but *also* her make-up—visible on a picture accompanying the article. The class aspects of make-up, of course, are known to all social climbers, a group to which we all belong because modern societies continually transform cultural hierarchies, as Proust so marvellously shows.

However, the letters commenting on the woman's make-up deserve further scrutiny. The first one argues that her make-up is too strong and that this, together with her black clothes, gives her a 'hard' face. It is questionable that 'autochthonous' future lawyers are being selected on the basis of their soft faces, but this is obviously not considered relevant. The other letter writer who mentions make-up also offers a peculiar explanation for the aspiring lawyer's problems in getting hired. He states that she is giving off contradictory signals: on the one hand, she wears a scarf, which *he thinks* Muslims wear because *they think* scarves 'protect women from unbounded male sexuality'. On the other hand, she also wears 'excessive' make-up, which *he thinks (or feels)* stresses her 'sexual attractiveness'. Such 'contradictory signals', he argues, would also have prompted him not to hire her.

Both letters suggest that the woman would perhaps not succeed without her scarf either, since she would still 'diverge' from unwritten norms. Such reasoning might remind us of Proust's narrator's problems with the insufficiently 'assimilated' Jews in Balbec, whose 'seaside fashions' and dinner-jackets he did not approve of (see chapter four, section one). Feeling irritated as members of the majority because of 'contradictory signals' like these—'signals' we might very well, at least partly, have created ourselves—may be the contemporary way of ensuring that many people with a Muslim background will not hit the glass ceiling, simply because they will have gotten stuck in a revolving door long before (see chapter four, section four).

Ironically, it is not up to the people wearing scarves or make-up to decide what kinds of signs they are sending out, or even whether scarves or make-up are 'signs' at all (see Asad 2004 and chapter six). The resident 'we' at least partly decide this and the more we leave behind the multiculturalist discourse to

exchange it for secularist or liberal assimilationist ones—*which want to be pluralist but are not, precisely because they overlook the crucial boundaries established by (the memory of) a public difference that will not (or that will only gradually) disappear*—the more the ‘signs of belonging’ to other groups, whether religious or not, will be delegitimised.

Moreover, ‘the heart’ is invisible and, for this reason, also much less controllable than any visible signs of belonging; requiring difference to move into the ‘heart’ (or the home) is precisely what led to an anxiety about difference in post-Revolutionary France. Since ‘we’ might not be able to forget that ‘these people’ came from somewhere else for some generations, we might as well not push them in the direction of defining their sense of belonging in terms of their ‘heart’ and ‘privacy’, for precisely this trajectory may cause us to impute to them a semi-public identity as Muslims, especially when we feel that a form of blackmail has been at play from the very beginning.

I do not, of course, mean to say that, if people think ‘the coast is clear’ to lose or actively reject the traces of their ethno-religious backgrounds, and if they wish to do so, they should encounter moral or social barriers. This is why democratic relational pluralists do not plead for a top-down multiculturalism but rather in favour of blurring cultural boundaries and making it easier to cross them (see for example Bauboeck 1998a). My concern is with majorities’ agency in ensuring to a greater degree that the coast will remain clear or will become a little clearer.

It is unnecessary to exclude people who practice religion visibly from the public sphere or from representing the state. There is no essential difference between wearing a headscarf and finding God (or reason) in your heart; the first no more proves an automatic tendency to ‘submissiveness’ (in practice or in ideology) than the latter proves ‘autonomy’ (see chapter six). If anyone would want to assert that religion in general is problematic, then we should perhaps be consistent and also screen judges and perhaps even schoolchildren for religious consciences; and, if we find any, send them home! We would then also have to screen a-religious candidates, for they too might have attachments to ‘communities’ or nationalist feelings. For example, perhaps the writer of the first letter about the aspiring Muslim lawyer’s headscarf owns a pearl necklace inherited from her grandmother. She might not have considered that the lawyer may have inherited her scarf from her grandmother as well. We might remember here Mme de Guermites’s ruby necklace introduced in chapter seven. A scarf, some eye shadow, a ruby, and a pearl necklace could go nicely together, adding colour to a ‘culturally neutral’ elite, a community of grey suits with matching ties and everything these are the conspicuous signs of.

