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# In Search of Living Citizenship and the Islamic Habitus: The Muslim Private School as an Alternative Space for the Formation of ‘French-Muslims’ in France*

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## Abstract

In France, the prominence of Islam in public spaces, notably in schools, has been called into question, as evidenced by a series of headscarf affairs that criticized the wearing of the veil. This debate concluded on March 15, 2004, when the French government imposed a ban on the Islamic veil in public schools. Today, however, we witness the resurgence of the Islamic habitus through the private schooling sector: ‘*école privée musulmane*’ (EPM) or the private Muslim school. In the French educational landscape, where public schools are of paramount importance, how can we interpret the development of EPMs? This article explores the school and religious life of the actors who compose these schools through an ethnographic school conducted in its premises. We highlight the experiences of the actors that led them to choose EPMs and retain them in these spaces. This study examines the choices made by these actors, particularly in the aftermath of the French headscarf ban and the public school crisis. Finally, the analysis focuses on the particularity of the EPM space as an alternative to public and private education of other denominations. The challenge of this new school space is to reconcile the two values to be transmitted through education — citizenship and the Islamic habitus — which will enable the establishment of a new ‘French-Muslim citizenship.’

## I. Introduction

For more than three decades, Islam has been on a contentious ascent in Europe. Consequently, it has come under question in relation to the public norms of European secularism (Césari, 2004; Joppke, 2009; Göle, 2017). In particular, the religious practice of wearing the headscarf in Islam, which extends beyond the private space, has been questioned by its prominence in the public space (Göle, 2005; 2013). While the cultural traditions of the immigrant population were already the subject of debate in France (Gaspard, 1992), Islam was introduced into the public debate through a specific public space — the school (Galembert, 2009; Hajjat and Mohammed, 2013; Beaugé, 2015). Considered as a supreme institution dedicated to instilling republican morality (Baubérot, 2004), the public school was embroiled in a series of controversies as a result of the headscarves worn by Muslim girls, an incident dubbed as the 'headscarf affairs' (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar, 1995; Baubérot, 2004; 2015; Ferhat, 2019). The visibility of Muslim girls' headscarves in public schools sparked such an intense debate in French society that in 2004, a law banning the headscarf was passed. It imposed the total exclusion of all religious symbols, including the headscarf, in public schools: "Law No. 2004–228 of March 15, 2004, framing, in application of the principle of secularism, the wearing of signs or dress manifesting a religious affiliation in public schools, colleges, and lycées" (Lorcerie, 2005; Bowen, 2007; Scott, 2007). Instances, such as depriving students, and particularly those of Muslim faith, of the freedom to display their religious symbols in schools, a place that plays a major role in shaping future citizens, have brought into question the relationship between religion, secularism, and educational institutions.

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Three decades later, and more than fifteen years after the implementation of the law of March 15, 2004, we have witnessed the development of private schools that provided education while upholding Islamic values; they came to be known as *école privée musulmane* (EPM) or the Muslim private schools (Bras et al., 2010; Poucet, 2011b; Ferrara, 2012; 2018; Bourget, 2019). These schools follow the national curriculum as in the case of public schools, while simultaneously providing a range of teachings based on Islamic values. Historically, the French educational landscape has been largely dominated by public or secular education, both for the formation of citizenship and access to social mobility. All the challenges, crises, and dilemmas faced by French society over the last few decades has led to a reconsideration of the role of public schools in shaping citizens and the republican model of the French nation-state. This movement began with the matter of immigrant integration in the 1990s, continued with urban instability and violence in the suburbs in the 2000s (Dubet, 1991; 1993), and is now culminating in the post-Charlie Hebdo era, in the so-called religious contestation of public education (Ravet, 2017; Obin, 2020).

What does the emergence of schools endorsing Islamic values signify in this deeply unsettled political and social landscape? Should we regard it as a consequence of the enactment of the law of March 15, 2004 that prohibited the conspicuous display of religious symbols in public schools? Does the development of EPMs and the implementation of religious education indicate a retreat from the community?

To contribute to the renewal of scientific investments initiated on this subject (Bras et al., 2010; Poucet, 2011b; Ferrara, 2012; 2018; Bouget, 2019; Girin, 2019; Hanafi et al., 2021), this study analyzes the 'school experience' (Dubet, 1994; 2017; Dubet and Martuccelli, 1996) of the actors in EPMs. According to Dubet and Martuccelli, "to understand what the school produces, it is not enough to study programs, roles, and working methods; we must also seize the way in which students construct their experience, in which they 'produce' relations, strategies, and meanings through which they constitute themselves" (Dubet and Martuccelli, 1996: 14). They also argue that the school experience comprises the normative and cognitive activities of the actor, who defines a situation, elaborates the hierarchies of choices, and constructs images of themselves, through which subjectivation is achieved (Dubet and Martuccelli, 1996: 14). To further understand how the educational role and Muslim identity influence the functioning of a school, it seems appropriate to examine the experiences of the actors who make up the school, including students, teachers, and leaders, through interviews and ethnographic observation of EPMs.

Accordingly, in 2016 and 2017, a series of ethnographic surveys were conducted at an EPM located in the south of France. Additionally, actors from other EPMs were interviewed between 2019 and 2021 as a part of the analysis. During the main investigation, I conducted observations in the classrooms as well as in the courtyards during recess and interviewed the actors of the school, including the students. Analyzing the experiences of these actors will allow us to reconstruct the issues surrounding the process of 'subjectivation' within EPMs, and the specificities of this type of institution.

