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APRIL 19, 2004

The Veil Controversy: International Perspectives on Religion in Public Life

3:30-5:30 p.m.
Washington, D.C.

Speakers:

E.J. Dionne, Co-Chair, the Pew Forum, and Senior Fellow, the Brookings Institution

Raja Elhabti, Director of Research, Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights

Husain Haqqani, Visiting Scholar, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Justin Vaisse, Affiliated Scholar, Brookings Center on the U.S. and Europe

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E.J. DIONNE, JR.: It's great to bring together the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life with the Brookings Center on the United States and Europe. I have been accused of believing in epic acknowledgements, and I just do want to thank so many people from these two organizations who made this event possible: Luis Lugo, Tim Shaw, Sandy Stencel, and the whole staff of the Forum; Jeremy Shapiro at the Center on the United States and Europe here at Brookings, Kayla Drogosz and Katherine Moore, who worked with me. Thank you all for making this discussion on a very important topic possible.

I'm going to reserve the right as a moderator to ask one question that you could see as pointed or obnoxious, but I'll do that later in the event. What I want to do now is bring on our distinguished guests. I also want to welcome this very distinguished crowd. We were going through the list of people in this room, and this room is full of very knowledgeable people, thoughtful people, and we're going to bring this discussion around to you very quickly.

Just so you know what's going to happen: Justin is going to present; Raja is going to reply; Hussein is going to reply; I will ask my pointed question; and then we're going to go immediately to you. We have a mike going around the room, although it's an intimate enough room that we should be able to hear if people speak loudly, but it would be helpful to have the mike because we do hope to post this event on both the Brookings and the Pew Forum Web sites.

One of the things I do hope we do discuss today is why this issue not only has created issues and misunderstandings between France and the Muslim world, but also the very different perceptions of this issue in the United States and in France. And Justin, I must say, is one of the smartest people I know, not only about his own country, but he is a very astute student of our country.

On March 4th, 2004, after two days of debate, the French Senate gave its overwhelming approval to a law banning Muslim headscarves as well as other "ostensible" – I put that in quotes – religious apparel from the nation's classrooms. The Senate vote in France was 274 to 20. It was as lopsided a vote as the vote in the Chamber of Deputies. This was a consensus position

among the French, and this is what we are discussing today.

Let me begin by introducing Justin Vaisse. I have heard him before. I have talked to him. And as I said, he is a very close student of both the United States and France. He is an affiliated scholar at the Brookings Center on the U.S. and Europe. He's an historian trained in France and in the U.S. He's now working with the Policy – if I pronounce the French correctly I would be accused of being French, which I am, which is dangerous in this presidential election. I'm told John Kerry has been advised not to speak French during the rest of this presidential campaign. But I'll do it: The Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision, the Policy Planning Staff – see, I wouldn get in trouble in an American election – at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, even though he is not speaking here as a French official. He was a visiting fellow here at Brookings from 2002 to 2003, and we are happy that he remains affiliated with us. He has written several books on the U.S. and particularly on American foreign policy, including the award-winning L'empire du milieu – les Etats-Unis et le monde dupuis la fin de la guerre froide, with Pierre Melandri. He has contributed many articles in op-eds to French and American newspapers. He is now working on a book on Islam in France with Jonathan Laurence, which will be published next year. I also understand he is working on a book on American neoconservatism. I hope you're still working on that book. I look forward to that.

Raja Elhabti is director of research at Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights. Her current research focuses on gender and Islamic law in scriptural interpretation, as well as the application of the sharia law in Muslim countries and its repercussions on women's lives. Before coming to her current position, she worked with L'Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc, a Moroccan women's organization, from 1999 to 2001, and was a consultant to – I really am in trouble with the Republicans now – the Collectif 95 Maghred Egalité from 2000 to 2001. She is also a research associate at Lyon University. She holds a Master's degree from Brandeis University where she focused on issues facing Muslim women, with a particular emphasis on family laws. She holds undergraduate and doctorate degrees in Arabic literature from the Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco. She is published widely in Moroccan newspapers.

Husain Haqqani, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, our dear neighbors next door, is a leading journalist, diplomat and former advisor to Pakistani prime ministers. He is a syndicated columnist for The Indian Express, Gulf News and The Pakistan Nation. His journalistic career includes work as East Asian correspondent for Arabia, the Islamic World Review, and was the Pakistan and Afghanistan correspondent for the Far Eastern Economic Review. He has contributed to many publications, including The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, the Financial Times, the Boston Globe, the International Herald Tribune, and Arab News. He regularly comments on Pakistan, Afghanistan and Islamic politics and extremism on – it's a long list of initials – BBC, CNN, NBC, and ABC. Haqqani has also had a distinguished career in government. He served as an advisor to Pakistani Prime Ministers Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi, Nawaz Sharif, and Benazir Bhutto.

Now, how did you work all sides of Pakistani politics that way?

HUSAIN HAQQANI: You don't want to know that.

MR. DIONNE: That's very impressive – almost Clintonian. From 1992 to 1993 he was Pakistan's ambassador to Sri Lanka.

We are very grateful for this distinguished panel. I'm going to ask Justin to begin. It's great to see you again, Justin. Thank you.

JUSTIN VAISSE: Well, thanks, E.J. for your kind words. And with your perfect French accent you are definitely a follower of "Jean Cherie," the Democratic presidential candidate. Anyway. (Laughter.) That's a Republican quote from the Web site of the Republican Party: Jean Cherie.

You all picked up copies of the US – Europe brief that I wrote, which is posted on the Brookings Web site, [http://www.brookings.edu/fp/cusf/analysis/vaisse20040229.htm (http://www.brookings.edu/fp/cusf/analysis/vaisse20040229.htm)] so I won't just read it. I would rather like to begin with some concrete questions from a different angle. Why do some French girls, teenagers, choose to wear the veil? And how do they themselves see it? What meaning do they give to this religious or not so religious behavior?

There are, of course, numerous explanations. I just want to mention here briefly that Muslim scholars do not agree – I'm obviously not a specialist of Islam, and so I'm just reading from what is available – on whether wearing the veil is a religious requirement or not. The analysis varies depending on the country you're in – if it's a land where Muslims are a majority or a minority, et cetera. So I won't go into that question. I will just try to focus on the very concrete problems that popped up in French high schools beginning in the 1980s.

What meaning does this wearing have? There are at least four or five different meanings, and that's what makes the situation so complicated, because the law has been accused of restricting religious freedom, et cetera, but it, of course, all depends on what is the meaning of the wearing of the scarf, and I would like to begin with that.

So, first of all, of course the wearing of the scarf can be the articulation of a free belief, the expression of a true religious commitment, and there is no problem with that. The problem in schools begin only when – and it's another meaning that is given sometimes by girls – when this religious commitment is conceived more as a sort of teenager identity formation, almost teenager rebellion, a sort of rejection of the parents and the school system and the whole society. Many of the girls that wore the headscarf know that it's a testy question, that it is sort of a third rail in French politics, and so some of them have been using this issue to assert their identity.

A typical example is the last case, the most famous one, in October 2003, the case of – maybe you've heard of it – of Lila and Alma Levy, two high-school-age sisters in Aubervilliers. Their desire to wear the headscarf certainly did not come from their Jewish and non-practicing father, or from the mother, of Khabil origin, who is agnostic and has been separated from her husband for many years. Nor was it linked, as far as is known, to any manipulation by any Islamist group. The young girls apparently patched together – and that's what came out of the book that they recently published – the young girls patched together their own Islam, mainly with the aid of audio cassettes by Tarik Ramadan.

The central issue with the Levy sisters, according to numerous observers and according to their book, is basically the desire to affirm their individuality and also put themselves in the media spotlight via a noncompromising religious expression. So seen as such in this sort of first situation, the headscarf is really not much different than a sideways turned baseball cap or a body piercing. It's the sign of adolescent assertion or rebellion. So that's one case that can be seen.

A second case is the headscarf is sometimes worn as a protection against machismo of fathers and brothers. The men in the family would let these girls go around, go freely at night, et cetera, go by themselves only because they wear the scarf in the street. It's sort of a protective piece of clothing that, for them, has no real religious meaning. It's just a protection that they're wearing so as not to get into trouble. It's sort of a body armor, truly, that is sometimes needed in some places in France.

But if you go further in this direction – and that has been the case in a few examples in the recent years, and Dounia Bouzar), a social scientist in France, showed this particular case very well. It can sometimes be a path to modernity – I mean, wearing the veil can be a path to modernity because wearing the headscarf in France in this particular social context frees these girls of the pressure of their fathers and their brothers. It sort of shields them from the family culture from Maghreb, where, basically, women bear the honor of their family on their shoulders. And so the affirmation of their religious identity, of their Islamic identity, and particularly the wearing of the veil, is a way to escape from male dominated and sometimes, somehow even from a clanic culture, which is exactly how modernity is defined, so they can say to their dad or to their older brother, Look, I do like it's written in the Qur'an; I study, which is a Qur'anic requirement, and I wear the headscarf. So, in some cases, it's almost playing one identity against the other; the sort of non-cultural but purely religious Islamic identity against the identity coming mainly from Maghreb.

A third case in the wearing of the veil can be, unfortunately, that it's simply imposed by parents, and indeed it has often been the case. This is especially true in some recent immigrant families, mainly among the Turkish community in France, which is not as numerous as the German one, but which is quite numerous nonetheless in France. And so in this case it's not a religious choice or an affirmation of identity, et cetera, but it's really something that is imposed by the parents.

A fourth case is less pleasant. It's when Islamist groups try to influence families, and some instances of financial rewards from abroad for parents whose daughters wear the scarf have been reported. What here must be understood is that it has become a common strategy for a few fundamentalist groups to test the French republic on this battleground of schools; that is, asking the girls to wear the headscarf, forbidding them to attend mandatory biology classes because of the classes on reproduction, forbidding them to attend physical education classes, and sometimes from the very same groups came the troubles when there is the teaching of the Holocaust in history classes.

And there are also other battlegrounds which can be mentioned: public swimming pools with requirements that at some hours men be separated from women – and that's more grave to some extent, in hospitals, where some women – it's usually the husband that doesn't want his wife to be treated by a male doctor. There is some testing by some fundamentalist group of the French democracy to see where the limit is going to be set.

The actual problem with the wearing of the scarf in school, and whatever its meaning, whether it's a free choice, an affirmation of identity, or it's imposed by the parents or any of the other cases I just tried to describe, is to balance the freedom of some girls to wear the scarf, when they wear it out of conviction, and to balance this freedom with the freedom of

all the girls who don't want to wear it, either because they don't like it or because they see it as a symbol of oppression that is mandated by male over female, or any other reason.

So the most important problem really here is not really proselytizing but it's really the group effect – or bullying, if you will. And I'd like to read from a very recent piece by Patrick Weil. Patrick Weil was a member of this commission that was set up on laïcité in July 2003, and so he was a member of this commission that recommended that this law be adopted. And I'd like to quote from him because I think his experience is really very, very interesting. [Patrick Weil, "A nation in diversity: France, Muslims and the headscarf" at http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-5-57-1811.jsp (http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-5-57-1811.jsp)]

He writes, "I was a member of this presidential commission, most likely chosen for my expertise in the field of immigration policy and nationality law, and as a former member of the High Advisory Council on Integration. I arrived with the idea that the law was probably unnecessary for resolving the problems. Yet, after four months of public hearings involving representatives of all religious confessions, political parties, trades unions and NGOs, as well as individual actors – principals, teachers, parents, students, directors of hospitals and jails, company managers – I endorsed a report recommending twenty-five different measures, including the banning of conspicuous religious symbols in public schools. I would like here to explain why.

"But let me emphasize one point at the start, before setting out the background and reasoning of my decision. After we heard the evidence, we concluded that we faced a difficult choice with respect to young Muslim girls wearing the headscarf in state schools. Either we left the situation as it was, and thus supported a situation that denied freedom of choice to those – the very large majority – who do not want to wear the headscarf; or we endorsed a law that removed freedom of choice from those who do want to wear it.