The only valid reason for prohibiting the wearing of specific signs is that given by Émile Poulat (2003), namely when wearing them poses a threat to public order. We do not have to exclude this possibility altogether but, as Poulat argues, it would require different circumstances than girls with headscarves or boys with kippahs, turbans or 'large crosses' attending public schools or working as public servants (see chapter five).

### 3. Summarising the critique of secularism and assimilation

It should be clear by now that my critical view of secularism is not meant to be an apology for religion. In our time, religion quite often takes on unhappy forms; we are seeing the re-emergence of (neo-)conservative interpretations of human life and their deployment in violent political ideologies of which we have little to expect in terms of democratisation and pluralisation. Liberal philosophies that retreat to a thin concept of morality and that leave a great deal of room for the 'communitarianisation' of ethics might be a little too 'thin' here.<sup>3</sup>

But to criticise (neo-)fundamentalist religion only in the name of secularism or in the name of Enlightenment or other values inherited from Europe's modernist past, might lead us in the wrong direction. Instead, we should become sensitive to the intricate relation between the specific forms religion takes today and the history of secularisation and secularism itself. Precisely in this sense it is crucial today to be sensitive to the dialectics of Enlightenment.

The stake for a progressive contemporary critique of secularism is not a 'return of religion'. There are other ways to recognise the role of affect, sensibilities and attachments in the ways we perform in the public sphere or to criticise the legacy of European modernity's rationalist monisms. Rather, we should thoroughly question the last essentialist dichotomies upheld within modernist, secularist liberalisms and their Eurocentric histories. These dichotomies lead us to distinguish religion, as a specific form of particularity, from other particularities of which we can see much clearer that they are interwoven, mediated, always related to power relations, and therefore always *public* (see also Asad 2003; Modood 2005; Connolly 2005; Bader 2006b). The special place assigned to religion might be a legacy of the way it did not disappear in modernity, but was transformed: it remained active as a transcendental counter-concept to freedom conceived as autonomy. This is still reflected in the ways in which modernist sociologies tend to understand the

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<sup>3</sup> Roy's view that today's neo-fundamentalisms, including *salafism*, should not be called political because they do not strive for state power but 'only' for a religionisation of society, is not really reassuring and depends on an overly classical understanding of the relation between state and society (see chapter six and Mahmood 2004).

relation of modernity to tradition and religion (Transit II, chapter five to seven). Hence, such a progressive critique of secularism is concerned with a self-critique of reason's own dogmas, precisely insofar as modernist concepts of reason (and of religion, for that matter) have a problematic relation to the plurality of human life forms, because of their idealisation of abstraction and interiorisation.

### *The neutrality of the public sphere*

Secularism, and *laïcité* in particular (insofar as *laïcité* implies that we strictly stick to the state's and the public sphere's religious neutrality by removing religion to a private sphere), is biased when it comes to the meaning of the mutual 'neutrality' of religion and politics. It mistakes this neutrality (1) for something that actually exists, (2) for a culturally neutral requirement, and (3) for a separation of religion from politics.

(Ad 1) While nowadays most people will concede that the cultural neutrality of public spheres is not actually achievable and that cultural inequalities should be compensated for by focusing on even-handedness rather than on formal equality, the myth of religious neutrality seems to be the last frontier for universalist modernists, which might explain the fascination for secularism particularly in France. The result is that the secularist state does not recognise its own insufficient religious neutrality or the fact that the nation-state is itself just one of many possible levels of human organisation. We have seen this exemplified in the association of the nation-state and its membership (citizenship) with modernity and universality (see chapters two, five and six).

(Ad 2) The cultural neutrality of requiring the privatisation of religion is questionable, if only because Catholicism and Protestantism, each in its own way, retain some of their own privileges within the state, particularly in France: Catholicism through its overwhelming cultural presence in the public sphere and Protestantism because the *laïcist* image of religion is so closely linked with the subjectivation and 'de-culturalisation' of religion in Protestantism. Hence, the *laïcist* discourse also denies the 'power' of 'resident religion', meaning those aspects of religion that are linked to the distribution of power, both politically and culturally. It remains prejudiced against those whose faiths are less connected to interiorisation.