## II. School Ethnography in an EPM

In France, a country where religious beliefs are not recognized in schools, private schools are an exception. Unlike public schools which are 'laïc' or secular, private schools, which were developed from prototype Catholic schools, are allowed to maintain a 'proper character' while reflecting the educational values of the school,[1] on the condition that it "provides its teachings with full respect for freedom of conscience" (Article L 442-1 of the Education Code) and insofar as its teachings conform with the rules and programs of public education.[2]

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[1] Concerning 'proper character,' Bruno Poucet (2011a: 34) says that it implies "a quality attached to a particular institution and therefore subject to variations. The specific character may be spiritual, pedagogical, etc.; this notion concerns Catholic establishments as well as establishments of other denominations […] or secular schools with a pedagogical purpose, etc. It is therefore an empty form, a 'catch-all' notion," and the concept is not defined by the Debré law (see the next footnote).

[2] This arrangement was defined in the Debré law of 1959 "on the relationship between the State and private educational institutions" (*Loi n°59-1557 du 31 décembre 1959 sur les rapports entre l'Etat et les établissements d'enseignement privés*), which has now been inscribed in the Education Code. This law was adopted under the initiative of Charles de Gaulle in order to put an end to the political conflicts enduring since the mid-19th century between the Catholic congregation and the anti-clericals over the education that was dominated by the Church until the laïcization of the school through the laws of Jules Ferry (the law of June 16, 1881 making the school free of charge and the law of March 28, 1882 making the primary education obligatory) as well as the law Goblet of October 30, 1886 entrusting exclusively secular teachers with the task

This exceptionality of private schools was not affected by the law of March 15, 2004, which only concerned public schools. How do private schools operate? How do actors exercise religious practices and, at the same time, maintain the pedagogical relationship? How do the schools strike a balance between the national curriculum and the freedom to observe religious practices? We first examine the pedagogical project of the school and proceed to observations conducted within its premises.

## 2.1. An Educational Project Integrating Public and Religious Education

### 2.1.1. *Creating an EPM*

The school (which I refer to here as 'school X'[3]) provided secondary education (i.e., middle and high school; average age between 11 and 17). School X was an important pillar in the development of EPMs in France, as it was the first private Muslim secondary school in southern France. According to the director of the school, who had worked for ten years as a mathematics teacher in the public sector, the initial project of school X can be traced back to the 1990s. At that time, the director and the conseillère principale d'éducation (CPE), that is, the principal education advisor, initially designed a construction project for a mosque in the place where the school is currently located. However, due to a succession of events, including the planned construction of a large mosque by the local municipality, and the presence of another Muslim primary school that was already established, this project was altered to involve the development of a secondary school, beginning with a middle school.

At commencement, school X consisted of a sixth-grade class (first year of middle school) with 26 students. Since then, it has grown tremendously, adding more classes each year to offer comprehensive secondary education.[4] In 2016, the school was able to achieve this goal by launching the final year of Science and classes for the Science and Technologies of Management and Administration course (STMG). At the time of the fieldwork, 168 students were enrolled in nine classes of middle and high schools. According to the school administration, the numbers are expected to rise to 289 students and 13 classes for the 2020–2021 school year.

In 2015, five years after its commencement, school X signed a contract of association with the state.[5] The first contractualization was carried out for a sixth-grade class.

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of teaching in public schools.

[3] All the names of the institutions, individuals, and associations that appear in this article are anonymized or modified insofar as the meanings of their names are not changed.

[4] Secondary education comprises middle and high schools and is between primary and higher education.

[5] In France, there are two forms of public schools under the current regime defined by the Debré law legislated in 1954: non-contractual and state-contracted. All private establishments start their function as non-contractual, after the examination and validation of the establishment's project by the rector, mayor, public prosecutor, and prefect. After 5 years of operation, private non-contractual schools can ask to conclude a contract with the state to receive the state's subvention. This concept of contract with the state was established

Subsequently, in 2016, all three classes at the school were included in the contract. As the headmaster included a part of the school in the contract each year, the school currently has five classes under contract and receives state subsidies for these classes.

### 2.1.2. *The school's educational project: integrating public education and the 'proper character' of Islamic values*

As it conforms to the public aim of educating "all children without distinction of origin, opinion, or belief" (Article L 442-1 of the Education Code), school X provides education that is consistent with the national education curriculum, identical to that provided in public schools. The director of the school explains that "*the first objective is to help the students obtain their national diploma for middle school (brevet) and high school (baccalauréat)*," as a school institution. In accordance with its first objective, the school affirms Islam as the 'proper character' underlying its teaching: "*In the name of the Islamic values that it holds, [school X] is innovative in the educational landscape. This is the reason [the association Y], which runs [school X], puts itself at the service of the society, families, and their children in a way that is unique to it.*"[6] Taking its objectives into consideration, how does the school strike a balance between its educational vocation as a public service and the 'proper character' of Islam? The CPE's statement exemplifies the rationale applied to reconcile this public function with the unique private value:

> The educational project of our school is for young citizens who are proud to be French, and proud to be Muslims in France. Today, the parents of our students understand this. They want their children to have officially recognized diplomas graduate with good grades in English, mathematics, history, etc., and to complete successfully their baccalaureate degrees to succeed in life. […] For this reason, we accept students who have never studied Arabic or the Quran, as it is not a problem; it is not an end in itself. Religious education is part of the fulfilment of self-realization. (CPE of school X).

