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Ex-musulman and musulman laïque in contemporary French literature and film

Although several public apostates from Islam are well known in France, most are not French. More attention is granted to French *musulmans laïques*—practising Muslims who underline their support for a contemporary model of *laïcité* holding that religious practices should be restricted to the private sphere. Olivier Arnaubec's novel *2023. Le mur* (2015), Xavier Durringer's film *Ne m'abandonne pas* (2016), and Zahwa Djennad's novel *Tabou. Confession d'un jeune de banlieue* (2013) reflect this, each deploying *musulman laïque* protagonists to communicate divergent visions of French Islam, while mentioning the figure of the apostate at most in passing. This may be because the figure of the secular Muslim can easily be appropriated to support the creator of each work's differing vision of the place of Islam in French society. *Musulman laïque* protagonists help further Arnaubec's racist rejection of populations racialized as 'Muslim;' the more insidious form of Islamophobia associated with the political mainstream seen in Durringer's film; and Djennad's portrayal of Islamic practice as already wholly French without needing further 'assimilation.' This article argues that the figure of the ex-Muslim is harder to appropriate to any of these ends: a difficulty which helps to explain the discrepancy in public prominence between the *musulman laïque* and the apostate in contemporary France.

Bien que plusieurs personnes qui ont renié publiquement l'islam sont bien connues en France, la plupart ne sont pas françaises. Plus d'attention est accordée aux musulmans laïques français: des musulmans pratiquants qui insistent sur leur soutien pour un modèle contemporain de laïcité qui veut restreindre les pratiques religieuses strictement à la sphère privée. Le roman *2023. Le mur* d'Olivier Arnaubec (2015), le film *Ne m'abandonne pas* de Xavier Durringer (2016), et le roman *Tabou. Confession d'un jeune de banlieue* de Zahwa Djennad (2013) reproduisent cette divergence: chaque auteur représente un ou plusieurs musulmans laïques afin de communiquer des visions divergentes de l'islam français, mais ne fait référence au figure de l'apostat tout au plus en passant. Ceci s'explique peut-être par le fait que la figure du musulman laïque se prête facilement à soutenir les visions divergentes que le créateur de chaque œuvre souhaite communiquer sur la place de l'islam dans la société française. À travers la figure du musulman laïque, on peut propager le rejet raciste des populations racisées comme «musulmanes» d'Arnaubec; la forme d'islamophobie plus insidieuse qui ressort du film de Durringer, et qui s'associe surtout à la politique traditionnelle; et le portrait que fait Djennad d'un islam qui est déjà tout à fait français sans avoir besoin de plus d'«assimilation.» Cet article soutient que la figure de l'apostat ne s'approprie facilement à aucune de ces fins: une difficulté qui aide à expliquer la divergence entre la visibilité publique de l'apostat et celle du musulman laïque en France contemporaine.

Introduction

It is striking that, while several public ex-Muslims have received significant media attention in France, almost none of the most prominent are French. Criticisms of Islam, and of practices associated with the religion, made by former Muslims like the novelists and essayists Boualem Sansal, Kamel Daoud, and Chahdortt Djavann have received considerable media coverage (See for example Devecchio 2019a; Mahler). Significantly, though, they are respectively two Algerians and an Iranian. Waleed al-Husseini, founder of the Conseil des ex-musulmans de France and trenchant critic of what he considers the growing influence of Islamism in French society, is a Palestinian who arrived in France as an adult (Al-Husseini). Few *French* ex-Muslims have a similar public profile: even the most prominent exception, journalist, polemicist, and vocal critic of Islam Zineb El Rhazoui, was born and raised in Morocco, and has French citizenship through her mother.ⁱ

This article interrogates the near-absence of French ex-Muslims from public discourse by exploring two recent novels and a film which communicate differing visions of the place of Islam and Muslims in contemporary France. Olivier Arnaubec's satirical novel *2023. Le mur* (2015) rejects both the religion and its adherents as un-French, representing France being partitioned into separate Islamist and secular nations after a Muslim attempt to 'Islamize' the Hexagon sparks civil war. Arnaubec ostensibly frames his anti-Muslim invective in the language of 'culture' rather than race, but makes little real effort to hide the racist ideology underpinning his novel. Xavier Durringer's 2016 *téléfilm*, *Ne m'abandonne pas*, which depicts two parents battling to prevent their teenage daughter from absconding to join the so-called Islamic State, expresses a more insidious form of Islamophobia which masquerades as an *anti-racist* republicanism. Zahwa Djennad's novel *Tabou. Confession d'un jeune de banlieue* (2013), meanwhile, portrays public, engaged forms of Islamic practice as at least potentially beneficial to the Republic. Her youthful protagonist, Yaniss, starts the novel unemployed and disenfranchised; embracing Islam persuades him to actively identify as French, become engaged in his local neighbourhood, and even embrace certain republican values. *Tabou* thus depicts a world in which the Republic's own failure to embody the values it claims as its own is more to blame for its perceived conflict with Islam than any putative Islamic anti-republicanism.

While none of these works include an ex-Muslim protagonist, each includes a figure more visible within mainstream French discourses: the so-called *musulman laïque*. This article argues that this is because the *musulman laïque*, as a stock character, is easier to appropriate to further the vision each text communicates of Islam's place in the Republic than the apostate. This is striking given how greatly those visions diverge. It suggests that it is difficult to even *imagine* a place for French apostates within dominant discursive frameworks used to discuss Islam in France, be they associated with traditional forms of racism; a neo-republicanism hostile to visible Muslim presence into the public sphere; or an anti-racism that objects that 'Muslim' and 'French' need not be considered conflictual categories.

