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Nur Syahidah Binte Ismail

As a self-identifying Muslim woman with notably feminist politics, one might jump to conclusions about the topic I have chosen. What intrigued me about Nicolas Sarkozy's speech on June 22, 2009 when he proposed the ban on the burqa , however, was not necessarily my identity politics. Rather, it was the amount of controversy over the burqa had enough clout to result in legal action. From Sarkozy's speech I am going to examine the burqa as an object of representation. How are the representations constructed? What discourses do the representations evoke? Who resists the representations and who does not? What arguments are evoked from each side? While examining these questions, I will not comment on whether wearing the burqa should be allowed or not, but rather will look at what the burqa represents to the different communities of the controversy. I argue that in Sarkozy's speech, the burqa is represented as foreign to the French identity. I will focus on the discourse of ethnonationalism that is evoked in Sarkozy's speech in relation to the discourses of French secularism and immigration. As well, the burqa is also represented as a symbol of gender oppression. I will further focus my examination of the burqa as it is conceptualized and represented through the colonial gaze. The gaze is a form of discursive colonization that over-determines the subjectivity of the women wearing the burqa as possessing "third world difference." This results in an absence of presence, the hypervisibility of the burqa-wearing, French-Muslim woman as well as the invisibility of the possibility of agency and self-representation.

Nicolas Sarkozy, current President of the French Republic, delivered a speech to the French parliament in Versailles about a policy regarding the burqa on June 22, 2009 (*British Broadcasting Corporation* [BBC], 2009). In the speech, he stated that the burqa "will not be welcome on the French republic territory" after commenting that the issue of the burqa "is not a religious issue. It's an issue of freedom" . He urged that there be a "debate where all points of views are expressed" and for the debate to take place in parliament. The next day on June 23rd, 2009, the French National Assembly appointed 32 lawmakers from right- and left-wing parties to a six-month fact-finding mission to look at ways of restricting its use (BBC, para.3). 7 months later, on January 26th 2010, a partial ban was enacted on the use of the burqa where it was banned in public places such as hospitals, schools, and public transport, but not on the streets (*Cable News Network* [CNN], 2010, para.3). 6 months after that, on July 7th, 2010, France's Constitutional Council endorsed the law forbidding the burqa in all public spaces, including the streets, but expressed concern about applying it in places of worship such as the mosque (Souchard, para.1). The following week, the French Assembly overwhelmingly voted in approval of a bill banning the burqa

as well as the niqab (Doland, para.7). On September 14, 2010, the French Senate overwhelmingly approved the ban on the burqas in all public spaces. This law will be effective beginning spring 2011 (CNN, para.2).

The controversy surrounding the ban is still a hot topic in France, with ongoing heated debates in public discourse from local and global communities. Three different communities can be discerned from the myriad of reactions: supporting the ban, against the ban, and both.

Members supporting the ban of the burqa in France typically draw from arguments of French secularism, women's rights and individual freedoms. Andre Gerin, president of the parliamentary inquiry into the burqa that was created in June 2009 after Sarkozy's speech, stated that the burqa was being exploited by Muslim fundamentalists, who "have taken power over a certain territory of France." He says that France "will not accept one religion, Islam or anything else, to occupy public space and dictate its rules over civil society…this is what the fundamentalists are doing…It goes against the entire history of Western civilization" (*The Economist*). Anne-Elizabeth Moutet, writer and political commentator, stated that the burqa is a "radical form of Islam imposed by a radical minority" and that this is "worrying" (*AlJazeera English*). The argument of curbing militant Islam is made explicit in the case of Faiza Silmi, a Moroccan woman with a French-Muslim husband who was denied French citizenship. She had been wearing a burqa during her citizenship application interview and later, received a letter denying her of French citizenship on the basis of her "practicing a radical form of Islam" (*The Economist*). Another argument expressed by 58 members of parliament is that the burqa violates individual freedoms (Wardrop, para.13). The term "individual freedoms" is defined in opposition to oppression, which the burqa represents to them. Most arguments that support the ban however, claim that the ban is against women's rights, sometimes more specifically in the name of feminism. Legislator Berengere Poletti from Sarkozy's party said face-covering veils "are a prison for women, they are the sign of their submission to their husbands, brothers or father" (Doland, para.11). Diana Nammi of the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation in London stated, "I fully support President Sarkozy. The burka isolates women" (Wardrop, para.25). Moutet stated that the issue of the burqa was an issue of "feminism and equality of women" (*AlJazeera English*, 2009).