(Ad 3) As we have seen, advocating secularisation is meant to lead to religion's de-collectivisation and, at the same time, its depoliticisation. It is questionable, however, that the two will always go together, particularly in a context of ethnic othering. This is a specific problem when it comes to framing questions around incorporation and ethno-cultural diversity within a discourse

of *laïcité* or secularism, as is common in France. It leads us to focus on the relationship between religion and politics and, consequently, leads to a structural forgetfulness of the cultural and memorial sides of the associational life of migrants. This in turn leads us to overlook that many practices which actually could be understood in cultural terms are assumed to be religious ones. *Laïcité* creates its own problematic religious counterparts or, to speak with Olivier Roy, 'les expressions bricolées de quêtes identitaires sont surislamisées systématiquement' [hodgepodge expressions of quests for identity are systematically 'overislamised' (Roy 2005: 152, my translation)].

In interpreting migrant religions—Islam in particular, but also other ones—the secularist legacy is at play in two different ways. Either the acceptance of *laïcité* is being prescribed to a 'premodern' religion (Islam still has to learn it), or full secularisation is actually presupposed (Islam has been thoroughly politicised (Kepel)) but this is itself seen as a problem (see chapter six for this distinction). What remains *unperceived* in both interpretations is the interaction between cultural and individual aspects of religion, particularly in contemporary France, where Islam clearly exists within the context of an intercultural dynamics of ethno-religious othering. Power inequalities, minority-majority relations, the history of migration, and colonial history are all evaded by sticking to the modernist secular interpretation of religion as a private and largely individual affair that is or should be separated from culture in a broader sense.

If we would leave secularism as a frame for dealing with questions of cultural diversity in the context of migration, neither religion as such, nor *communautarisme* would be at the centre of what is considered problematic today. Nor would certain ethnic, particularising aspects of religious practices in the public sphere or diasporic and transnational attachments. What would be at the centre would be only those practices that are criminal and/or harm minorities within minorities. One of the dangers of secularism is that while we keep saying that religion is not the problem and terrorism is, we persist in defining religion in such a way that many of its harmless aspects become suspect simply because they do not fit our expectations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A recent illustration of this problem, which shows us the difficult situation we are in, is the following: in 2005, on the evening preceding the Eid-al-Kebir (The Sugar Feast), two men in clearly religious dress were suspected of preparing a terrorist attack on a Dutch train by their fellow passengers. It took a few hours before it was discovered that they carried only Qu'ranic texts and no bombs, but we can all understand the panic of the other passengers as they disappeared for a long period into the train toilets. The two men were arrested by a rather big police force and filmed as they were forced into a police car. To my mind, the significant aspect of this event, however, was that later on, these same images (of people who had been proven innocent) were used several times to 'illustrate' news items about terrorism. Similarly, it is

#### 4. Alternatives; shifting the meaning of 'religious neutrality'

The vital question is how we can get away from the dynamics of secularism, fundamentalism and postcolonial migration in a globalising context without getting into too much trouble. I do not mean to say that we have to be 'soft' on or blind to the political sides of contemporary religion, or to the impact that ideologies of violence have within the *Islam des jeunes* today. But we should be very careful to distinguish between criticising the contents of actual beliefs and the specific practices of *some* people, and the delegitimisation of beliefs (or even the individuals that adhere to them) in a more general sense.

Inclusion is the first and foremost way to prevent violent conflict and here we finally have to start seeing that this should not prevent us from accepting, admitting, and even welcoming visible and sensible differences. For it is the exclusion of these differences from public offices and even schools or workplaces that may lead members of specific groups—or those perceived as such—to take up rigid positions, if they do so at all.

Most people will probably agree that identifying the public appearance of religion in the form of collective practices as 'political religion', and, subsequently, of 'political religion' as a theocratic threat to or perhaps even a 'libanisation' of society, is unhappy and creates inequalities. Yet some people think that we have to protect the state's neutrality in this manner in order to protect (segments of) society from fundamentalisation and entire nation-states from being endangered by theocratic groups.

