SIX

TO BE MUSLIM, OR ASSUMED TO BE MUSLIM

Even before my formal interviews began, an Airbnb host introduced me to a predicament faced by people in France who are either Muslim or assumed to be Muslim. Ayoub, a young Maghrebi man with no religious feelings, talked about a test he feels that "French" people impose upon him. Whenever he socializes with someone new, it seems that there's a charged moment: Will Ayoub join him in a glass of wine? Will Ayoub have some charcuterie? If he does (which doesn't raise an issue for him), there's a palpable sense of relief: he's okay. But if he doesn't—or if a practicing Muslim friend doesn't—there's a tensing up. The guy's not like us; he could be trouble. It was even worse following the 2015–16 terrorist attacks in France.[1] At work the day after each attack, Ayoub's boss wanted him to swear his loyalty to France.

During the interviews that followed, I spoke with many people for whom some sort of Muslim identity is an integral part of life. Some are practicing Muslims;[2] others are former Muslims or non-Muslims from Muslim families. Apart from their own religious identities, some are assumed by "French" people to be Muslim, while others are not. Further, even individuals who have similar backgrounds—for instance, practicing Maghrebi Muslims or former Muslims of Iranian origin—have fashioned very different lives in France. But despite all this variety, these interviewees have something in common: they must deal with the stereotypes of Muslims in France.

The experience of being Muslim—or just being assumed to be Muslim—is the focus of this chapter. The first section surveys the wide variety among interviewees who have some sort of Muslim identity, whether felt subjectively or perceived by

others. The second section reviews pivotal issues of French identity—*laïcité*, *intégration*, and the shared pleasures of French life—and how the interviewees deal with these issues. The next section involves a discussion of the stereotypes and assumptions that interviewees feel "French" people have about Muslims. Finally, there is the question at the heart of it all: can a Muslim be French?

THE INTERVIEWEES

Throughout this book a sharp division has emerged between how a person feels internally (for example, "Am I French?") and how others see that person ("Is she French?"). The same duality applies to being Muslim. As various interviewees explained in chapters 1–3, while anyone can be Muslim, since it is an internal matter decided by the person alone, to be seen as Muslim hinges on social signals. The most obvious signal is physical: those who are seen as Maghrebi (or, more generally, Arab) are assumed to be Muslim, while others—even interviewees who originate from such predominantly Muslim countries as Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan—are not. "French" people assume, according to Samuel, "You're Arab, so you're certainly Muslim; you're Muslim, so you're certainly Arab." The other social signal of identity is behavioral. Among the interviewees, this involves dietary restrictions: those who abstain from alcohol, pork, and meat[3] are suspected of being Muslim.

In the following accounts, the interviewees speak about both their own religious identities and how they are seen by others. While these people have already been profiled in previous chapters, where the focus was on other aspects of their lives, each had much to say about these issues. (For what has already been reported about these interviewees, see the page references for each interviewee in the Appendix.) The interviewees are grouped according to the way they are initially seen by others, either as Maghrebi (and thus assumed to be Muslim) or as something else (and thus not assumed to be Muslim). But this is just the beginning. As the headings that follow indicate, each interviewee has a distinctive perspective on what it is like, in one way or another, to have a Muslim identity in France.[4]

Interviewees Who Are Seen as Maghrebi

Although "French" people apparently assume that Maghrebi people are Muslim, the Maghrebi interviewees have pursued a wide array of approaches to religious identity and practices.

Samuel: "Forgetting God," then rejoining the "detested" religion. Although Samuel's life and romantic interests have been extensively reported, the history and depth of his religious faith have hardly been mentioned. Samuel was born into a Muslim family in France, given a Muslim name for use within the family, and raised as a Muslim. But by his early twenties, he was desperate to escape "the rejection of French society." He abandoned what he says "French" people consider Muslims' "funny customs, like Ramadan, the prayers, the food." He began to drink alcohol—"I drank so I could fit in"—and, he said, "little by little, I stopped praying." As time went on, he made his way among "French" people, falling in love with a "French" woman and pursuing a career in the French entertainment industry.

"I forgot God for ten years," Samuel recalled. Even though his relationship with the "French" woman continued and he became professionally successful, Samuel was full of "suffering." Samuel teared up as he spoke about this time of life. He remembered that it "was a very long process to accept my life as it is. It was very hard." He finally realized that "the only way" to escape this distress was, in his words, "to give myself over to God." And so, he said, "I was recaptured by God" and "became a new man."

While Samuel thinks that his return to Islam "was a blessing," it has complicated his interactions with non-Muslims. He now hides his religion with everyone until he has "sounded them out." He did this with previous Airbnb guests, he said, who "might have wondered if I had an exploding belt." He also did it with me: "When you arrived, I paid attention to how you looked at me. I do that all the time. All my life is like that with everyone, to sound out others before revealing who I am. That's the way of life here in France." But Samuel cannot always control whether people learn that he is Muslim. When he declines wine on social occasions, he "senses a look" from "French" people "trying to find out" if he does this because he's a Muslim.

The 2015–16 terrorist attacks in France further complicated Samuel's life. Though Islam is "a religion of peace," he said, and

the perpetrators of the attacks "don't belong to my religion," the media and many people turned against Muslims. "It works well to make the Muslim the criminal. Today people like to detest Muslims." Once, upon hearing that Samuel is Muslim, a man blurted out, "Ah, you are Muslim, a terrorist." The attacks have even warped Samuel's own way of thinking. One day in the subway, when he "saw a Muslim, a brother, bearded, with a sack on the floor," Samuel found himself "terrified."

