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# ‘A crooked, passion-laden mirror’: ‘Jews’ and ‘Muslims’ as a European question beyond religio-secularism

YOLANDE JANSEN

**ABSTRACT** In this article, Jansen attempts to demonstrate that addressing the religious practices of Jews and Muslims from the perspective of a religio-secular framework in today’s European context underestimates the complexity of semiotic relations between Muslims, Jews and other Europeans. She discusses this complexity in terms of ‘intercultural semiotics’ between the three groups. In particular, she focuses on what she calls ‘mirroring relations’, drawing on an expression from Yirmiyahu Yovel about a ‘crooked, passion-laden mirror’ characterizing the ways in which modern Europeans imagined their Jewish neighbours in early twentieth-century Europe. In order to further explain this, Jansen analyses a passage from Marcel Proust’s novel *In Search of Lost Time*, which concerns a group of people in late nineteenth-century France, following the Dreyfus Affair, who are perceived by the narrator as Jewish. Thereafter, drawing on Gil Hochberg’s notion of the ‘re-membling’ of the Semite, Jansen analyses semiotic mirroring in the work *Projet Deburkanisation* (2017) by the Belgian author Rachida Lamrabet, which she reads as a contemporary meta-reflection, involving Muslims, on the mirroring relations between Jews and other Europeans first discussed via her reading of Proust.

**KEYWORDS** antisemitism, freedom of religion, intercultural semiotics, Jews and Muslims, Marcel Proust, piety, *Projet Deburkanisation*, Rachida Lamrabet, religio-secularism, Semite

## Religio-secularism and the intercultural semiotics of Othering

The debates and controversies in many European contexts concerning the religious practices of Jews and Muslims are often guided by a discursive formation that I call ‘religio-secularism’.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I explain why I think this is problematic, and argue that we need to supplement a religio-

- 1 See Yolande Jansen, ‘Beyond comparing secularisms: a critique of religio-secularism’, in Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2017), 369–86; and Markus Dressler, ‘Beyond religio-secularism: toward a political critique’, 25 February 2014, available on *The Immanent Frame* website at <https://tif.ssrc.org/2014/02/25/beyond-religio-secularism-toward-a-political-critique> (viewed 14 February 2020).

secular approach with one that we could call ‘intercultural semiotics’. By ‘semiotics’, I mean the analysis of practices of meaning-making as a reaction to perceptions that subjects experience as signs of communication. These practices of meaning-making themselves are called *semiosis*.<sup>2</sup> For a semiotic approach, in the specific context of controversies about religious practices of Jews and Muslims today, we can learn from earlier analyses of the practices of meaning-making in relation to Jews in European societies from before the Second World War. I call these intercultural semiotics ‘mirroring relations’, drawing on Yirmiyahu Yovel’s expression about a ‘crooked, passion-laden mirror’ characterizing the ways in which modern Europeans imagined their Jewish neighbours in early twentieth-century Europe.<sup>3</sup>

To better understand the complexities of Othering, we might refer to ‘racialization’ as a more accurate framework of analysis than religio-secularism, but what I would like to do here is to include instead a perspective on semiotic practices of Othering in which references to both race and religion form part of processes of perception, self-perception and signification. Highlighting semiotic mirroring draws attention to those practices of meaning-making whereby an Other is constituted as a distorted reflection of the self. Such an approach, as I will further explain below, will help us to understand better the dimensions of conflicts about religious practice that do not deal with religion as belief in a specific value system or with Islam or Judaism as discursive traditions or interpret religious practices as practices of piety, not even with Jews and Muslims as objects of racialization. Instead, perceptions of religious practice and religious belonging will be situated as part of a dynamic of intercultural meaning-making whose genealogy might at least partly be traced to the nineteenth-century paradoxical dynamic of Jewish ‘assimilation’ and Othering. I want to try to convey this further by briefly discussing, first, a passage about the narrator’s perception of a group of characters with a Jewish background in Marcel Proust’s novel *In Search of Lost Time*,<sup>4</sup> and, second, after a brief discussion of Gil Hochberg’s notion of ‘re-remembering the Semite’, Rachida Lamrabet’s five-minute dramatic work *Projet Deburkanisation*.<sup>5</sup>

- 2 ‘The study of processes of meaning-making (*semiosis*) in reaction to objects of experience perceived as signs’ is a very basic definition of semiotics, but a more sophisticated one is not required to support my argument in this article. For an elaborate introduction to semiotics, see Mieke Bal, *On Meaning-Making: Essays in Semiotics* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press 1994).
- 3 Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press 1998), xi.
- 4 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, 6 vols, trans. from the French by C. K. Scott-Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, revd D. J. Enright (London: Vintage 1996).
- 5 Rachida Lamrabet, *Projet Deburkanisation*, 2017, video with English subtitles available on *YouTube* at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5skX\\_BOrml&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5skX_BOrml&feature=youtu.be) (viewed 13 January 2020).