According to the school administrators, imparting religious education based on Islamic values is not the primary purpose of the school. The provision of denominational education naturally serves to provide students with religious knowledge. However, it is not about training religious leaders for worship, as the CPE recalls meeting several parents during the school's opening who "*thought [the school was] going to train imams and sheikhs* (Muslim spiritual leaders)." Private schools referring to Islamic values are not the same as Quranic schools or theological

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to put an end to the conflict between the promoters of secular public education and the Catholics who dominated the landscape of children's education until the beginning of the 20th century, known as the "school war." (Poucet, 2009; 2011a; 2012)

[6] From the leaflet presenting the school (obtained during the fieldwork in 2016).

training institutions. The goal of this school is to train young citizens who are "*proud to be French and proud to be Muslims in France.*"

### 2.1.3. *Special teachings*

All courses provided by school X under its educational project are taught in French by qualified and experienced teachers, some of whom have also taught or are teaching in other institutions, both private and public. In addition, the school offers complementary courses. According to student A (a female first-year high school student), what makes the school "*special is that it already provides additional courses.*" There are three specific courses apart from the national curriculum: Arabic language, Muslim education, and Muslim civilization.[7]

First, the Arabic class is taught for three hours per week as LV2 (*Langue Vivante* or Modern Language),[8] alongside English LV1. Since 2017, the school has added Spanish as a third language, which is taught for two hours every week. Second, the school offers three hours of Muslim education at all levels each week. According to student B (a female second-year high school student), who attended a Catholic school before joining school X, it is similar to "*the catechism for Catholics: everything about religion, how to pray, good deeds, etc*." Teaching is divided into three parts. The first is devoted to learning and memorizing the Quran. The significance of this teaching is summarized by the headmaster as follows: "*For us, the aim is not to solely learn the Quran; rather, it is to learn a part of it that will allow us to understand the essentials.*" To facilitate the learning of the Quran in the classroom, the teacher assigns specific parts to each student, depending on their levels. The second is worship performance, which is aimed at teaching students the different methods of worship, such as praying and fasting. Finally, the third concerns teaching "*ethics, values, morality, authenticity, honesty, sincerity, through the text, anecdote, and parable*" (CPE of school X).

Additionally, Muslim civilization is yet another subject that distinguishes the education provided at school X from that offered in public schools. It aims to explain the history of Islam. This course is taught in both middle and high schools for one hour every week. In high school, part of this course is replaced by another course on living communication. These two courses are held alternately every two weeks. The living communication course is a perfect illustration of the school's concern for citizenship and the nurturing of 'Muslims of France.' Students are taught inter-faith and intercultural dialogue in contemporary secular and multicultural societies.

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[7] Almost all private Muslim schools offer religious education alongside the national curriculum. However, it should also be noted that this teaching is not sufficient to define a private Muslim school in the strict sense and there are some exceptions. For example, the anonymous school in the suburban region of Paris teaches Arabic but does not devote any classes to the Quran or religion. According to her, the school places more emphasis on ethics than on knowledge.

[8] The teaching of Modern Languages was introduced from the fifth grade (second year of middle school) onwards since the start of the 2016 academic year after the reform of the middle schools. In general, the choice of languages is left to the students.

For example, in the first-year high school class I observed, they were preparing for a meeting-debate about Muslim women in France wearing the veil. During this debate, people from outside the school were invited to participate, even if they did not necessarily agree with the students' point of view, or even opposed it completely (the majority of this class was composed of girls, and two thirds of them wore the veil). Under the supervision of an outside teacher (cultural mediator), students were trained to better express their opinions, defend themselves, and refute opposing points of view. They thus learned to better communicate and participate in a dialogue on this sensitive albeit essential issue, especially for those who attend the EPM.

An advantage of EPMs that attracts students is the availability of special subjects such as these. As student A, who had previously attended a private Catholic school, explained, "*We don't have that in Catholic schools, so I was naturally attracted to it.*" Student B, one of her peers, also considers these religious teachings appealing in determining her choice of school: "*We have Muslim education and Muslim civilization; in fact, it is the history of Islam, so I was greatly fascinated by these options.*"

Prior to the development of EPMs, or if there is no EPM nearby, children of Muslim families learn Arabic and the Quran in Quranic classes offered at local mosques. Classes are often held on days when there is no school, on Wednesday afternoons, or weekends. However, according to a religious education teacher at another EPM, "*for students to attend Quranic classes during weekends in addition to their studies at school during weekdays becomes psychologically and physically exhausting for them. On the contrary, in EPMs, they can do both at the same time, which also saves their time.*" This observation, along with the students' comments, reveals their genuine desire to deepen their religious knowledge and the EPM's cumulative role as a school that simultaneously provides public education and religious instruction.

### 2.2. Islam Practiced in French Schools

In France, students and teachers of the Muslim faith are confronted with several issues related to religious observance in public schools. Apart from issues on halal food (that Muslims are permitted to consume), co-education/single-sex education, daily prayers, Friday prayers, and the content of religious education, there is an evident concern about the veil for Muslim women. In this study, we use ethnographic observations from field surveys to explore how the religiosity of the actors is manifested in daily school life in the EPMs.