Samuel tries to show "French" people that Muslims are not terrorists. "I often help people on the street who can't carry bags or the like. It's my nature. But when they look at me, astonished, I want to say, 'It's a Muslim who helps you!'" This is not enough to do away with the association. In the eyes of many, he thinks, if he's Muslim, he might be a terrorist. Miserable at the thought of this, he said, "We Maghrebi Muslims are the first victims" of terrorism.

Nour: a "non-Muslim." Although her parents were devout Muslims from Algeria, Nour was born in France and grew up in a "French" neighborhood. From the start, she felt no affinity for Islam. Nour "secretly" ate pork and, she said, during Ramadan "never fasted, not even one day." She took part in the world around her. "My friends were very Catholic. I attended catechism school with them and loved the beautiful catechism stories. I was invited to all my friends' first communions. Everyone was very well dressed, there were loads of gifts, an enormous buffet. It fascinated me."

Nour's siblings also had no interest in being Muslim. It was the 1970s, she said, and "my older brothers were great hippies. It was all 'Peace and Love,' long hair and guitars. It was very Woodstock." She laughed at the memory. One weekend, when her parents were out of town, Nour's older brothers hosted a party. "There was alcohol everywhere. My brothers were completely soused." When her parents came home unexpectedly and saw this scene, their father "went crazy." Despite the beatings that followed, her siblings persisted in living like their Catholic friends, with little regard for Islam.

Nour says she's a "non-Muslim" because "I'm neither practicing nor a believer. I'm completely agnostic." She is not an "ex-Muslim," as some people think, since she never was a Muslim. Neither is she "of Muslim origin," she says, because Islam

"isn't an origin, but a religion." While her being a non-Muslim has never been a problem with colleagues at work, Nour is still stung by a memory from the 1990s, when she worked as a supervisor at a local high school. "By this time, the problems with religion had begun." One day in the lunchroom, she said, when "I had a tray with sausages on my plate, some Maghrebi students" challenged her for eating pork, saying, "You're Algerian." Furious at this "lack of respect," Nour told them, "First, I'm not Algerian but French, and second, I'm not Muslim."

Another incident occurred when Nour was only seventeen. The father of "one of my best friends was extremely racist," she recalls. "He voted for the National Front, he told me all this." One day "he explained why." During the Algerian war, when the man was still living in Algeria, he said that he "had another daughter who was tortured" by Algerians. Nour asked him whether this experience made her a problem in his eyes. He told her, "No, you're not like them. You follow all the rules, you're not a believing Muslim, you eat pork, et cetera." For him, Nour believes, "my face showed my origins, but behind that I was as French as his daughter."

Rania: "I show them what they want to see." Rania grew up in Tunisia. Although her mother was "a free thinker" who cut her hair "like a boy" and sometimes wore pants or applied makeup, Rania decided to veil herself when she was twelve. While many Muslims do not consider veiling a religious obligation, it was important for her, she explained. "The veil became a part of my identity, it was me. It became a part of my body." She'd have felt "completely naked" without it.

After receiving undergraduate and master's degrees at a French university, Rania went to work for an IT firm in a major city. She was still veiled. Soon, her supervisor spoke to her privately:

> I know that the veil is extremely important to you. The concern is not the veil itself—it's not you who are the concern, we know you, you are very congenial and open—but there are people who have prejudices. You may be at a meeting with a client who's prejudiced, and, because he sees you veiled, he'll cut ties with our company. It's not against you, but how people see you.

Rania decided to take his advice. "I took it off." Indeed, she transformed her entire workday appearance, dressing and grooming herself like a young French professional. Her reasoning was practical. "A person's appearance changes the attitude of the people around her. It's very important."

Rania is hardworking and talented, but she recognizes that more is needed to succeed. She is against presenting herself as different from her true self but does it anyway. Why? "I don't do this for others, I do it for myself. I do it because if I do it, I'll win. And why not? I need a promotion, I need opportunities, I need people to say 'very good' at work, so I do it. It's not an obligation, but an adaptation. In my environment, I adapt."

Although she dresses and acts like her French colleagues, Rania is open about being Muslim. "At work, I'm not ashamed to say that I'm Muslim. Everyone knows I don't drink; everyone knows I don't eat pork, that I eat fish." And while she faces prejudice from some colleagues, including anti-Muslim jokes and resentment that "a Muslim" is getting the good assignments, she is not put off. Other colleagues have been "very sympathetic and generous," and her supervisor has taught her "so much."

Each evening, Rania catches up on the mandated daytime prayers (a sanctioned practice known as *qadaa*). "Every Saturday and Sunday, no make-up, not a drop. I live for myself," she explained. Gone are her stylish clothes. Rania also "transforms" herself when she visits her parents five times a year: "When I return to Tunisia, I toss that appearance in the trash. I put on a veil that goes down to my chest. I wear an enormously ample dress. I become another person. The true me is when I'm at my parents' home, when I'm with my family. I feel myself."

Rania grounds this double life in her view of *intégration*. There's the "inside," who she really is, and the "outside," how she presents herself. *Intégration* exists only on the outside, as people are only "interested in appearances." She explained, "You've got to change your skin to be well integrated. If I hold onto my identity, who I am, and change the outside, they'll all come toward me. They'll all like me. They'll say, 'she's like us.' They'll accept me." But this does not change her inside. The outside, Rania said, "doesn't matter to me. None of it counts, none of it has value, none of it is real. None of it represents my identity. It's not me."

Rania's inside/outside dichotomy is nuanced. Because she maintains a reassuring "outside" whenever she is with French people, she does not need to hide her "inside" from them. Her colleagues and friends know she's Muslim. Indeed, she reports, "When I return from Tunisia, I show my photos." Seeing her fully veiled, "they say, 'You're like that?' and I say, 'Yes, I returned to my origins. Take a look!'" They think that the photos show how much Rania has changed in France. They see it as "evolution, as *intégration*. They take it positively."