"We decided to give freedom of choice to the former during the time they were in school, while the latter retain all their freedom for their life outside school.

"But in any case – and this is the fact I want to emphasize at the start – complete freedom of choice for all was, unfortunately, not on offer. This was less a choice between freedom and restriction than a choice between freedoms; our commission was responsible for advising on how such freedoms should both be guaranteed and limited in the best interests of all."
And so, he explains how he changed his mind by trying to show what changed since there was a ruling by the Conseil d'Etat in 1989. And he says, "What, then, has changed since 1989? In this period, and especially in the last two to three years, it has become clear that in schools where some Muslim girls do wear the headscarf and others do not, there is strong pressure on the latter to 'conform.' This daily pressure takes different forms, from insults to violence. In the view of the (mostly male) aggressors, these girls are 'bad Muslims,' 'whores.' who should follow the example of their sisters who respect Qur'anic prescriptions.
"We received testimonies of Muslim fathers who had to transfer their daughters from public to (Catholic) private schools where they were free of pressure to wear the headscarf. Furthermore, in the increasing number of schools where girls wear the hijab, a clear majority of Muslim girls who do not wear the headscarf called for legal protection and asked the commission to ban all public displays of religious belief.
"A large majority of Muslim girls do not want to wear the scarf; they too have the right of freedom of conscience. Principals and teachers have tried their best to bring back some order in an impossible situation where pressure, insults or violence sets pupils against one another, yet where to protest against this treatment is seen as treason to the community."
So I find his testimony interesting because it is, of course, an insider's view in this Bernard Stasi Commission that advocated the adoption of that law.

So, here is what I think was missing from my article posted on the Brookings Web site, that was distributed here outside the room; that is this explanation of the concrete situation in schools, and why the law is not just a restriction of religious freedom but the balancing of one freedom against the other. And I must say that if you're interested in that and read French, the whole Bernard Stasi Commission report is available on the Internet of the Web site of the National Assembly, and you can also see all the testimonies that were given, to add some more depth to this testimony by Patrick Weil. ["Commission de réflexion sur l'application du principe de laïcité dans la République : rapport au Président de la République" at http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/brp/notices/034000725.shtml (http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/brp/notices/034000725.shtml)]

So let's get back to the big picture, and let's try to update a bit. This article dates back to about one month ago, two months ago, and so let me tell you what has happened since then. I just want to remind you – I'm sure you all know this – the law, of course, bans conspicuous religious signs only in public schools, not anywhere else, and of course not in private schools and not in the university system. And one of the reasons that Patrick Weil gives for that is that in the university and other places,

people have the means to make their own choice, to defend themselves. In schools, it's different. Children don't necessarily – and young girls in particular don't necessarily – have the ability to defend themselves, to retain their freedom of choice, and so that's why the recommendation was what it was.

Okay, so just a couple of points to remind you of the big picture. First, it's a different political context, so I'll leave it at that because E.J. will probably ask a question about that, but let me just read a quote from Tocqueville, because I know E.J. loves it. (Laughter.) So I'll make a different quote from the one that is here in the article.

Tocqueville wrote, "I do not know if all Americans have faith in their religions, for who can read to the bottom of hearts? But I am sure that they believe it necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions." And what's interesting in this quote is that for France, it's exactly the reverse. That is to say, in the French political culture, because of its specific historical context, religion, and especially the mixing of politics and religion, is seen as the most deadly mix that can really threaten the whole republican institutions.

A good example is the law that separated state from church, the 1905 law. It is definitely not an anti-religious law, and this 1905 law recognized the right of everyone to practice his or her own beliefs to the point where the state even paid the salaries of religious officials in order to allow those obliged to live in confined institutions, such as asylums, prisons, the army, residential schools and hospital to practice their faith. The 1905 law did not forbid the wearing of religious signs, but the custom in France was at that time, and still is, to keep religious faith as a private matter. This tradition is most likely linked in France to the long battle against the power and public exposure of Catholic faith, and the relation between – and this is particularly important for the law -the individual, the religious group, and the state; the latter is both expected and seen to act as a protector of the individual against group pressure. That's how we once again come back to this idea of protecting one freedom against the other.

Okay, the second point in the big picture is of course the challenge of radical Islam in France, and I said with a bit of provocation that this was also what separated the U.S. from France. The U.S. on its own soil does not face the same challenge of radical Islam. I hope Daniel Pipes is not in the room, because otherwise he would have popped up and said, you know, yes, of course there is a threat –

MR. DIONNE: But I bet somebody will.

MR. VAISSE: Oh, okay.

MR. HAQQANI: You won't have to go very far for that one. (Laughter.)

MR. VAISSE: Okay, so I leave it here because I think I explained that in the brief, so in the interest of time I'll just skip to the third reminder about the big picture. The reaction to the law was largely positive. The French population was overwhelmingly in favor of it; that the Muslims of France were opposed to it by about 53 to 42 percent – well, more precisely the people who declared themselves of Muslim origin – that the law was very harshly condemned by Iran – E.J. mentioned it in his piece in the Post – but also by different terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda senior leader al-Zawahiri. Very recently, last week, or two weeks ago, there was a leaflet that was found in the papers of the Lashkar-i-Taiba terrorist group in Pakistan that was devoted to this law and appealed to attack France, with a broken Eiffel Tower on the top and it was all about the banning of the headscarf in France. And so this has been going on since the law was passed, whereas many moderate Muslims like the grand sheik of Al-Azhar, Mohammad Tantawi, said they didn't have any problem with the law.

More importantly, probably, was the reaction of the UOIF last weekend. Every year there's a sort of annual meeting, annual conference of the UOIF, l'Union des Organisations Islamiques de France, which is the most important Muslim group in France. Actually, there was a lot of controversy two years ago when Nicolas Sarkozy created the Conseil francais du culte musulman, the French Council of Muslim Cult, because he included UIOF in it, and UIOF is seen to be a group that has ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, that is to be a bit of a fundamentalist group, but it's still in the mainstream, so it's a group that is a bit unclear.

But the meeting of the UOIF each month of April is a very important event attended by tens of thousands of people, and the UIOF two weeks ago made very conciliatory declarations about the headscarf law and let people understand that there would be a negotiation on a case-by-case basis, which was the case from a long time ago, except now there's a law, so things are a bit different. But they said there would be a negotiation on a case-by-case basis at the "rentrée scolaire"- the moment when the students get back to school, early September, and so they did not oppose it outright and did not protest it.

And the fourth and last point in the broader context is the integration – of course, it's a reminder, because that's in my article – but I think it's always important to mention it because the important issue behind the controversy over the veil is really the integration of populations of Muslim origin in France. That's where the real problems are.

I think there has been some huge progress, especially with the creation of the CFCM that I was mentioning a moment ago, the French Council for the Muslim Cult, gathering all the different strains and all the different aspects of Islam in France in one single council that is the equivalent of the Jewish and Catholic and Protestant councils, and that can negotiate with the government on concrete issues, like mosques, like cemeteries, halal meat, et cetera.

So I think there has been some huge progress, but it's obviously not enough, not nearly enough. That's the position that I took in the brief, and it's also a position that Patrick Weil, whom I was just quoting, holds. I think that the other recommendations – you remember Patrick Weil mentioned 25 recommendations that the Bernard Stasi Commission made – Of course one of the things that we can regret is that out of the 25 recommendations, only one was taken, which was the banning of religious signs, I think that's regrettable, because this would have gone in the right direction, and especially in this broader context, which is principally a social and economic one.

Thank you.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. Thank you very, very much, Justin. I was grateful that you did quote Tocqueville. I am reminded of my friend Michael Baron's great line that American political writing would be better if we paid more attention – this was a while ago – to Al De Tocqueville than Al D'Amato. Michael is a good Republican, so he meant no disrespect to Al D'Amato.

A second quick point: I am clearly a victim of American cultural imperialism because this is the first panel I have ever been on where somebody has suggested that adding as opposed to subtracting a piece of clothing was a form of cultural rebellion -it's actually worth contemplating that.

And thirdly, I hope we can discuss in more detail your point that a ban on headscarves in public schools could increase the freedom of certain Muslim girls and young women, and how this balancing act, which is something I don't think we in the United States have thought about that much, is something worth discussing. I hope someone will bring that up.

We are very grateful to have Raja Elhabti with us, and thank you very much for agreeing to be the first respondent.

MS. ELHABTI: Thank you, E.J., and thank you all for being here. Thank you, Justin. That was a very remarkable defense of the banning law.

Justin started by citing what the hijab, or the headscarf, means for different Muslim women around the world. I would say that what matters to us here is what the headscarf means for the French government and the French state, because this is what the problem is. We are not discussing what the veil means to Muslim women. I think they can decide for themselves.

The law, the subject of this debate, supposedly aims to protect the French principle of laïcité, which came back to the debate many times in the French official discourse and in the discourses of the proponents of the law. This principle of laïcité – and I'm not using the word secularism, and I think that Justin agrees with me, because they are different – laïcité means, loosely, the idea that religion should be excluded from civil affairs and public education. Secularism is something more radical, which is suppression of religion or rejection of religion. So I'm using the French word here, laïcité.

The French officials and proponents of the law vehemently reject accusations that the measure – you will have to bear my accent here, which is French and Maghreban – Moroccan. (Laughs.) So the French officials reject accusations that the measure discriminates against Muslim girls in France who wear headscarves. Some others, mainly feminist groups – and Justin came back to that; he noted that even some Muslim organizations supported the banning law – they point out that the veil, or hijab, or headscarves – I'm using the three terms interchangeably – symbolizes women's oppression by patriarchal Muslim societies and groups and denotes the internalization of such oppressive values by Muslim women themselves, and therefore it should be banned.

Finally, some more honest voices evoke the widespread fear of growing Islamic fundamentalism in France, where the Muslim population is estimated to be the largest in Western Europe, with 5 million Muslims, and the urge for French authorities to counterattack and respond to this threat.

Well, I think that for a critical mind it doesn't take much to see that the proposed law has nothing to do with defending laïcité of France, and even less to do with defending the rights of women and children in France. It has everything to do with political concerns of the French government. In fact, the French official discourse is inconsistent – and I will come back to three points of inconsistency in this discourse – which is the deliberate misuse of the concept of laïcité, the stereotypical and condescending view of the other, and the attempt to avoid real problems that the Muslim community has in France as well as, of course, different other immigrant communities.

The first point is that banning the headscarf, the Islamic headscarf, has been justified by protecting or defending the French principle of laïcité. And the other argument that actually was used by Justin here is that it protects girls, Muslim girls, who do not wear the hijab from the pressure exerted by Muslim girls who do wear the hijab within the schools. There is supposedly a great pressure exerted on those girls who do not wear the hijab from those who wear it. Well, I would like to ask, how does Islamic headscarf threaten the French principle of laïcité? And second, is that principle non-negotiable, as described by President Chirac; is it really observed so firmly when other religions are involved? And third, do Muslim girls who wear hijab really have the power that enables them to exert such pressure on other girls who do not wear it?

Well, first, throughout French history, let us highlight the fact that the principle of laïcité has never been a principle of exclusion; it has always been a principle of emancipation and freedom. It is rather paradoxical here that French officials and feminists, of course, think that Muslim women or Muslim girls who wear hijab are victims of patriarchal societies and patriarchal families and system of thinking, and at the same time exclude them from the educational system, because this is what it is about: excluding them, leaving them behind, facing their "oppressors" alone. It is very paradoxical.

It is certain that the French principle of laïcité refers to the necessity of upholding the separation of church and the state in education. It requires the neutrality of the state, the public sector, public schools, and the educational system in general. However, it does not require from students and users of the public services to renounce to what they are and to their identity to be able to use these services. It doesn't require from them to be neutral themselves to access the school, or to access the public space. All students should be able to practice their religion and their beliefs peacefully, as long as they do so without provocation and intimidation of others. The 1905 law of separation between the church and state, as well as France's constitution and the general regulations of the French educational system, do not mention anything relating to neutrality of students. All that is required from students, like anywhere else is of course, in addition to assiduity, is respect of others, whether they are other students, other teachers, staff, et cetera.