At this point, it might be wise to think about whether we could shift the meaning of the state's religious neutrality. Indeed, instead of implying the invisibility of belief, religious neutrality could also be given another meaning. We could declare it irrelevant whether practices, beliefs, proposals, arguments etc., have religious (or other particular) sources or not, and discuss them *only* in terms of the norms inherent to politics: do they enhance freedom and equality or not? Such a shift might enable us to overcome the fear that once we give up our definition of religious neutrality as the invisibility or at least privatisation of difference, we may have no 'norms' left that would protect us against fundamentalisms. As I have explained in chapter six, referring to Bader (1999; 2006b), we could shift our focus to democracy, subjecting *all* public arguments and behaviours to the strain of being open to discussion and objections. The only relevant question then would be whether these arguments and behaviours are democratic and liberal in the sense that they do not legitimise violations of human rights but rather enhance their actualisation.

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striking how often women wearing headscarves are shown accompanying reports about crime in poor neighbourhoods.

Perhaps a moderate politicisation of religion would not even be so objectionable, in that it might lead us to put more trust in the possibility to debate ethics with everyone. This would also enable us to evaluate the ways in which religion *is* political because it is being 'governed' in various ways, as I have argued with Benbassa, Bowen, Asad, Roy, and Bader. Secular politics does not have to do all the work and we do not have to write off all religions, private or public, as ritualistic and unchangeable entities whose boundaries can only be forced upon them by an outside, secular political realm. The 'political immunity' of religion is perhaps only one more unnecessary heritage of secularism. Hence, the proposal is to change our perspective altogether and adopt a neutral stance towards the necessity of privatising religion in order to organise societies liberally and democratically.

As Bruno Latour (2004) has argued, in adopting a law forbidding conspicuous religious signs to put an end to the '*discussions interminables*' about the scarves, French political culture has revealed itself as undemocratic; for if peace and justice in European societies (and outside them) depend on anything, it is on 'endless discussions'. Listening *and* talking will have to occur on all sides. The framing of the debate in terms of a 'sovereign we' that could decide whether or not it should 'tolerate' religious signs (and everything that they may symbolise) is already insufficiently democratic and illiberal; a sign of what Olivier Roy calls a *laïcité autoritaire* (2005: 148). The Stasi committee's attitude in advising this law is not a *divergence* from secularism, but inherent in it insofar as secularism implies that the voices of those who have either interiorised their beliefs or replaced them with 'reason' should be taken more seriously than those of others.

Besides accepting signs of ethno-religious attachments in the public sphere, taking democracy as the central norm also implies that a voice and opportunities should be guaranteed as much as possible for minorities within minorities. Not symbolically, by 'protecting' women by forbidding them to wear scarves in some situations and in some public places, but practically: by giving them access to quality education, by guaranteeing their participation in society and politics, and by providing them with 'real exit' options from their communities—under police protection if necessary, and with a guarantee of economic security.

It may not be superfluous to mention that our practices of protecting women do *not at all* live up to our ideals, and that we had better concentrate on the actual practices here as well. Even those women who are most excluded and most at risk of being isolated, of being trafficked and of being used as sex slaves, cannot be sure of police protection or even of a definite residence permit when they cooperate with the police to prosecute human traffickers (see for example Hopkins 2005). In public debates, exit options (the freedom to vote

with one's feet) are usually only mentioned in debates about how to deal with strongly (political-)religious communities and their grasp on the souls and bodies of their members. Much less frequently do we hear talk of this freedom when we discuss the need to welcome and support individuals who have actually fled their communities or countries.

In sum, shifting the definition of 'religious neutrality' would imply that we consider people who practice religion publicly as in principle just as reasonable or unreasonable, impartial or biased, as any others. A girl wearing a headscarf would not be considered less on her way to 'autoconstituting herself as a subject' than any other girl or boy, nor would a woman wearing a scarf be seen as necessarily unable to symbolise the state's neutrality, or to judge impartially. We should start recognising that sharing beliefs with others—and being influenced by collective practices and prejudices—is part of all of our lives, and that the differences between how we define the influence of particular groups are just a matter of gradation. This leads me to argue that we also need an alternative understanding of the relationship between secularisation and religious practice, an argument which I will conclude by returning to the Proustian narrative of memory one last time.