Local and global members against the ban of the burqa typically draw from arguments of constitutional rights, personal freedoms, xenophobic fear and the legitimacy of the French state in regulating public appearance. The arguments invoked by members against the ban range from pleas of educating the public on Islam to reduce Islamophobia, to outright threats of violence against French troops in Afghanistan. In March 2010, France's highest administrative body, the Council of State, warned that the law could be found unconstitutional, especially in places of worship open to the public such as mosques. It said that neither French secularism nor concerns

about women's equality, human dignity or public security could be legal justifications for banning the burqa (Doland, para.17). The argument of personal freedoms is also invoked by this community. The term "personal freedoms" is taken to mean the right to choose one's dress in public. In Cairo, Islamic scholar Abdelmotie Bayoumi said a French ban would not violate Islamic law, but would violate personal freedoms as "The niqab has no strong legitimacy based on the Quran or in examples from the Prophet's life … A Muslim woman wears the niqab not because of religious duty, but as a personal freedom" (Doland, para.20). Shahid Malik, Communities Minister from the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), supported this view. He stated:

> It is not the job of government to dictate what people should or should not wear in our society – that is a matter of personal choice. There are no laws stating what clothes or attire are acceptable and so whether one chooses to wear a veil or burqa, a miniskirt or goth outfit is entirely at the individual's discretion (Wardrop, para.18).

Some people who are against the ban point to the xenophobic fear-mongering discourse evoked from the policy. Dr Reefat Drabu, assistant secretary general of the MCB, said in a statement:

> Instead of taking a lead in promoting harmony and social cohesion amongst its people, the French President appears to be initiating a policy which is set to create fear and misunderstanding and may lead to Islamophobic reaction not just in France but in the rest of Europe too (Wardrop, para.18).

Todd Green, a religious studies scholar and visiting assistant professor at Luther College, said that the xenophobic response was a result of France "suffering from an identity crisis," like much of Western Europe. He writes that France's "political response is to restrict the free exercise of religion so as to preserve an identity that is defined against Islam" (Green, para.8). Indeed, this fear-mongering discourse from the French government has been counteracted with a similar fear-mongering discourse by Muslim fundamentalists. In a audio recording broadcasted by the Al-Jazeera network on October 20th 2010, a voice of a man claiming to be Osama bin Laden denounced the ban on the burqa stating "If you want to terrorize and think that it's your right to ban the free women from wearing the burqa, isn't it our right to expel your occupying forces, your men in our lands by striking them by the neck?" (CNN, 2010).

The third community accepts that the burqa is not suitable in France and that it limits freedoms of Muslim women but questions the legitimacy of the French state and fears the ban will stigmatize all Muslims. For example, Sabria Jawhar, online blogger for the Huffington post and a self-identified hijab-wearing French-Muslim, writes, "I hate the burqa because it serves no logical purpose in Western society. The intent of the clothing is to draw attention away from the woman, but in the West it only attracts unwanted attention" (Jawhar, para.4). Much like the

opinion belonging to the first community that the burqa represents foreignness, Jawhar continues in the blog to urge Muslim women to reconsider cultural and religious values and adapt to the new environment as rigidly adhering to cultural dress unnecessarily invites trouble (Jawhar, para.11). However, she also questions the legitimacy of the French state: "Muslims no longer have the luxury of choosing whether to wear the burqa in the West. The French government has led the campaign to steal that choice from us" (Jawhar, para.4). Jean-Marie Fardeau, Director of the Human Rights Watch in Paris, states that the French state does not have legitimacy to "free the Muslim women by banning the burqa" and instead that the Muslim community have to organize among themselves with regards to the issue of the burqa (*AlJazeera English*, 2009). Like members of the first community that believes the burqa oppresses women, Fardeau subscribes to the representation of the burqa as a symbol of oppression but, like Jawhar, questions the role of the French state in "freeing" them.