Article 1 of 1905 law states: "The republic assures the right of conscience and guarantees the freedom of cult." The French historian, René Remond – I'd like to cite him here – pointed out to the Stasi Commission [of which he was a member] the misuse of the concept of laïcité in the French official discourse. He said, "I read the law of separation of state and church; I accept it as a whole without being a fundamentalist of laïcité. I see that Article 1 says – and God knows that the first article is always important – the French Republic guarantees the free practice of cult. It is not true that this law ignores the religious act (…) not only does it not ignore it, but also it commits to guarantee it (…) I'm little surprised by the lecture you [referring to Joachim Salamero (la Libre Pensée)]make of it [of the 1905 law], a lecture that is restricted, fundamentalist, and extremist." [http://www.laic.info/Members/webmestre/La_laicite_en_France.2003-10-29.2756/view (http://www.laic.info/Members/webmestre/La_laicite_en_France.2003-10-29.2756/view)]

Moreover, the European Convention on Human Rights, ratified by France in 1974 and that has become opposable to public authorities before the European court of human rights in 1981 clearly states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance."

The argument that France must protect school, which is a space of integration and where the citizens of tomorrow are being taught – and I'm using the words that are used in the official French discourse – by banning signs of difference and promoting instead what is universal and common is, at the least, questionable. It reveals a certain fear of difference that should rather be, if well handled, a source of strength.

The French De Saint-Exupéry once said, "Your difference, my brother, far from scaring me, enriches me." How do French officials, then, expect to teach their kids to live in a diverse society if they think that every sign of difference should be banned from schools, and how do they intend to erase more inherent signs of difference: color of skin and difference of gender?

Second: it seems that the principle of laïcité is not set in stone, and actually accommodates exceptions. In fact, proponents of French laïcité prefer to set aside the fact that there is a type of cultural particularism that tends to dominate in the French society, in which only those holy days of the Christian origin are implicitly recognized though they have lost their religious meanings. Clergy in eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine still receive government salaries, and despite the French state's claim to be laïc, it provides 80 percent of the budget for Catholic schools where 2 million study. In the past years, Jewish schools have also grown by 120 percent whereas only one Muslim school exists in all France, which took eight years of negotiations with the government before it opened. This also means that going to Muslim schools is not an option for girls who refuse to take off their headscarves. [http://rwor.org/a/1234/wtw-veil.htm (http://www.revcom.us/a/1234/wtw-veil.htm)] They are left with only two options: to go to Catholic schools or to drop out, which many of them have already opted for.

The third argument is that Muslim girls who wear hijab supposedly exert lot of pressure on other Muslim girls who do not wear it. And let's just state the fact here that out of the 2 million girls, students in French schools, only 1,500 wear headscarves to school, according to the government report that was used to justify the law. That represents less than 1 percent of 500,000 students from Muslim families. How can this small number exert any kind of pressure on girls that don't want to wear headscarves? Being such a minority, wouldn't that be the opposite? They are a minority: 1,500 out of 500,000 girls who do not wear the veil. [http://rwor.org/a/1234/wtw-veil.htm (http://www.revcom.us/a/1234/wtw-veil.htm)]

Well, it just seems that those Muslim girls will be excluded from public schools and they will become an easy target for radical groups, which is supposedly what the French government wants to prevent. And if the French government was sincere in its attempt to counter the raise of fundamental Islam, this is a very curious way of doing so.

Let's then move to what is really behind this banning law: it is fear of difference and speaking for the other. In an article about the headscarf issue in France, Patrick Weil – who was actually cited by Justin a while ago – one of the 20 members of the presidential commission that proposed the law in December, said, "Whereas for a majority of women the headscarf is an expression of the domination of women by men (…) it can also be the articulation of a free belief, a means of protection against the pressure of males, an expression of identity and freedom against secular parents, a statement of opposition to Western and secular society. The state has no right to adjudicate between these meanings or to interpret religious symbols tout court."

This is his statement, and actually this a very wise statement from a person who rejects accusations that this law discriminates against Muslim girls. However, the same Patrick Weil flatly states in another setting, with American journalists this time, "I'm surprised that in America, where the fight for sexual equality has been fought so early on, no one says anything. This is frankly surprising. The veil carries a symbol of inequality and domination, right?"
[http://www.forward.com/issues/2004/04.01.23/news9.html (http://www.forward.com/issues/2004/04.01.23/news9.html)]

So he is choosing the right tone for the right audience. The first one was intended for Muslim people living in France. We're not deciding for the meaning – what the meaning of veil is for you, we're just doing this to protect our laïcité and to protect other girls. The second one was for American journalists. It is a different tone. This is what other French officials and other French intellectuals and feminists are doing also.

Some proponents go as far as to formulate their fear for the supposedly threatened laïcité in words that are for the least racist, and I'm quoting here, "We won't let those people alter our traditions." The second quote is, "It is necessary to limit the freedom of conscious." And the third one, "We should have the lucidity of recognizing that those Muslims ("Allah's crazy"), reproduce like rats." And the fourth one is, "Our Muslim guests must comply with the laws of the republic."
[Herrgott Jean-Claude. "Le rapport Stasi ou l'invention de la commission réalité."
http://www.islamlaicite.org/article183.html (http://www.islamlaicite.org/article183.html)]

We're no more talking here banning a piece of clothing from schools. We're talking about banning a whole religion and a whole community from France. The terms of the debate have subtly changed. They are about "we" French, and "they" foreigners, and it's about our traditions and their practices. They're not French-Muslims; they are, at the best, guests that have to comply with their host's rules.

MR. DIONNE: Could I interrupt you? Where did those quotes come from?

MS. ELHABTI: Oh, I have – I mean, I can give you –

MR. DIONNE: No, no, I just – were they from the debate or from the –

MS. ELHABTI: Yes, it is from the debate, it is cited in "Le rapport Stasi ou l'invention de la commission réalité. »- which is an article written by Herrgott Jean-Claude who is a member of the Commission Islam and Laïcité. The most racist quote is taken from a book, that Muslims reproduce like rats.

MR. DIONNE: Which is not official state French policy.

MS. ELHABTI: No, I'm just saying that the terms of the debate have changed in France.

MR. DIONNE: Right.

MS. ELHABTI: In another statement, from a feminist point of view this time, Elle magazine printed an open letter to President Chirac signed by leading French feminists who called for an outright ban. "The Islamic veil sent us all, Muslims and non-Muslims, back to discrimination against women, which is intolerable," said the letter. It is clear that minds were set to

strip the Muslim community in France not only from their women's headscarves, but also from their identity and their right to speak for themselves. In fact, nobody remembers here that those women we are talking about should have the right to speak for themselves and that we should ask them what this veil means for them, not what it means for us.

This debates – the debate that is going on and the terms of the debate as it is going on right now in France – reminds us of some events that have taken place in the colonial history of France in Algeria, and especially one event that took place on May 16th, 1958, where a ceremony took place to unveil Algerian women by French women to show to the world that Algerian women were on their way to becoming modern. This event was one of the many French attempts to appropriate Algerian women's voice and to silence those among them who began to take the revolutionary women as role models by not abandoning the veil.

Franz Fanon comments on this event, the event of May 16th, 1958 saying, "The immediate response of many Algerian women who had long since dropped the veil, once again donned the haïk" – [which is the Algerian traditional way of veiling]- "thus affirming that it was not true that woman liberated herself at the invitation of France and of General De Gaule." [Marnia Lazreg, The Eloquence of Silence, Algerian Women in Question. New York, Routledge, 1994. pp. 134-135.] And this is actually the reaction that probably is going to happen in France now if girls are forced to take off their veil. Marnia Lazreg, who is an Algerian sociologist, states that "This incident did lasting harm to Algerian women. It brought into the limelight the politicization of women's bodies and their symbolic appropriation by colonial authorities." [The Eloquence of Silence, p. 135] This is something to think about for those who condemn Islamists groups and societies for using women's bodies for political ends.

The last point for this section is what the veil means for those women. The Islamic veil – this is a very short statement – The Islamic veil is part of a complex system aimed at both sexes in order to manage the community's sexual needs and social relations. [Asad, Muhammad. The Message of the Qur'an. (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus Ltd., 1984) p. 538.] It bears no demeaning implications for women themselves, for most of women who choose to wear the hijab. To the opposite, many of them think that it's an empowering practice that allows them to move freely through their professional and social life, and in this – to this extent the veil symbolizes for many Muslim women not only a religious obligation but also a different way of being a woman, but this is, I think, exactly what feminist organizations, French and others, refuse to see, is that there are many ways of being a woman. There are plural voices of women, and we should listen to them and we should learn from them. This is something we don't see.

The last point here is what I believe is really behind the ban, is the crisis of the French policy of integration. Françoise Gaspard, a sociologist at the Advanced Group for Social Studies in Paris, says, "The headscarf today symbolizes a defeat for the French government, which has failed to integrate those minorities."
[http://www.secularism.org.uk/newspress/news19sep03.htm#one (http://www.secularism.org.uk/newspress/news19sep03.htm#one)]
And actually, this is exactly what it is about, the failure of the French policy to integrate the immigrant communities into the French society.

Immigrant workers, who are mainly North African, have played a key role in the French labor market ever since the Second World War, but it took France 40 years to realize that those workers have families they left behind and to allow them to bring their families to France. But even then, we are asking them to assimilate to the French culture while they are still subject to racist attitudes in hidden and open forms. The Stasi report at the origin of the banning law actually ignored the alarming social and economic problems, the increasing gap made of inequalities, poverty, discrimination and racism all exacerbated by international political tension.

I would like to cite one last passage from a book named "Territoires Perdus de La Republique" which was of great influence to the Stasi Commission, and which also influenced a lot the public opinion in France. For many French, discrimination and racism against immigrants is just a dream, and this state of mind is very well expressed in this book. Emmanuel Brenner, the editor of the book, writes, "If one were to assess the feeling of rejection, the North African population living in France suffers certainly the most among all other populations of foreign origins from this feeling. However, it is not the rejection itself that matters, but most importantly acting upon this rejection. If some of our contemporaries nurture dreams of eradication [of immigrants], they usually do not go further. A police of dreams was never an objective for democracy."
[Cited by Alan Gresh, in: http://www.islamlaicite.org/article187.html (http://www.islamlaicite.org/article187.html)]

After quoting this passage, Alain Gresh, chief editor of Le Monde Diplomatique, wonders whether all forms of discrimination against North African immigrants going from failing to find a decent job, decent housing, decent school, to the police racist acts and use of unnecessary violence are just dreams, should we say nightmares, and not daily realities in France.
[http://www.islamlaicite.org/article187.html (http://www.islamlaicite.org/article187.html)]

I will just stop here, and maybe the last word I would say is that French Muslim girls can still console themselves and wear Fatima's hands around their necks and small copies of the Qur'an. That's really another proof that we don't even care to know about what Muslims consider as integral part of their religion and what they consider as traditions and what is even prohibited by the Qur'an.

Thank you and I'm sorry for taking more time than I was supposed to. Thanks.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you very much. And I hope that before when Justin has his chance to reply, even John Kerry, I think, doesn't fully understand the concept of laïcité and I would love Justin, when he replies, to offer perhaps a compact definition of this for us and then – because I think it's important to this discussion.

And Husain if you could keep yourself to about eight to 10 minutes because I really would like to bring in this great crowd.

HUSAIN HAQQANI: I'll certainly try. Of course, I sympathize with this audience, which has had to endure an Anglo-French accent, a Moroccan-French accent and will now have to endure a Pakistani-Anglo, Anglo-Pakistani accent.

Let me just begin, as Justin began, with a disclaimer that he does not have that much knowledge about Islam. I do not have much knowledge about France. So that makes us more or less even, him talking on an Islamic subject and me talking on the French particularities, and if I show my ignorance about France or French history, I would seek forgiveness.

