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# Becoming Good: Muslims Pursuing Moral Personhood in a Rural French Town

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines how members of a Muslim community (made up of migrants and their descendants from various parts of North Africa, West Africa, Turkey, and elsewhere) in a small town in France seek to become moral persons through Islam. I argue that this quest for moral recognition is informed simultaneously by Islamic and French Republican values, which my French Muslim interlocutors usually conceive of as being consistent with one another. I contrast this analysis with other scholarly approaches to Islam in France that have generally explored the way non-Muslims perceive Islam to be at odds with Frenchness, how Muslims are marginalized and kept from becoming full citizens, and how certain public figures challenge and resist that oppression through explicit forms of resistance. I argue that these accounts, by focusing on Muslims seeking political recognition (from the state) in the face of oppression, have failed to account for the life projects of French Muslims, like my interlocutors, who emphasize moral over political considerations. In contrast to previous approaches, I follow my interlocutors' lead in analyzing the ways in which they seek after moral personhood and recognition as moral persons in their everyday discourse and practice. Thus, I show how an understanding of the moral projects of French Muslims is key to moving beyond a focus on suffering, oppression, and resistance in scholarship examining the experiences of migrants in France.



Keywords: Islam, France, morality, personhood, recognition, suffering slot

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## Introduction

On a late July afternoon in Gien, France, a town of 13,000 people two hours south of Paris, I met with two non-Muslim members of a prominent local community organization. I had reached out to the organization a month previously via their website, explaining that I was living in Gien to study the town's Muslim community and asking if we could meet to discuss their organization's perspectives on life in Gien. As I walked into their headquarters in the central part of town, I was greeted by a retired man who presided over the organization and a young man from Gien who also worked closely with the organization on various projects. We met around a large table in the central room where the walls were covered by bookshelves and various memorabilia.

Although I had come to discuss the town in general, we spent most of our hour or so together talking about my research topic: Muslims in Gien. Both men had a lot to tell me about Islam. They spoke to me at length about Islam oppressing women. They told me stories about the local politicians who defied secular values by secretly colluding with the Islamist Muslims of Gien. After listening for a while, I mentioned to them that many Muslims in Gien had told me they want more people to get to know them because they believe it will help correct misunderstandings. The president responded that several months ago he had received an invitation from the directorship of the mosque for a joint event between his organization and the mosque. The mosque had proposed bringing their two associations together so that the mosque's congregants could learn more about their town and so that members of the community organization could get to know their Muslim neighbors. The president said that he had refused because, as he put it, any discourse that portrayed a religion in a positive light constituted proselytizing and was incompatible with the secular values (*laïcité*) that guided him and his

organization. When I asked about their organization's work focusing on Gien's Catholic community and how that corresponded to the president's secular vision of his organization, the younger man responded "Oh yeah, it's true that I never thought about that" (*ah ouais c'est vrai que je n'ai jamais penser a ça*), but the president remained silent. When I asked the younger man about growing up with and going to school with Muslims, he responded "I'll tell it to you straight, I have almost no Muslim friends" (*Franchement, je vais te dire, j'ai cassiment aucun ami musluman*). He told me that in middle school and high school he moved in different circles than Muslims because he had different interests and "different values" (*des valuers differentes*).

Later in the conversation, the young man told me that while he approved of decreasing religiosity in France, he thought religious belief and behavior was tolerable as long as it did not come into conflict with enlightened Republican values. But he said that these values were founded on "Judeo-Christian values" (*des valuers judeo-chretiens*) that were in conflict with Islam, especially in regard to women's rights. Later, the two men told me that the real issue with Islam was that it conflicted with "the rights of man" (*les droits de l'homme*), referring to name of the document that was key in developing the Revolution of 1789 and establishing the French Republic, and to human rights discourse more broadly. They described these rights as being inalienable, universal, and based in reason. They said the state was in charge of teaching these values to everyone and that Islam was problematic because of the way it was trying to assert a place for itself to teach conflicting values that were based on divine will instead of reason. The solution, according to the younger man, was to create "a Republican Islam" (*un Islam Republicain*). Republican Islam is a fairly common term in French discourse that typically references ideas about state governance of Islam and the integration of the supposedly divergent values of Islam into the value system propagated by the state. All of these talking points were

standard fare for many of the non-Muslims I spoke with in Gien and elsewhere in France, as my Muslim interlocutors were well aware.