Rania summed up her approach to the work world in France. "Professional life is a theatrical play for me," she said. "I have one colleague, Stéphanie, who knows everything, who accepts me as I am. Those who don't accept me as I am, I show them what they want to see. And so, they accept me. That's *intégration*."

Nassim: "almost French," then "transformed." Nassim, the son of religious Muslims from Algeria, grew up in a small French city. Often the only Muslim in his class, he said, "I had trouble finding my place." He wanted to change "my appearance in the eyes of others," he said, so "when I was sixteen, I started distancing myself from religion." Seeing a lack of "coherence" in Islam, Nassim stopped following its practices, such as fasting during Ramadan and praying. Discontinuing Islam's food and drink restrictions was particularly important:

> I said to myself, if I no longer made myself eat halal, if I no longer kept myself from drinking alcohol or eating pork, well, when we went on an outing or to the movies or a restaurant, I could eat like everyone else, drink like everyone, and feel myself integrated like everyone else. I'd have a different appearance. All this was a motivation for moving away from Muslim practices.

Nassim's abandonment of Muslim dietary restrictions had an immediate effect. "People would say, 'You're almost French' and things like that." His "French" girlfriend's parents, he said, noticed that "I drank alcohol, I ate pork, and I didn't eat halal." They thought, "He's fine by us." This type of reaction continued into adult life. "I noticed something in business. When I drank wine and had no food restrictions, everything went smoothly."

A couple of years ago, when Nassim was almost thirty, he turned away from this way of life. "I had to transform myself." He

broke up with his "French" girlfriend, learned to read and write Arabic, and, he said, "returned to my religion." While deeply gratifying, this transformation complicated his interactions with "French" people. "When I returned to Islam, I started to follow the rules, eating halal. When I ordered fish at restaurants and said I don't drink alcohol, that always raised questions, always."

Although ordering fish is a seemingly unobtrusive way to avoid non-halal meat, a colleague once told him, "That makes two times that you ordered fish. I noticed that." Nassim said "Wow!" just recalling this incident. "By contrast, if my European colleagues order fish or don't drink wine, they're never asked questions."[5]

Hiba: "If I weren't Muslim, I'd be 200 percent French." Hiba's family came to France from Morocco when she was seven. She loved France from the start—"I adopted France or France adopted me—but even today, at forty-seven, she doesn't feel accepted. Though "I behave like a French person," she says, Hiba has to "explain all the time" why she doesn't drink alcohol or eat pork. "I'm of this country, but people are bothered that I'm Muslim. That's it. If I weren't Muslim, I'd be 200 percent French."

Being Muslim in France was not always so problematic. But after the 2001 terrorist attack in New York City, Hiba recalls, "it was Muslims all the time on TV." All anyone heard was "religion, religion, religion," and that the perpetrators were "Muslim extremists." People "pointed fingers, you felt it." This attitude became more intense after each of the 2015–16 attacks because they were "in France, not America."

Hiba has always worked for "French" families. It hurt her, she says, in 2015–16, when her clients talked about how the attackers were Muslim, since "it's not true about Muslims. Muslims search for peace." The problem has not gone away. She says that "all my clients accept that I'm Maghrebi, even if they think they're superior to us. But when they hear that I'm Muslim, that stresses them." In their minds, "it's the Muslims who cry 'Allahu Akbar' and kill."

Sami: "No problem" being Muslim. Now fifty-five, Sami grew up in Tunisia, where his whole family was religious. For the last twenty-eight years, he has lived in a town near a large French city, where there are 5,000 Muslims, but many more non-Muslims. The Muslim congregation just built a large mosque at a cost of

five million euros (at the time, about $7 million). He has had "no problem" practicing his religion.

Sami also has "had no problem with French people." He runs his own electronics repair shop, where, he says, "I see French customers every day." They're "friendly" and "appreciative"; "even the Christians, the Catholics are fine. There are no issues." Sami does not have to interact with "French" people outside his community because he rarely travels elsewhere in France.

Sami says that "even if I see prejudice, it has no importance." Slurs "don't interest me," and prejudiced people "wouldn't dare" take action "against men. Those who are sick will remain sick, that's all." And though "people have changed a little" since the terrorist attacks of 2015–16, Sami dismisses the attacks from a religious perspective. "No one has the right in our religion to take a life that God has given. All Muslims agree with this. The beasts who don't understand anything, they kill people. They are manipulated."

Interviewees Who Are Not Seen as Maghrebi

Just as the Maghrebi interviewees are assumed to be Muslim, interviewees who are not seen as Maghrebi are not assumed to be Muslim. From what these interviewees can tell, many "French" people do not even consider the possibility. But some of these people are Muslim or at least come from Muslim families. Each person had a distinctive story to tell.

Amina: "I'm a woman and I'm Black. On top of that, I'm Muslim." Amina grew up in a Muslim family in Cameroon, West Africa, and has remained "profoundly Muslim" throughout her time in France. This hasn't been a major problem for her, though not because of open-mindedness on the part of "French" people.

Amina carved out a professional niche that helps her sidestep bias. She is a highly trained consultant in the field of business intelligence, where the only thing that matters, she says, is "being technically solid." Her appearance also limits the bias she might otherwise face as a Muslim. "Me, I'm not veiled. I dress normally, so I'm not rejected for this reason. There are times when people distrust women who are veiled. It's a matter of what one fears." She dresses "like Oprah Winfrey," she says, with tailored black dresses and stylish hair. With "no religious sign" in

her clothing, she's "Mrs. Like-Everyone-Else." And because she is Black rather than Maghrebi, her religion "isn't visible."