The *ex-musulman* and the *musulman laïque*

As Simon Cottee (14-15) notes, public apostasy from any religion is necessarily confrontational, or at least experienced as such by the apostate's former co-religionists. *How* confrontational a public ex-Muslim is can vary, but overtly rejecting a faith implies a repudiation both of its fundamental teachings and often a community with which one previously identified, usually including family and friends. This is not necessarily true of apostasy more broadly. Cottee (5-6) underlines that former Muslims who cease to consider themselves as such are, for differing reasons, often reluctant to do so in public. *Public* apostates, however, make clear their rejection of their former faith; many outspokenly criticize both the religion and its adherents. This is true of every ex-Muslim listed above. Consequently, media outlets looking to publish critiques of Islam and Muslims while denying Islamophobia often cite prominent public apostates. In doing so, they assume that descriptions by such individuals of their own negative experiences of Islam hold universal truth, flattening the diversity of Islamic practice worldwide into a singular, homogeneous 'Muslim culture.' Hence, although Daoud and Sansal are both Algerian, French media valorise their 'expert' comment on either Islam's place in France or the practices of French Muslims (see for example Devecchio 2019a). Even state bodies treated Djavann's tale of the gendered violence she suffered in 1980s Iran as necessarily germane to veiling practices in early noughties France, ignoring the temporal and cultural differences between each context. Following the 2003 publication of her autobiographical text *Bas les voiles!*, Djavann was invited to testify before the Stasi commission as it considered whether 'ostentatious religious

symbols' should be banned from French state schools. Conversely, the commission only consulted two headscarf-wearing French women, on its last day, as an afterthought on historian Jean Baubérot's request (Fernando 44-45, 49, 185-186, 193-194). That writers like Djavann are not French does not invalidate their lived experiences. However, the Stasi commission's apparent treatment of her testimony as more relevant for their purposes than that of contemporary French hijabis at best represents an essentialization of 'Islamic culture.' Such essentialization has been necessary even when using the testimony of ex-Muslims to legitimate Islamophobic outcomes because the ex-Muslims in question are so rarely French.

Public French *musulmans laïques*, however, are more numerous. This label designates individuals who both publicly identify as practising Muslims and openly support what Baubérot labels 'la nouvelle laïcité:' a model of *laïcité* that sees public religious practices, and especially those associated with Islam, as inherently problematic. Baubérot holds that this new *laïcité* has in recent decades usurped a previously dominant model expressed in the 1905 law separating church and state. Then, he argues, *laïcité* was understood as *protecting* religious pluralism in France's public spaces by limiting the influence of a powerful Catholic church; however, since the 'affaire du foulard' of 1989, and particularly since the turn of the millennium, politicians from across the ideological spectrum have directed a more exclusive model against France's already marginalized Muslim population (Baubérot 2014). Baubérot's argument can be expanded by noting that even the comparatively open vision of *laïcité* enshrined in the law of 1905 made provisions for the practice of Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism, but not Islam. This was despite a small Muslim population already being present in the Hexagon, with Muslim majorities in several colonies including Algeria, then considered a French *département*. Excluding Islam from the legislation was no mere oversight, but enabled colonial administrators, who feared that the faith could become a vector of anticolonial resistance, to maintain state control over its institutions. The Algerian colonial regime, for example, continued subsidizing Islamic education in the hope of forming a compliant clergy, despite the law formally banning the French state from funding religious institutions (Bozzo 79-81; Mas 605-606). If the currently predominant model of *laïcité* excludes Islam and Muslims from public life, the seeds of that exclusion were sown in its early, apparently more inclusionary interpretations.

Exclusionary *laïcité* forms part of a republican model holding that the Republic can only maintain social cohesion by treating each citizen as an abstract individual, divorced from all other ethno-cultural or religious loyalties. Republicans consider this an anti-racist

perspective: the Republic refuses to recognize racial difference, so cannot possibly be racist. It becomes exclusionary, however, when they uncritically assume that the Republic has already achieved this colour-blind ideal. Those who make this assumption blame French citizens who publicly identify along communal lines (including to oppose racism) for bringing difference back into the universal Republic, rejecting the social contract preventing the nation from fragmenting into mutually conflictual minorities (Samuels 4-5). Activists who argue that the Republic itself is implicated in structural racism can thus be denounced as anti-republican, if not actively racist, seeking to reimpose the category of ‘race’ in a society that asks citizens to emancipate themselves from essentialized racial categories. In recent years, Muslims have been particularly vulnerable to such accusations. Contrasting ‘particular’ minority self-understandings with a putatively ‘universalist’ republicanism in this way grants abstract, universal status to the dominant-hegemonic groups that have, over a period of centuries, defined what it means to be ‘French:’ white, heterosexual, cisgender men of Christian heritage. Emile Chabal (69-72) argues that, from the 1980s on, this ‘neo-republicanism’ achieved hegemonic status in French political discourses ~~from the 1980s;~~ little-Little remains of the discursive space that Maurice Samuels (9-10) holds once existed to elaborate more ‘pluralist’ understandings of French universalism.

Musulmans laïques often adopt neo-republican language, harshly criticizing co-religionists whose practices they consider insufficiently republican. Unlike public ex-Muslims, however, they rarely label Islam itself inherently problematic, instead claiming that it can become compatible with the Republic if certain reforms are implemented. Another difference between the *musulman laïque* and the apostate is that, where some ex-Muslims choose to keep their apostasy private, the *musulman laïque* is always defined by their public status. Being a *musulman laïque* has less to do with complying with legal requirements associated with *laïcité*, which most Muslims do regardless of whether they agree with them, than *overtly declaring* one’s support for *laïcité* in its current form.