Later that evening, as I drove home from the Mosque with Lami, a respected member of Gien's Muslim community, we discussed my earlier meeting with the two men. When I mentioned how one of the men had spoken of the need to create a "Republican Islam" where Muslims (and religious people more generally) leave some of their values behind in order to accept those of the Republic, Lami responded "I'm sorry but I don't want anything to do with that Republican Islam" (*je suis desolé mais je ne veux pas de cet Islam Republicain*). Lami said that he had seen what happened when people rejected the values his religion gave him. He said that it had created a society that was "egotistical, individualist, and materialist" (*egoiste, individualiste, et materialiste*). He compared mainstream French society's self-absorption to Islam's injunction to focus on others, or as Lami put it, "to go toward the other" (*aller vers l'autre*).

These interactions demonstrate that moral questions are central to debates about Islam in France. As they spoke with me, Lami and the two men from the community organization presented differing conceptions of what qualities they recognized as "good." On the one hand, the members of the community organization emphasized (individual) liberty and gender equality. On the other hand, Lami emphasized (social) responsibility and community connectedness. Both parties also criticized an "other" group for failing to live up to the moral values they emphasized. As the two men criticized Islam by comparing its perceived failing to their own perceptions of what constitutes "the good," they essentially asserted that the values of the Republic produce a certain kind of moral person while Islam is incapable of producing such moral persons. This implies that the reason they viewed Islam as incompatible with Frenchness was that Islam was

seen as producing bad people while French Republicanism was seen as producing good people. Lami counters this narrative by pointing to the perceived moral failings of a society that in his view is overly individualist and materialist, asserting through opposition that Islam in fact does produce good persons.

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed both Muslims and non-Muslims negotiating the meaning of Republican moral values. Most people I spoke with, Muslim and non-Muslim, shared a sense that French Republican values had something to do with liberty, equality, and fraternity (the tripartite French motto with origins in the French Revolution), in addition to *laïcité*, democracy, national unity, and economic contribution to society. Most people also spoke about these terms as the two members of the community organization did, using universalizing language. Despite this, scholars such as Marchand and Ratinaud (2012) and Caron (2013) have noted that definitions of these common French values are often debated from person to person and that these debates contribute to (emerging) conceptions of what it means to be a good French person. This ambiguity around definitions of Republican values and what makes someone a good person under those values is apparent in the way the two men from the community organization seemed to differ in their opinions about the limits of secularism and how they referenced both Judeo-Christian values and universal, secular values in the construction of French Republican morality. Furthermore, Fernando (2014) (following Scott 2005, 2007) has argued that the increased presence of Islam and its adherents has been key in "unsettling" notions of a uniform definition of Frenchness by calling the definitions of certain values into question. The essential point here is that Republican values are not a fixed, agreed upon moral system. Rather, these values continue to emerge in social life as people negotiate moral questions. Therefore, I use the term 'Republican' throughout this paper to refer not to a set of predefined values but to an

established network of values that are continually being defined and redefined in discourse and practice by my Muslim interlocutors and others in France.

Such an open negotiation of moral values is apparent in Lami's response to my re-telling of my interaction with the two men from the community organization. Lami frames his response in terms of morality by comparing his Islamic values that push him to dialogue with others to a broader society that has become self-absorbed. In response to the two men's insinuation that Islam fails to produce good persons, Lami asserts that it is actually Islam that pushes him to do the right thing in reaching out to others. Lami asserts that those without his religious values seem to have a hard time going toward, caring for, or seeking to understand people. Thus, Lami contrasts Islam's apparent capacity to produce moral-because-they-engage-with-others persons against Islam's accusers' apparent inability to engage with their Muslim neighbors. As with the men from the community organization, Lami was deeply concerned with negotiating the values by which a "good" person is recognized.