Still, Amina doesn't hide the fact that she's Muslim. She abstains from pork and non-halal meat, fasts during Ramadan, and has a Muslim first name. She doesn't keep her religion a secret either. "When the subject comes up, I always say I'm Muslim." But even people who know she's Muslim aren't put off; when they see how she dresses and acts, they assume that she's "moderate."

I asked Amina whether she ever feels the sting of anti-Muslim bias. She laughed aloud. "Sure," she replied, but "in my case, already I'm a woman and I'm Black. On top of that, I'm Muslim. I have everything going against me."

Fatih: "It's frustrating." Turkish by origin, Fatih grew up in a small village in France, where he followed his family's Muslim practices. He says that "it was complicated at the beginning because I wanted to be like the others. People would point their finger, saying 'He doesn't eat pork.' The experience wasn't good." In particular,

> I had problems at family dinners at the home of French friends. I had to justify why I didn't eat pork or even chicken, since it wasn't halal. They didn't understand and I was uncomfortable. To refuse is impolite. This gave me problems with frustration and confidence. It was frustrating when someone rejected me.

Now thirty-three, Fatih has pursued a career in business. Keeping his skin pale and smoothing his hair, he says that he's never mistaken for a Maghrebi. It's still hard for him. When "French" people interact with any "foreigner"—by which he means someone who doesn't look "French" —there's "always a blockage in the beginning. But with people of a different religion, for Muslims," he continued, "it's an enormous blockage." At one job, "there were small remarks in the beginning." When this didn't let up, he said, "I realized that I didn't have to work with such people, so I left." He now lives in a large city. "It's good, even if there are still intolerant people. There will always be some imbeciles." Food continues to trigger discomfort for him. Even though Fatih now drinks alcohol, he says, "when I go to restaurants with colleagues, they remark, 'Ah, you don't eat pork. Is that a matter of religion?'"

Shayan: Leaving behind the "constraints" of Islam. Now thirty-three, Shayan has spent his entire life in France. Originally from Iran, his parents followed Islam's dietary restrictions, and Shayan did the same until junior high school, when he noticed that many people found Muslims "troublesome." Then came the 2001 World Trade Center attack, which, he said, "spoiled the image of Muslims, just like that." Uncomfortable with "this cap, this label of being Muslim," he said, "little by little I detached myself from Islam. I asked myself whether it makes sense to continue following the prohibitions for a system of religion I don't particularly believe in." He stopped fasting during Ramadan in high school, began drinking wine at twenty-two, and began eating pork at twenty-five or twenty-six. Ultimately, he became a "non-Muslim."

During the same period, Shayan says, he "gravitated toward the Catholics." He began "speaking in the same way as the French Catholics," which brought him "closer, indirectly, to them." He also "identified with" them, though this was "more as a social category than a religion." A year before our interview, Shayan married Christine, a "French" woman of Catholic background, though neither of them practices Catholicism or any religion. And that, he says, "is how I am today."

Usman: Seizing the "opportunity not to classify myself as Muslim." Now forty-seven, Usman grew up in northwestern Pakistan. His family did not follow Muslim practices at home. Still, he said, "the society around us was very religious and you had to at least show yourself at the mosque. I showed myself there every Friday." But even in Pakistan, "I wasn't convinced. I already had a critical attitude."

Coming to France for graduate studies, Usman said, "was an opportunity to not classify myself as Muslim." Religion was not an issue among the people at his university. "I came to understand"—he chuckled here—"that if you're going to be someone sophisticated and intellectual in this society, you won't believe in God." He fit right in. "I felt free. It was good." Though "I wasn't used to eating pork," Usman said, he'd have some when it was served. "For me it was a question of respect. I always made an effort to be like the others." He readily drank alcohol.

Usman said that he hasn't had a religious identity for the entire twenty years he's been in France. He's not mistaken for a

Maghrebi, and, he says, "no one has ever asked me, 'Are you Muslim?'" Even during the tense days following each of the 2015–16 terrorist attacks in France, "Never did anyone ask a question like 'What do you think of it as a Muslim?' No one asked whether I'm a Muslim."

Clément: "Cut off from Catholic society" after converting to Islam. Although Clément was ashamed of being Black during his childhood in France, he was, at least, Catholic. But even this social advantage, as he sees it, was lost in his mid-twenties, when he fell in love with a Senegalese woman who agreed to marry him, he says, "only if I converted to Islam." Clément became Muslim, finding the experience "super-enriching," but he has paid a high price. While a Black who's "a good Christian isn't completely integrated into White, Christian society"—he laughed at his own understatement—"being Muslim is to be cut off from it. That's certain."

When someone learns that he is Muslim, Clément senses "a different look, a completely different look. A coldness sets in." He has decided to keep his new religion "behind closed doors," but this has exacted a high price, he says. "To my regret, to my very great regret, I can't express this side of my identity." Although "it has great value," he feels "forced" to keep it hidden.

Elise: "It's not easy to be a Muslim in France." Elise presents a special case among the interviewees. Born in France of a mixed couple (her mother comes from Morocco, while her father is "French"), she grew up in a well-off French neighborhood in the center of town. She attended private schools and then universities in France and England. Now twenty-eight and "very well integrated," Elise is an investment banker. Her sense of self is unqualified. "I was born in France, I grew up in France, I am, before all else, French."

But how is she seen by others? Using a striking turn of phrase, Elise said that people usually take her for "a normal French woman." Her name is completely French (since she also has her father's last name), she has long, smooth hair, and her complexion is relatively light. Because she lacks the manner, name, or appearance associated with Maghrebis, she doesn't have "the stain on one's forehead that you can't wash off." And since she is not seen as Maghrebi, she is not assumed to be Muslim. But she is Muslim, and she has adhered to Muslim practices her whole life.