### *Revising the concept of secularisation and the role of memory*

We have seen that sober and moderate concepts of modernity and secularisation would help overcome the modernist dichotomies suggesting that we either belong to (religious) communities or are free citizens whose beliefs are their own conscious choice. This could help to develop a ramified understanding of the relation between individuality (and subjectivity) and shared cultural practices within modern societies.

If we would start to do justice to the cultural and practical aspects of religious and a-religious subjectivities alike, we could stop considering the practical, publicly visible aspects of religion as structurally different and hence separable from its invisible, interiorised aspects. This might also lead us to see that these practices do not have to be political, 'conspicuous', or even 'zealous', nor do they have to be signs of a premodern, 'unfree' religion—to speak with Hegel. These practices can be partly inherited, partly a result of political motives, partly a result of conscious religious choices, partly of *bricolage*, partly of fashion, or they could have other sources that we cannot predict. We have to adopt conceptual schemes that enable us at least to *perceive* these complexities. In chapter six, I suggested that the frames of *laïcité* and full secularisation prevent some French modernist intellectuals from perceiving this.

Practices are part of the solution, because they are inevitably diverse and make new interpretations possible. This may also be the case even if some people explain them in terms of dogmas. The immanent divergences within practices guarantee their multi-interpretability and we should focus on this aspect of religious practices, instead of simply going along with their 'orthodox' interpretations. Instead of conceiving of a strict distinction between secular and practice-based religion, we should realise that the individualisation of religion never entails a complete loss of practices or of culture. As soon as new practices develop, possibilities for plural interpretations and debate will also arise and mediation will occur.

By forcing the separation of religion from practices and by delegitimising the passing on of particular cultural or ethnic habits—for example by presupposing that they can only be purely constructed and 'political'—we may actually produce the opposite of religion's relaxation.<sup>5</sup> This insight might also lead us to see that successful policies of assimilation, but secularist pressures as well, may actually promote the emergence of neo-orthodoxy. This argument dovetails with Ayelet Shchar's argument that the 'obstinate' aspects of neo-orthodoxy in the context of migration may have a lot to do with the intercultural dynamics in relation to assimilationist majorities (see chapter two).

My reading of Proustian memory in chapter seven was intended to scrutinise the interwovenness of subjectivities with collective practices of meaning making. Scrutinising memory in close connection to forgetting helped us to find a ground for mediating the dichotomies between autonomous, free, individualised subjects (whether religious or not) and exteriorised, mechanical views of human action. However, memory is not a stable ground; it is 'recherche rather than recuperation' (Huyssen 1995: 3; see also transit I). Scrutinising memory enables us to perceive the immense complexity of human interaction and the sheer impossibility of 'isolating' the moment of our subjectivity and agency from the people around us and *their* agency, from our habits, and from the power relations in which we are inevitably involved. Realising that this interwovenness plays a role for all of us may serve to 'de-dramatise' the opposition between 'them' and 'us' at a deeper level.

The exact balance between religious belief and the memories that lead to collective identification is not transparent, not to ourselves, let alone to others; it

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<sup>5</sup> An effect of secularism (as the pressure put on people to leave the 'ethnic' sides of their religious habits behind), is the 'purification' of cultural-religious habits into religious symbols. Mahbooba Menapal, an Afghan doctor whom I befriended through my activities as a 'neighbourhood' volunteer, told me about the diversity, in terms of class and regional aspects, of the burqa and other kinds of scarves as they were worn in Afghanistan before the Taliban came to power. The more we pressure the 'religionisation' of Muslim practices, the more difficult it may become for women to make the scarf into an object of distinction and beauty.

is as complicated as all human lives are. However, at a time of conflict between groups, separating one's personal thoughts and feelings from those assumed by a group becomes more difficult, because group ties tend to become closer. This implies a recognition that inter-group conflicts may make it more rather than less difficult for those connected to a certain group to say 'no' or at least to become ironic. Pressures not only come from the people around us, but also from internalised solidarities.