In principle, supporting *laïcité* as a Muslim need not entail stigmatizing one’s co-religionists as un-French. The meaning of *laïcité* has always been contested: Baubérot (2000, 28; 2014, 16, 40-43) argues that multiple forms have historically existed, some of which were comparatively open to religious practices in the public sphere. Nonetheless, those who have publicly identified as *musulmans laïques* have typically promoted the currently predominant version. This has partly been because the figure of the *musulman laïque* emerged in conjunction with the state project, elaborated in differing forms by successive governments,

of creating a suitably republican ‘Islam de France:’ a project that simultaneously postures as inclusionary by claiming that Islam *can* be French, and excludes the majority of Muslims by implying that the way they practice their faith currently *is* not (Mas 594-596; see also Fernando 121-126). Those who have identified as *musulmans laïques* have done so, at least in part, to position themselves as exemplars for this Republic-friendly brand of Islam, which has meant accepting that reforms are required for an ‘Islam de France’ to be possible. Consequently, they have denounced as Islamists those Muslims unwilling or unable to restrict their practice entirely to the private sphere: a restriction that Talal Asad (45-46, 58-59, 66-67, 72-73) has shown defines ‘religion’ as constituted primarily through interior belief rather than exterior practice. This definition, Asad demonstrates, is rooted in the specifically Christian history of post-Reformation Europe, and thus maps at best imperfectly onto the way in which many Muslims understand and practice Islam.

One prominent *musulman laïque* is Avignon city councillor Amine El-Khatmi: a founding member and president of the Printemps Républicain movement, self-styled defenders of *laïcité*. He claims to ‘défendre les principes républicains’ against the ‘vision politique de l’islam’ that he claims undergirds Muslim identity politics (Devecchio 2019b). In practice, though, he seeks not merely to *defend* neo-republican principles like the *nouvelle laïcité* but to extend their reach. In 2016, he expressed outrage upon learning that a Muslim councillor in the town of Argenteuil wore a hijab while performing her duties. Although no law has ever prevented France’s elected officials from wearing religious symbols, El-Khatmi denounced this as undermining *laïcité*, arguing that a new law to this effect should be passed (Condomines).

Fadela Amara, former president of the organization ‘Ni Putes Ni Soumises,’ is another recent *musulmane laïque*. Amara problematically confounds *laïcité* with feminism when denouncing what she claims are purely religiously determined gendered inequalities in neighbourhoods with large Muslim populations. In particular, she characterizes veiling practices as imposed upon young Muslim women by their fathers and brothers. *Laïcité*, she argues, protects them from such patriarchal pressures; she consequently strongly supported the 2004 ban on headscarves in public schools (Fernando 185-186, 193-197, 210-211). There is no reason to doubt that Amara’s arguments reflect her own lived experiences. Nonetheless, those who claim that veiling practices are always and unequivocally imposed by men ignore the diversity of differing explanations given by French Muslim women for why they wear veils or headscarves (see for example Amghar; Bibimoune; Chouder, Latrèche, and

Tevanian; Gaspard and Khosrokhavar; Killian; Zerouala). Even where misogyny does exist in Muslim communities, Christine Delphy (97-98) argues that treating it as purely culturally determined, rather than one expression of a problem transcending ethno-religious divides, protects gendered inequalities elsewhere in French society.

Musulmans laïques like Amara or El-Khatmi typically express themselves individually, although some have sought since the turn of the millennium to create representative organizations (see Mas 595-596; Ramdane Ferradj). Neo-republican commentators often appropriate their criticisms of their co-religionists to stigmatize most Muslims while denying accusations of Islamophobia. El-Khatmi's approval, for example, allows fellow Printemps républicain members to continue posturing as left-wing republicans even as their fixation on a putative Islamic threat to the Republic leaves them increasingly indistinguishable from the far right (see Lancelin). Such tactics are often associated with what Aurélien Mondon and Aaron Winter (63) label 'liberal' articulations of Islamophobia: discourses that justify their rejection of (most) Muslims by citing a supposedly culturally distinctive Islamic opposition to values like feminism or LGBTQI+ rights, which liberal Islamophobes uncritically accept that France, Europe, or the West otherwise embody. Those who make such claims mostly claim to find Islamic doctrine problematic, rather than rejecting Muslims themselves. Typically, however, they treat Muslims as guilty of adhering to a homogenized, illiberal 'Islamic culture' until they prove themselves innocent by distancing themselves from it. Championing *musulmans laïques* as 'good Muslims' allows liberal Islamophobes to deny accusations of Islamophobia while mobilizing this 'racialized understanding of culture' to reject the majority as 'bad Muslims' (Mondon and Winter 63, 66-68).

Ruth Mas (609) argues that the emergence of *musulmans laïques* since around the turn of the millennium recalls the historical assimilation of French Jews, who, to be accepted as French, had to '[disidentify] with [their] most victimized... and politically radical brethren.' The violence with which *musulmans laïques* reject their co-religionists is thus a product of 'the hegemonic, colonial, and assimilative consolidation of liberal secular values.' (Mas 2006, 609). Rather than questioning the motivations or character of individual *musulmans laïques*, then, this article explores why the figure of the (French) *musulman laïque* is more prominent in French political discourses than that of the (French) apostate. Its focus is thus primarily on how other people appropriate both figures rather than how they describe their own lived experiences. This lack of engagement with their life stories is not

intended to dismiss their academic interest. Rather, the article argues that the figure of the *musulman laïque* reveals an ambivalence at the heart of the (non-Muslim) French relationship with Islam: although dominant republican discourses claim to recognize only abstract individuals, liberated from ethno-cultural affiliations, in practice, as Mayanthi Fernando (192-193) puts it, the Republic ‘produces and depends on commensurable forms of difference.’ ‘Exceptional citizens’ like the *musulman laïque* embody that difference in a way that apostates cannot.