This first became a problem when Elise was only ten or twelve. She was the sole Muslim at her private school, and each time another student realized that she was Muslim (as they would when she declined pork or, in later years, fasted during Ramadan), she says, "I had to justify myself." Because other children saw being Muslim "as bizarre" or "as an error, a defect," Elise decided to "show it less." She thought, "If they didn't see it, they wouldn't criticize it. I didn't hide that I was Muslim, but I avoided saying it because it would trigger questions, remarks, judgments, and so on." Whenever it was discovered, she recalls, "I always got the same questions, always the same looks."

The problem became worse when Elise grew up. Although she makes sure to practice her religion privately, social life doesn't allow her to keep it private. At meals, she must explain why she doesn't eat pork, and alcoholic beverages are a particular sticking point. "I'm asked every day, 'Why don't you drink alcohol? Is it religious?' People ask me directly, 'Are you Muslim?'" For her, it's "a battle every day."

Ever since Elise left home for college, "it's been difficult during Ramadan." She remembers the early years well. "When I was a student in my studio apartment and came home from a day of fasting to eat pasta all alone, the feeling of Ramadan—ah, there was none at all." Even today, "I have no one with whom to share the breaking-fast meal in the evening." Instead of the warmth of spending Ramadan evenings with family and friends, she feels that "social life is on hold."

Elise's profession adds another level of stress. "It's worse in my line of work, in finance, since I work with clients, meaning we go to a restaurant, share a glass of wine." This is all part of "business culture." People often "push" her, she says. "It's like a mission in their lives to make me drink. It's almost an insult that I don't drink alcohol." When she still declines, some people "get annoyed," insisting that they know "other Muslims who drink alcohol."

To sidestep these interactions, Elise sometimes speaks vaguely of special diets. She also makes excuses during Ramadan, when, she says, "I can't have lunch with clients. This is difficult professionally." Such ploys are painful for her since "avoiding saying that I'm Muslim is almost a denial of myself. It's as if I'd made a mistake. But I haven't made a mistake. I'm Muslim. There's nothing reprehensible about that."

The 2015–16 terrorist attacks in France made life for Muslims even more problematic. Elise is furious with the perpetrators. "These are not Muslims. In the Qur'an, it doesn't say, 'Go ahead, kill people.' The moment you kill someone you are not Muslim." But many people don't realize this; they think that "Islam is a religion of war." And so, even though "it's easier for me because I'm a girl," she says, after each attack "I have to justify myself." She has to tell people who know she's Muslim that "I haven't done anything at all. No, I will not set off an explosion. I promise not to launch an attack tomorrow."

In sum, Elise says, "It's not easy to be a Muslim in France." And since she cannot avoid having her religion discovered—and having people make so much of it—she finds herself typecast: "I'm a Muslim before I'm Elise." There's nothing she can do about this. "In the end, one must make peace with oneself."

LAÏCITÉ, *INTÉGRATION*, AND THE SHARED PLEASURES OF FRENCH LIFE

Muslim interviewees repeatedly complained about how Muslims are stereotyped as rejecting core French values, particularly *laïcité* and *intégration*. They also spoke of how Muslims are criticized for declining alcoholic beverages, pork, and non-halal meat at social occasions. Their positions on these issues say much about how they see themselves in French society.

Laïcité. Generally speaking, *laïcité* is the principle of French law and values by which the public sphere is kept neutral with regard to religion. Although freedom of religion is guaranteed, religiously based behavior is limited to private spaces, such as places of worship or homes. In theory, the principle ensures that neither the government nor French society favors a particular religion or lack of religion. (See introduction; Bowen 2007: 29.)

While the interviewees agree that some Muslims in France reject the principle of *laïcité*, all of the interviewees embrace it. Elise spoke at length about her adherence to *laïcité*. "Everyone has the right to practice her religion," she said, "but only in private places." For Elise, *laïcité* extends to everything that reflects a religion in the public sphere. She insists that the *burkini* (a modest type of swimwear associated with the Muslim *burka*

body covering) "must not be worn at the beach." She applies that same principle to other religions. While Muslim veils shouldn't be permitted in public, she said, "nuns are veiled too. It's exactly the same. Why doesn't this bother anyone?"

All of the Muslim interviewees evidently keep their religious practices out of the public sphere. This includes praying, even for those who adhere to the five-times-a-day rule. Where necessary, they postpone the daytime prayers until they have returned home in the evening. None of the interviewees mentioned praying in public, and none of them wear clothing in public that expresses or even reveals their Muslim faith. Rania was the only one who once veiled herself, but even she put this aside once she entered the work world. As their profiles show, all of the practicing Muslim women—Lina, Amina, Khira, Hiba, Rania, and Elise—present themselves in public as the opposite of the stereotypical Muslim woman. Amina said that she is "super well-coiffed" and dresses "classically" in "tailored" dresses and "pumps." None of the men mentioned wearing a skullcap in public. When Sami and I went to the local mosque for evening prayers, he put his skullcap on upon entering the mosque.

Intégration. Because *intégration* is such an important concept in France—and vital to the interviewees—it has been discussed throughout this book. A few still-unreported comments illustrate the role of *intégration* in being Muslim in France, at least in the lives of the interviewees. Even when Shayan and his family were practicing Muslims, his parents wanted him to "fully integrate" into French society, and he feels that he has succeeded. "In my childhood, I never felt non-French as a matter of *intégration*. No one said otherwise."

Always a devout Muslim, Rania delights in fitting in with French people: "To live here in France, well-integrated and well-dressed, to put on make-up, speak well, et cetera, is to be integrated, it's to take part." In France, she added, "*intégration* is very important to live. To survive."