## Religio-secularism and ‘the European question’

‘Religio-secularism’ refers to a public discourse or scholarly paradigm in which societal conflicts and problems involving religion or ideology (broadly conceived) are discussed in ways that foreground their religious and/or secular dimensions. Controversies are then often structured by concepts of belief, piety, (freedom of) religion, secularity and pluralism.<sup>6</sup> For example, contemporary Euro-American public discourses about Muslim and Jewish religious practices tend to be structured in these terms, as can be seen during thirty years of debates about the wearing of headscarves.<sup>7</sup> At first, religio-secularism occurred mostly in laicist France and *laiklik* Turkey but it later emerged in other European countries as well. In public and legal debates about the wearing of headscarves—hijabs, burqas, niqabs and burkinis—European publics, and many intellectuals and scholars among them, increasingly formulated their views on these practices in terms of the right to religious freedom, or in terms of religion in the public sphere, or in terms of an incompatibility or a divide between secularism (or ‘the Enlightenment’) and Islam. They then often conceived of these conflicts as a deep value conflict between religious (orthodox) and secular moral principles. Consider also the controversy surrounding the Danish cartoons and their reprinting by the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. Public views about the killing of eleven *Charlie Hebdo* staff members and the subsequent ‘Je suis Charlie’ campaign were often framed in terms of an opposition between the moral values attached to ‘western-secular freedom of speech’ and Islam.

Authors like Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Nadia Fadil, Sarah Bracke, Schirin Amir-Moazami and others have consistently criticized the secular-religious divide, showing how the two terms constitute an interdependent, highly problematic binary.<sup>8</sup> They have urged European publics to take seriously the

6 See Dressler, ‘Beyond religio-secularism’; and also Jansen, ‘Beyond comparing secularisms’.

7 Although these events have, of course, mainly affected Muslims, Jews have been implicated from the beginning. The headscarf debates began in 1989 following a controversy about a Jewish boy wearing a kippah to school. For a reconstruction of the events based on diverse French sources, see the following: John R. Bowen, *Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, and Public Space* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2008); Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2009); and Yolande Jansen, *Secularism, Assimilation and the Crisis of Multiculturalism: French Modernist Legacies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2013).

8 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1993); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2003); Saba Mahmood, ‘Religious reason and secular affect: an incommensurable divide?’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2009, 836–62; Schirin Amir-Moazami, ‘Investigating the secular body: the case of the male circumcision debate in Germany’, *ReOrient*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2016, 147–70; Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil, ‘Islam and secular modernity under western eyes: a genealogy of a constitutive relationship’, Working Paper, EUI

piety of those who exercise their religious practices as part of a religious obligation. This was meant to counter the Protestant-Kantian-secular tendency to ascribe ‘religion’ only to the inner meaning persons give to their practices, and not to the practices themselves, which were interpreted as mere ‘vehicles’ of religious meaning. These authors, set against the dominant tendency, argue that Jews and Muslims tend to be perceived as interconnected minorities whose visible religious practices simply do not fit in European secular spaces, and whose pious practices therefore have historically been conflated with fanaticism and backwardness, as they still are today.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, these authors and the critiques they have formulated remain within the discursive framework of religio-secularism. After all, misunderstandings of Muslim ‘piety’, and formations of ‘the secular’, ‘secular affect’ and ‘secular modernity’ in relation to Islamic discursive traditions, are terms central to their criticisms. For example, Mahmood explained the reasons for the pain caused to Muslims by the Danish cartoons as difficult to understand from within a secularist semiotic ideology that misunderstands Muslim pious experience and practice.<sup>10</sup> Critiques along these lines thus remain relatively close to Talal Asad’s initial analyses of the Rushdie and headscarf affairs, which he understood in the context of the genealogies of religion.<sup>11</sup>

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RSCAS, May 2008, Mediterranean Programme Series, available on the *Cadmus EUI Research Repository* at <http://hdl.handle.net/1814/8102> (viewed 13 March 2020).

- 9 Critiques of the Kantian-Protestant framework have been available in Jewish intellectual culture from the late eighteenth century onwards, beginning with Moses Mendelssohn’s reaction to Kant and then throughout the nineteenth century; regretfully, these criticisms are mostly read in the context of Jewish studies and history of the humanities only, while they form an integral and important part of the European philosophical tradition. For an extensive discussion of how categorization under the rubric of ‘religion’ caused problems for European Jews in the nineteenth century, see, among others, Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2011); Yaacov Yadgar, *Sovereign Jews: Israel, Zionism, and Judaism* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2017); and Jansen, *Secularism, Assimilation and the Crisis of Multiculturalism*. See also the introduction to this special issue of *Patterns of Prejudice*, Yolande Jansen and Nasar Meer, ‘Genealogies of “Jews” and “Muslims”’: social imaginaries in the religion–race nexus’, as well as the two forthcoming dissertations by Anna Blijdenstein and Matthea Westerduin.
- 10 Mahmood, ‘Religious reason and secular affect’. I certainly do not want to dismiss Mahmood’s reading, not least because of my own teaching experiences: I have been teaching about the Danish cartoon affairs for five years to students of theology and religious studies at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and among them are always students of Islamic theology. These students almost invariably endorse the article by Saba Mahmood and feel she was one of the first to explain what really constituted the pain caused to them by the cartoons.
- 11 See Talal Asad, ‘Trying to understand French secularism’, in Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press 2006), 494–526; and Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*.