Illiberal Islamophobia: 2023. *Le mur*

Mondon and Winter (62) contrast the liberal articulation of Islamophobia described above with an ‘illiberal’ counterpart associated primarily with the political right and far right, which often closely resembles biological racism. Illiberal Islamophobes see Muslimness as ‘an immutable characteristic (akin to biology)’ rather than a discursive tradition that has been interpreted in multifarious ways: Islam, in their eyes, is an inherently conquering monolith, which both wholly determines Muslim behaviour and is diametrically opposed to (rarely defined) French values. According to this worldview, France can only be protected from the Muslim threat by limiting its Muslim population as far as possible. The far-right pivot from using the language of biological race to that of ‘culture’ reflects a deliberate strategy.

Accepting from the 1970s that biological racism was no longer electorally viable, think tanks like the Groupement de recherche et d’études pour la civilisation européenne (GRECE) made the shift for purely strategic reasons; the broader far right gradually, although not always consistently, followed suit from the 1980s (Fysh & Wolfreys 109-113). Equally, however, race, religion, and culture have never been cleanly separable. Historically persecuted religious minorities, and particularly Jews and Muslims, have for centuries been perceived by their persecutors as racial groups despite their linguistic, cultural, and indeed phenotypic diversity (Jansen and Meer 3-4; Meer and Modood 18-19; Topolski 75-80, 87-88). Anya Topolski (72-73) invokes a ‘race-religion constellation’ to denote ‘the practice of classifying people into races according to categories we now associate with the term “religion.”’

Numerous factors, extending beyond phenotypes to encompass perceived cultural and religious traits, converge to construct a racialized group: As Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood (22) put it, ‘while racialization has to pick on some features of a people related to physical

appearance and ancestry... it need only be a marker, and not necessarily denote a form of determinism.'

Race, culture, and religion have always been mobilized to construct racialized groups as inferior to the dominant (white) majority in French discourses. Algerian colonial *indigènes* were barred as Muslims, rather than Arabs or Berbers, from becoming naturalized as French citizens; in 1903, however, the Court of Algiers underlined the term's racial underpinnings, ruling that those who renounced Islam could not claim naturalization because:

le terme "musulman" n'a pas un sens purement confessionnel... il désigne au contraire l'ensemble des individus d'origine musulmane qui... ont nécessairement conservé leur statut personnel musulman, sans qu'il y ait lieu de distinguer s'ils appartiennent ou non au culte mahométan (cited in Hajjat and Mohammed 170-171).

That the language of culture has now largely supplanted that of race represents an evolution in racism rather than its disappearance. 'Musulman' has thus become shorthand for the racialized populations previously rejected as 'les noirs,' 'les arabes,' or 'les immigrés,' regardless of whether or not they are in fact practising Muslims (and at times even if they adhere to different faiths altogether). Illiberal Islamophobia differs from its liberal counterpart less because it is racist than because, where some liberal Islamophobes truly do not consider themselves racist, the illiberal switch from racial to cultural language has been a conscious strategy.

It seems paradoxical that a novel reproducing such an outlook would portray a *musulman laïque* protagonist rather than an apostate. The blanket criticisms of Islam often made by public ex-Muslims ostensibly seem more amenable to stigmatizing all Muslims as un-French than the *musulman laïque*'s insistence that a currently anti-republican Islam can become compatible with the Republic. Nonetheless, *musulmans laïques* are more prominent than apostates in 2023.

Arnaubec's novel invites readings in terms of its relationship to illiberal Islamophobia. 2023 adopts the generic conventions of satire to fictionalize the far-right concept of the so-called 'grand remplacement': an idea popularized by far-right polemicist Renaud Camus, who claims that Muslim immigrants and their descendants are plotting to 'Islamize' the Republic and replace the 'native' white French population (Camus). Satire is, as George Test (5-6) underlines, an inherently political genre, imagining what would happen if a trend that the author considers to be at work in their own society continued indefinitely.

The trend depicted in *2023* is a *grand remplacement*, which Arnaubec thus implies is a real-world reality. Furthermore, his novel was published and promoted by Riposte Laïque: a group best known for running one of the most prominent, virulently Islamophobic websites in France's so-called 'fachosphère.' It can thus be less problematically stated that a far-right ideology underpins the novel than, for example, Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission* (2015), its closest mainstream equivalent in terms of content. This does not imply that such readings of *Soumission* are unjustifiable. Following early critical claims that Islam and Muslims were at most secondary targets in Houellebecq's novel, a consensus is emerging that it more unambiguously expresses its author's politics, and personal anti-Muslim sentiments, than his earlier works (see McQueen; Williams). Nonetheless, that such a debate has been necessary indicates that a certain literary ambiguity continues to insulate *Soumission* from straightforwardly 'political' readings. Such ambiguity is largely absent from *2023*.