"If you're in a country," Elise insists, "you behave according to that country's code of conduct." You must "integrate yourself into that country's practices." Her entire family—including her mother Lina, who is also deeply religious—has done this. "I'd like the French to see people like us, who've embraced France

as their country, who've integrated themselves here, as Muslims in France."

While they readily acknowledge that some Muslims do not try to fit into the broader French society, Muslim interviewees were offended by the belief that Muslims as a group resist *intégration*. This stereotype is nevertheless common among "French" people. As Mohamed put it, debates in France "go in a single direction: Islam is a problem, Muslims are incapable of integrating themselves into French society." But the interviewees, including those who are active Muslims, are altogether different. As seen throughout this book, they pride themselves in having French values, including a firm adherence to *laïcité*, and in speaking high-quality French as they live, work, and socialize in French society.

Joining in the social pleasures of French life. This is a complicated issue. Almost everyone discussed thus far in this chapter—Nassim, Samuel, Nour, Shayan, Rania, Elise, Usman, and Fatih—spoke about social occasions that French people delight in. In business and personal life, in restaurants and in homes, people in France come together to drink aperitifs, share a bottle of wine, snack on appetizers (often pork-based charcuterie), and dine together. Scholarly literature supports this perception. According to Mathilde Cohen, food is "central to French identity," and "the French meal is represented as a national ritual to which every citizen can partake on the same footing" (Cohen 2021: 26, 27).

This presents a problem for practicing Muslims. As Shayan explained, "In France, you have all the ritual of aperitifs and good wine. People say such things as 'This wine is a little fruity' or 'This wine is a little tannic.' They ask, 'What charcuterie would you prefer?' 'What would you like to eat? Maybe a pork chop?'" A person cannot just opt out, Shayan said, because "if you do, it's difficult to fit in." While this is no longer an issue for Shayan, who has given up the dietary restrictions of Islam, it is a major problem for practicing Muslims like Samuel and Elise. When Elise declines a glass of wine, she said, people insist: "But it's French. Wine is a part of French culture, so you have to drink."

The problem goes beyond alcohol and pork. Because many practicing Muslims abstain from any non-halal meat, they can-

not eat the meat dishes served in the great majority of French restaurants and homes. This may leave them ordering fish or hard-boiled eggs and salad at every meal, as Amina does, but it is not a social problem until non-Muslims make it one. Some do just that, as Nassim and Fatih repeatedly discovered. Practicing Muslims also fast from sunrise to sunset each day during the month of Ramadan. When someone says to Elise during Ramadan, "Let's have lunch next week," she has to decline. "People don't understand."

These dietary restrictions present a conundrum for practicing Muslims. The problem bubbled to the surface during my interview with Elise, who had just spoken emphatically about the necessity of "integrating" oneself. When I wondered aloud whether her practice of declining wine could be seen as a refusal to fit into French social life, she answered, "I've had such thoughts myself. I'm in France and it's part of French culture. It's almost denying your culture not to drink."

STEREOTYPES AND ASSUMPTIONS

Many interviewees who are Muslim or of Muslim origin complained about the stereotypes and assumptions that many French people have about Muslims. Their comments bring home how they feel they're seen by others.

"Muslims are backward." Mohamed is incensed by the portrayal of Muslims as backward. "It's incredible," this "permanent humiliation in the media." The media, he reported, "always talk about the veiled women, saying that they're forced" to veil themselves. Veiled women, who are never given "the opportunity to speak" for themselves, are assumed to be subjugated by the men in their families. Mohamed thinks that "politicians add to these prejudices. There was even a government minister who said that Muslims sacrifice, that they slit the throat of sheep in their bathtubs." He doesn't "understand why there's this obsession, this bad faith" in depicting Muslims. It's "very stigmatizing for us." As already discussed, Samuel and others reported how "French" people show disdain for even routine Muslim practices, like daily prayers, dietary restrictions, and the Ramadan fast.

Whatever practices might be followed by other Muslims in France, the interviewees feel that modernity is not inconsistent with Islam. As their profiles make clear, all of the practicing Muslim interviewees – Amina, Clément, Elise, Hiba, Khira, Lina, Mohamed, Nassim, Rania, Sami, and Samuel – are full participants in the economic and social life of France. They live and work like others in France. Many are highly educated professionals. And on the issue of female subjugation, one need only consider the lives and forceful personalities of Amina, Rania, Elise, Hiba, and Lina.

"Muslim equals terrorist." Many interviewees—practicing Muslims, former Muslims, and non-Muslims alike—complained that the terrorist attacks of 2015–16 in France were blamed, immediately and unthinkingly, on "the Maghrebis" or "the Muslims." This attitude started even earlier, Shayan believes. Following the 2001 attack at the World Trade Center in New York, he said, a simple equivalence set in: "Muslim equals terrorist." While the effect of these attacks on Shayan, Samuel, Hiba, Nassim, Elise, and Sami has already been discussed, Mohamed's and Ibrahim's experiences should also be reported.

Mohamed described life following the terrorist attacks. As soon as they began, "a tensed-up mood took hold." People felt that "all the Muslims are guilty, all are responsible," and "demanded that individual Muslims disagree" with each attack. Mohamed finds this grossly unfair. "Muslims have been denied the right to be individuals. We became the people who always have to justify themselves, always. No one ever asked Christians about an act done by a White, to say that it's not in the Bible, that it's not Christianity." Mohamed believes that it doesn't stop with terrorism. Some people think that "the lack of safety" they feel in France "is the fault of Muslims."