#### 2.2.1. *Clothing and the Islamic veil*[9]

First, focusing on women's clothing, we examine the direct impact the codification of the 2004 law had on the religious symbols of Muslim women. Wearing the veil in EPMs is permitted because they are non-public establishments. However, it would be more appropriate to specify that freedom of dress is allowed according to the choice of the individual. As in other schools, we observed that, in school X, the choice of clothing remains ‘free,’ both for its teachers and students, on the condition that the type and color of clothing are appropriate and not conspicuous. During the fieldwork, it was observed that the prevalence of women wearing veils was remarkable. About half of all the female teachers wore veils, and the number of students wearing veils increased as the levels of classes advanced: very few in the first year of middle school, and almost all in the final year of high school. However, compared with the other EPMs investigated, where we could find veiled students even in elementary or middle schools, in school X, the presence of non-veiled students in middle schools or even in high schools was significant. Both students wearing hijabs (headscarves) with long skirts and those dressed in T-shirts, trousers, and trainers were observed talking to each other. It was the case with my informants in the group interview, students C and D, who declared themselves to be Muslims and friends in the same STMG class. Their dressing styles were strikingly different. Student C wore a black veil and a long black skirt, while student D wore tight jeans and a jacket, with her hair down. Furthermore, during my second fieldwork in the following year, I noticed that student D wore a turban, with the same type of clothing, similar to that in our previous encounter.[10]

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[9] According to the school's public communication on social networks, uniforms were introduced from the beginning of the 2020 academic year. Certainly, the willingness to introduce uniforms is observed in several schools to "maintain discipline and uniformity in the school," according to the CPE of a non-contractual EPM in Ile-de-France, who showed me around her school. Future studies are expected to shed more light on this aspect.

Similarly, the teachers were free to dress as they pleased, and at times, their clothing appeared more ‘conspicuous’ than that of the students. Some wore their traditional dress, which comprised a hijab and a long black and brown skirt, while others dressed in varying ways. For example, Farah, the supervisor wore tight jeans, a black jumper, and a black hijab. Sarra, the English teacher, seemed pleased with her fashion sense as she wore a white T-shirt and jeans, a red cardigan, and a black asymmetric turban. Mina, the science teacher, whom I met later in 2019, wore leather trousers and a fur vest. Over the course of the two surveys, it was observed that the dressing styles of Muslim women, which included both students and teachers, ranged from religious to secular.

However, with regard to the veil, as in the case of student D, we observed a plurality of choices, whether it was the color or style, the hijab or turban, or the decision not to wear one. For example, I interacted with a young female teacher who identified herself as Muslim and did not wear a veil. Similarly, another science teacher, Asma, described her decision not to wear the veil as follows:

> No, I do not wear the veil. There are women who choose to wear the veil, and I respect them. But I do not wear one because not wearing it does not bother me at all.

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[10] Unfortunately I did not get the opportunity to inquire about this change.

> It is my spirituality... the relationship between me and God that matters, not the veil. And people do not judge me! We all understand that the veil is a matter of individual choice. We are free to choose whether to wear the veil or not.

In school X, veiling is not imposed as a ‘uniform’ for Muslim women, and being Muslim does not obligate them to wear the veil. They can choose not to wear it if that is their way of practicing Islam. The CPE, who is in charge of the relationship among the school, the students, and their families, insists that wearing the veil does not directly signify one’s religiousness:

> Personally, there are days when I wear the veil like this, while on some days I wear it differently. I do not restrict myself to a specific veiling style. Because it is not specified in the Quran. You can wear a hat to conceal your hair. You can conceal it as you please. Today, I am wearing a hat, yesterday I wore a veil. The same applies to our students; we have clarified to them that they should not feel bound by a piece of clothing. The Quran instructs us to dress modestly, that is all. That is, what a modest veil is. However, there can be several interpretations of the text. These are the teachings that I communicate to my students. You can choose not to wear the veil, but at the same time, you can be a good Muslim. For instance, it is not obligatory for younger girls to wear the veil, there are some who want to wear it, we respect them; while others choose not to wear it, which is not a problem either. That is about it.

For the Muslims of school X, wearing a veil does not indicate faith as a ‘*good Muslim.*’ Thus, both students and teachers are given the opportunity to wear the outfit of their choice, as long as it is not too ‘conspicuous’ for school. They are also encouraged to reflect on their own religiosity, by questioning how to dress ‘*modestly*,’ as a ‘*good Muslim*,’ while in the school space. What remains to be understood is the extent to which the environment that allows religious socialization among students directs or not the will of each person to wear veils. As demonstrated in the case of student D, being in an environment that permits veiling and being surrounded by those who wear a veil, might encourage students to wear the veil by mimetic aspiration, especially among adults. In future studies, special attention should be devoted to the issue of religious socialization in EPMs, as well as to religious awakening.

### 2.2.2. *Religious practice in school life*

For a school that identifies itself as Islamic, and at the same time is part of the French educational landscape, the practice of the Islamic prescription is one of the most significant characteristics that distinguishes it from public schools. Although this type of “school [is] open to everyone without discrimination"[11] (Ministry of National Education, Youth and Sports, 2012), in principle, almost all the students enrolled there as well as most of the teachers are of Muslim faith or culture. In these circumstances, how is their faith manifested and practiced within school premises?

During the fieldwork, it was noted that religious practices were accommodated in the school's daily routine. First, because the director was both a math teacher and the Imam of the mosque annexed to the Muslim Centre, which also shares the premises with school X, our interviews were sometimes interrupted due to *salât* (prayer) time at the mosque. Similarly, on another occasion, after having lunch in the staff room, some of them left our discussion to go for the *Zuhr* prayer in the early afternoon. One of them took his own *qamis* (a long tunic worn by Muslim men for prayer). Not only the school officials but also the students and teachers regularly performed religious practices. Even during classes, some students would go out to perform *Asr salât*. One after the other, the students would leave the classroom. Among them was student A, who sat next to me during the history geography class. While they were assigned individual work, she stood up at a certain point and walked towards the teacher, asking him permission to leave the room. The teacher responded with a silent nod, after which, three other girls followed her. The teacher himself also headed out for the prayer. Those who left the room for prayer moved very quietly, without making any noise to avoid disturbing the others who continued their work. Everyone returned after about ten minutes and resumed their studies. Regarding the Friday prayer, which I could not observe during my survey, students and teachers would go to the mosque attached to the school and perform the prayer together. Unlike at public schools, the Muslims in an EPM can benefit from "*the punctuality of the prayer*" according to student A.