Any uncertainty over whether Arnaubec's novel should be read as racist is, for example, undermined by his use of explicitly racial language to describe the Muslim forces in his fictional civil war. His narrator variously refers to them as 'Africano-musulmans,' 'africano-arabes,' and even 'le peuple Arabo-africano-musulman' (Arnaubec 72, 77, 260-261). Decades after the civil war, meanwhile, with France partitioned into a secular Republic in the north and Islamist theocracy in the south, legal problems force several northern protagonists to pass through the south while fleeing for Italy. When their presence is discovered, local media warn citizens to remain vigilant for 'quatre Européens' (Arnaubec 293-294). These descriptions highlight the extent to which the label 'musulman' designates a racialized group within Islamophobic discourses. A unified 'peuple Arabo-africano-musulman' apparently exists, their shared Muslimness uniting these presumably phenotypically varied (although never white) populations. Conversely, even by the late 21st century, French Muslims can apparently be physically differentiated from a category of 'Européens' to which they do not belong. Both physical and imagined cultural qualities thus converge to construct 'les musulmans' as a racialized group that contrasts with 'les Européens' (which, presumably, equates to 'les blancs'). While a *religious* civil war is ostensibly at the heart of Arnaubec's novel, his descriptions of the Muslim forces suggest that such a conflict, in the illiberal Islamophobic imagination, would be functionally identical to a race war.

Arnaubec's depiction of France being split in two recalls another key trope in the racialization of French Muslims: the widespread fear that the deprived *banlieues* in which

many are concentrated are secessionist enclaves of Islamism. Representations of the *banlieues* as spaces of cultural alterity, at best on the fringes of the Republic, have penetrated mainstream politics, triggering targeted law and order policy responses from successive governments (see Fernando 198-204; Silverstein 2018, 157-158). However, illiberal Islamophobes are particularly outspoken in stigmatizing these already spatially and economically marginalized districts in racialized terms. Camus (87-89) claims that social disorder in the *banlieues* is not caused by ‘voyous’ but ‘soldats’ of Islam; fellow far-right polemicist Eric Zemmour (23-29) alleges that high *banlieue* crime rates represent part of a long-term strategy to impose Islamic control throughout France, starting in neighbourhoods with high Muslim populations. The *banlieues* are not uniformly Muslim, and nor do all Muslims live in the *banlieues* (Silverstein 2004, 11-12, 96-98, 108). Regardless, the treatment of *banlieue* social problems as culturally rather than socio-economically determined has been mirrored by the racialization of Muslims taking on a distinctively geo-social dimension. By having the populations of the racialized *banlieues* near-unanimously support the Islamist uprising, resulting in territorial secession, Arnaubec takes these anxieties to (indeed beyond) their logical conclusion.

Including French protagonists who had *chosen to cease* being Muslim would have undermined Arnaubec’s association of Muslimness with racial alterity: if one can, theoretically, leave a religious category, the same is not true of race in the racist imagination. This helps explain the almost complete absence of apostates from 2023. Arnaubec’s narrator acknowledges only twice that ex-Muslims exist, and underlines their rarity: the northern secular Republic is populated by current and former Christians and Jews, and ‘de *rare*s ex-musulmans’ (Arnaubec 46-47, my emphasis). Apostasy, meanwhile, is punishable by death in Islamist France. Mistreatment of apostates is thus invoked to demonstrate Islam’s putative savagery, but only in what is now a *foreign* context. As with real-world non-French ex-Muslims like Daoud, Sansal, or Djavann, evoking the suffering of *these* fictional apostates does not undermine the racialization of Muslimness: they have ceased to be Muslim, but their Muslimness need not be invoked to stigmatize them as un-French for the simple reason that they are, literally, not French. Given that it is as (perceived) Muslims that Islamophobes deny the Frenchness of French citizens racialized as Muslim, however, they cannot be granted the same possibility of leaving Islam. This does not imply that there is anything inherently French, or European, in apostasy. Rather, because ‘Muslim’ designates a racialized group rather than ‘just’ a religious one for contemporary Islamophobes, it is not a category that one

can choose to abandon: there is thus no space for the (French) ex-Muslim in the illiberal Islamophobic imagination.

There are, however, *musulmans laïques* in the novel, although again only in Islamist France. One protagonist, Kader, believes that Islam occupies ‘trop de place dans l’organisation de la Nation,’ because religion is ‘une affaire personnelle et n’[a] pas vocation à régir la vie publique’ (Arnaubec 298). The narrator underlines, however, that few of his compatriots share his views. His support for French-style secularism thus serves primarily to discredit his co-religionists. Moreover, he is still a practising Muslim, and has apparently never even considered leaving Islamist France. Even as this ‘good’ Muslim allows the majority of his co-religionists to be stigmatized as ‘bad,’ he ensures by remaining a Muslim among Muslims that the racialization of the category remains unchallenged. Conversely, an apostate would have undermined that racialization by emphasizing that one can choose to cease being Muslim.

Liberal Islamophobia: *Ne m’abandonne pas*

If *2023* hints at why illiberal Islamophobes cannot easily appropriate the figure of the ex-Muslim, *Ne m’abandonne pas* does likewise in relation to liberal Islamophobic discourse. Durringer’s film depicts the teenage Chama planning to leave for Syria to join a jihadi whom she has married online. After discovering her intentions, and the extremist views she had hidden from them, her parents battle to keep her in France. Durringer claims that his film can play a pedagogical role for viewers, underlining that he consulted anthropologist and self-styled ‘déradicalisation’ expert Dounia Bouzar to ensure that his portrayal of female jihadism was accurate. He thus frames his work in terms of its supposed quasi-sociological accuracy rather than any imaginative qualities (Camier; Poitte). Schools and independent associations have accepted his framing, holding screenings of *Ne m’abandonne pas* as part of their public education strategies regarding the dangers of ‘radicalization’ (Camier). Given Durringer’s own championing of his film’s supposed accuracy, and these uses of it as a pedagogical tool, like *2023* it invites readings in terms of its relationship to contemporary political discourses. Significantly, Durringer claims that the film can help ‘déstigmatiser la communauté musulmane,’ demonstrating that French Muslims ‘sont avant tout des Français’ (Camier; Poitte). Far from deliberately reproducing racist stereotypes, then, he considers *Ne*

m'abandonne pas anti-racist. As will be argued below, however, in practice his film uses the figure of the *musulman laïque* to validate liberal Islamophobia.