Ibrahim feels hurt that "French" people blame the terrorist attacks on Muslims. He says, "the only thing they have in their mouths is 'Muslim.'" But the man who committed the 2016 attack in Nice "didn't pray, he took drugs, he smoked hashish, he frequented homosexuals, all things that Islam prohibits." The perpetrator said "'I killed the people because I don't like immigrants,'" even though he had come from Tunisia. "He was crazy," Ibrahim said. In spite of all this, the media portrayed the perpe-

trator in religious terms, as a "Muslim who'd been radicalized, a fundamentalist."

Ibrahim believes that such attitudes fuel violence against Muslims in France. "Every day there are Islamophobic acts," but "people don't respond." He reported that, ten days before our interview, a man insulted a "bearded Muslim man on a bus" and "stabbed him in the back," and, five days later, "a man on a motorbike ran over two veiled women with a small child." But "this wasn't reported on TV."

"French means Catholic." Although France is officially a "*laïque*" nation—the First Article of its Constitution defines it as such—interviewees report a different social reality. Abbas described France as "a country with Christian origins." This can be "camouflaged," he said, "but society is permeated with this way of thinking." It's part of French "culture, of their heritage."

Even though French people are less religious today—according to Sami, "the churches are empty"—the association of France with Catholicism complicates the interviewees' lives. Shayan said that "even though I felt French, French means Catholic." At least in part to be seen as French, Shayan gradually abandoned Muslim practices and began identifying with the Catholics around him. Elise said that France is a "country with a Catholic history" and that it's difficult "to be Muslim in a Catholic country, a dominant Catholic country."

Vincent is on the other side of the religious divide, coming from a devout Catholic family that originates from South Asia. He believes that life is simpler for him than for Muslims. "It's easy to be Catholic in France," he said. "There's not the same look from French people as with Muslims. For them there's a blockage." Clément, the Black interviewee who converted from Catholicism to Islam, feels much the same way. When he was Catholic, he shared something with "French" people, but now he finds himself "forced to avoid the subject of religion." He believes that "there's a great hostility toward Muslims in France'" The very subject "is taboo."

Maghrebis are assumed to be Muslim until they prove they are not; non-Maghrebis are not assumed to be Muslim until they reveal they are. As seen in their profiles and the accounts in this chapter, the Maghrebi interviewees are assumed to be Muslim, while the non-Maghrebi interviewees are not. The first of these as-

sumptions is not surprising. After all, the vast majority of people in the Maghreb, as in the rest of North Africa, are Muslim.[6] Even Nour, who has always been a "non-Muslim," is assumed to be Muslim. Vincent, a non-Muslim of South Asian origin, captured this Maghrebi-Muslim equation when he (unselfconsciously) said that "Maghrebis and Catholics are not seen in the same way."

It is the opposite for the interviewees who are not seen as Maghrebi: they are not assumed to be Muslim. Samuel thinks that this reflects a blind spot among many French people, because only a small percentage of Muslims worldwide are Arab.[7] As it turns out, many of the interviewees who are not seen as Maghrebi are Muslim or have Muslim backgrounds. Fatih originates from Turkey, Nima and Shayan from Iran, and Usman from Pakistan—all non-Arab countries that are overwhelmingly Muslim—and each comes from a Muslim family. Amina, Abbas, Djibril, and Clément, who originate from sub-Saharan Africa, are all Muslim. Then there is Elise, whose mother is Maghrebi but who is usually taken for "a normal French woman," she says. When she reveals that she's Muslim by declining alcohol or pork, it's often a surprise to the people around her.[8]

These assumptions put both Maghrebis and non-Maghrebis in a peculiar position. Although assumed to be Muslim, Maghrebis can show "French" people that they are not Muslim—at least not practicing Muslims—by drinking alcohol and eating pork or non-halal meat on social occasions. For some of the Maghrebi interviewees (like Nour, Zhora, Achraf, Abdel, Youssef, and Karim) this is not a problem. Indeed, they are happy to participate in these shared pleasures. But some other Maghrebis, even non-practicing Muslims, are made uneasy at social occasions, feeling that they are forced to make a public statement, either by joining the "French" people around them or setting themselves apart. Ayoub's predicament was reported at the beginning of this chapter. The test he reported is simple: does he drink and eat like the others, showing that he's a good guy, or does he decline and align himself with those troublesome Maghrebis who hold fast to their Muslim ways? Similarly, Nassim "noticed something in business" before he became a practicing Muslim. He felt accepted by colleagues and clients. "It was almost like being tested: 'Good, he eats meat, he drinks alcohol.'"

Non-Maghrebis of Muslim background have the opposite experience. Although they are not assumed to be Muslim (because they are not Maghrebi), they reveal that they are Muslim if they decline alcohol, pork, or non-halal meat at a social occasion. This is not an issue for people like Nima and Usman, who feel no affinity for Islam, or for non-Maghrebi Muslims who have abandoned these dietary prohibitions, like Shayan. Today, no one wonders whether Shayan is Muslim. But the non-Maghrebis who are practicing Muslims do not have this luxury: when they decline such food or drink, they reveal their faith. While this doesn't pose a problem for Amina, who is openly Muslim, others are uncomfortable. Fatih said that people notice whenever he declines a pork dish and ask if it's a matter of religion. Elise, whose half-Maghrebi parentage is not evident, tries to keep her faith private, but when she declines alcohol or pork dishes, people "systematically" ask if she's Muslim and then insist that she justify herself.

CONCLUSION: CAN A MUSLIM BE FRENCH?