However, this fact does not mean that religious observance is a compulsion; rather, Muslims in school X practice their religion "*as they wish*" (without being constrained by the school's routine, either during class or in a different situation), explained student B, who did not join her classmates in prayer. Amongst them, and in general, within the school, autonomy and respect in religious practice were observed. These are well integrated into the daily life at the school, thus allowing students to choose whether to participate in it. To a certain extent, the actors in the school appreciate this arrangement, which is designed on the assumption that Islam is practiced regularly, as in the case of the students mentioned above, who told me that the punctuality of prayer in school life is significant.

It is true that observing religious practices was already permitted in other private schools, particularly Catholic ones. Some of the students interviewed stated that part of their schooling had been in Catholic schools and that they had not encountered any problems in practicing their faith. Student A even affirmed her rather positive impression of the Catholic school, where she studied before school X: "*I actually liked it when I was in primary school in a private Christian school. It was excellent, I really liked it.*" Similarly, student C, who had been to two different private Catholic schools for primary education, expressed her feelings: "*Actually, it is not really different from the Muslim school. It was rather... we had the class, the atmosphere was more or less the same, and then on their side there was the catechism class and all that, so it was somewhat similar.*" As for the religious education class, she said: "*I attended the catechism class, for example, but I did not participate in it, and engaged in doing other things.*"

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[11] The latest version of the Ministry's website defines the same requirement this way, changing the tone: "This contract [with the state] obliges the institution to admit children without distinction of origin, opinion or belief." (Ministry of National Education of Youth and Sports, 2020)

When asked why they finally choose school X, student A explained thus: "*I joined this school to continue wearing [the veil]. Additionally, there is Islamic education, I said to myself that I could continue on this path... yes, I chose this, not my parents. We talked about all this, and it was a decision that I made, it was not imposed on me by my parents.*" Student C agreed: "*Yes, there is a school here, a Catholic school that permits the wearing of the veil. It is a middle school, and I could go there for a simple reason that, if I go there, it is the same level, whereas here we have everything that is Islamic, and are also provided with Muslim education. You see, so when you have a better choice, it is always better to take that choice... That is it.*"

Both students A and C who went to a private Catholic school mentioned their wish to continue wearing the veil, but also acknowledged the additional benefit of "*Islamic teaching/ Muslim education*," or even "*everything that is Islamic*." They value not only Islamic practices but also Islam as an ethical principle that frames school life and guides their teaching. In response to my question about the most important difference between public schools and school X, the CPE pointed to the "*religious fact*" that exists in the EPM space:

> That is, there is a religion here. There is religious education, the things that you will never, see in French public schools. Because of the laïcité (secularism), right? Even if they permit the observance of religious practice, to provide religious education is something else. Here, the difference is that there is Muslim education. The difference is that there is a prayer at the mosque after lunch. On Fridays, the students attend the Friday prayer in the mosque. Otherwise, everything is the same. That is, there is a dean, supervisors, and qualified teachers; there is discipline; school orders; and incidence reports, exactly the same as public schools. (CPE of school X).

Beyond the religious practice tolerated or authorized in other private schools, the recognition of religious facts, which form a part of their own specificity, is particularly important for the school and its students. The director also mentioned that "*assumed religiosity and fulfilled spirituality gives them the balance*" to form "*an open and fulfilled personality*," making a reservation that religiosity is not the only determining factor in achieving this "*personality*." Nonetheless, since 2004, it has become impossible for Muslims in public schools in France to recognize their own Muslim identity in the course of their schooling. To continue their studies in schools without having to abandon their religiosity,[12] the founders of EPMs, such as school X, established school spaces that are compatible with their Muslim identity. In school X, Islam does not constitute the fundamental principle, as in the case of Quranic schools or Islamic theological institutes, but it remains "*an added value*" (Deputy Director of school X) alongside public education.

## III. Creating and Choosing an EPM: An Alternative Space to Build "Good Citizens" and the Muslim Habitus

After exploring school life and the role of Islam in the EPM, it is necessary to analyze what the school environment represents for the actors involved in school X. As these institutions promote their Islamic values, besides those aiming at '*success*' and '*fulfilment*' for everyone including non-Muslims, how can we interpret the emergence of such institutions in France?

### 3.1. The 2004 Law and the Wearing of the Veil in Schools: A Nuanced Effect Depending on the Generation?

First, we will examine the association between the development of these establishments and the religious effect, namely the impact of the 2004 law, which prohibited the wearing of 'ostentatious' religious symbols in public schools. Our study reveals a rather biased assessment among the interviewees, students, and teachers regarding the impact of the 2004 law on the development of EPMs in France. As we have already seen, while wearing the veil and observing religious practice are important elements for the actors in school life, they are not the only determining factors for choosing an EPM. On the one hand, there are Muslims who placed a greater emphasis on the Islamic veil and joined the EPM for this reason, such as student A; on the other hand, there are a significant number of non-veiled female students and boys who were not affected by the enactment of the 2004 law. The other veil-wearing students, such as student B (first-year of high school) and student C (second-year of high school), do not consider wearing the veil as important as student A does. Additionally, student D (final year of middle school) from another EPM explained her reason for choosing the private school to continue wearing her veil; however, she further expressed that she would join a public high school after completing middle school in the EPM, because "*it would be nice to go outside and*

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[12] Since the codification of the March 15, 2004 law, the number of students enrolling in home schooling has increased. During the fieldwork, we interviewed a Muslim woman who decided not to continue public schooling, nor private (catholic) schooling, but chose to study at home from her final year in middle school till the end of her high school, because she was unable to wear the veil. She is now a Religious Education teacher at a Muslim school in the Grand-Est region.