I will examine the discourse of ethnonationalism that is evident in Sarkozy's speech and later, in the arguments of the communities supporting the ban. I will then examine how the burqa is represented to the French public and the world, focusing on Sarkozy's speech as the main source of the colonial gaze. Sarkozy effectively combines the concepts of ethnonationalism and the colonial gaze through this statement: "the burqa will not be welcome on the French republic territory, we cannot accept in our country of women, prisoners behind bars, cut off from any social life, deprived of any identity, it is not how the French republic conceive the dignity of woman." As evidenced by this statement alone, the two concepts are not separate. For the purposes of clarity in this discussion, I have chosen to examine them separately. What does it mean to be "French"? How are women who wear the burqa seen through the colonial gaze?

Sarkozy represents the burqa as an object foreign to French national identity. The argument that the burqa is a threat to French secularism is also invoked by communities supporting the ban. First, it is important to historicize and define secularism as it is practiced in France. Secularism in France implies an absence of religious symbols in public spaces and institutions. This is a very different notion from that in the United States, for example, where secularism implies that the state cannot privilege any particular religion and should not interfere with religion (Shirazi and Mishra, 46). The assumption then is that French secularism is a neutral and secular background from which religion is absent and all religious signs are equally foregrounded (Al-Saji, 880). However, as evidenced through Sarkozy's speech in the statement, "Who can forget that the separation of the church and the state was made in pain," one recognizes that French secularism is built on a history of Christianity. Although it is assumed in Sarkozy's speech that this history of Christianity has been successfully erased, the ban on the burqa demonstrates otherwise. As Alcoff eloquently describes in "The Whiteness Question" (2):

> modern world legitimation narratives proclaimed that European-based societies were superior, not because Europeans were close to God … but because they have developed concrete political values and institutions that maximized individualism, civil liberty and economic prosperity…assumed to be the highest human goods … many nonwhites are able to participate in these narratives … but because it was the cultural traditions and economic methods of Europe and the United States … whites were at the center and the forefront, with non-white allies alongside but to the back.

When French secularism is historicized through the lens of a "modern world" legitimation narrative of European superiority with whites in the center and non-whites in the peripheries, the French secular space is suddenly placed in a larger history of white supremacy and hegemonic mainstream Christianity which it cannot escape. The French "secular" public space is not a generalized absence, but a structured absence where certain religious practices can coexist with it, even though they are no longer explicity inscribed within it (Al-Saji, 881). As such, French secular space can accommodate religious practices from Christianity with relative invisibility, with the example of a crucifix being allowed as long as it is 1/16th of a size of a person and tucked under a shirt (read: discreet and acceptable), while practices like Islamic veiling such as hijabs and burqas and Sikh turbans are disallowed (read: conspicuous and unacceptable). The successful separation of the church from the French state as stated in Sarkozy's speech is nothing but a myth of a nation trying to escape its painful history.

This specifically French-republican version of secularism was unable to answer the question of how the veil would be accepted in the contemporary French context when this issue first arose in 1989, with the case of 3 college girls being suspended for wearing a hijab (Al-Saji, 879). Al-Saji argues that since a law could not be passed solely on the basis of secularism at this time, the argument for gender equality enters the debate (880). The veil, specifically the hijab in the early 1990s, is equated with oppression of women in Islam, a value in opposition to the French republican value and perceived social reality of gender equality for non-hijab-wearing women in France. In the 1990s, the media and the political discourse around the hijab increasingly rallied around the issue of gender oppression. It came to the fore during the hearings of the Stasi Commission in 2004, which resulted in a banning of the hijab in all public places including schools and public office (*Canadian Broadcasting Corporation*, 2004, para.1).