In his 2010 book, John Bowen asks, "Can Islam be French?" by which he means, "can Islam become a generally accepted part of the French social landscape?" (Bowen 2010: 3). To answer this question, Bowen listened to Muslim "scholars and educators and public figures who are trying to configure a set of teachings and norms and institutions that will anchor Islam in France" (5). After careful study of their "public reasoning," Bowen offered a cautious answer to his question: yes, Islam can be French, but only if "makers of public opinion" in France can shift "toward an ideal of shared respect for a common legal and political framework" (198).

A similar question—can a Muslim be French?—is at the heart of this chapter, although the focus here is on non-experts (the interviewees) and the answer is particular to each person. Further, the question is answered for each person on two levels: the personal (Do I believe that a person can be both Muslim and French? Am I?) and the social (Do others believe that a Muslim can be French? If they know that I'm Muslim, will they think I'm less French?).

Shayan's evolution illustrates how these two levels coexist and potentially interact. As an adolescent, when he still saw himself as Muslim, Shayan said that he was both Muslim and French "in my head." But when he discovered that many people found Muslims "troublesome," he thought, "Wow, it's complicated to say, 'I'm Muslim and I'm French.' French plus Muslim, that's French, but not very French." Intent on being accepted by the "French, Catholic" people around him, Shayan gave up his Muslim faith and practices.

Since the personal level is within the control of each person, the answer may be clear-cut, even emphatic. Clément, Elise, Hiba, Nassim, and Samuel—all practicing Muslims—grew up in France and vigorously adhere to French values, including *laïcité* and *intégration*. They speak "good" French, and they live, work, and dress in the same manner as the non-Muslims around them. They have the same pride in their country. As far as each of them is concerned, they are both Muslim and French.

The social level is more complicated. The same interviewees feel that many non-Muslims do not see practicing Muslims as truly French, or, put more concretely, they feel that many non-Muslims don't fully accept them. Each reports a deep bias, even fearfulness, on the part of non-Muslims. According to Samuel, "people like to detest Muslims," and some of Hiba's clients feel that "it's the Muslims who cry 'Allahu Akbar' and kill." Clément and Samuel both hide their religion, and Elise tries to keep it from being noticed. But this is often impossible. Nassim, Elise, and Samuel reported that some non-Muslims seem intent on uncovering their secret by checking for foods or beverages they avoid. While the interviewees rarely phrase such experiences in the abstractions of identity (Can a Muslim be French?), the social dynamic underlying their accounts is plain: to be known to be Muslim is to be subject to what Clément called a "completely different look," a "coldness."

This raises an important analytic question: are people of Muslim parentage who grew up in France but who are not Muslims seen as French? Are these people fully accepted? What about Nour, who has always had French values and habits, has always been a "non-Muslim," and has partnered only with "French" men? What of the Shayan of today, who has not only become a "non-Muslim," but also has gravitated toward Catholic people,

has married a "French" woman of Catholic origin, and has plans to raise his children to be "totally French"? Or of Nassim in his younger years, who had left Islam behind and was so successful in behaving in the ways expected of French people that his boss called him "the most French person I know"?

These people test what it means to be seen as French. They grew up in France, feel French, and are fully integrated into French values and ways of life, even when it comes to traditional food and drink. For them, there seems to be nothing missing, nothing lacking in what it means to be French. But virtually none of the interviewees said that they are seen as simply or truly French. This is remarkable, almost illogical. Indeed, it suggests that something deeper than all these behavioral attributes is central to being seen as French. But what is it? This pivotal question is addressed in the conclusion of this book.

NOTES

1. A brief history of these attacks is set out in chapter 1 above. Terrorist attacks attributed to Muslims continue through the present.
2. Here, as elsewhere, I follow the interviewees' way of speaking. When talking about Muslims, interviewees spoke far less about religious faith than whether someone is a "practicing" Muslim. Abdel, who was raised in a Muslim family, said, "I don't consider myself Muslim because I drink alcohol and eat pork. It would show a lack of respect to others and myself to say that I'm Muslim when I don't follow the practices."
3. Islam does not prohibit the eating of meat other than pork, but religious law requires that the slaughter of each animal is conducted according to religious dictates. This renders the meat halal, or "permitted." Because French restaurants and "French" people rarely, if ever, serve halal meat, many practicing Muslims forgo all types of meat on social occasions.
4. To keep the variety of people and perspectives from overwhelming readers, I have selected a dozen interviewees. Others who are either Muslim or assumed to be Muslim include Abbas, Abdel, Achraf, Asma, Djibril, Karim, Khira, Lina, Mohamed, Olivier, Salma, Youssef, and Zhora. Discussions of each of these people can be accessed by checking the Appendix, where page references for interviewees are listed.
5. This accords with my own experience in France. Although I do not drink alcohol, I have never been asked why.
6. Depending on the country, the percentage ranges from 98 percent to 99.9 percent (Statista 2019).

7. Samuel said that "they don't realize that only 10 percent of Muslims are Arab." As it turns out, his estimate is not far off: apparently 15 to 20 percent of Muslims worldwide are Arab (see PBS Website n.d.; Georgetown University 2022; Huda 2018).
8. The assumption that non-Maghrebis are not Muslim is not absolute. Abbas and Amina, both Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa, point to their Arab first names. According to Amina, "a Black with an Arab name is necessarily a Muslim." But because Muslims originating from sub-Saharan Africa are not thought to be violent (Ndiaye 208: 238) and being Black is so salient in their dealings with "French" people, their religion hardly seems to matter. Another exception arises from physical proximity. When Fatih was growing up in a French village, there were a number of other Turkish families living there. The fact that others in the village knew they were Muslim is illustrated by a painful memory from Fatih's childhood. When he went to a "French" friend's home for a family dinner, the "adults were mean. They did it intentionally, serving pork, for example, to create a situation. It happened many times." Now that Fatih lives in a city and mixes with "French" people, he is not assumed to be Muslim.