It is also important to note that Lami is not rejecting Republican values for Islamic ones. In many other conversations, Lami told me that he sees "living well together" (*le bien-vivre ensemble*) as an essential value of both Republicanism and Islam. During my time in Gien, I observed both Muslims and non-Muslims voice conceptions of Republicanism which held that anyone who contributes to the well-being of the community can be a good French Republican. Thus, Lami asserts his investment in the moral projects of the Republic through his investment in the moral projects of Islam. And in contrast to the two men from the community organization, he asserts that the values of Islam push him to become the kind of good person valued in (a certain conception of) a French Republican moral system.

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed French Muslims in Gien drawing on the emergent, debated quality of French Republicanism in order to assert a place for themselves within that Republican framework. For instance, in the example above, Lami rejects the metapragmatic assumptions of some in France (including the two men from the community organization) who question the possibility of Islamic values' compatibility with Republican values. To do so, Lami draws on different assumptions which are also present in the broader debate about the nature of Republican values. By drawing on a particular position that asserts the importance of living well together as a feature of Republicanism, Lami stakes out a place for a conception of goodness where Islam is not in conflict with French Republican moral values.

In this paper I show the ways that my Muslim interlocutors, as they talked about morality and carried out their everyday lives, sought after a particular, moral way of being. I position my interlocutors' emphasis on moral concerns against a current literature on Islam in France which emphasizes the (perceived) conflicts between France and Islam, the oppression of French Muslims, and the ways people resist that oppression. I argue that this focus on more explicitly political concerns misses the morally focused life projects of my interlocutors. I demonstrate that my interlocutors' sense of becoming a good Muslim person is consistent with their sense of becoming a good French person, and I describe various ways that this sense of morality emerges, including through discourses about the moral power of Islam, through ritual and non-ritual practices, and through discourses juxtaposing "good" and "bad" Muslims. Furthermore, I argue that through these discursive and practical moral engagements, my Muslim interlocutors in Gien are able to pursue their own sense of goodness while also seeking recognition of their moral personhood, not from the state, but from the people they interact with in their everyday life in Gien.

## Theoretical Background

In the following section, I demonstrate that the existing scholarship on Islam in France has focused primarily on the suffering of French Muslims and on the forms of political resistance in which they engage. I argue that this approach fails to account for the centrality of moral concerns in the lives of French Muslims, like my interlocutors, who are more concerned with moral questions then with questions of political power. In contrast to existing scholarship, I propose an "anthropology of the good" approach that accounts for the ways in which French Muslims seek out moral personhood.

### Oppression, Resistance, and the Suffering Slot

I situate my analysis of the everyday moral lives of Gien's Muslims in contrast to a scholarly literature on Islam in France that has predominantly focused on analyzing France's unique approach to perceived conflicts with Islam or on describing the oppression of French Muslims and the ways certain people resist that oppression. By approaching the study of Islam in France through the lens of the marginalization of French Muslims, such scholarship falls under the "suffering slot" approach to anthropological inquiry that Robbins described as one focused on "the figure of humanity united in its shared vulnerability to suffering" (Robbins 2013, 450). I argue that such "suffering slot" approaches, while making important contributions to the understanding of Islam in France, tend to miss the everyday concerns with the pursuit of moral personhood that I observed among French Muslims in Gien.

Scholarly engagement with Islam in France increased as interest grew in controversies related to Islamic dress, especially following the 2004 nationwide "headscarf ban" in schools. This led to an outpouring of scholarship focusing on understanding the ways many non-Muslim French and/or the French state perceive Islam to be at odds with Frenchness and how Muslims

are kept from becoming full citizens. Such scholarship critically examined the common popular discourse in France, already outlined above, which posits that French Republicanism facilitates proper personhood while Islam impedes it, and that it is nearly impossible to be both pious Muslim and Republican French.