The burqa as foreign object to French national identity not only threatens French secularism, it also clashes with current French immigration policies. Again in comparison to the United States which generally does not expect immigrants to assimilate in areas of religious and cultural practice, France expects immigrants to integrate by adopting French behavior and cultural values (Shirazi and Mishra, 46). Furthermore, while Muslims in the US are an economically powerful,

well-educated and diverse group comprising South Asians, African Americans and Arabs, Muslims in France are working-class, postcolonial immigrants primarily from North Africa. Arguably, the United States has made the "immigrant experience" part of its national identity, while this is not the case for France. As evidenced by the controversy on the ban of the burqa, public debates regarding the burqa are increasingly associated with concerns about social integration. Many communities against the burqa ban argue that the ban is a French political response to the perceived threat of Islam with "moves to roll back multiculturalism and promote monocultural homogeneity" (Shirazi and Mishra, 48). Seemingly marginal images of veiled Muslim women play a central role in the Western imaginary construct, underwriting the binary of freedom versus oppression and the modes of gender and subjectivity through which the "West" maintains its imaginary borders (Al-Saji, 877). Therefore, French-Muslim women are expected to prove their French nationalism by abiding by this burqa ban. History has consistently shown that in turbulent times, especially in times of economic uncertainty, immigrant populations have been suspected and asked to prove their loyalties to the nations in which they are living (e.g., Japanese in World War II Canada; Muslims in 9/11 America).

The word "la burqa" is itself foreign to the French language. The 2004 law banning the hijab in public spaces describes the hijab as *le voile*, or "the veil," and *le foulard Islamique*, "the Islamic headscarf" (Al-Saji, 878). The francofied word *hijab* suggests more familiarity than *la burqa* which suggest foreignness. The word itself is thus crucial to the representation of the burqa in the French republic. Naming the hijab "le foulard Islamique" is less alien to French secularist values and might explain why it is only partially banned in public spaces whereas "la burqa," a more alien term, might explain its being fully banned everywhere. By interpreting the burqa as a symbol of foreignness to French identity, there is no acknowledgement of the possibilities of a hybrid identity that is neither completely French nor completely North African. By adopting this view, there is no space for the female body to express a French-Muslim identity. The image of the Muslim woman forms an Other, which explains the exclusionary and silencing function played by this representation.

As well as a foreign object, the burqa is also represented as a symbol of gender oppression in Sarkozy's speech. The colonial gaze overdetermines the subjectivity of the French-Muslim women who wear the burqa as both villain and victim, a symptom of her third world difference. This leads to an absence of presence, a hypervisibility yet invisibility of the burqa-clad Muslim woman in France.

Veils in general have been romanticized as a marker of exotic orientalism (Rantanen, 343). The image of the burqa-covered body of the Afghan woman became the symbol of oppression of women under the Taliban rule. This representation attributed Afghan womens' conditions to

a unitary source, an "Islamic fundamentalism" immediately identifiable with the burqa (Al-Saji, 876). What is most visibile, the burqa, is essentialized as the marker of a society's and individual's difference. The question however is: Most visible to whom? The burqa is seen as a marker of Islamic difference from the vision of the French observer. This colonial gaze is exemplified through Sarkozy, president of the French republic. The colonial gaze functions not only through economic and political hegemony but also by means of an apparatus of representation that overdetermines perceptions of the colonized, in this case, the burqa-clad Muslim woman as an oppressed, helpless victim in need of saving. She embodies Mohanty's third world difference: sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented and victimized (Mohanty, 337).