Focusing on the secularist misunderstandings (and derision) of religious obligation and practice has the function of correcting prejudice and confusion. Moreover, doing so exposes a paradox inherent in secularist expectations in a liberal-secular society, in which the idea prevails that, once religion is privatized, it will effectively be depoliticized in so far as it is enclosed within conscience. The critical view has enabled us to understand that this idea leads to severe misunderstandings of publicly visible religious practices, in that they will almost automatically be understood as 'political'. In addition, it can help us to understand that severing meaning from practice inserts religious meaning into a semantic field in which 'signs' can also become private in the sense of secret, difficult to read and possibly part of a danger that requires the assiduous attention of the state. So, rather than separating the state from religion, the privatization of religion can actually produce its securitization. This feeds anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia today as it once fed the early modern forms of racialization in fifteenth-century Spain.<sup>12</sup>

From the above, we see that a lot of critical work can be done from within religio-secularism. However, relying on the framework of religio-secularism also incurs serious risks. I have argued elsewhere that working within the confines of religion and secularity in the European context fails to take account of the intricacy of the genealogies of race, migration, colonial imaginaries and religion. Moreover, it obscures the socio-economic dimensions of these controversies (thus ideally fitting a neoliberal framework). It also ignores the reality of sustained anti-multiculturalism in Europe and the United States since the 1980s, tending instead to reinforce political struggle along religious and secular lines and patriarchal alignments within minorities.<sup>13</sup> Instead of remaining focused on Jews and Muslims as religious minorities in a secular (or Christo-secular) context, it would make sense to ask what it means that broader socio-political and cultural perspectives and approaches remain relatively missing in many analyses of social conflicts related to religious practice. Remaining within religio-secularism as a framework for discussion is a contemporary analogue for what was seen, in the nineteenth century, as the 'Jewish question', which parallels how people today sometimes speak of the 'Muslim question', especially in relation to 'secular modernity'. An alternative perspective would address what Gil Anidjar, Anya Topolski and Nicholas De

12 For the early modern Spanish context, see also Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within: The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2009). This is a very brief explanation that cannot consider today's securitization of Islam in the context of the emergence of terror activism in the name of Islam, which has further complicated the field of religious meaning. See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Jansen, *Secularism, Assimilation and the Crisis of Multiculturalism*, 225–53; and Martijn de Koning in this issue.

13 See Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2015); and Nasar Meer (ed.), *Racialization and Religion: Race, Culture and Difference in the Study of Antisemitism and Islamophobia* (London and New York: Routledge 2014).



Genova have called the 'European question'.<sup>14</sup> I interpret this expression as a plea 'to turn the focus around', a perspective that calls for an analysis of the positions and practices of ethno-religiously minoritized groups, not by fixating on them but by focusing on the underlying complex of imperial and civilizational legacies, assimilationist ideologies and some happier pluralist legacies, all of which operate in a global context in which resurgent patriarchy, alt-orientated social media, capitalism and populism go hand in hand.<sup>15</sup>

This article adds one particular step to this turn. It specifically addresses the 'European question' by looking at the dimension of intercultural meaning-making in relation to the religious practices of Jews and Muslims in Europe. I elaborate on the suggestion that specific religious practices, such as the wearing of the niqab or burkini, can be read as communicative signs that are shared and contested by all involved, and whose multilayered meaning is the product of semiotic interaction. I am aware that analysing the worldly and intercultural, communicative dimensions of religious practice seems to feed into the views of those who interpret religious practice from a secular point of view, and also of those for whom Islam represents a political (and, hence, dangerous) religion or ideology. This is precisely what happened in the French discourse about headscarves. Recall how the Stasi committee's advice on the prohibition of headscarves in 2003 referred to them as (implicitly political) 'religious signs'. The committee was criticized for this by Talal Asad, who explained how wearing a hijab is a religious practice related to traditions of piety, not a communicative 'sign' or a part of an 'identity', let alone a political identity.<sup>16</sup> However, I would like to argue that we can also approach the communicative dimensions of religious practice in a critical manner, and even that it is important to do so. In what follows, I will show how the concept of 'mirroring relations' can help to make sense of these specific semiotic processes.

14 Gil Anidjar, 'On the European question', *Forum Bosnae*, vol. 55, 2012, 13–27; Nathan Emmanuel and Anya Topolski (eds), *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter 2016); Nicholas De Genova, 'The European question: migration, race, and postcoloniality in Europe', *Social Text*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2016, 75–102.

15 As an aside I cannot develop here, I have some doubts as to whether the emerging tendency to focus more on 'race' as a central category in the European context will not also turn the perspective, once again, towards minorities. While having more critical potential than the religio-secular orientation, such an approach might still remain rather one-sided in comparison to the complex of factors that an approach in terms of a 'European question' would need to take into account. In my view, we simply should not reduce the whole complex of problems to one 'central' category but rather outline all the factors and their interrelations.

16 See Asad, 'Trying to understand French secularism'. At a conference on *laïcité* I attended in Paris in 2005, the American sociologist Adam Seligman took a similar view when critiquing the secularist understanding of religious practices in terms of identity politics.