Let me just begin by saying that I asked a colleague of mine, a younger colleague, Rashid Chowdhury find me the main reasons and arguments that are offered in favor of the headscarf, and he has found me 9 arguments and that's how I am going to proceed. I am going to list each argument and then try and rebut it.

The first argument that is offered is that headscarves stand in the way of integration into French society. That, to me, seems absurd, partly on the basis of the fact that only a minority of Muslim girl students in France use the headscarf. I think that the real problem in integration is never what you wear, it is what is done to you and how you are treated. And so I think that issue of poverty, unemployment, poor housing, discrimination, alienation are the issues that need to be addressed by the French, but I guess it's a typically French solution. You can't do anything about all of those, ban the headscarf and then go around debating O'Reilly on Fox News. (Laughter.) The spokesman for the Catholic Church in France, the Reverend Stanislas Lallane has also pointed this out, , and I quote, "The fundamental questions of integration will not simply resolve themselves through a law on religious signs."

And, of course, the major factor is, as Raja pointed out, that there is a distinction between, for example, the significance of a cross to a Christian and a headscarf to a Muslim. The cross is a religious sign and a symbol, whereas the headscarf is an integral part of the religious belief of some Muslims – and I do concede that to Justin – but for those for whom it is an integral part of their belief, it should be considered as a part of religious belief rather than a matter of just a religious symbol. And this is where, I think, the French decision makers have shown tremendous ignorance of Islam, but I guess, that they showed it even when they ruled several parts of the Muslim world.

The second argument that is offered is that the public school is a neutral environment and no one should have the right to display his religious affiliation there. Just to counter that, I would offer a quote from the Assistant Attorney General of the United States commenting on the case of Nashala Hearn in Oklahoma: "No student should be forced to choose between following her faith and enjoying the benefits of a public education." I personally am quite unabashedly Amerophile on that one, and I think that the Americans have it right. Of course, they have it right on more than one issue, but we won't get into that this afternoon.

Taking away a girl's right to wear the headscarf, in my opinion, can push her out of the public educational system. If a girl chooses her headscarf over her belonging to a particular school, then she's marginalized and that would contribute to her lack of integration rather than promoting integration. There are already cases like that. I will cite the case of Sharifa, a 13 year old who was not let into her school with a headscarf on. After several attempts by her to enter the building, she left. She then tried to enter a correspondence course, but she was not allowed to register for it because she had not been formally excluded from her school. So this child is going to end up not being able to join a correspondence school and not being able to join a school.

Of course, the argument will be, Yeah, but she could always have a private education. The likelihood is if she is the daughter of a poor immigrant, then she will probably enter a religious school rather than a secular private school because secular private schools tend to be far more expensive. So in a sense, the French government will be setting itself up for failure and exactly diametrically opposed results.

Furthermore, when her case was taken to her ex-principle, he or she was asked to at least her get into a correspondence course. The response was, and I quote, cited in Le Monde on the 10th of February of 2002, quote, "The rules of the college forbid all head coverings. She has made a life decision. Now, if she is not registered in the correspondence school, it is not my problem." So, the state actually just washes its hands of the problem, even if it is only about 1,500 children, and creates a bigger problem by creating an "us" and a "them" situation with the Muslim immigrant community.

Of course, the more radical elements in the Muslim immigrant community would argue that we wouldn't have been here in the first place if you hadn't been in our homes earlier. So, I think that that is that – instead of ending radicalization it is more likely to radicalize the immigrant community in France.

The third argument that is used is actually a matter of ignorance of religion. It is said that headscarves are a sign of the submission of women. Now, I think that this comes from, of course, the understanding of Christian doctrine or Christian principles about it, and again, with due respect to the Christians present in the audience, since I am a Muslim I do not want to arrogate to myself the right to try and interpret the fundamentalist version of Christianity. It's the right of the Christians to interpret it.

But, from what I have read, I think it is in Corinthians 11, Paul is cited as saying, "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ and the head of the woman is a man and the head of Christ is God." He then goes on to say, "A man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason and because of the angels the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head."

So I think this notion that somehow the headscarf is essentially a sign of submission of woman to man is out of this rather than out of the Koran which says in chapter 33, verse 59, "O Prophet, tell thy wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons when outside. That is most convenient, that they should be known as such and not molested, and Allah is oft forgiving and most merciful." So the reasoning there is totally different. The reasoning there is that a woman should not be molested because by covering her head she is not attracting man to her, whereas there it is about authority.

So, at least in Islamic doctrine, to the extent that it matters in making any policy about Muslims, those who choose to wear the headscarf are not wearing it because it's a sign of submission to man. They are wearing it because they believe that it is a sign of their chastity and their modesty, and we have to concede them that. I wrote that in my piece in the International Herald Tribune, which has been available outside.

My mother has worn her headscarf all her life. She's 84 years old. I have two sisters who wear the headscarf. None of the next generation wears the headscarf. My daughter, who's 15, does not. I don't agree with the theory that the fathers can make – all of those who are in this audience and happen to be fathers of teenagers would attest that it is not easy to make teenagers do anything. So this notion that somehow their fathers are forcing the teenagers to do anything – in this day and age of television, most teenagers are actually as smart alecky and as fast mouthed as the television teenagers. Thank Hollywood for that. But they don't do it out of obedience. And they go through phases. My daughter for 15 days decided to wear the headscarf, and on the 16th day cast it away, but it was her decision.

And so I think that a misunderstanding about what the headscarf means to a Muslim woman is definitely at fault in the French perception of what it is the French government is trying to do. And, of course, the practicing Muslims who support and believe in the headscarf as their right would argue that it is something that keeps unwanted male attention away. So by making it into a political issue, as the French government has done, it is actually depriving these people even of the modesty that they are trying to assert themselves, which is their faith. They've made it into a political issue, whereas for these people, for those who practice, it is a matter of their faith and of their proclamation of chastity and modesty.

It is very interesting that a young Muslim woman in Britain – where, by the way, policewomen who happen to be of Pakistani or Muslim origin are allowed to wear their headscarf as part of their uniform. It's a totally different attitude. And coming from a former British colony, I can say that there are moments when we thank God for the English and their peculiarities – (laughter) –

MR. DIONNE: He's going to strike that from the transcript if it goes back to Pakistan. (Laughter.)

MR. HAQQANI: But let me just say that one of these Muslim women in England made a very interesting comment, and I would like somebody to try and address that. Her comment was to the effect that , if a woman is forced not to wear a scarf, she's being made to submit to the government. I mean, on the one hand, you say that if she wears the scarf she's submitting to

her parents or her family or her tradition, but on the other hand – so either way the woman is not being given the right of choice, and it's a matter of choice, and that's how it should be treated.

The fourth argument given is that the ban on headscarves applies to girls between the ages of six and 16. They are too young to be able to make a choice. They wear the headscarf because of their fathers or other relatives. I think that I've already answered that about the teenagers, but I think even there – I mean, yes, parents do tell children what to do and what not to do, but that could apply in the secular realm as well. So either the French government has to come up with a solution whereby parental authority will be substituted by state authority – but I thought we used to call that communism- or they would not just apply it to the Muslim immigrant community of France.

The fifth argument that is made is that France is committed to its secular values and cannot make exceptions for one group of devout people. Well, that is already an absurdity because the 1905 law already makes – and pardon my ignorance on this one if I'm wrong, but this is how I see it – the law of 1905 doesn't apply to the Alsace and Moselle region. So the Stasi Commission, which drew up recommendations for the law banning visible religious signs in school, expressed the belief that "Reaffirmation of the secular state, laïcité, does not lead to the questioning of the particular status of Alsace-Moselle to which the population of these three departments is particularly attached." So their particular attachment is very important, but if a Muslim child and her family are particularly attached to the hijab, tough luck, French integration.

Number six: The argument that is given is that headscarves create an environment that breeds fundamentalism and anti-Semitism. From my knowledge of history, before the French started having Muslim immigrants they had anti-Semitism. The Holocaust took place long before any Muslims showed up in Europe as a result of the depletion of the male population of Europe as a consequence of the Second World War, because that's when you needed the immigrants essentially. That's when the Turks came as guest workers to Germany, that's when the Pakistani industrial workers were brought into Britain, that's when the North Africans started coming into France.

So I don't think that there is a direct relationship, and if there were empirical studies that proved that the French, when they saw a Muslim woman with a headscarf or a Muslim child with a headscarf, became more anti-Semitic, I would then revisit the issue. But since there is no such study, I think that this argument is just one of those arguments.

Next, the argument is made that the headscarf is not really required in Islam. Now, the point here is that what a person's belief is or is not should be determined by that person and not by somebody else saying this is how we understand your religion. It is very interesting that President Chirac went and met the Sheikh of Azhar), Sheikh Tantawi, who has been quoted because he said ,Oh yeah, yeah. Now, the Sheikh, of course, is a very nice guy, and there's never been an issue any government in the world has ever asked him about that he has ever disagreed with.

But the point is he's not Islam's pope. Islam doesn't have a clergy in that sense, so it is for me, as a Muslim, to decide whether I want to believe in Sheikh Tantawi or Sheikh Haqqani. It's my choice, and for other Muslims as well. I'm sure that after this afternoon, I'll have a few more followers of Sheikh Haqqani than Sheikh Tantawi, but let me just say the fact that the state goes to a particular religious authority to find out or to get sanction for their view of what religion is shows the lack of logic in it. Why not ask the people who wear it what they believe?

As I already said, in my own family, I have women who cover their heads and I have women who don't, and I have women who don't want to cover their head and one little, particularly special, child in my life who keeps changing her mind and will probably change it several times over in her lifetime. And I think it's her choice, and I don't think it's a matter where Sheikh Tantawi or Jacques Chirac should make the choice on her behalf and make those decisions. In fact, if anything, I have more right to make decisions on her behalf, being her father in relative terms – only in relative terms – than Jacques Chirac does, who has no chance of ever meeting her, although he would probably learn a thing or two by seeing her. (Laughter.)

Now, the last point I would like to make is that the French had to struggle for a long time to separate church and state before achieving the law of 1905. They can't allow militant Muslims to undo this law. Well, let me just quote – in fact, I'm quoting Justin here – the law was meant, "to protect the new French democracy from the Catholic Church." Thus, it was meant to stop an institution from imposing its rules on all of society. Islam, on the other hand, has no church, and that is very hard for the French to understand, which is why they went to Sheikh Tantawi, I guess. But the fact of the matter is that Muslims have a kind of collective decision making rather than a hierarchical clergy – at least the Sunni Muslims, and the French do have more Sunni Muslims than they have Shi'ites.

Now, the girls who wear headscarves in schools don't seek to impose their views on anyone. They merely want the freedom to wear the scarf for themselves as a matter of personal dress. The argument that other Muslim girls feel compelled, of course, would again be one of those things for which you need some kind of empirical study. Do a survey. Find out how many Muslim girls wear headscarves and how many of them somehow end up – they may influence each other, but then, hey, people are

influenced by Vogue magazine in choosing their dress, or by Gentleman's Quarterly. Should you ban those because it's having an effect? Supposing tomorrow, Jean Paul Gaultier or somebody comes up with designer clothing with a veil as part of it and some child wants to wear it. Are you going to ban that because it has some religious dimension to it? Is it something that needs to be seen in that particular light.

And last, but not least, there's the argument that headscarves are a sign of militant Islam. Where did we get this? Militant Islam is a recent phenomenon and headscarves have been around for 1,400 years. Now, I am all for Muslim women who do not want the headscarf, and I am all for those who want it. I think that the relationship between militant Islam and headscarves does not exist. In fact, I would argue that the battle to try and pull the headscarf down has bred militant Islam, and I will give four quick examples.

Iran: The Shah of Iran came up with this whole doctrine of – again, all those four countries where it has been a major issue have been countries which were influenced by the French idea of laïcité rather than the American concept of secularism, you know, where you can have anything, do anything. The Mormon Church can be established and practice its doctrines within the law and then there is secular law. Bouraquiba in Tunisia, Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, the Shah in Iran and King Amanullah in Afghanistan are the people who tried to forcibly pull down the scarf or ban it in the public sphere et cetera, et cetera.