The colonial gaze serves two functions. It imposes Eurocentric meanings on the burqa-clad woman but also acts as a mirror. This field of vision interprets the image of the burqa-clad Muslim woman as inferior and oppressed, reflecting it back to the image of the superior, white, Western and liberated woman. As outlined by Mohanty, the universal images of the "third world woman (the veiled woman, the chaste virgin etc.) ….are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives" (Mohanty, 353). As evidenced by the argument brought most notably by Anne-Elizabeth Moutet that the issue of the burqa is an issue of "feminism," she fails to specify that the kind of feminism it serves is itself colonial and elite: a white, Western, First World feminism that prides itself in being sexually liberated, secular and having control unlike their Third World counterparts. As with Moutet's argument towards the case of Faiza Silmi who was denied French citizenship on the basis of "not living like a French citizen" because she did not own a bank account, vote or speak to men aside from male relatives (*AlJazeera English*, 2009), the argument lacks reflexivity in examining France's non-Muslim populations who also lead similar lives. Under the guise of gender oppression through the burqa, French society identifies itself with a commitment to gender equality, which it assumes it has already attained. French politics of anti-sexism are endorsed as French society targets the Islamic other, but it also absolves mainstream French society from having to critically examine itself.

The third world difference of the burqa-clad French Muslim woman appeals to the "West" to "do something," just like it appealed to Sarkozy to bring the issue to French parliament to enact a committee to examine how to restrict its use. As Kleinman says in his discussion of photojournalism and the role of pictures in mobilizing "help" for "Third World" countries:

> Something must be done, and it must be done soon, but from outside the local setting. The authorization of action through an appeal for foreign aid, even foreign intervention, begins with an evocation of indigenous absence, an erasure of local voices and acts (Kleinman, 7).

The "West," in this case the French state, takes it upon itself to free these women who are "prisoners behind bars." Again, the colonial gaze provides a mirror. Viewing the oppression faced by women in this "fundamentalist Muslim society" reassures the "West" that despite all the havoc in its own society, it is somehow better. The "West" gains in moral status and as Kleinman describes "some of our organizations gain financially and politically, while those whom we represent, or appropriate, remain where they are" (8). As such, the burqa as an object of representation, symbolizing gender oppression, provides a positive mirror for both white, Western women and the society they live in.

Burqa-clad Muslim women in France are hypervisible as the symbol of gender oppression of Islam. They are seen as naturally inferior, and cannot be seen otherwise. The veiled body is not merely seen as oppressed but cannot be seen as a subject who takes up and constitutes itself through that oppression (Al-Saji, 885). Muslim women are literally invisible as subjects to the colonial gaze. As they are unable to return the gaze, their agency cannot be imagined within the field of the colonial gaze that is so accustomed to objectifying women's bodies. Foucault defines biopower as an "explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving subjgation of bodies and control of populations" (Foucault, 140). Foucault continues to describe the many forms of biopower, such as "regulating populations, infinitesimal surveillances, permanent control…a micro-power concerned with the body" (142). The law on the ban of the burqa can be seen as a form of legal surveillance, a form of permanent, uncontested control that regulates not only the "fundamentalist" Muslim population but the Muslim female body. To become a subject, the state (read: colonial gaze) demands a removal of the burqa. Women who continue to don the burqa are seen as placing themselves beyond colonial recognition and thus have no place within the heterosocial and scopic economy. This absence of presence is effectively described in the quote, "They look at you but they're not looking at you, they're looking through you" (Robertson and Culhane, 60). The burqa-clad Muslim women in France face a representational crisis of both being highly visible and invisible in French society. As Kleinman describes "representation is the absence of presence … how it is real for us is always mediated through some representational practice" (9). The representational practice is the colonial gaze which imposes interpretations of oppressive religious practices on the Muslim women who wear the burqa. In looking and making visible the burqa-clad Muslim women, the colonial gaze renders the agency and possibilities for self-representations of the French Muslim woman invisible.