*meet new people*." Whether some students choose to study in EPMs because of the importance of wearing the veil or whether others consider the veil to be less important, the Islamic practice of veiling for girls depending on their age needs to be emphasized, as it reflects their physical and spiritual development and nurtures a sense of modesty in them. In general, the number of girls wearing veils in EPMs increases as they progress from kindergarten to high school. This tendency is because they become spiritually conscious around adolescence in general, and it is the period when they experience bodily changes. During the course of the fieldwork, we also observed spiritual awakening in some of the girls. For example, student D was not veiled at the time of the first survey, and said: "*I am not sure yet (about veiling), I am waiting for the moment to come*." However, six months later, she wore a turban, saying, "*yes, Madame, I am ready now.*" Therefore, it can be inferred that the student's choice of school is not predetermined by the ban on displaying religious symbols in public schools, albeit because the students themselves are in the process of adopting the practice of veiling according to their religious awakening and corporal change.

However, the consequences of the law of March 15, 2004, should not be underestimated. In the interviews, some of my informants described it as a factor that led to the development of Muslim schools in France. Aisha, a young 24-year-old teacher at an EPM, who herself wore a turban, immediately stated: "*Yes, I think that the 2004 law has influenced the development of this type of school. This was because the girls were rejected. They had to be placed somewhere, so I think it was here. I think the law was the basis of this initiative.*" Lyna, a teacher at a private Muslim college in Paris, also expressed this opinion: "*Yes, it [her school established in 2005] was motivated by the 2004 law, right? In fact, the 2004 law greatly impacted the Muslim community as a whole. Muslims finally understood that it was necessary to work more amongst themselves, because it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to go outside. I would like to work in the public sector, but I cannot. In fact, we are obliged to withdraw from the community, because there are no other solutions. So that is the problem*." For these two women working in the education sector, where the law directly influences their own religious practices, the consequence of the law of March 15, 2004, was more direct and obvious.

Furthermore, regarding the actors' perceptions of the consequences of the 2004 law, we propose a hypothesis on the generational difference between those who attributed the development of EPMs to this law and those who did not. The former consists of those involved in EPMs as project leaders, managers, or teachers, namely the generation that is professionally active today and, in particular, those who directly witnessed the enactment of the law and the changes it brought to the educational situation of Muslims including discrimination. It is not uncommon to find the same kind of testimony in France post 2004. Muslim women working as schoolteachers, in particular, those certified for teaching in public schools, are now faced with the constraint of either removing their religious symbols, that is, taking off the veil, or choosing to teach at a public school (Girin, 2019). Similarly, with the memory of the discrimination they encountered as children, and the restrictions imposed on them today, they directly experience the consequences of the codification of the principle of secularism in public schools.

The latter comprises the younger generation of students, who were born and raised during the period when the legislative condition of the law of March 15, 2004, was enacted. In the course of their education, these students have learned how to reconcile their faith with the school environment in the face of the legal condition of the 2004 law, or even within the 'laïc' French society. It is against their will to continue their education in public schools without their veils, but they are grownups and possess the knowledge to avoid this situation — by choosing to study in Catholic schools or striking a compromise to remove their veils at the entrance of the schools.

The 2004 law has affected both the academic and professional lives of Muslim educational actors. This situation has triggered the establishment of more EPMs in France. At the same time, with regard to the impact of this law on the choice of EPMs, field observations have revealed elements that can nuance this correlation, depending on the generations. At the beginning of the EPMs in 2000,[13] and especially after the adoption of the 2004 law, the latter was one of the factors that led the promoters to create such a private school. However, with regard to the impact on the development of the EPMs, and on what currently attracts students and their families to choose them, the testimonies of my interviewees reveal other reasons, which are presented below.

### 3.2. Experience of Injustice in Public School

From the perspective of the actors' 'school experience,' we can note that some of them place a greater emphasis on the issue of the school environment in the public school. For some students, their parents chose the school for them, sometimes even under pressure due to their own experience or their children's schooling in the public school. Students D and E (a girl and a boy from the second year at high school in school X) talked about their 'experiences' at the public school:

> Student E: In the public school, they don't care for their students at all.
>
> Student D: Yes, because... in the public school, in fact, I noticed that we have teachers who can do anything they want.
>
> Student E: They work just to finish the program.
>
> Student D: Yes, that is right. They arrive late and leave in the middle of the lesson; leave us, and go home. In contrast, the teachers here are passionate about their work. They want to teach us.

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[13] For the history of development, see Bras et al. (2010), Poucet (2011b), and Bourget (2019).

> Student E: But over there [in the public school], they would give us the lesson, and then leave.
>
> Student D: Yes, that is what it is.
>
> Student E: If we did not understand, they [public teachers] would not teach us. Come and I will explain it to you [like the teachers here] or... We do not understand, we cannot progress; however, their only aim is to finish the program, without making us understand, as quickly and efficiently as possible [sic].