In chapter seven, I traced Proust's narrative of how we 'forget' such internalisations and the pressures they put on us, and how not even his hyper-reflexive narrator escapes from the perspectivism it causes. This is something else than presupposing a mono-identification, a reified concept of culture, an immediate, affective identification of individuals with one single group, or a dogmatic *communautarisme*. We can be hybrid and feel solidarity with a group at the same time. Moreover, the narrative of Mme de Guermantes's forgetting of her old friend Swann made clear that we can also *not* feel very attached to any specific group and still participate in excluding people from society and even from our memories.

Taking seriously the identification of individuals with groups, including religious ones, which always takes place in mediated ways, which proceeds also through forgetfulness, and which happens partly unconsciously and is not that manipulable, provides us with a somewhat different basis for pluralism than the argument that people should have the right to pursue their (given) 'traditions' on relativist or culturalist grounds. Such a pluralism is not based on some immediately given religion or culture, but on the relation of individuals to others and to the power differences between them that are always and irreparably at stake.

## 5. Some matters for further research

Haym Soloveitchik (1994) has analysed the transformation of religion among some traditional Jewish groups after they were forced to move from Eastern Europe to the United States and Israel. Soloveitchik argues that the loss of mimetic, habitual practices, which always *perform* their own diversity, may stand in close connection to the emergence of orthodoxy, of a fascination for rules, stereotypes and classic texts, and to the increasing authority of those who can pass on these rules:

the compartmentalization of religion, typical of modern society, shrinks dramatically religion's former scope and often weakens its fiber. But where belief still runs strong, this constriction of religion means its increasing

concentration in a single realm and a dramatic enhancement of the authority of the guardians of that realm. The broad sway of their current prerogative stems from the shrinkage of the other agencies of religion, and it is the deterioration of these long-standing counterweights that gives this newly found authority its overbearing potential (Soloveitchik 2005 [1994]).

By 'the other agencies of religion' Soloveitchik means practices handed down as cultural practices, as habits, and the examples he gives often refer to women's practices related, for example, to cooking and dressing. When these practices disappear at least partly after migration—and, we might surmise, particularly quickly when secularist majorities ridicule, disrespect or at least question habitual religious practices—a stronger centralisation of religious authority might occur than in traditional societies. Soloveitchik argues that this process is further enhanced by the opportunities offered by modern media to maintain relatively immediate contacts between centre and periphery.<sup>6</sup>

It might be useful to scrutinise whether a similar frame could offer a fruitful way of understanding the religious authority of web-based imams and the *Islam des internautes*. Soloveitchik's perspective is related to Roy's in that it stresses the transformation of religion in the context of modern society, but contrary to Roy, he does not force an exaggerated understanding of the new form of religion by arguing that it has 'secularised', 'individualised', and become a matter of choice within one or two generations (something Roy has perhaps inherited from the same Durkheimian frame that Noiriel deploys).

A second point I would like to bring up is that, while in this study I focus on the role of secularism in European and primarily French history, it would also be important to address the ways in which secularism, also in the form of *laïcité*, has been functioning 'abroad' for a long time now; specifically, the ways in which it has been confronted with Islamic cultural and political traditions in countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Tunisia and Algeria. If we did this, we would probably also be able to better place the understanding of *laïcité* among migrants in France. Here, the relation between secularism and the so-called *gestion* of religion under colonial rule, communism, and state authoritarianism would have to be scrutinised.

In that context, it might be useful to explore the hypothesis that we should consider the political culture of laïcism, which has been dubbed '*catholaïcité*' in the French context, as '*islaïcité*' as well. After all, *laïcité* has been constituted not only in reaction to Catholicism but also in relation to Islam, in the specific

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<sup>6</sup> Adam Seligman made me aware of this article during a conference about *laïcité* in Paris. Halfway through the conference, Seligman said something important: he suggested that most of the sociologists and philosophers gathered there did not understand anything about religion as a 'response to being', instead explaining everything related to religion in terms of 'identities'.

contexts of, first, (semi)-colonial government and, second, post-colonial migration. This interaction between *laïcité* and Islam cannot be taken into account in a concept of *laïcité* that exclusively locates its genealogy in the historical relation to Catholicism (and other long-time resident religions). Important work in this field has been done by for example Raberh Achi (2004), Edward Webb (2005) and Marcel Maussen (2006), and I hope to contribute to such research myself in the future.