Turkey's still unresolved, but we saw the Islamic Revolution in Iran; the less said about Afghanistan the better; and North Africa – I mean, we have seen, for example, the French also had the notion about not allowing an elected Islamic government to take over because that would contribute to militant Islam, and lo and behold, Algeria, which had not had that kind of militant Islam ended up having the GIA instead of the FIS. Try and learn from Malaysia where an overwhelming majority of Muslim women cover their heads, where the people have the right to vote and elect and remove governments, where in two states Islamists have been elected to office, and in one have been voted out only recently. I think that is the better model for the rest of the Muslim world.

Thank you all.

(Applause.)

MR. DIONNE: Thank you so much. It occurred to me during Husain's wonderfully entertaining discussion that if Yves Saint Laurent had created a headscarf 15 years ago, everyone would be wearing it, and we wouldn't be having this problem in France.

I want to make two quick observations. First, to paraphrase, I believe, what Gerald Ford said, Justin has suffered enough, and so I will not ask my own question until the end of the session, because I want to bring the audience in. Also, as it happens, I do appreciate Husain's reference to Saint Paul. As it happens, I met my wife 17 years ago today on Easter Sunday, and at our very Catholic wedding she did not want a word of those Saint Paul passages read, and I thought that was a good judgment myself.

I'd like to give Justin a chance to reply to all of this, and then I want to bring the audience in, and I'm going to reserve my own question until the end.

Justin, thank you.

MR. VAISSE: Thanks. I'll just limit my comments to a very, very few words. Let's get straight to the point of defining laïcité. Laïcité stands for tolerance and emancipation, and I think Raja brought very good quotations – except that if it's true that it's emancipation and freedom, it's also neutrality. If you want to translate laïcité the best way you can do it in just one word is really "neutrality." That is to say, it's not anti-religious. Laïcité is not anti-religion like secularism can sound in English..

Laïcité is not exclusion, it is the acceptation of all religions and a principle of tolerance, but at the same time, to ensure the concrete possibility of exerting that freedom of religion, you need to ensure a minimum of neutrality and this, of course, depends all on the historical context that you have. And, for example, in the 18th and 19th centuries you had this dominant Catholic Church that made freedom of religion shaky and actually impeded the birth of the French democracy. So that's why laïcité is both emancipation and freedom but also is the enforcement of a strict principle of neutrality. Religious matters should remain in the private sphere.

And so school – and that's where I would disagree with you – – is the place where this enforcement happens. As soon as 1905 there was an exclusion of religion from school because school is the place where, for six hours a day, you would be free as much as possible of all external pressures, be they regional or religious or commercial or whatever. And so that's why laïcité also has teeth, so to speak.

Just a couple of quick comments on the René Rémond quote because I think there was a misunderstanding. René Rémond was part of the Stasi Commission, and so I don't think he was speaking about the Stasi Commission, but probably about somebody else. And –

MS. ELHABTI: (Off mike) – during the discussion that he said that comment to the rest of the commission saying that the interpretation they gave to laïcité is very extremist. That was during the discussion.

MR. VAISSE: Yeah, except he's an historian, a specialist of Catholicism in particular, and so he signed on to the recommendation of the commission. The only thing he said was that afterwards he regretted that other recommendations of the commission had not been taken into account.

A quick point on the European Convention of Human Rights. Actually, the commission acted in full awareness and respect of the European Convention of Human Rights, which authorizes limiting expressions of religious faith in circumstances where these create problems of public order or attacks on the freedom of conscience of others. So there's no chance that this law will be invalidated because of the Convention, because it actually is in line with it, if you will.

So, let me now address a point that you both raised, that is to say, questioning what is the real problem is. Okay, it's very well to say everybody is allowed to wear a scarf or not wear a scarf. That's fine, that's wonderful. It's a wonderful world. But, at the same time, concretely on the ground, sometimes it's just not possible, and I'll give you a very empirical example. I was in Berlin at the end of December, and Berlin is a very good example in this case. In some schools in Berlin, you will see that all the girls wear the headscarf, which is a very good example of group pressures. If you go into the literature about this – the very detailed literature about these empirical cases – you will find a whole range of examples and studies that show that group pressure does exist, and sometimes you actually do need to protect those who don't want to wear the headscarf.

That exists, it's not just an invention. It does exist and so the Saint-Exupery quote that you mentioned is wonderful. Your difference enriches me. Of course, who wouldn't agree, but the question is how do you protect those who don't want this difference in one group? So we still are left with the same problem.

Two small points on what's going on in France for the creation of private schools and also the creation of Muslim schools. All the creation of Jewish or Catholic or Muslim schools takes a long time because it's a process of negotiating with the state. It takes a bit less than a decade basically, and so the first Muslim school to start the process was only in the mid-1990s, so that's why now you have only one private Muslim school. But I can assure you that when you want to open a Catholic school or a Jewish school, it takes as much time to do it because you need to make sure that all the teachings are coordinated with the Ministry of Education et cetera. So it's just a process that takes time.

But then now all the private schools that have a contract with the state, which is the case with most of them, are just very inexpensive, and I know, because I was in one of these private schools, a Catholic one, and they are extremely inexpensive. That was when the franc still existed; now, in Euros, it would be something like 250 Euros for a term – that is for three months in the French system. So, actually, when there are Muslim schools – and some are in the process of being created – that will be definitely an option.

And just one last point, Raja, on your quote of Patrick Weil: It's not very fair to say that the interview he gave was aimed at an Arab or a French-Arab audience, because it was in English and it was written in English and it was published in an American paper… And so I don't think he was speaking to a home audience, and I just think that the quote in The New York Times is a very partial quote. I happen to know Patrick Weil, and I know that it's not the entirety of his view.

A couple of things on what Husain said. I pride myself for having refused last year to go on the O'Reilly Factor no less than five times, and it was always such a pleasure when they called – when an assistant of O'Reilly would call me and said Oh, we really would like you to talk about France and why France is so bad with the U.S. et cetera, and I always prided myself of refusing. I did a lot of CNN and Newshour et cetera but I never did O'Reilly. So I wanted to mention that because it's always a pleasure for me.

So, on the number of girls, there were a lot of them in the early 1990s, but the numbers have dropped to about 1,500 – but 1,500 is the number of cases where there is a problem. That is to say, where there's a negotiation between the girl and the school, and usually with the principle of the school, but not the number of girls that get excluded. That number has been constantly down. In 1994-5 it was about 300 and now it's about 100, 150. So out of ten times more, out of 1,500, you get down to 150 and usually – so you can always quote one case where it didn't work where the girl didn't get distance education, but in most of the cases – and there's literature on that that you can dwell on – they've always been taken either by other private school or by distance education.

A point about your family: I guess your mother is not interested in attending a French public school, right? So, I don't think Chirac will ask her anything-

MR. HAQQANI: She wanted a good education, so therefore she had it in India and Pakistan. (Laughter.)

MR. VAISSE: Excellent, excellent. So that's wonderful. So now we don't have the problem of the mother having to take off her headscarf, and for the teenager, I'm happy that you mentioned that, because it goes right into one of my points. That is to say, teenagers do what they want, and so I'm sure that on the 16th day, if you had told your daughter not to wear the scarf, she would have kept it, and that's exactly one of the reasons to wear the headscarf that I mentioned at the very beginning of my speech. That is to say, sometimes it's just – it can be a lot of different things – but sometimes it's just the expression of teenager rebellion. That is to say, if you had forbidden her to wear the headscarf she would probably have worn it just out of contradiction, because that's how teenagers are, and you described that very well.

MR. HAQQANI: I would like you to explain that, because as I see it – I mean, maybe it's a different kind of reasoning, but the way I would see it is, does that mean that everything that requires or involves teenage or potential for teenage rebellion requires legislation and the state to intervene?

For example, on the question of peer pressure: Okay, so children smoke from peer pressure. Has the French state made any law for preventing that peer pressure? Why does it only have to be in this one sphere, because these are mixing arguments about teenagers will do – of course, they'll do that. All I'm talking about is in the context of individual freedom, the argument that children and teenagers wear the hijab only because of parental pressure is not necessarily correct, that some of them may make the choice to do it and the law should allow them to exercise that choice. That is the point that I would like you to address.

MR. VAISSE: Right.

MR. HAQQANI: How does the state's intervention – on whatever grounds, whether it's teenage rebellion or this or that, how does the state's intervention in what is essentially a matter of faith and religion, how does that improve French secularism and the practice of French secularism, and how does that improve the chances of the Arab and North African immigrant population in France becoming more integrated into France? That's what I would like to understand.

MR. VAISSE: At the beginning of my speech, I explained the four or five or six reasons why girls wore headscarves, and one of them was because they were forced by their parents and another was just the opposite attitude. That is to say, they want to contradict their parents and what their father or brother tells them. So you have just the two different behaviors that are just the opposite, and I think if we want to be faithful to what happens on the ground, you have to describe all these different things.

Whereas, for the comparison with smoking, the only thing – I think we must keep in mind some measure – I mean, there was never huge, bloody wars because of smoking, and there were bloody religious wars in many places in the world, including in France, and so you would understand that it's a bit different and that the subject is a bit more grave, and so that state intervention is necessary. Moreover, I would say that the issue is to protect the freedom of some of them precisely to be able to practice a religion freely –

MR. HAQQANI: Just simply we are not talking about – religious wars are the result of religious belief per se, not about one manifestation of it. So are you suggesting that basically then the state should intervene to ban religion completely, which of course, I mean some people would advocate? But is that the purpose – I'm just trying to understand the logic of it, because to me it does not add up.

(Cross talk.)

MR. VAISSE: There must be some place during the day –

MR. HAQQANI: There is a lady sitting in the audience with a headscarf. Does she represent violence or militancy?

MR. VAISSE: Are we in a French public school?

MR. HAQQANI: No, I'm just asking you.

MR. VAISSE: I'm just asking you.

MR. HAQQANI: How does it represent it in the French public school? I want to understand. Was there an act of violence prompted purely by the hijab that prompted the ban? I would like to hear that, because I didn't find that in your article or any of the other justifications.

MR. VAISSE: No, violence is when you don't have the choice of not wearing the headscarf. That's where violence is, and that's where the state must weigh in order to protect religious freedom at least in one place, which is public school, which is the place where knowledge must be put before everything else, especially the pressure from political or religious or commercial or whatever – from whatever origin there is. And so the state has a duty to protect the individual against group pressure and against any kind of pressure and there's one place for that which is the school and between when you're from six to 16 more or less and after you can do whatever you want.

As soon as you're into the street, you can do whatever you want. When you're in a public conference at Brookings you can do whatever you want, but school is different. That's really the place where the citizen is acquiring its knowledge and that's where he must be – he should be free of any pressure from any part.

A last point on the quotations just –

MS. ELHABTI: Can I just say a word on –

MR. VAISSE: Sure.

MS. ELHABTI: You're talking about the principle of neutrality in public schools, because it's supposed to be the place where students or future citizens are being taught, and I did say that laïcité means neutrality of school at the public space, but it means the neutrality of teachers, of the space itself, not neutrality of students. You cannot ask them to renounce to their identity just to access school, and this, actually, it's not me – I mean, part of my ignorance because I'm not an expert of French laïcité, but this has even convinced – (speaks in French) – who are advocating this point of view.

They're saying that there is nothing that requires from students to be neutral. They're required from teachers, from staff, from the space, administration to be neutral so that everybody, every student can express what they are, who they are at the same level of equality. No one has a better chance than the other to express him or herself, which is not the case now. Now what is the case is those who don't want to wear hijab are given full chance to express who they are. Those who do want to wear it are denied this right. This is not neutral.

MR. VAISSE: (Chuckles.)

MS. ELHABTI: How could this be neutral?

MR. VAISSE: Yeah, but what do you against group pressure and the fact that some of them don't have the freedom –

MS. ELHABTI: I'm sorry, but we talked about group pressure. I mean, how can 1,500 pressure 500,000 –

MR. VAISSE: Oh, come on, Raja, you know full that they're concentrated in some high schools.