The liberal articulation of Islamophobia has arguably more successfully driven disciplinary state measures against Muslims than its illiberal counterpart. Laws like the headscarf ban in schools presuppose that Muslims can become 'republican' by restricting supposedly problematic religious practices to within certain parameters, even if republican subjecthood is constantly moving out of reach. Mondon and Winter (63) argue that the liberal and illiberal articulations have worked together to 'mainstream' Islamophobia, as liberal Islamophobes have been able to characterize their own stances as progressive by contrasting themselves with their illiberal counterparts. Such actors cannot easily invoke the figure of the apostate, who is by definition no longer a practising Muslim, to prove that 'good Muslims' can be acceptably republican; the *musulman laïque* is more useful for this purpose.

The kind of 'republican' Muslimness that liberal Islamophobes valorise, however, bears little resemblance to the practices of Muslims like those who are 'committed to practicing Islam as French citizens and to practicing French citizenship as pious Muslims:' a subset whom Fernando (13-14) labels 'Muslim French.' Such individuals actively identify as *both* fully Muslim *and* fully French, and unlike the *musulman laïque* are often unwilling to confine their religious practices entirely to the private sphere. They suggest, implicitly or explicitly, that Islam is not antithetical to the Republic and does not require reform; rather, *laïcité* should return to the historical model embodied in the law of 1905, itself reformed to include Islam. The Republic has failed to live up to its own values by excluding Islam, particularly (although not exclusively) since *la nouvelle laïcité* rose to prominence. The overtly politically engaged Muslim French comprise only a small subset of French Muslims, but highlight the extent to which liberal Islamophobia excludes many Muslims who consider their religious outlook neither confrontational nor anti-republican.

The protagonists through whom Durringer represents acceptably French Muslimness, most notably Chama's divorced parents, Mehdi and Inès, instead comply with *la nouvelle laïcité* in a fashion recalling the *musulman laïque*. Mehdi counters Chama's new-found radical fundamentalism with a view of Islam holding that 'Je suis un bon musulman... parce que tous les jours je me demande comment être plus heureux... comment être meilleur.' Both drink alcohol, and Inès smokes. Chama underlines how greatly Inès's behaviour contrasts

with her vision of acceptable Muslim femininity by lambasting her on the basis that ‘t’es divorcée, tu fumes, tu bois!’

Durringer has stressed the importance of Inès’s drinking and smoking to his supposed de-stigmatization of Muslims, claiming that ‘on prend le contre-pied des poncifs sur les jeunes de banlieue. La mère de Chama... est médecin, divorcée, elle fume, elle boit’ (Poitte). Republican Muslimness, for Durringer, apparently means rejecting embodied religious practices like abstinence in favour of the understanding of Islam focussed on internal piety outlined by Mehdi: an interpretation compatible with relegating religious practices purely to the private sphere, but which, as noted above, defines ‘religion’ according to a specifically Christian history of secularization. Many Muslim French do not share this belief in the pre-eminence of internal faith, considering the discipline associated with embodied, external practices vital to cultivating the pious self. They protest, however, that this does not imply that they adhere to the underlying principles of republicanism any less than any other French citizen (Fernando 157-163).

This article takes no normative position regarding which is more legitimate between Mehdi or Inès’s understanding of Islam and the Muslim French perspective. *Ne m’abandonne pas*, however, treats the latter as inherently suspect by always associating public, embodied forms of Islam with jihadism. Inès discovers Chama’s plan to leave for Syria upon finding a false passport, cash, and copy of the Qur’an hidden under her mattress. Owning the Qur’an, to Durringer, thus apparently constitutes evidence of radicalization. Similarly, before this point Chama explains away her unwillingness to eat non-halal meat as vegetarianism, and only prays in front of her parents after they uncover her plan, suggesting that these embodied practices are similarly suspect.

The embodied Islamic practice most often stigmatized as problematic for *laïcité* is, of course, wearing a veil or headscarf. Again, *Ne m’abandonne pas* portrays doing so as inherently suspicious. Every headscarf-wearing Muslim woman who appears is either a jihadi or posing as such. Chama only starts wearing one after being uncovered as a radical, presumably because doing so constitutes evidence of her radicalization. Significantly, she subsequently dons her hijab every time that she video-calls her jihadi husband, linking headscarves to the putative submissiveness of Muslim women to Muslim men in a fashion typical of French liberal Islamophobia (Guénif-Souilamas 113-118). Her Algerian-born Muslim grandmother reacts by angrily asking Chama if ‘[son] nouvel idéal, c’est

d'emprisonner le corps des femmes dans un hijab... Couper les mains des petites filles parce qu'elles veulent apprendre à écrire.' She thus links such misogynistic violence not even to full-body veils like the niqab or burqa (which would remain problematic), but to the hijab, a simple headscarf. Durringer describes the grandmother as a 'traditionaliste,' invoking her as proof that his film de-stigmatizes a broad range of visions of Islam (Poitte). It seems, then, that even the most 'traditional' forms of the religion he will accept as republican involve rejecting all veiling practices as unambiguously fundamentalist and misogynistic, imposed on Muslim women by controlling men. As noted above, such moves ignore the diverse voices of Muslim women who wear veils or headscarves, implying the existence of a homogeneous, misogynistic 'Islamic culture' in a fashion typical of liberal Islamophobia.