The sociological and semiotic complexity of what are seemingly only religious practices, and the identification of Jews as *religious and/or racial Others* even when such practices are only imagined (or collectively remembered), has been grasped well in renderings and analyses of the position of Jews in European societies from before the Second World War. Although Jewishness had a symbolic dimension that had little to do with the actual lives and practices of Jews, it nonetheless influenced the perception of them in many ways. Hannah Arendt once put it like this when talking about antisemitism:

Whether the Jews are a religion or a nation, a people or a race, a state or a tribe, depends on the special opinion non-Jews—in whose midst Jews live—have about themselves, but it certainly has no connection whatever with any germinal knowledge about the Jews. As the people of Europe became nations, the Jews became ‘a nation within the nation’; as the Germans began to see in the state something more than their political representation, that is, as their fundamental ‘essence,’ the Jews became a state within a state ... and since the end of the last century, when the Germans transformed themselves into Aryans, we have been wandering through world history as Semites ...<sup>17</sup>

An essential part of antisemitism, Islamophobia and racism is formed by intercultural semiosis, whereby members of majorities (of the ‘nation’) perceive, imagine and conceive their Others as their biased reflections in a mirror. Intellectual historian Yirmiyahu Yovel, in close connection to Arendt, also notes that there is a dynamic relation between the majorities in the diverse European countries and the qualities of the Other in the case of the European Jews before the Second World War, but he qualifies the mirroring function noted by Arendt:

Jews ... provided Europeans with a mirror, a crooked, passion-laden mirror, in which to see a reflection of their own identity problems. The ‘Jewish problem’ was basically a European problem: that is, not only a problem for Europe but a reflection of Europe’s own problem with itself, of how, in an age of rapid transformation, Europeans were understanding their own identity, future, and meaning of life.<sup>18</sup>

The suggestion is that the meanings of ‘Jews’ and ‘Europe’ were co-constitutive, and that these meanings were dependent on their mutual, affectively loaded relations. This co-constitutiveness implied that perceptions of who ‘Jews’ were were always at least partly also a matter of self-perception—and a distorted one—distorted by passions such as fear and jealousy and, in

17 Hannah Arendt, ‘Antisemitism’, in Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, ed. Jerome Kohn and Ron. H. Feldman (New York: Schocken Books 2007), 49–121 (68–9). See also Jansen and Meer, ‘Genealogies of “Jews” and “Muslims”’.

18 Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, xi.



anticipation of my reading of Proust, distortions poisoned by earlier, intertwined, racialized antisemitic imaginaries and anti-Judaic Christian legacies.

The metaphor of the distorted mirror, implicit in Arendt and explicit in Yovel, has also come up in literature about the Semite as a nineteenth-century European construction that still haunts intercultural interaction. Early work on the notion of the 'Semite' has reconstructed its emergence as mirroring the 'Aryan', originating in the early nineteenth century, and made possible by the development of a theologically oriented philology. In the words of the historian of philology, Maurice Olender, the search for the origins of human language—and later of the European languages that were called 'Aryan', 'Indo-Germanic' or 'Indo-European' in contrast with the Semitic languages—was inflected by a desire to reconstruct the origins of Christianity in ways that would sever Christianity from its Jewish origins. This led influential Orientalists, such as Ernest Renan, to forge an

image of Semitic monotheism [that] is reflected in an Aryan *mirror*: he [Renan] incorporates—and in a sense dissolves—the Semitic race into a history from which the Aryan outlook emerges triumphant. This Aryan outlook, originally polytheistic, later found embodiment in the 'moderate' monotheism of Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

Olender reconstructs the way in which the typical 'automatic' dynamic between Judaism and Christianity inherited from supersessionist theology was being projected into the linguistic and geographical materials encountered in the course of the colonial project, and how these became integrated into a mould of mirroring dynamism that was already more or less 'waiting' for them.<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, when explaining the structural analogies he encountered in the histories of antisemitism and of Orientalism, addressed the mirror function of the Jews and Arabs in his famous invocation of antisemitism as the 'secret sharer' of Orientalism. Said borrows this term from Joseph Conrad's short story 'The Secret Sharer', in which Conrad identifies his 'secret

19 Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. from the French by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 1992), 68–9 (emphasis added). See also Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2008); Céline Trautmann-Waller, 'Semites and Semitism: from philology to the language of myth', *Philological Encounters*, vol. 2, no. 3/4, 2017, 346–67; and Gil Z. Hochberg, "'Remembering Semitism" or "On the prospect of re-membering the Semites"', *ReOrient*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2016, 192–223. For the more strictly philosophical field and how it influenced the humanities, see Miriam Leonard, *Socrates and the Jews: Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2012).

20 For an extensive exploration of the legacies of supersessionism in coloniality, see Matthea Westerduin, 'Supersessionist Geographies: Religion and Race in the (Re)making of "Europe" and "Islam"', PhD dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, forthcoming.

sharer' as a 'second self', 'my other self', a 'double', what Said calls a 'mirror'.<sup>21</sup> This leads Joseph Massad to argue:

The Oriental and the Semite, the Orientalist and the anti-Semite, Orientalism and anti-Semitism are all second selves to one another, doubles and reflections in a mirror that must always be read and seen in tandem. ... If the designation of people as Semites was precisely a ruse for the designation of their superior other as Aryan, Semitism then begins to look indistinguishable from anti-Semitism. The act of inventing the Semite is the very act of inventing the carrier of that identity as other.<sup>22</sup>

As Yovel says, when talking about the ways in which Europeans projected their own identities on to those of the Jews, we are talking about a distorted, passionate, stylized and negative mirror. Such a perspective complicates recent European debates about contested religious practices. Let me now turn to Proust to further explore these semiotics of intercultural mirroring.