MS. ELHABTI: I do know – I've never been to a French high school, thank God. I've been in Morocco and in Morocco, though, even – it's a bad thing to cover in Morocco. It's very badly seen, but I have sisters who are covered. I have a sister who goes to school in Germany – thank God, I hope that they're not going to do this because otherwise she's going to drop from school. I do have another sister who is going to school in France. Thank God, she's not wearing the veil, but I mean, just think that was the opposite.

What would that mean for them? It would mean dropping out of school, because I'm sure my sister, the way I know my sister, she's not taking off her veil. She's not and it's not because of my father or my mom forced her. It's not because society – the Moroccan society – nobody cares in Moroccan society whether a girl wears the veil or not. You know that and you know that in North Africa it's not a problem anymore. Nobody pressure anybody to wear the veil in North Africa, and this is a really false debate. This is not about the pressure of wearing the veil. It's not about that, and we all know that. It's –

MR. VAISSE: I mean, the problem –

(Cross talk)

MS. DIONNE: (Off mike) – just let Justin finish, and then I do want to bring in the audience, then we should –

MR. VAISSE: Yeah, yeah, I'll be very quick. No, I mean it's very well to be in favor of letting everybody do what they want. I'm all for those who want to wear the veil, as Husain said, and I'm all for those who don't want to wear the veil. That's great, but that's a sort of bird eye view from very, very far, with big principles, but on the ground, unfortunately, the reality is a bit more complex, is a bit more messy. You do have some groups that are advancing their beliefs and their political agenda, and one of the battlegrounds is the school, and I think we should not keep that out of mind.

If you focus just on the girl that has a strong religious belief like your sister, for example, and who would like both to attend school and keep her veil, of course that's a problem, but as Patrick Weil was saying, you're just sort of trying to balance one freedom against the other. And so you have to take into account the reality where militant Islam does exist and you don't have only the case of the girl that has real strong religious belief, you also have the case of the girl that is pushed by militant groups and so you have to take this reality into account to protect the freedom of other girls.

I'll stop there in order to give the floor to the audience.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. It is a tribute to this panel that usually you wait a moment when people put their hands up. There are at least five hands that have gone up even before our panel stopped speaking.

Can we go – wow! This is impressive. Let's take four at a time if we could. Why don't we start over here and then the lady over here and, if I may say it that way, the lady in the veil. Bless you! (Laughter.) And then over here and then we'll keep going.

Sir. If you could identify yourself for the transcript, we are going to put a transcript out on this.

Q: Yeah, Joseph Loconte with the Heritage Foundation.

MR. DIONNE: A great writer on these subjects –

Q: Thank you, E.J. This is for anybody on the panel, but the point that was made about the pressure, it does sound very much like kind of an Americans Untied for the Separation of Church and State argument or an ACLU argument, which you tend to hear on the state side here about why we shouldn't have religious expression in the schools. And I guess I'm starting to wonder if moderate Muslims – anybody on the panel here – would moderate Muslims look at the French model of church/state relations, do they think that is the model? Do they think that's the model of the West? Do they think that's the American model? Or are they willing to make the distinctions that some of you on the panel are willing to make, and is it important to make those distinctions internationally?

MR. DIONNE: Take notes and we'll keep moving.

Please.

Q: Yeah, hi, my name's Leila Pope. This is directed at Justin: You're argument that you need to protect the majority of French Muslim schoolgirls who don't wear the veil strikes me as very similar – I'm half-Iranian – to the Iranian argument for making the veil obligatory. They said, you know, pre-revolution there was an elite of women who didn't wear the veil, and that made more traditional women feel very uncomfortable, and so, you know, that was their justification, which I find really out of order.

The second point I wanted to make, from growing up in England I have lots of Bangladeshi friends who went to government schools and at one stage – due probably to peer pressure, because their parents didn't wear the veil – put on the veil, and then a few years later, some of them decided not to wear the veil, some continued with wearing the veil. Now, why I cite this is because you seem so concerned with kind of eradicating Islamic extremism, you know, we must eradicate the desire to wear the veil. Let people work through the process. Let people work it out for themselves. You can't negate this pressure that may exist for other people but you have to let them work it through. It's their own free will to work this through.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you.

Ma'am? Yes, thank you.

Q: Hi, thank you very much. I don't mind being, you know, called out [for wearing a headscarf], but since laïcité here has actually been rallied as a justification for the ban, I would like to actually point out a few things about France and how they institutionally actually violate this very concept of laïcité by, for example, subsidizing religious schools. We know the French Ministry of Education subsidizes religious schools in exchange for a commitment to cover the national syllabus in addition to religious teachings. Now, 95 percent of religious schools are subsidized by the state are actually Catholic and there is not one Islamic school that is subsidized in the whole metropolitan of France.

MR. DIONNE: One is.

Q: Okay, maybe now after 1995 when Alec Hargue was my former professor actually wrote this book, and in addition to that actually Catholics enjoy a privileged status in France, such as coinciding public holidays around the Catholic calendar besides the direct state funding of religious schools, like I said, or church-run schools.

Second of all, in terms of Article 1 of the French Constitution, which actually is equality of all citizens, now in fact what this ban is doing is privileging some religiously devout children over others, because if I were a Mennonite girl and wore long skirts to school and decided to never cut my hair, I would have the right to do that. But as a Muslim child who believes that a hijab is an obligation by God, I would not have the right to do that. So, in fact, it's a direct violation of Article 1 of the French Constitution, because just as the Mennonite girl has a right to practice her religion freely and have a free public education, so would I as a French citizen.

I think the debate is the fact that the hijab is in itself foreign to French culture and I think it has a lot to do with this idea of French nationalism, because the hijab, it's not just the fact that it's a religious symbol. It's the fact that it's seen as a reluctance to assimilate, and as an American citizen who is Muslim, I would like to point out that the hijab has nothing to do with a reluctance to assimilate. I consider myself 100 percent American. If this place isn't my home, I don't know what is, because this is the question that has come up in the American public sphere is why have American Muslims refused to assimilate. I just want to say that this is a mark of faith, and faith doesn't have national geographic boundaries. You carry faith wherever you go, wherever you live, and to me, this is about me and God, so regardless of my nationality, I should have the freedom to practice what I believe God has asked me to do.

And, I mean, just lastly, as reductionist as this may seem, I just want to ask, you brought up the point, Justin, of the idea that Muslim girls wearing a hijab in school is infringing upon the freedom of conscience of other students. I went to high school here in the United States. I was the only one out of 2,200 students of my high school wearing hijab, and Florida State University, out of 35,000 students. I think, if we're talking about pressure in a country where we're the minority, I think the pressure is really the other way around, especially when we have been stigmatized as submissive and submitting to a misogynistic interpretation of the Qur'an, which in fact, I see as an affirmation of my feminine identity to be able to dress this way and not allow strange men to judge my body and my physical appearance on a scale of one to 10 when that is the only value that they're attaching to me as a human being. I actually see it as an affirmation of feminist ideas.

But, I mean, the question I was asking is, maybe this is reductionist, but how does me here in the audience wrapping my hair with a scarf infringe upon the freedom of conscience of anyone else in this room? I really would like to know.

Thank you very much.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you very much.

Sir. Everybody keep in mind these thoughtful comments. Thank you very much.

Q: Will Armatruda, Catholic University. The point was made early on that Muslim scholars disagree as to whether the hijab is required by the religion or not. For those of us not expert in Islam, if someone could comment just very briefly on how that division comes down.

Second, Ms. Elhabti made the point that laïcité should mean that the state should be neutral, not that students should not have religious convictions. Would she feel differently whether this ban on the headscarf applied only to teachers but not to students?

And third, not so much a question but a comment, in many ways this whole issue reminds me of the argument about what some call female genital mutilation, what others call clitoridectomy. People like Alice Walker have said, Oh, this is oppression of women et cetera, et cetera, but there have been voices in Africa who saw this very much as an affirmation of African identity. And there's a very good thesis by a scholar named Jocelyn Murray about the circumcision controversy among the Kuikui in Kenya in the 1930s, which anyone can find in dissertation abstract if they want to really follow this up.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you very much. If everybody can keep all those questions straight and respond in brief, because we've got – it's 5:15, we've got about 15 more minutes. If everybody try to take all of those questions as seems appropriate so that we can go back to the audience, because there were at least another four or five hands up, and I'd like to include them.

Who wants to start?

MR. HAQQANI: I will start first with the question of the French versus the American model of secularism. I think that, in practice, most Muslim countries that took the lead in secularization – I mean, you must understand militant Islam is a subject of a different representation, but it is, and this whole business of Islamic revivalism as we know it today, is actually a response to modernity and the whole period of greater exchange, interaction between the West and the Islamic world beginning with the First World War primarily, mostly – (inaudible.)

So, in that sense, unfortunately the early exponents or supporters of secularism in the Muslim world took the French model because that was – because the 1905 law was just coming around when we came in. So Ataturk tried to adapt the French model; Bouraquiba who came subsequently. Ironically, for example, in Urdu, the world for secularism, because it's a new term and so a new term had to be found, the term is ladiniyat, which basically means not having a religion, which is not what it actually means.

The concept of the separation between church and state is something that now is being discussed, and many of us in the Muslim world, especially those who know the American experience, are now making the argument that perhaps the American experience of secularism is a better choice for us, because the ones that have been attempted have been seen as anti-religious. Whatever Justin will say, the fact remains that within the Muslim community, it is seen as pulling down hijabs rather than allowing people to make a choice and the state being neutral, which is how we see the American experience. And so hopefully in the future it will be seen differently.

However, the whole political atmosphere right now of Islam versus the West unfortunately does not allow the average man in the street in Cairo or Islamabad or Dhaka to make a distinction. The French thing actually has created an anti-Western backlash because, unfortunately, people there do not know the details of the French-American divergence, and so there it is being seen as another act of perfidy on the part of the Westerners trying to take away our religion from us.

And there, perhaps, there is some role for people like Raja and myself and other Muslims who are moderate and who want to convince the world that there is coexistence rather than conflict, but so far it is playing in the hands of the conflict. For example, Lashkar-e-Taiba would have paid no attention to France ever if it hadn't been for the headscarf controversy. This is this extremist group in India and Pakistan. They would never have paid any attention to France if it weren't for this, because this has now – they have a long list of grievances against the West going back to 1492. This is the latest one, and, unfortunately, it just adds to their grievances.

MS. ELHABTI: I will just address very briefly some of the questions that came up. The first one was that Muslim scholars disagree about the veil or hijab, whatever we call it, and actually I don't want to go into great details about this issue. It is really a very large issue, and there are lengthy books written on that, but the fact is that there are few verses in the Qur'an, the holy book, about not hijab but about the dress code, how a modest Muslim woman should be dressed to avoid being harassed in the street. And actually when you go to the context of the revelation, that women were being harassed in streets, and so that verse was revealed to tell them to cover, not to be very provocative, so that the people know that they are good Muslims and chaste women and they don't harass them.

The disagreement here is not about the verses. The disagreement is about what parts of the body should be covered and how, and this is a disagreement among Muslim scholars. The fact is – (inaudible) – it might have seemed to us that he was – he disagreed, he doesn't actually. He is one of the opponents of the Islamic veil. What he said is that if you are in a foreign country that has different rules you have to comply to the rules. He doesn't say that that the veil is not compulsory or is not a part of Islam. That's what he said, and there are many other scholars that actually said the same.

And I remember that during the first debate in France about the veil, that arose because of one or two Moroccan girls who went through the same process as the last case. The king of Morocco intervened and asked them to take off the veil in his quality as commander of the faithful, because that's his quality. He decides about religious affairs as well, and he asked them to take it off and not to create a problem because they're living under a foreign country, they shouldn't contravene – whatever – the belief system or the law – the legal system.