For all Durringer's claims that *Ne m'abandonne pas* de-stigmatizes Muslims, then, his film validates the liberal Islamophobic belief that most Muslims, or at least many who would not consider themselves fundamentalists, are not (yet) suitably French. Valorising the figure of the 'good' *musulman laïque* through Mehdi and Inès enables Durringer to stigmatize these 'bad' Muslims while apparently convincing even himself of his own inclusivity. Although his film problematizes Muslims as a racialized group, he apparently does so less consciously than Arnaubec. Once again, however, he could hardly have used a protagonist who had renounced Islam to embody an acceptably republican form of the religion.

Intriguingly, *Ne m'abandonne pas* reproduces the tropes of liberal Islamophobia in a different way to earlier French films featuring young Muslim women as protagonists. Houria Bouteldja (75-76) criticizes films like Gérard Blain's *Pierre et Djemila* (1987), which depict such young women struggling to escape their oppressive families. Muslim women are thus depicted as victims of the patriarchal practices of earlier generations of Muslims, and only able to achieve emancipation through the Republic. The implicit suggestion is apparently that younger generations of Muslims (or at least Muslim women) educated in the Republic will gradually shed the baggage associated with this homogenized, misogynistic 'Islamic culture.' Conversely, Durringer depicts Chama succumbing to extremism despite the previous two generations of her family having embraced something resembling an 'Islam de France.' Where *Pierre et Djemila* suggests that the younger generation will naturally defy their parents by becoming *musulmans laïques*, Durringer's film instead has its young protagonist embrace jihadism in defiance of her *musulman laïque* parents. The implication, arguably, is that a racialized, viscerally anti-republican Muslimness always lies dormant in French Muslims regardless of how 'integrated' they or their families might seem. *Ne m'abandonne*

pas thus reproduces republican anxieties surrounding an apparent resurgence of Islam, often conflated with Islamism, among the younger generation (see Fernando 14-17).

The two novels explored here received comparatively little national media attention, and no international coverage. By contrast, *Ne m'abandonne pas* was favourably reviewed by several French news outlets (see for example Camier, Mandel, Poitte) and even received an International Emmy Award in the United States (Morel). This discrepancy in attention is perhaps explicable through reference to the political vision emerging from each work. *2023* makes little effort to hide its racism, while, as argued below, *Tabou* can be read as critiquing Islamophobia. Both positions are controversial in mainstream French discourses: outright far-right racism continues to be considered beyond the pale, but neo-republicans equally challenge the validity of the notion of Islamophobia and, as discussed above, postcolonial identity politics more broadly (see Hajjat and Mohammed 71-91). Liberal Islamophobia, meanwhile, is very much the mainstream position – particularly when it frames itself as anti-racist. The disparity in coverage received by these three works arguably hints at where the window of discourse considered acceptable in relation to Islam and Muslims lies in the contemporary French mainstream: even when promoting and reviewing literature or film, one must pay lip service to anti-racism while remaining within a neo-republican frame that continues to stigmatize and exclude Muslims.

Opposing Islamophobia: *Tabou. Confession d'un jeune de banlieue*

It seems self-evident that neither the figure of the public apostate nor that of the *musulman laïque*, with their outspoken denunciations of Islamic practices, can easily be invoked to support a critique of republican Islamophobia. Anti-Islamophobia activists do, however, implicitly invoke the *musulman laïque* when they critique the exclusionary nature of Baubérot's *nouvelle laïcité* (see Baubérot 2014, 81-82). Such arguments reformulate this stock figure, suggesting that 'musulman laïque' would, were *laïcité* understood in accordance with the law of 1905, updated to include Islam, be recognized as already describing most French Muslims. Islam does not need to be 'republicanized;' rather, the Republic must be reformed to live up to its own universalist promises, enabling the inclusion of *musulmans* who are currently excluded despite already being *laïques*. Mas (599-601) argues that such a

position implicitly underpins the arguments made by groups like the Parti des Indigènes de la République; a similar vision emerges from *Tabou*.

Djennad's novel cannot be reduced to its political stakes as unproblematically as *2023* or *Ne m'abandonne pas*. Even if *Tabou* should be appreciated for its imaginative qualities rather than read as though it were sociological data, however, exploring its political 'work' is justifiable. Critics like Alice Géraud have interpreted the novel as an example of so-called 'littérature de banlieue' (Géraud). Kathryn Kleppinger (165-166) notes that the (problematic) critical convention is to read such novels as much as socio-political testimony as literature, seeking within them information regarding the experiences of post-immigrant *banlieue* populations. Djennad has critiqued such reductive readings, protesting that 'Les choses... sur lesquelles j'écris ne sont pas forcément mes réalités. Mais parce que je porte ce nom, que je viens de là, que je parle de la banlieue, on suppose que c'est mon histoire' (Géraud). Djennad's complaint is valid. Nonetheless, as Nicholas Harrison (6-7) notes, 'most ideological theories of literature... are reception theories.' That is, any political 'work' literature performs is conditioned by the expectations, and positionality, of its readers. Critics framed *Tabou* as belonging to a subgenre widely understood as having socio-political stakes, and it portrays its protagonist gradually constructing a Muslim French self-understanding. It seems reasonable under these circumstances to discuss how the novel might have interacted with the dominant discourses conditioning how readers understand the place of Islam and Muslims in the Republic.