### **Burkinis and Balbec**

As the burkini-bashing took place on the beaches of the Mediterranean during the hot French summer of 2016, I was reminded of a passage from Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. It is a passage in which the narrator reflects on how he perceives his Jewish neighbours as holidaymakers on the beach of his imagined beach resort Balbec:

Now this Jewish colony was more picturesque than pleasing. Balbec was in this respect like such countries as Russia or Romania, where the geography books teach us that the Jewish population does not enjoy the same esteem and has not reached the same stage of *assimilation* as, for instance, in Paris. Always together, with no admixture of any other element, when the cousins and uncles of Bloch or their co-religionists male or female repaired to the Casino, the ladies to dance, the gentlemen branching off towards the baccarat-tables, they formed a solid troop, homogeneous within itself, and utterly dissimilar to the people who watched them go by and found them there again every year without ever exchanging a word or a greeting, whether these were the Cambremer set, or the senior judge's little group, professional or 'business' people, or even simple corn-chandlers from Paris, whose daughters, handsome, proud, mocking and French as the statues at Rheims, would not care to mix with that horde of ill-bred sluts who carried their zeal for 'seaside fashions' so far

21 See Joseph Conrad, 'The secret sharer', in Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus' and Other Stories* (London and New York: Penguin Classics 2007), 171–214; and Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (New York and Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press 2008), 127.

22 Joseph A. Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2015), 316, 318.

as to be always apparently on their way home from shrimping or out to dance the tango. As for the men, despite the brilliance of their dinner-jackets and patent-leather shoes, the exaggeration of their type made one think of the so-called 'bright ideas' of those painters who, having to illustrate the Gospels or the *Arabian Nights*, consider the country in which the scenes are laid, and give to St Peter or to Ali-Baba the identical features of the heaviest 'punter' at the Balbec tables.<sup>23</sup>

One could read this passage in terms of 'intercultural mirrorings at the French seaside.' It is constructed as a typical Proustian long metaphor, whereby the imagined characteristics of certain objects or persons are superimposed on other objects that normally form a contrast with them. In *Proust and Signs*, Gilles Deleuze explains how Proust's entire style is thoroughly metaphorical in this way. He explains this by referring to the paintings of one of Proust's characters, Elstir. The latter gives the sea the qualities of the land, and the land the qualities of the sea in one of his paintings. Thus he invents 'signs of art', metaphors, and this style gives a specific unity to the otherwise disparate objects of our perception and memory.<sup>24</sup>

In the passage under discussion, analogously, qualities that usually pertain to one object are assigned to another object or to a set of perceptions. The narrator endows the group of assimilated Jews with the qualities of the equally modern guests of Christian background around them, while thoroughly intermingling those qualities with all kinds of mental associations with Jews and Judaism from the cultural archive so as to document how the alleged differences between the groups are part of his imagination. Proust undoes the differences listed by the narrator through his metaphoric style, by mixing together what cannot be usually mixed: modern and excluded Jews are intermingled with religious 'signs' of various kinds—associations with unasimilated *Ostjuden*, the Gospels, the *Arabian Nights*, St Petrus and Ali Baba—while also being sketched as modern individuals *par excellence* who are just a little bit racialized, 'the exaggeration of their type'. In sum, the metaphor sketches out for us an oxymoronic group of modern, biblical, Christian, Arabic, rich and poor Jews, all at once.

Deleuze explains the stylistic procedure of metaphorization as a 'spiritualization' of matter but this interpretation is, in my view, overly steeped in a Neoplatonic, Christian imagination.<sup>25</sup> When it's about Jewish-Christian relations in Proust, it's nearly always a matter of deep irony concerning separatist imaginaries and the subtleties of Othering, and not a case of aesthetic unification. Proust is initially evoking, through his narrator, a group of Jews very much like all other guests of the seaside resort but, by adding layer after layer of imaginary associations, he 'paints' them with a

23 Proust, *In Search of Lost Time. II Within a Budding Grove*, 367–9 (emphasis added).

24 Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text* [1964], trans. from the French by Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000), 45–50.

25 *Ibid.*, 50.

kaleidoscope of 'crooked, distorted' markers of Judaism, making explicit that they are being seen as 'utterly dissimilar' not because there are real differences but because of the host of imaginary associations.

The passage also attends to the separation of the Jewish *girls*, wearing modern bathing dress but remaining Jewish forever in comparison with the equally modern daughters of the Catholic majority who are portrayed as essentially French girls, rooted in the Middle Ages but modern at the same time. The passage sketches out a shifting world of admixture and social separation based on imagined differences, and plays with temporality, complete with mirrorings à la Yovel and Said. The interplay between the groups here is a thousand times more layered than either the specific religious or secular values of one group under the power of the other, as suggested in so many liberal theories about 'religion in the public sphere', and in religio-secularism as a framework of analysis more broadly.<sup>26</sup> The passage forms a historical background, perhaps a distorting mirror, to the controversies over the burkini, by reminding us that they took place in a context in which there had been Jewish French citizens who had zealously adopted secular 'seaside fashions' but nonetheless remained Other, and were even constructed as Other *in the process of* their assimilation or secularization.