The students, who had spent part of their schooling in a public school, noticed a lack of attention and respect towards them and felt that they were disregarded by the public school teachers. On the contrary, in school X, they felt encouraged with the attention they received, to the extent that they felt that "*the teachers were volunteers*" (Student E in the interview quoted above). In school X, they received esteem and recognition from teachers, as François Dubet has already observed about teachers who despise students and passionate, 'good teachers' who value them (Dubet, 2008: 60; 1991: 188–197). In the public-school environment, not just the students but also parents, "[felt] *lost.*"

> Personally, I think in the school of the Republic, the public school, if you are not well-informed to manage things, you do not understand how it works, and thus, you do not succeed. Therefore, I understand families who choose EPMs. This is because they are at least confident. The teaching staff are always willing to assist them and improve their children's schooling experience. They [the students' families] feel lost in public schools. (CPE of school X).

According to the CPE, who has been observing numerous Muslim families for almost two decades, some parents who feel "*lost*" enroll their children in school X in an attempt to find better ways to educate them. As most teachers told me, "*parents feel reassured*," "*supported*," and "*assisted*" in school X. For both students and their families, this confidence in having a school and teaching staff who understand and assist them is missing in public schools. This fact underlies their choice of EPMs, thus resulting in an atmosphere of strong "*friendliness*" and "*familiarity*," which is valued by the school's actors. The problem experienced in public schools is the intimate rapport that Muslim families desire. Moreover, it is not only the members of school X who appreciate the support provided by EPMs. A Muslim man, who sent his daughter to an EPM in the suburbs of Paris, also explained that, even though she had made the initial decision herself, they supported her because the school was "*well supervised*."

Based on our surveys, we believe that there is no single cause for the development of such schools in France. There are complex educational and social factors that fostered the growth of this phenomenon. Our survey indicated that there is a generational difference in perceived influence. This result leads us to consider that the impact of the law of March 15, 2004, on the development of EPMs could be put into perspective, depending on the generation: it triggered the real birth of these establishments and accelerated their development. However, today, it is more beneficial for female Muslim teachers on a long-term basis. However, the 2004 law is not the only determining factor. The concern of public schools largely complements this development, particularly for the students' families. We can claim that this progression was symbolically provoked by this law and has been continuously fed by the crisis of public schools.

### 3.3. An Alternative Place to Create 'Good Muslim Citizens'

In the previous two sections, we attempted to understand the factors that led to the development of EPMs, based on the social and educational experiences of those involved in these fields of investigation. On the one hand, the law of March 15, 2004, and the resulting unjust 'experiences' of exclusion triggered the emergence of EPMs for some generations. On the other hand, this discriminatory law is imposed on public schools, pushing students and their families out. Owing to these conditions faced by the Muslim educational actors, we see that this new school space was conceived and continues to function as an alternative place:

> The Muslim school is an alternative between the public school and the Catholic school. In public schools, the level is not good enough, in the private Catholic school, the level is very good. The problem is that it is not the religion that they follow. Further, there are socio-professional differences between Catholic and Muslim children. Because often, in Catholic schools, you find children of people who are very well off, such as executives and teachers. I think they [the students' parents] are afraid of that. Thus, motivation is either on the Muslim community or at the academic level. (Assia, history and geography teacher in a non-contractual school in the suburbs of Paris suburbs; 26 years old)

Previously, Muslim students had only two options. For those who wanted to continue wearing the veil, private schools, especially Catholic ones, were the first option. The others, who adapted to the environment regulated by the 2004 law, although against their will, continued their schooling in public schools without the veil. Nevertheless, when they continued their education there, concerns about the condition and quality of public education bothered the students and their families. Enrolling in a Catholic school, characterized by a high representation of the affluent class and the resulting atmosphere, is a default and unwilling choice. Muslim students want to proactively choose a school of their own choice, one that is acceptable for the necessity of schooling but that also follows their own values, so much so that student A even considered leaving his town: "*No, [if there was no private Muslim school in my town], I would have considered leaving the town to join a school that was willing to accept me.*" Therefore, EPMs were developed to provide a solution to this dilemma. By devising a possibility that could solve their problem, that is, prevent their children from dropping out of school and safeguard Muslim girls from giving up being 'citizens of the Republic,' the founders of EPMs have created a new kind of public school, which is 'appropriate' to be part of the French citizens' denomination: the public school of Islamic character. Thus, the EPMs, while not being public or Catholic schools, constitute a genuine alternative space to nurture children of the Muslim faith into good citizens of France.

Simultaneously, alongside these passive reasons for the development of EPMs by Muslims, another positive force, emanating from these same actors, needs to be highlighted. To understand this aspect, we spoke to the director of the institution, who carried out the initial school project. When he explained the educational project of the school, which is the pursuit of academic and social "*success*," he added an additional objective:

> Another objective of the establishment is not to build a well-stuffed brain, a full brain, but a well-built brain. In order to do so, we need what we call education. Education means to inspire students, to give them, or rather put them in the conditions, I would say, of well-being, so that the child feels valued, respected, and encouraged. For this purpose, we tried to bring together their citizenship and spiritual belonging. I would like to describe this in one word, that is: they should perhaps be faithful to their 'Frenchness,' and should perhaps be faithful to their 'Islamicness.' Do you see what I mean? It is this complementarity, this happy alliance between these two allegiances that will create accomplished and conscious citizens, as well as faithful Muslims without falling into fundamentalism or extremism that risks affecting them. (Director of school X)