Scott (2005, 2007) examined the ways in which French ideas about race, secularism, individualism, and sexuality come together to make Islamic women's dress a symbol that, for many in France, represents all that is problematic about France's Muslim population. Specifically, she argued that French Republicanism has traditionally sought to create a uniform citizenship by abolishing difference and that Islam (generally) and Islamic dress (specifically) challenge this Republican ideal of sameness. Similarly, Bowen argued that the visible differences of Islam challenge certain notions of Frenchness, but not "the political and legal framework of the Republic" (Bowen 2007, 249). Thus, he claims that Muslims who assert their ability to live by Republican rules through their religion "are challenging the conditions of belonging to the nation" (Bowen 2007, 249) and that tensions around Islam in France emerge because Muslims are forcing France to re-imagine the possibilities of exploring difference within a Republican framework.

Other scholarship focuses more explicitly on French Muslims' experiences of oppression from their own perspective. In addition to non-ethnographic analyses of politics at the nexus of immigration, ethnicity, race, and religion in France (c.f. Brubaker 1992; Hargreaves 2007; Laurence and Vaisse 2007), many ethnographic analyses also place an emphasis on citizenship and its denial to French Muslims and other immigrants. For example, Beaman (2017) explores the experiences of marginalization faced by the middle-class children of North African immigrants in order to demonstrate that, in France, racial and ethnic difference is at least as

much a cause for exclusion from full citizenship as religious difference. Similarly, Keaton's (2006) ethnography of veil-wearing French Muslim girls in the banlieues of Paris focuses on the ways the visibility of racial and religious otherness contributes to their social exclusion. Silverstein (2004, 2018) analyzes the intersection of religious, racial, and postcolonial dynamics in the marginalization of French Muslims.

In addition to focusing on the documentation and analysis of oppression, many scholars analyze the ways in which French Muslims resist that oppression. Most of these approaches take a top-down approach by engaging with political thinkers, leaders, and activists (c.f. Cesari 1994; Fernando 2014; Laurence 2012; Gemie 2010), public figures (c.f. Silverstein 2018), and religious leaders (c.f. Bowen 2010; Fernando 2014; Laurence 2012). For example, Bowen takes what he calls "an anthropology of public reasoning" (Bowen 2010, 5) approach to his ethnographic engagement with French Muslims, evaluating how school directors, teachers, and imams publicly engage the conceptualization of Islam in France. Significantly, he examines the ways this reasoning weaves together traditionally Islamic types of reasoning with those that are acceptable under French Republicanism. Silverstein (2018) focuses on high-level public discourse by examining how public figures such as writers, singers, and professional athletes debate Frenchness, Muslimness, and North-Africanness in the face of marginalizing post-colonial narratives. Fernando's (2014) excellent ethnography focuses on the ways in which Muslim student-activists, teachers, and religious leaders resist oppression by exposing "the contradictions of secularism" even as they seek a place within the Republic by cooperating with some state initiatives.

Such approaches—focused primarily on suffering and political resistance—miss the kind of moral project I argue my interlocutors are engaged in. To be sure, I am not implying that the

oppression, resistance, public debate, universal values, or the state are not worth analyzing as we seek to understand the situation of Islam in France. Instead, I am simply arguing that focusing exclusively on those things fails to capture what my interlocutors felt was most important – becoming good persons.

## Moral Personhood and the Anthropology of the Good

I seek to move away from an emphasis on suffering and towards what Robbins calls "the anthropology of the good," an anthropology that aims to examine "the different ways people organize their personal and collective lives in order to foster what they think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project" (Robbins 2013, 457). For my interlocutors, their pursuit of the good is fundamentally tied to specific ways of being in that their moral project is to become good people. Thus, following a number of scholars working on the anthropology of ethics and morality (c.f. Hickman 2014; Parish 1994; Shoaps 2009), I use the term "moral personhood" to capture my interlocutors' self-conscious approach to pious self-fashioning (Keane 2015). Just as the concept of personhood (broadly) asks what it means to be a person in a given cultural context (c.f. Appell-Warren 2014; Schattschneider 2021; Shweder and Bourne 1982), so the concept of moral personhood asks what it means to be a *good* person in a given cultural context. In this way, moral personhood captures the ways Muslims in Gien pursue "the good" by seeking to become people-who-are-moral.