Because the burqa is represented as an oppressive symbol, Muslim women in France who continue to wear it are seen as bad Muslim women. Bad Muslim women are the ones who dare defy Western gender norms, who refuse to condemn their religion and who refuse to unveil (Thobani, 237). Muslim women who wear the burqa are seen as both villain and victim. The

local French media as well as global, typically Western media portray the bad Muslim woman as the woman who refuses to take off her burqa. Claims from the women themselves that it is their choice to wear the burqa, as with Faiza Silmi, are interpreted as instances of bad faith that does not allow for genuine freedom or agency (Al-Saji, 880). They are also seen as unrepentant, fanatical and oblivious to male domination (Thobani, 237). Otherwise, the acts are labeled as "irrational and self-destructive…as the local world is deemed incompetent" in understanding its own oppression (Kleinman, 8).

Perhaps what I find most interesting in this debate is the representation of the burqa as simply an item of clothing. The overt denial of the burqa as a religious object shows that the burqa itself has undergone a re-definition into secularism. It is represented as an object of clothing, devoid of religion. Clothing is often seen as a form of artificial envelope that can be removed to reveal a "natural," biological body. This generates the impression that the burqa can be removed without affecting the bodily sense of self of the woman wearing it (Al-Saji, 890). There is a tension here between the burqa as a mere article of clothing with seemingly practical and varied uses, and the perceived religious and symbolic weight of it being an Islamic dress. At the same time, the burqa is seen as a form of unchanging and static gender oppression. The burqa represents a material prison, as exemplified in Sarkozy's speech: a woman who wears a burqa is a "prisoner behind wire netting." This prison limits and immobilizes the woman as well as psychically and psychologically disables her. Oppression is taken to belong to the materiality of the burqa itself, the "grillage" or wire netting. Read metaphorically, the wire netting are bars that imprison the Muslim woman. As Lutz and Collins state:

> Entire notions of difference among people are easily disgestible when difference is attributed to dress. Difference becomes assimilable to the idea of taste, and, like that concept, allows renaming of poverty as "bad taste" and unlike values as matters of consumer choice (93).

By having "bad taste" in clothes, the French-Muslim woman who chooses to wear the burqa to express Muslim identity is again blamed for complicity in her own oppression.

Parallel to Sarkozy's overdeterminance of the verdict on the ban of the burqa a year before the official law was passed, the colonial gaze overdetermines the subjectivities of the burqa-clad Muslim women in France by labeling the burqa foreign to French identity. The representations of the burqa in the French state have very real effects on the daily lives of the Muslim community both locally in France and globally. Increasingly there is a need for every Muslim, especially Muslim women, to effectively and clearly articulate their subject position to both Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike. Words such as "mainstream," "radical," "practicing," "non-practicing," "Sunni," "Shia'a," from "East" or "West" are terms that I have noticed beginning to appear within

the Muslim community in the last decade. The increasing need for differences to be labeled and articulated is especially worrying at a time when solidarity within the Muslim community and between non-Muslim communities is most needed. The response in the European context regarding issues of social integration during a period of economic crisis serves as yet another example in history of the scapegoating of visibly different immigrant populations. France's myth of secularism is a reminder of the inescapable colonial histories that most other European countries have to bear and are trying to move past in this age of increasing tensions between a country's histories and its futures. As a self-identified Muslim with feminist politics, I hope to contribute to the growing body of work on this issue. I wish to self-represent and locate myself within the context of these two communities, whose histories, views and arguments have often been misrepresented in the ongoing debate of the ban of the burqa. A possible direction for future research is to investigate the different levels of visibility to the colonial gaze with regards to Islamic veils. Is the hijab more acceptable than the burqa in "secular" France as Muslim women are able to "return the gaze"? Another direction for future research would be to investigate how Muslim women living in the West have re-defined and re-appropriated the meanings of veiling. Do they see it as a form of personal liberty, to challenge stereotypical notions of Islam or as a form of strategic essentialism?