Through his educational project, he has established an education system that places children "*in the conditions of well-being*," without contempt for the students. To establish these conditions, he proposed the "*happy alliance*" between "*their citizenship and their spiritual belonging.*" According to the school's project leader, the condition for happiness is to be recognized not only as a citizen subject but also as a 'Muslim subject' (Toguslu, 2015), with 'pious agency' (Mahmood, 2005). Indeed, in public schools, Muslim students experience injustice and contempt simply for being students. If they display a religious symbol, they are excluded from the public space or even legally denied. To feel valued, respected, and encouraged in the school, the actors of the EPM believe that not only their 'Frenchness' but also their 'Islamicness' must be recognized. The acceptance of these two simultaneous belongings to define a subject is considered here as the key to 'living citizenship':

> They deserve to fulfill their own capacities, like everyone else. Similar to everyone else, in the same way. After all, the word 'integration' is not the correct term. It is for people who have migrated from abroad. They are not completely separated. Rather, they live their citizenship and are members of the society. An open and fulfilled personality, no superiority complexes, no inferiority complexes, normal like others. I say what is normal do not I? If they achieved success, I would say, why not? We will not succeed with everyone, but why not? A small normal elite. A normal elite. (Director of school X)

In school, whether in the public or private sector, the actors wish to be "*normal like others*," without suffering contempt, exclusion, and complexity, and to find themselves in a comfortable environment. Thus, their social experience corresponds to the legal reality of being a citizen in France, that of being legally 'normal' in France. The new school space of the EPM is the product of this negotiation between their will to be both a 'good citizen' and a 'good Muslim.' It is an alternative space, allowing them to be 'normal' individuals, which is what they had initially sought during their integration in France. The process of integration into the society was accompanied by the introduction of Islam. Paradoxically, thanks to this demand for recognition, for a place in secular society, Islam has entered the public space in France (Göle, 2013; 2017). Seeking to be 'normal like others' is in line with Nilüfer Göle's analysis when she talks about the 'ordinary European Muslim':

> […] 'ordinary Muslims' does not mean Muslims who live their faith in a 'habitual' way, transmitted by family tradition from their country of origin. Immigration opens a rupture with authorities of religious knowledge and breaks the classical chain of transmission. European Muslims find themselves in a social context where their relationship to religion is not preset. They readapt religion in a conscious manner. In this work in progress, they distinguish themselves from the preceding generation, characterized by the oral transmission of religion, and favor an intellectual apprenticeship of Islam. Thus, they master canonical texts by going to seminars and conferences and frequenting Islamic institutes and associations. This apprenticeship is at once personal and collective. […] This process outlines the contours of a new Islamic habitus specific to European Muslims. (Göle, 2017: 59–60)

Even in the field of EPMs, we observe figures of “ordinary Muslims” in search of an “Islamic habitus” (Göle, 2013, 2017). As for the actors of the EPMs, they are not looking only for this ‘Islamic habitus,’ because the EPMs are not institutions with the objective of solely learning the Arabic language, the Quran, and the hadiths (Prophetic narrations). They focus on the training of republican citizenship, to succeed as a ‘good citizen,’ albeit in an ‘Islamic habitus.’ In this sense, the establishment of EPMs is about providing Muslims in France with an alternative space to form, in Göle’s words, “good ordinary Muslims.” The emergence of EPMs would never have been possible without the will and determination of some Muslims to be French citizens, while pursuing the national curriculum to acquire “*real diplomas*” that could lead them to “*success*.” Far from being a sign of community retreat, the EPM space thus shows us the spontaneous will to be fully integrated into French society as a ‘good citizen’ endowed with the Islamic habitus, namely a Muslim citizen.

## IV. Conclusion

In France, a nation that is defined as ‘one and indivisible’ in its Constitution, secular and Republican citizenship cannot acknowledge diverse attributions of identity, such as ethnicity, religion, or race. This means that a French citizen cannot be more than an abstract individual, without considering other types of attributes, such as social, religious, and ethnic origins, in the formulation of citizenship (Scott, 2007: 11–28). This republican ideology was one of the main causes for the headscarf issues, which led to the enactment of the law of March 15, 2004, and the exclusion of girls wearing headscarves from public schools. It is true that the EPMs developed in the wake of these cases and the adoption of the 2004 law. However, after almost 20 years of presence in the French school landscape, EPMs are beginning to obtain more prominent roles than the actors themselves had initially given them. Today, the leaders of the establishments, the teachers, students, and families of the students, are the actors composing this exceptional place in the French school landscape, giving meaning to the EPMs, both at the religious level (religious practice) and the academic level (conflicts and quality of teaching in public schools). Thus, we can argue that more than representing the problem of Islamic communitarianism, the EPM is a mirror that reflects the crisis of publicity (publicness) in France or even the “decline of the institution” (Dubet, 2002). The latter no longer maintains the promise of the ideal of the republican school, ensuring social mobility for working-class children or those of immigrant origins, namely the integration of Muslims into French society. It is indeed this crisis of publicity that no longer allows citizens of the Muslim faith to evolve in public spaces. In the absence of being able to live out their citizenship, Muslims in France have managed to create EPMs. This new public space, insofar as private education functions as a “private service of public education” (Langouët, 2011: 170), gives Muslims in search of legitimacy, that of being both a citizen and a Muslim, another opportunity to learn about republican citizenship and the Islamic habitus. What is at stake in this new formulation of Franco-Muslim citizenship is the ability to imagine another model of living together, both for Muslims in France and the French society.

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