Significantly, the process by which Djennad's protagonist, Yaniss, comes to identify as Muslim resonates with Muslim French reappropriations of the figure of the *musulman laïque*. Early in the narrative he might be labelled 'culturally Muslim,' abstaining, for example, from drinking alcohol for religious reasons, but not actively practising his faith (see Sidlo 67-68). His limited religious education came from a mother too busy providing for her family to worry about correct orthopraxy and an alcoholic father uninterested in educating his children: he acknowledges that in religious terms, 'j'ai mes bases et rien de plus' (Djennad 65-66, 128). This changes when a charismatic imam whom he meets while visiting Algeria offers him religious instruction; the Muslim self-understanding that he subsequently elaborates quickly becomes central to his sense of self. He describes regular prayer as being as important to him as breathing, underlining the relationship this exterior practice has with his interior piety by adding that when he prays, 'mon rapport à Dieu est grand' (Djennad 137-138).

A similar confidence in his Frenchness mirrors Yaniss's increasingly confident identification as Muslim. Having previously reflected bitterly on his exclusion from the Republic, he underlines that he now feels 'français tout court' rather than 'français d'origine,' expressing hope that Franco-Maghrebis like himself will one day be accepted as such (Djennad 153-154). His new-found faith also motivates this previously detached bystander, who indifferently observed the struggles of his neighbours in his deprived *cité*, to become socially engaged. He opens an art workshop in the neighbourhood, hoping to inspire local youths to improve their own situation by transmitting his passion for painting to them. The Algerian imam encourages this shift, emphasizing that Yaniss's Frenchness and his Muslimness cannot be separate or conflictual by telling him to '[mettre] un peu d'ici et beaucoup de là-bas dans ton parcours' (Djennad 150-151, 152-153). Yaniss, he adds, 'saur[a] donner et diffuser l'islam, le vrai' to vulnerable young people in his neighbourhood, at a time when 'beaucoup d'escrocs... font de la religion musulmane la plus simple, le problème le plus compliqué' (Djennad 146-148, 149-150). By doing so, he will help them construct a stable sense of Muslim selfhood like his own, dissuading them from being attracted to fundamentalism (violent or otherwise). Djennad thus portrays the very Muslim French outlook that neo-republicans label 'Islamist' as a bulwark *against* fundamentalist currents.

Embracing Islam thus both helps Yaniss by giving him a sense of purpose and helps the Republic by promoting social cohesion in his neighbourhood, reducing the disenfranchisement on which fundamentalist movements feed. Significantly, though, Yaniss's new-found sense of Muslim selfhood does not fold into dominant understandings of *laïcité*. The imam's entreaty to him to spread 'l'islam, le vrai' in his neighbourhood, if anything, represents the Islamic 'prosélytisme' that republicans abhor. While his vision of Islam valorises values resembling those claimed by the Republic, like fraternity with believers of other faiths, it also emphasizes the importance of embodied practices like prayer. By portraying Yaniss's conversion to a form of Islam that *la nouvelle laïcité* would consider problematic as so unambiguously beneficial to all concerned, *Tabou* suggests that the current republican model, rather than Islam, may be antagonistic to so-called republican values. Djennad renegotiates the relationship between Islam and *laïcité* in this way by depicting a (reformulated) *musulman laïque* figure in Yaniss. Again, she could hardly have used an ex-Muslim to this end: a protagonist who had ceased to identify as Muslim could hardly personify the Muslim French self. As in 2023 and *Ne m'abandonne pas*, the *musulman laïque*

is more amenable than the apostate to furthering *Tabou*'s vision of how 'Muslim' and 'French' self-understandings can intersect.

Conclusion: the unimaginable apostate

The three fictional works explored here communicate differing visions of the places of Islam and Muslims in contemporary France. The illiberal Islamophobia of 2023 barely masks its racism; the liberal articulation reproduced in *Ne m'abandonne pas* masquerades as *anti*-racism while continuing to racialize Muslims as un-French. *Tabou*, meanwhile, represents embodied, publicly engaged forms of Islam as compatible with the values the Republic claims as its own, implying that it is (neo-)republicanism itself, and not Islam, that is inimical to those values. Each work uses some variant of the *musulman laïque* to personify its vision; conversely, it is unclear how an ex-Muslim protagonist could help to either stigmatize Muslims as a racialized group or demonstrate Islam's potential compatibility with the Republic, regardless of which is considered most in need of reform. The difficulty of even *imagining* how a French apostate could be appropriated to any of these ends speaks to the difficulty of situating ex-Muslims within any of the dominant discursive frameworks used to discuss Islam in the Hexagon. Along with the comparative ease of appropriating the *musulman laïque*, this helps explain the near invisibility of French apostates in mainstream discourses. The ambiguous figure of the *musulman laïque* far more neatly embodies the ambivalent relationship that French politicians, commentators, and writers from across the political spectrum have with Islam, Muslims, and their relationship with the Republic. Further research on media and political discourses surrounding apostasy from Islam in France (or the lack thereof) would help to further contextualize this argument.

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ⁱ Other French public apostates include, for example, blogger and Youtuber Majid Oukacha, whose virulent criticisms of Islam have seen him accused, like El Rhazoui, of proximity to the far right (Mebroukine & de Rauglaudre). Only El Rhazoui, however, has a public profile to match that of figures like Daoud, Sansal, or Djavann.