Critical to capturing my interlocutors' broader project is an understanding that their ethical goals go beyond narrow definitions of Islamic piety. As Laidlaw points out in his critique of Mahmood's (2004) presentation of piety, ethical life is often more "internally complex and ironic than the execution of a self-consistent moral will, and this is true even for people who accept and articulate just such a self-representation" (Laidlaw 2014, 169). Laidlaw's point here is

that conceptions of morality-as-piety are limiting because religious people "also think and feel in moral registers other than those of piety" (Laidlaw 2014, 171). This is certainly true for my interlocutors, whose framing of religious moral values often refers explicitly or implicitly to their consistency with French Republican moral values. Thus, while my interlocutors' projects have deep roots in Islamic piety, they also seek a morality that is recognizable beyond a purely Islamic context. Through Islam, they are seeking to become generally good persons.

## Ethnographic Background

In this section, I describe the setting of the town in which I conducted my research. I also contextualize the Muslim community in that town and in France more broadly. I then consider the ways my methodological approach and positionality as a researcher contribute to my argument.

### Gien: Field Site in a Rural Town

Between May and August of 2022, I conducted three months of ethnographic fieldwork in Gien, France, working primarily with the town's practicing Muslim population. Gien is a town of approximately 13,000 people (INSEE 2022) located along the Loire River about two hours south of Paris by car. The areas outside of town are primarily agricultural, with wheat, sunflowers, and vegetables among the major crops being grown. Many of Gien's current inhabitants, and especially those in the Muslim community, are employed in the nearby nuclear plants, an OTIS elevator factory, a perfume factory, several pharmaceutical and chemical plants, a meat-packing business, and a car parts factory. Others work in a variety of service jobs, including restaurants, medicine, and clothing stores.

The relatively small, rural nature of my field site contrasts with both popular and scholarly approaches to Islam in France which tend to focus on Muslims living in urban areas.

Most ethnographies of Islam in France have been conducted in Paris and its poor suburbs (*banlieues*) (c.f. Beaman 2017; Bowen 2010; Fernando 2014; Kepel et al. 2012; Silverstein 2004, 2018) as well as in a handful of other large cities such as Marseilles (c.f. Bowen 2010; Cesari 2005; Evers 2018, 2021; Geisser 2009), Lyon (c.f. Bowen 2010), and Toulouse (c.f. Cesari 2005). To my knowledge, mine is the first extensive ethnographic engagement with a Muslim community in a rural town. The small-town nature of my field site matters for my argument because the conflation of urban issues with Islam in France is a prominent feature of both popular French critics of Islam and suffering slot approaches that link the suffering of French Muslims to their urban context.

While I believe that studying the urban context is essential to understanding the experiences of the many French Muslims living in large metropoles, I also believe the experiences of my small-town Muslim interlocutors are important to consider for two reasons. First, the relatively smaller and more rural environment distances my Muslim interlocutors, even those active in leadership, from the national, public, politicized debates that come off as central to the lives of big-city Muslims in much of the scholarship discussed above. Simply put, compared to Paris and other large cities, explicit activism isn't as significant a feature of social life in Gien. Second, my interlocutors would frequently tell me that they were aware that many in France, especially the media, often linked Islam to contexts like urbanity, race, ethnicity, and certain national origins, but that this approach was misguided, especially when it subjected Islam to criticism, because they believed that, in the ideal, Islam transcends those categories. Even though they recognized that it didn't always work out in practice, my interlocutors were deeply invested in outsiders understanding Islam as they understand it – as an ideal, transcendent system

for helping them become good people. Thus, they viewed Islam as a system for pushing beyond the challenges of urban decay or ethnic rivalry in order to seek after moral personhood.