There are some Muslim scholars that now try to read the verses differently, to say that since the parts of the body are not clearly described, then it depends on the context of where a Muslim woman lives. So if I am in a Western country, then I decide that, well, it meant a loose shirt or whatever would be seen as modest is enough, and if I'm in a traditional society it's different. This is – I mean, these are some lectures. I'm not for or against, I'm just telling you, but the largest majority of Muslim scholars – let's say it – agree that it's compulsory upon women. This is not the Muslim feminist point of view, of course, but this is the majority of Muslim scholars, and I believe that if we have to contest this, we have to do it from within the Islamic tradition, and that shouldn't be dictated from outside the Islamic tradition.

The second thing is that there was a question about female circumcision, and actually this exists in some African countries and some of them are, of course, Muslim – Egypt, Mauritania, Sudan and Nigeria. And, actually, this is not a part of Islam per se. The tradition existed before the coming of Islam, and it persisted after that because it was not forbidden clearly. It was kind of disliked by Islam but not forbidden. But in most Muslim countries, it's not practiced, and you're right, I've read many articles from feminists, non-Muslim feminists, who actually advocated that this practice was a celebration of their femininity and it was not demeaning to them. And I believe this is their right to decide whether it was – if they have the choice to decide whether they want to go through this practice or not, and some of them actually – I've read that they went through the practice when they were 18 and 20 years old because they decided that they want to do it. So this is a very different issue from the veil here.

MR. DIONNE: Could you hold –

MS. ELHABTI: Sure.

MR. DIONNE: Hold that thought, because I want to Justin to get in, and I want to bring in one round of questions and everybody will have a chance to –

MS. ELHABTI: So, all right.

MR. DIONNE: So if you can hold – just scribble that last thought so I can go back to the audience because I don't want us to go over time too much.

Justin.

MR. VAISSE: Yeah, just two short points. Once again, where you stand depends on what you look at. That is to say, if you look at one particular girl that has strong feelings, and then you say, Oh, it's really unfair that she cannot – for six hours during the day she cannot wear the hijab. Of course, it's unfair and it's an infringement on her freedom, but then when you look more closely at the whole picture, at what's going on in France with this rapid growth of this Muslim population, which is a new phenomenon starting in the '60s and '70s and now coming to about 4.5 to 5 million people. That population of Mulsim origin is 99 percent peaceful and moderate, but you also see that there are movements that are not so peaceful and moderate and that radical Islam does exist.

And I want to make one thing clear. It has been suggested that in the eyes of the French people or the French government or whatever, hijab was the same as extremism. No, that's not true. Otherwise they would have been calls to ban the hijab everywhere, including in the university and in the street, just like the Iranian case. Of course it's not the case. It's only in public school, and hijab is not equated with extremism.

It's the same with the quotes that Raja used. I mean, we all know that we can find on the Internet outrageous quotes on any group, on the Catholics, on the U.S. government, on Islam and Buddhism, et cetera. There are crazies all around, but these quotes were simply not representative of the mainstream debates and the mainstream positions. So here, I would just caution you to maybe – probably for those of you who read French – to go back to the report, the Bernard Stasi report, because it's very well balanced, and it offers a lot of thoughts, including the testimonies by real people; Husain was asking for concrete examples of case studies, and there you can find the case studies.

One thing on laïcité that still allows the state to fund religious schools. That's true, of course, and then some people in France are in the process of creating more Muslim schools than the only Islamic one that exists – the only Muslim private school that exists. And once these schools will be there – probably in 2005, maybe in 2007, 2010 – they will be subsidized all the same as the Catholic schools and as the Jewish schools as long as they have this contract with the state. So laïcité is not – I mean, the Stasi Commission was not a sort of Ayatollah of secularism. Laïcité has always been tolerance, dialogue and negotiation; really, that's what it's all about.

A last point on the days off – it's true and that was one of the recommendations of the Bernard Stasi Commission, which was to offer days off for Yom Kippur, for the Eid-el-Fitr celebration at the end of Ramadan. That was one of the suggestions of the Stasi Commission to make them days off, to make them holidays. And unfortunately it was not followed up on, even if already 45 percent of the French population say that they saw no problem with that. We all know how it is when a new subject enters in the public sphere: At first there's a reaction that is not necessarily positive, but then when the debate goes on, it goes up,- so that's one thing that I regret that was not taken by the Stasi Commission – (inaudible.)

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. The French bureaucracy moves with equally deliberate speed for Muslim, Catholic and Jew alike, I think is the summary of this.

All right, we have a lot of hands. I'd like to get everyone in. Starting with the gentleman in the back, move up here, we'll go to Al, we'll go to the lady here. If you could be brief in your comments, I'd be grateful, and the panel could also be brief, because we are already about to hit our limit. So thank you for your patience; I appreciate it.

Q: I think it was a very interesting debate; thank you very much. My question goes back to the big problems of integration, and I think any country has difficulties with that, and in fact, it goes also to problems of identity. I was brought up in the U.S. I had to pledge allegiance to the flag every morning. I'm not American, why do I have to do that? When I was in France, nobody was asked to sing the Marseillaise every morning. So –

MR. DIONNE: You didn't have a problem with the under God part, it was everything else in the pledge.

Q: It's just that we all have different ways of implementing our identity, and in France, it so happens that we have been through religious oppression. It's a fear in our country, we've had that problem for centuries, and we've found a way to come with peace with that history was to vote this law of laïcité. From my point of view, the main problem is not that religious symbols are banned from public schools, it is that we don't have enough Muslim schools. Once you'll have more Muslim schools, you'll have more opportunities for students who want to practice Islam and study in France to do the two together. In France, if you're Catholic and you want to practice your religion every day and go to school, you go to Catholic private schools.

It's interesting, because we have this debate about religion because we had the same debate about languages in France. That was two years ago, and we had to vote a convention on local languages. Now, if you study in Brittany or in Corsica you have to learn either Breton or Corse and why should – it's like that's it, that's the rule now. So if you don't want to learn Breton or Corse, you just have to move and to adapt. There are rules to protect and promote each aspect of the identity and I think it's best that way.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you very much. There was someone – oh, wow! This is impossible. We're not going to be able to get everybody in, and I apologize. Let's – (inaudible) – up unless people are really brief in deference to everybody else because we can't go on much longer.

Q: One sentence: Isn't this the price of immigration, when you move somewhere you're going to take on the culture of the place you move and it seems kind of galling that you come to another place and then expect it to be exactly as the place you left.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. That's a model comment, a model of brevity. Thank you.

Q: I'll be very brief in my question. As you alluded to up there in your presentations, you said that let's put the hijab issue aside and let's focus on the larger issues of integration. There are clear disparities economically, in education, in housing, the list goes on and on – employment. How do we begin to resolve those issues? I would imagine for the French it'd be an increasing concern, as you mentioned, as 5 million Muslims in a country of 60 million people, getting close to 10 percent of the population. Eventually France is going to have to address these issues. How do we begin doing that?

And also, a question I have – I'd be interested in your opinions – in terms of the problems with integration, is this something that's inherent in the Muslim community? How are other minorities integrating in France? Is it really – is it a question of the French republican values like laïcité? Or does it work in both directions, do Muslim communities – does the Muslim community need to think about how they can integrate better and does France need to make compromises in their value system?

MR. DIONNE: Thank you.

Over here.

Q: Briefly, because I didn't hear mention by your panelists – the law that was debated adamantly in France before it was voted presented all the arguments that I heard today. So it's quite interesting that internationally we have the same debate.

I just want to say that we have in France now a group of French women of Muslim faith, very articulate and very outspoken, who contribute actively to define what it is today to be a French woman of Muslim faith. These women have come out in favor of the law, and I wish somebody here had been able to represent their thoughts, because they're very interesting to listen to, and those women do live in those neighborhoods, majority Muslim, in France and they're French. So I just regret that we didn't get a chance to hear them and I cannot speak for them obviously but just bear in mind that they exist. They are called "Ni putes, ni soumises"- and they're very articulate and intelligent.

MR. DIONNE: Merci beaucoup.

This gentleman next to her and the man in the back – sir, yes, you have been very patient.

Q: Two brief questions for Justin mostly. First of all, how many lawmakers and policymakers in France are actually Muslim, especially ones who had a say on this bill and especially how many of them are Muslim women – first question. Second question, I'd be curious to know more about the debate surrounding any sort of ban on the kippah, knowing that some Jews, myself not included, approach it as an obligation of faith, a commandment from God. Others, such as myself, do not, and yet this is a minority community within France, some elements of which are very militant and have very militant beliefs but with which the French state has not historically had an antagonistic relationship, as it perceives itself with the Muslim world, but rather one of oppression and now guilt. I'm very curious to know of the differences and parallels in the treatment of the two matters.

MR. DIONNE: Just parenthetically on that point, an Orthodox Jewish lawyer I know was arguing with a military person about a rule which was wholly neutral, which required all soldiers inside to take their hats off, and he said he was all in favor of neutral rules, but he thought the rule should say they should always keep their hat on. It's a powerful point, I thought.

Sir?

Q: Thanks. Some have argued that President Chirac politically made this decision because of trying to outflank Le Pen and others; that in some ways the pressures from the right were such that he felt that he needed to move this way and the Stasi Commission and others have done that. But when you look at how this is played out politically, both in France and around the world, it seems to me that it's moved a long ways from the original concept that you all articulated what laïcité is about, dating back to 1905, of religious neutrality, and instead it skewed over to infringements on minority rights.

My question is that we've heard – or there's been some discussion about how, for example, the Sikh community and others have been affected by this in ways that weren't anticipated when the original law was put forth. And when you look at the effects that have happened of young women leaving school and going to other schools, do you think unofficially any speculation on whether the French government may try to back away from this or find ways to accommodate – I mean, in some ways has been there more of a firestorm out of this than the French government expected?

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. Okay, I'm going to have to call a halt soon.

All right, you have been very patient, Al has and this lady here, and I'm sorry – I apologize to everyone else.

Q: Thank you. Speaking as a French person, a few things have hit me about the conversation. One is I think we've been looking at this a lot from the Muslim point of view and we haven't been looking at it from the French national point of view, and we haven't – and I thought a point was important about the fact that France has been struggling with religion for a long time and that it considers that people are citizens above all and that's one of the reasons, I think, that this law was important, and the fact that they want to keep religion a private matter.

The other thing is France has had immigrants for not that much time and it's learning and it's starting to create things like the CFCM and it's starting to change the laws, and it seems to me like we've been doing this for 50 years and the U.S. has been doing it for 200 years and it doesn't seem that things are much better here. That's it.

MR. DIONNE: Al and then the lady – you still want to come in, right?

Q: Al Millikan , affiliated with the Washington Independent Writers. I received an email from a Muslim mentioning how the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, has often been depicted artistically and historically with a similar headscarf. Has this been brought up in the French debate at all since this modesty, purity, respect in honor of the Virgin Mary is one area of Christian-Muslim agreement rather than disagreement?

MR. DIONNE: Thank you, and then lastly, and again I apologize for everyone – to everyone else I couldn't include.

Q: Thank you. My question is, I'd be interested in knowing your proposals to address the problem that Mr. Haqqani brought up, the problem of some girls not being educated, dropping out of school because they wouldn't give up their veils. What's your proposal to solve that problem?

MR. DIONNE: And then having held off to this point, I just want to ask Justin to, in closing – and maybe because he's been battered so much I'm going to let him have the last word, so we'll go down the line – address one last point. I think one of the problems Americans have had in understanding this is what Wilferd McClay, a historian at University of Tennessee, has called

two forms of secularism. Ours is largely negative, that is to say that you protect religion from government establishment and interference, which would mean a kind of individualist view that people can wear kippahs or headscarves or large crosses in public schools.

The French version of laïcité is, well, McClay calls it a kind of alternative faith, but whether you accept that language or not, it is a view that the public sphere has to keep these symbols out, lest there be a religious war. I'm just curious, as a close student of both of our countries, whether there is something useful in this American, if you will, negative – which in some ways is more positive to religion – this negative view of the state's role. And if there is every any way that that would penetrate in France, because it's – this whole debate is very paradoxical, because the U.S. is supposed to be a much more religious place, yet we don't give public aid to religious schools and all of that.