I hope that with this research, both Muslims and non-Muslims alike are able to read and understand the discourses of ethnonationalism and the colonial gaze that mold the representations of the burqa as symbols of foreignness and gender oppression in the French government. Hopefully, this would serve to create a platform of educative activism for French-Muslim women, Muslim women and self-aware Western feminists who are allies to such issues to acknowledge possibilities of agency and self-representation beyond the Western norms of social consciousness.

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Appendix

Nicolas Sarkozy's speech addressing French parliament at Versailles on June 22, 2009

Original in French

La laïcité c'est le respect pour toutes les opinions, et pour toutes les croyances.

Quand Jules Ferry a écrit aux instituteurs, il leur a dit " au moment de proposer aux élèves un précepte, une maxime quelconque, demandez-vous, s'il se trouve à votre connaissance un seul honnête homme qui puisse être froissé de ce que vous allez dire. Demandez-vous, si un seul père de famille, je dis un seul, présent à votre classe et vous écoutant, pourrait de bonne foi refuser son assentiment à ce qu'il nous entendrait dire, si oui, abstenez-vous de le dire."

Qui peut oublier que la séparation de l'Église et de l'État s'est faite dans la douleur. Et sommes-nous obligés de continuer cette guerre qui n'a plus lieu d'être ?

Nous ne sommes pas menacés par le cléricalisme, nous le sommes davantage par une forme d'intolérance qui stigmatiserait toute appartenance religieuse.

Je le dis en pensant en particulier aux Français de confession musulmane, nous ne devons pas nous tromper de combat, dans la République, la religion musulmane doit être autant respectée que les autres religions.

Le problème de la burqa n'est pas un problème religieux. C'est un problème de liberté, c'est un problème de dignité de la femme [applaudissements du public]. La burqa [les applaudissements se poursuivent] la burqa ce n'est pas un signe religieux, c'est un signe d'asservissement, c'est un signe d'abaissement.

Je veux le dire solennellement [applaudissements du public] elle ne sera pas le bienvenu sur le territoire de la République française, nous ne pouvons pas accepter dans notre pays des femmes, prisonnières derrière un grillage, coupées de toute vie sociale, privées de toute identité, ce n'est pas l'idée que la République française se fait de la dignité de la femme.

Le parlement a souhaité [applaudissements du public] se saisir de cette question, c'est la meilleure façon de procéder, il faut qu'il y ait un débat et que tous les points de vue s'expriment, où ailleurs qu'au Parlement pourraient-ils mieux s'exprimer ? Mais je vous le dis, nous ne devons pas avoir honte de nos valeurs, nous ne devons pas avoir peur de les défendre.

English translation

Secularism is respect for all opinions and for all beliefs.

When Jules Ferry wrote to teachers, he said to them "before suggesting to students whichever precept, a maxim, ask yourself if you ever knew a single honest man who could be offended by which you are about to say. Ask yourself if a single father of the family, I am saying a single, who is in your class and listening to you with good intention could disagree with what you're saying, then don't say it".

Who can forget that the separation of the church and the state was made in pain. And are we obliged to continue a war that is not meant to be anymore ?

We are not threatened by the clericalism but we are even more by a sort of intolerance that would stigmatize any religious belonging.

I am saying this in particular thinking about French people of Muslim religion, we should not mistaken the

fight we're in, in the Republic, Muslim religion should be as much respected as other religions.

The issue of the burqa is not a religious issue. It's an issue of freedom, its an issue of woman dignity (applause in the audience). The burqa (audience applause) the burqa is not a religious symbol, it's a symbol of subservience, it is a symbol of debasement.

I want to say it solemnly (audience applause) she (the burqa) will not be welcome on the French republic territory, we cannot accept in our country of women, prisoners behind wire netting (read : bars), cut off from any social life, deprived of any identity, it is not how the French republic conceive the dignity of woman.

The parliament has wished (audience applause) to grasp this question, it is the best way to proceed, that there should be a debate and that all points of view can be expressed, where else than in the parliament could those be best expressed ? But I am telling you, we should not be ashamed of our values, we should not be afraid to defend them.