This takes us in the direction of a discussion about the meaning of antisemitism. In 2003 Brian Klug proposed a revision of our understanding of antisemitism. He distinguishes an old understanding: 'A good, simple working definition of antisemitism, according to a broad consensus of scholars, is this: hostility towards Jews *as Jews*.'<sup>27</sup> However, according to Klug, this is incorrect.

It should be amended to read: hostility towards Jews as 'Jews'. ... It would be more accurate (if cumbersome) to define the word along these lines: a form of hostility towards Jews as Jews, in which Jews are perceived as something other than what they are. Or more succinctly: hostility towards Jews as *not* Jews. For the 'Jew' towards whom the antisemite feels hostile is not a *real* Jew at all. Thinking that Jews are really 'Jews' is precisely the core of antisemitism. Antisemitism is best defined not by an attitude to Jews but by a definition of 'Jew'.<sup>28</sup>

The amendment proposed by Klug highlights the importance of 'prejudice'. Prejudice is why we are talking about 'Jews' and not Jews. However, if we

26 For further elaboration, see Edward Hughes, 'Textual and tribal assimilation: representing Jewishness in *À la recherche du temps perdu*', *Jewish Culture and History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2003, 152–73 (a special issue on *The Image of the Jew in European Liberal Culture, 1789–1914*, ed. Bryan Cheyette and Nadia Valman); and Jansen, *Secularism, Assimilation and the Crisis of Multiculturalism*, 165–93.

27 Brian Klug, 'The collective Jew: Israel and the new antisemitism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2003, 117–38 (122).

28 *Ibid.*, 123–4 (original emphases). See also Meer and Jansen, 'Genealogies of "Jews" and "Muslims"'.

focus on the interactive, mirroring semiotic dimensions of the meaning of 'Jews', we may see that hostility towards Jews as 'Jews' may have no clear boundaries that set it apart from hostility towards Jews as Jews. The intercultural semiotic processes mix perception with cultural memory and its materialization in culture. The collective archive of images connected to 'Jews' is so easily touched on in actual semiotic patterns that making a distinction between Jews and 'Jews', which Klug suggests is possible, may be more complicated than we would want it to be under modern European conditions. The Proust passage quoted can give us pause as we consider and deepen our understanding of what is involved in expectations of assimilation, secularization or integration for that matter, and what the unintended discursive effects of these expectations may be. Neither imagined or collectively remembered cultural differences, nor real social differences, have faded. The narrator projects biblical origins on to the modern Jews in Balbec, thus participating in the discourse of the 'Semite'. Although the narrator perceives no cultural practices that distinguish the Jews from the others in any religious or traditional sense, the metaphors he produces 'fill in' this absence with, first, an association with religious origins and, second, book knowledge about Eastern European ghettoized Jews. A reified image of the Balbec Jews as copies of the two stereotypical originals is inescapably linked to their modern appearance. The passage suggests that a reified, mythical image of Judaism/Semitism tends to take the place of the cultural difference that the assimilants have been told to make invisible. The fact that the Jews of Balbec do not distinguish themselves from the other guests in any particular sense, apart from being excluded by them, does not help them overcome their isolation, since the absence of any visible culturally distinctive practices only leads observers to fill in their awareness of their Jewish (intersected with class) backgrounds with reified, mythical images of religious difference.

Although the associations are only imagined and remain implicit—having been concealed by a modern narrative of equal citizenship and assimilation—they nonetheless form part of an inescapable public culture that transmits mythical images of religious and cultural difference. The construction of the Semite is elaborated in the Proustian metaphor. It confirms Said's more general analysis:

In no people more than in the Oriental Semites was it possible to see the present and the origin together. The Jews and the Muslims, as subjects of Orientalist study, were readily understandable in view of their primitive origins: this was (and to a certain extent still is) the cornerstone of modern Orientalism. Renan had called the Semites an instance of arrested development and functionally speaking this came to mean that for the Orientalist, no modern Semite, however much he may have believed himself to be modern, could ever outdistance the organizing claims on him of his origins.<sup>29</sup>

29 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books 1979), 234.

Thus, even if 'assimilation' as a nineteenth-century expectation had taken place to the extent that the Jews had 'secularized away' all the practical, differentiating and collective parts pertaining to their Judaism (and had thus fully assimilated to the Protestant understanding of 'religion' as a private, even inner, belief), the 'distorted mirror' of difference would have caused majorities to fill in their perception of the Jews with Orientalist cultural images; the absence of objectively distinguishing practices could even have stimulated that process.<sup>30</sup>

We have seen that the meaning of 'being Jewish' was heavily affected by the assimilationist-secularist expectations towards the Jews. There was an intricate link between these expectations and, while being Jewish was considered fully legitimate on the one hand, on the other, it was always screened as something that was not legitimate, something to do with differences that were not to be bridged. Historian Elizabeth Bellamy therefore argued that the disavowal of difference at a conscious level was premised on the fetishization of difference at an unconscious level.<sup>31</sup> Referring to the production of difference that resulted from assimilationist expectations in the late French nineteenth century in his analysis of the controversial nature of the hijab in the late twentieth century, French studies scholar Max Silverman puts it like this:

The splitting and Manichaeic boundary-drawing at the heart of this Enlightenment model—dependent on the by-now familiar binary oppositions between universalism and particularism, assimilation and difference, citizen and subject, civilisation and barbarity, secularism and faith, public and private, individual and collectivity, and so on—ensures that any ambivalence remains firmly repressed and displaced.<sup>32</sup>

Silverman suggests that assimilationism has in a sense only stimulated the process of mirroring that Yovel was talking about: the more the Jews adapted and modernized under pressure from the Enlightenment model, the more a Manichaeism of oppositions led to the perception of seemingly unbridgeable differences. The only logic that seems capable of opposing this kind of dynamic would be one in which there was no implicit hierarchy between the groups; where it was not the case that some (the 'minorities') had endlessly to integrate or assimilate, while others (the 'majorities') had merely to be the witnesses and judges of the other's assimilation, integration or secularization processes.

30 For further information in terms of 'the paradoxes of assimilation', see Yolande Jansen, 'French secularism in the light of the history of the politics of assimilation', *Constellations*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2009, 593–603; and Jansen, *Secularism, Assimilation and the Crisis of Multiculturalism*.

31 Elizabeth J. Bellamy, *Affective Genealogies: Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism, and the 'Jewish Question' after Auschwitz* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 1997).

32 Max Silverman, 'The French Republic unveiled', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2007, 628–42, 631.



## Re-membering the Semite

Contemporary authors interested in the situation of Jews and Muslims in Europe today face the memory of the deeply problematic structure of assimilationism/integrationism, of which the many denotations and uses of 'secularism' and the policies exercised in its name form but one part. One is confronted with the memory of a Jewish assimilation that went wrong, not for reasons of insufficient assimilation but because of a created difference that was implied (and reinforced) by assimilationist expectations themselves. One of the options for reacting to this memory is the ironic hyper-visibility of difference, to counter the process in which difference slowly becomes part of an implicit, and repressed, cultural background.

This is the context in which I would like to situate Gil Hochberg's plea to 're-member the Semite'. Hochberg gives 're-remembering' a specific interpretation for today's political context, in which the 'third party' of Christian/secular Europe has an under-estimated role in creating Jewish-Arab/Muslim enmity, both in Israel and in Europe:

... I suggest that what is needed is a *play-ful* rejuvenation of a particular discursive history, a European discursive history to be sure, and one that has long been responsible for positioning both Jews and Muslims alike as 'Other' and 'lesser' to Western-European-Christian civilization. One way to approach this is to re-invest in 'Semitism' as an alternative memory, or rather a 're-memory' to borrow Toni Morrison's term (*Beloved* 1987): a re-memory with which to punctuate the present, itself subjected to the myth of 'a clash of civilizations'. In other words, I suggest we revisit the legacy of Semitism as an act of 're-memory', an act of 're-membering' Jews and Muslims as sharing positions of marked alterity within past and present centers of power: Western, European, and unquestionably Christian.<sup>33</sup>

The video artwork *Projet Deburkanisation* explores what re-remembering the Semite might mean in today's European context, and it does so in a provocative manner. The project has not been accepted as part of the mainstream cultural archive and is a deeply contested contemporary text. It was written in 2017 by the Belgian lawyer and writer Rachida Lamrabet during the parliamentary debates in Belgium about the prohibition of face-coverings in public. The work was one of a number of art works commissioned for a larger project called 'The Plurality of Privacy in Five-Minute Plays', and was performed at the Royal Flemish Theatre in Brussels. Following its appearance on *YouTube*, and an interview on the play and the 'burqa law' in a Belgian magazine, Lamrabet was fired from her job at the human rights agency UNIA at the instigation of the right-wing populist party Nieuw-Vlaamse

33 Hochberg, "Remembering Semitism" or "On the prospect of re-membering the Semites", 199–200.

Alliantie (New Flemish Alliance). This stirred a heated debate on social media and beyond as to whether she had been fired because of her opinions, or as a sign of the way in which Belgian cultural elites have become more and more dogmatically ‘white’, racist and/or ‘secularist’. The widely known and respected Belgian anthropologist Nadia Fadil remarked that much had been said about the radicalization of Muslim youth as a cause of terror in Belgium but that ‘less attention has been accorded to the way in which European states have systematically (yes, systematically), and continue to systematically wipe out any critical voice from “The establishment”’.<sup>34</sup>

*Projet Deburkanisation* opens with the voice of a woman (speaking Flemish-Dutch), addressing a ‘you’, in the name of God. Her words combine prayer and an accusation of the ‘you’. At the start of the film/play, we see a migrant neighbourhood. The camera focuses on a television satellite dish as the voice begins to praise the Almighty, who sees everyone, including those who—the woman says—want to see everything of her. The Almighty is praised and invoked as the all-sovereign consoler who will take revenge for her: ‘You will not go unpunished.’ When the movie turns inward, we see a woman in a rather dark room wearing a niqab and typing on a computer about her anger at the law prohibiting the niqab. She keeps addressing a ‘you’ who remains unnamed, but obviously refers to those who have written and/or supported the law. She is invoking theological reasons for wanting to wear a niqab, and expresses a deep mistrust of the majority supporting the law, and from which she seems to want to separate herself by wearing her niqab. This is a different way of mirroring, one in which she takes up the stereotypical image of the ‘Semite’, the perfect (black) negative mirror of the white, secular, state-loving, historically ‘Indo-European’, ‘Aryan’, Christo-secular majority. At a certain point she writes: ‘You want to see everything, scrutinise everything, my body must be transparent.’ And continues:

There were many women who were pleased about your law ... because finally I became their mirror image ... A woman made in the image of your expectations, your wishes, your demands. Oh, how you hate it that my body is a dark continent ... I know how you dream about drawing borders on my body with a black marker ... and about marking the places that can be exploited in red. In your dreams you have shaded my most vulnerable zones in green. [ . . . ] Liberté, égalité, sécurité. Liberty, equality, security.<sup>35</sup>

34 Available on *Facebook* at [www.facebook.com/nfadil/posts/10154292952131078](https://www.facebook.com/nfadil/posts/10154292952131078) (viewed 21 October 2018). Fadil went on to say: ‘The fact that a critical voice like that of Rachida has been discharged from her function at the very same federal institute that is supposed to protect people from racist attacks is not only a sad irony, it also says something about how many of these very same “liberal institutions” today partake in the sustainance [sic] of racist violence.’

35 Lamrabet, *Projet Deburkanisation*, video with English subtitles available on *YouTube* at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5skX\\_BOrml&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5skX_BOrml&feature=youtu.be) (viewed 13 January 2020).

A woman taking on the one kind of dress that could be seen to 're-member the Semite' protests all the historical associations with the Semite—the Oriental—and does indeed mirror the uncertainties of Europeans in the age of security and insecurity. Instead of assimilationism, she chooses its inverse, hyper-visibility of the Oriental in the European context: the niqab-wearer's text is full of references to imperialism and the 'dark continent' of Joseph Conrad. The woman talks about drawing borders with a black marker, as in the scramble for Africa; she talks of exploitation and rape, and then invokes the universalist slogan, supplanting solidarity (*fraternité*) with security. The most theological, faith-oriented moment of her text—where she expresses her belief in the Almighty's power to avenge and her hatred of the modern sovereign state as his mirror—is accompanied by the image of the satellite dish: the theological comes from a foreign place. We could read this as a sign of secularity, but also as a comment on the text's contemporary nature, recalling the mirroring that Arendt and Yovel were talking about with regard to the Jews before the Second World War, and Said with regard to the Semite. I read Lamrabet's piece as a dense reflection on the semiotic relations between the three groups: white, Christian/secular Europeans, historically associated with 'Aryans' and with coloniality; Muslims, historically associated with Semites from outside Europe (often in a colonial and/or Oriental context), who are now inside Europe; and Jews, historically associated with Europe's internal Semites, whose fate is implicitly re-membered in the piece by the rejection of the assimilationist option.

Lamrabet thus takes up the history of the trouble with integration/secularization/assimilation and shows that the 'Semites', and particularly the women associated with them, are deprived of options for themselves. Stuck between the white majoritarian state and a quite unforgiving (usually male) God, and their mirroring each other, women associated with the 'Semite' can be driven to create an option for themselves through a theological performance that justifies itself historically.

By way of conclusion, I would like to connect the stylistic choice of hyper-visibility made by Lamrabet with Gil Hochberg's understanding of what 're-remembering the Semite' could mean in the contemporary European context. Today, the concept of 'Judaeo-Christianity' is being used to drive a wedge between Jews and Muslims, even as they need each other's support while shifting the focus towards the 'European question'. Hochberg argues:

To re-remember Semitism today is in many ways to fight this ignorant alteration of the past with a memory that brings about the immediate historical, discursive, and affective connections between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia; between the 'Jewish question' of the past and the 'Muslim question' of the present, and between so-called modern racism and the religious discriminations and matrix of exclusions of the past, and to do so, at times, against the will of many Jews and Muslims who, along with their Christian neighbours, would prefer to forget.... To re-remember Semitism, quite on the

contrary, is to bring Jews and Muslims together into a shared political framework in which both figures, Muslim and Jew, gain *more freedom of movement* with the help of irony as they revisit and reclaim the rich discursive landscape that has historically associated them both with the desert, Biblical times, tribes, monotheism, fanaticism, despotism, circumcision, stale languages, restrictive mental capacities, no artistic talents, no capacity to think abstractly, and above all the capacity to contaminate, destroy, and undo 'Europe'.<sup>36</sup>

We have seen that Proust pushes the mythical image of the Semite to the ironic point of its total imbrication and mixture with other Europeans. But, whereas in Proust, the end result is a play with the 'real' invisibility of 'Jewishness', whether in practices, in language or in habits, and the continuous projection of difference (Othering) under the surface, Lamrabet explores a strategy that is its polar opposite, namely addressing the same intercultural difficulties in an iconology that hyper-visibility difference, that re-memembers the Semite. We can read this as an artistic reflection on how our age seems to be burying the many possibilities that there have been for multiculturalism, irony and genuine pluralism, to harvest political polarization, moral pain and identitarian struggles, also in the name of deeply patriarchal ideologies and white ethno-particularism.

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36 Hochberg, "Remembering Semitism" or "On the prospect of re-memembering the Semites", 210, 212–13 (original emphasis).