So, in addition to dealing with all these questions and all these attacks, if you could close by talking about the paradoxes of differences between our countries.

Husain.

MR. HAQQANI: I'll just start very quickly. The price of immigration, yes, but I think both sides should pay because, after all, the whole problem with immigration is that countries that encourage immigration at a particular time have to be prepared for the fact that the immigrants are going to bring different cultures, different languages, different lifestyles and different races to them. You can't have a one-sided attitude that well, we will have you when we need free or cheap or relatively cheap labor because our labor force is depleted and needs more people, and then when we have more then, first of all, we are going to beat up on you, and second we are not going to let you be what you are or what you want to be. So this is a problem of everywhere, but I think that that is a major problem in Europe right now.

The whole concept of immigration is that you can't have pure states anymore, and so that's my answer to the young French lady here. I mean, what it means to be French – you have to change what it means to be French to accommodate 5 million of your citizens who may have a slightly different view of what it means to be French, and you should have thought about it before considering or opening the doors to immigration. Nations have to do it in a modern context. It's necessary.

Second, I think that the Sikh and the Jewish communities have sided with the Muslims on this one because they have been affected, and they have been affected without necessarily the intention. I think that the purpose was Muslim specific, but to make it less Muslim specific, the Sikhs and the Jews and the kippah and the turban was also included.

On the question of the issue of when you make the headscarf the symbol of extremism and ban it on those grounds, because that has been the context. I think context is very important. One of the consequences has been, for example, a Muslim woman with a headscarf went into a bank and was not served by the bank. They told her to go out and take the scarf off before they would serve her in the bank. Situations like that are likely to happen.

I posit a question for Justin to try and address: Who is likely to be more integrated, the Muslim policewoman in Britain who is allowed to wear her headscarf while serving in the state and for the state and having had that headscarf while she was at public school, or the child who, even if she took off her headscarf to get a public school education, knows that she is different because there was a debate about her at age 12, whether she could wear this headscarf going to school or not? I think that the former is more likely to be integrated than the latter, and I think that is something that the French should take into consideration.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you.

Raja?

MS. ELHABTI: Oh, I'll keep it very short. I just have two comments. The first one is, whether the problem of wearing the veil or of integration in general is a problem inherent to the Muslim community per se or if other communities do suffer from it. And I actually didn't talk about the Jewish community because – and pardon my ignorance – I don't know if it means the same thing as what the veil means to Muslims, but I have come across testimonies of Sikh people, and it actually means exactly the same for them for male Sikh people to wear their turbans than for Muslim women to wear their veil. And they actually demonstrated in the streets against this ban, and many of them said it equals to tell us, Go naked. I mean, this is exactly what it means for us. And I believe for many Muslim women this is exactly what it means for them.

The second thing is that I didn't want to go through what the veil means, religiously or for women themselves, because I can't claim that I know every meaning of the veil for Muslim women. I'm a Muslim woman. I grew up in a Muslim society in a very Muslim family. My father was a Muslim scholar. He never forced us to wear or to decide whether we should wear or we

shouldn't, and he was a scholar. He was a Muslim scholar, a teacher – a professor of university, and he was very clear about the veil, but he never forced us to do it.

And the same way I can't say what the veil means, I can't also talk for these women. I am a feminist. I consider that I am a feminist. I can't talk for these women and say it's a sign of oppression. I know that they were for the ban; I know that. And I know that many other organizations, not only in France but in other Muslim countries and in North African countries, were for the ban. But it doesn't mean that they are right because they don't have the right to speak for other women. You state your point of view, and you let other people speak for themselves.

I'd like to ensure the right for every woman in the Muslim world to say that I don't want to wear the veil and to be granted this right, because there is nothing in the Islamic jurisprudence, in the Qur'an, that states a clear punishment for a woman that doesn't want to wear the hijab. There is nothing. And if we see manifestations of this in Iran or in the Taliban or whatever, it doesn't mean that it is in the Qur'an. It just means that there are some people who are interpreting the Qur'an the way they want to. And I don't want this to happen. I'm working to prevent this, the same way I want other women who want to wear the veil to be granted this right whether they live in a Muslim country, even more if they live in a country that is supposed to be a human rights defender and committed to women's human rights. I mean, it's even more of an emergency, or of a commitment.

MR. DIONNE: (Off mike.)

MS. ELHABTI: I think that will be a big –

MR. DIONNE: — coming to a stirring conclusion because I want Justin to get in. We're really late. Just one more point, if you would.

MS. ELHABTI: I think that we are almost done. The only thing I think that came in your comments, Justin, I didn't have the time to go to it, is about Rene Remond. He was in the commission, and actually he was against the interpretation of the concept of laïcité. And he actually signed the recommendations, with all surprise they just pick up one measure and they put off all the other measures because nobody likes them. But I'm sure you are aware there were many testimonies of members of the commission who said that they were under tremendous pressure to sign these recommendations, and they said that nobody could have refused to sign the recommendations without being considered as conservative extremist in the eyes of the commission itself and in the eyes of the French public.

MR. VAISSE: Yeah, but remember – group pressure doesn't exist. (Laughter)

MS. ELHABTI: Well, at least it exists in the Stasi Commission politically.

MR. VAISSE: Right. Yeah, but in the high schools, don't worry; it doesn't exist. Anyway –

MS. ELHABTI: You should have different ways of protecting people from group pressure without denying others their rights.

MR. VAISSE: Yeah. No, I think when there's a commission – no, no, I was just making a bad joke. But, you know, when there's a commission like that, there's always pressure to reach a compromise that would be – a consensus that would be as big as possible, and so I think that that's the reason why – but group pressure does exist unfortunately. I'll try to address a couple of points quickly.

On the adaptation to culture and the need for immigrants to adapt to the culture, and also for the country to adapt to the culture of minorities, especially when they are as big as 4 to 5 million people, I couldn't agree more with what Husain said, and I think that I would take a slightly less dramatic view than maybe the impression that has been given. That is to say, I think that broadly – there are big problems, there are huge problems in some places, in some banlieues in particular, but broadly, if you take the sociological indicators, I think that integration is actually going in the right direction. That is to say I think that the immigrants are transforming themselves, and I think that France is transforming itself also, and that it has done some great progress in this direction.

And so I would not take the sort of dramatic and negative view that, you know, everything is going in the wrong direction, everything is painted in black and that it does not go well. I think that to focus only on the headscarf issue has had the effect of giving the impression that everything was polarized around this issue whereas, for example, in this community there is one third of the persons only that describe themselves as believers and even a smaller minority that says that they practice their religion. So I would say that it's not as terrible as it seems..

How many lawmakers took part in the decision from Muslim origin? The answer is probably zero, I think, and that's one of the huge problems that –

MR.: (Off mike.)

MR. VAISSE: One? Oh, oh, two – oh, yeah, three of them but they didn't –

MR.: (Off mike.)

MR. VAISSE: Yeah, well, they were in solidarity with the decision but they didn't vote because they were not members of Parliament. But it's true that Mekachera, Saifi and other ministers are actually at the highest levels, but still there is a huge problem, which is that there are not enough women and there are not enough people from the minorities in our National Assembly, and that's a fact. I mean, that's – I'm sorry?

MS. ELHABTI: Ninety percent male, I believe.

MR. VAISSE: No, it's less because of the law that was passed to get –
MR. : Affirmative action.

MR. VAISSE: No, no, that's affirmative action for – (unintelligible) – parité, the parity between men and women. Anyway, so the answer is, are many lawmakers -s probably zero, and that's way too few.

On the key part, Jewish groups didn't support the protest against the banning. On the contrary, they were in favor of it, all of them. And as for the Sikh, I mean, it's disarming, because you know we had this debate for almost a year. The commission was created with big headlines in the newspapers, and everybody knew that it would probably end up recommending a ban of religious signs, so everybody could read in the papers every day, but now the Sikhs wait until recently to say, okay, that might make a problem for us. So among the 4,000 to 5,000 Sikh that live in France, and a fraction of them of course –

MS. ELHABTI: That's not what – no. There are so many – you can just go on the Internet and you would find so many associations of Sikhs speaking against the law. This is not accurate.

MR. VAISSE: Yeah, but look at the date that they spoke.

MR. DIONNE: We've got to shut it down.

MS. ELHABTI: I think nobody actually talked about it because usually when you create a commission it's a way to –

(Cross talk.)

MR. DIONNE: I'm sorry. I just want to let Justin make his last point.

MS. ELHABTI: Sure.

MR. VAISSE: Yeah. So –

MR. DIONNE: It's the good people who stayed this whole time and they deserve a little –

MR. VAISSE: So the law was really anticipated, and it was easy to predict it. But I'm confident that there will be a way around this with an understanding with the Sikh people who do not wear the turban for religious reasons. That's, again, another figure – another situation, but indirectly for religious reasons.

Thanks for the person who brought up the history thing, because I didn't. It's in the brief, but I didn't talk about it. But there was a lot of blood in France because of religious wars, a lot of it, and this is still in the mind of French people. And that's where I go to the difference between France and America. America was created precisely to escape from this – from religious oppression, and freedom of religion was really at the very basis of the creation of this country, of the United States, whereas in France, the basis of creation of the Republic was precisely to get away from religion and especially to get away from the mixing of religion and politics, which proved so bloody in all the centuries since basically the 15th century.

For the girls that are not educated, it's not true. You can take a couple of examples of girls that – as Husain did – of girls that did go through the system that did not fit into the system, but either they would go to private school, Catholic or non-Catholic, or they would get a distance education. And this is true for all of them, for the 150 of them that have been excluded. So you can find that easily.

One last point on the difference – just to close on the difference between the U.S. and France, and also with Britain because multiculturalism is great and it's wonderful to see that policemen can wear their turban in the English police, for example, and that women can wear the headscarf while they are doing the job. It's wonderful but, I mean, this must be put into a context, and England is interesting in this respect because it has been challenged on its soil by radical militant Islam, and I think you cannot separate the two issues because it's often the same people – not always, as we have seen, but it's sometimes the same people that advocate – that push for protesting against the law and that advocate radical Islam.

And actually, you know, France is a country where you demonstrate all the time. As soon as you have a grievance against the government, you demonstrate.

MR. DIONNE: And even when you don't.

MR. VAISSE: (Chuckles.) And even when you don't, just for fun, and it's true that it's fun. I mean, the ambiance is great, but that's not the issue. The issue is that the demonstrations have been extremely reduced- and the groups that have actually demonstrated were made of, let's say, some unsavory characters. And, I mean, you cannot escape the fact that the people that protested the most and the people that are fighting the most are also from a strain of Islam that we don't approve.

And so I'm referring here to a question about eradicating Islamic extremism. Of course, I think all extremism should be eradicated. And last Friday there was an imam in Brest that has been expelled from France and been sent back to Algeria. And the reason was that he had been defending the March 11th bombing in Spain every Friday since March 11th in his Friday preaching.

And so, yes, we have a different conception. The state is supposed to protect the citizen against religious groups, and there's also a point to be made about religious cults. You know that one of the big issues in French-U.S. differences and a big fight between France and the U.S. is this fight against religious cults and against the Religious Freedom Act that was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1998. And it's exactly the same problems, and it reveals the same difference of conception of the place of church in the society.

The problem with Britain is that precisely it happens that with this wonderful tolerance, in the 1990s what developed in London was what has been called "Londonistan." That is to say, it happens that all the radical Islamists and all the terrorists passed through London, including the only French terrorist that was involved with 9/11, which was Zacarias Moussaoui. He was radicalized not in France but in London. And all the others are the same.

So a degree of control in order to ensure public order I think is not completely totalitarian. And I think here we all have – I mean, Britain, France and the U.S., we all have to learn from the others' experience.

MR. DIONNE: Thank you. I just want to say that Justin has – at the risk of using a religious metaphor – has been a first-rate and very smart Daniel in the lion's den. Husain, Raja, and this audience were very thoughtful, articulate, and unusually compassionate lions, and I hope we can reconvene this. (Unintelligible) – merci, and thank you all.

(Applause.)

(END)