My hope is that by analyzing moral personhood in a Muslim community living in a town that is relatively little affected by issues that afflict large urban areas, I can more effectively portray my interlocutors' understanding of their Islamic value system. In doing so, I am not implying that anthropology focused on moral personhood need ignore social context that does not fit the ideal in question. Rather, I wish to posit that the particular, relatively rural context of my research allows me to analyze Islam as (my interlocutors') ideal notion of morality in an environment unencumbered by a particular urban context that has otherwise nearly always been present in the analysis of Islam in France, and which has, perhaps inadvertently, contributed to the focus on the suffering of French Muslims.

## Muslims of Gien: Background and Context

The Muslim population in Gien began to develop in earnest in the 1970s and 80s through labor migration. A few men came to Gien to work as unskilled laborers in its world-renowned ceramics factory. When construction began on the nearby nuclear power-plants at Dampierre and Belleville, these laborers brought over other male relatives and friends to work with them on these projects. Some eventually returned to their home countries, but many stayed and were joined by their families. Though some, especially young people in the second, third, and fourth generation, leave Gien for nearby cities like Orleans and Paris, the Muslim population of Gien is maintained through continued (inter- and intra-national) migration for labor and family reunification, as well as high birth rates and conversions.

The initial wave of migration to Gien consisted overwhelmingly of Moroccans, primarily from the Rif region in northern Morocco, and Moroccan immigrants and their descendants make

up the largest part of the Muslim community in Gien. The Moroccans were soon joined in Gien by Turks, who make up the second largest component of the Muslim community in Gien. Of the two mosques in Gien, one is attended mostly by Turks and Kurds, and sermons there are conducted in Turkish. At the other mosque, called the Grand Mosque of Gien, sermons are given in both French and Standard Arabic, and attendees come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The majority are Moroccan immigrants and their descendants, but there are also many Turks, Algerians, Tunisians, Senegalese, Malians, Lebanese, Somalians, Syrians, and European converts, among others, that attend the Grand Mosque. The two mosques are very friendly with one another, often hosting joint events together, and in my observations, Muslims in Gien were friendly with one another regardless of country of origin. The existence of the two mosques, then, should not be understood as a result of ethnic tensions. Most Muslims in Gien whom I asked explained the difference in primarily linguistic terms. Many in the Turkish community are far more comfortable in Turkish than in French or Arabic and appreciated hearing sermons in their native language.

My Muslim interlocutors in Gien live in a country with a rich and complicated history of engagement with Islam. When speaking about the history of France with Islam, both Muslims and non-Muslims in Gien would frequently reference the Umayyad invasion of Gaul (732 AD), the presence of a Muslim controlled area in medieval Provence, and the Crusades. The French colonization of lands in North and West Africa beginning in the 1800s also featured prominently in their discourse. Signs of the colonial relationship between France and Islam can be seen in varying degrees of prominence across France, from the Grand Mosque of Paris, built by the French government in 1926, to the cemetery of Gien where there are Islamic graves of Algerian and Malagasy soldiers who died while fighting for France in WWI.

Following the decolonization of North Africa, France invited labor migration from its former colonies, especially Algeria and Morocco. Along with this migration came tensions between France and its Muslims. Various major controversies related to Islam were also much talked of in Gien, and therefore I will describe them briefly. In 1989, several schoolgirls were suspended for refusing to remove their hijabs. Heated and ongoing debates about the acceptability of Islamic dress in schools and in public spaces more generally have occurred periodically ever since and contributed to a 2004 national ban on "ostentatious" religious symbols in public schools. In 2016, another controversy arose around women's Islamic dress, with state courts upholding bans on modest swimwear, colloquially called burkinis.

In Gien there was also plenty of talk about Islam's (perceived) conflict with the French conception of secularism, *laïcité*, which (debatably, according to most Muslims and certain non-Muslims I spoke with) requires the exclusion of religion from the public sphere. Tensions with Islam have heightened further with fears over an increase in violence following attacks on the Charlie-Hebdo offices (Le Monde 2015) in early 2015, the November 13th attacks (Sekkai 2015) in Paris in 2015, and the 2016 attack on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice (Le Monde 2016), among others. For many, these tensions also involve associating Islam with urban decay, delinquency, crime, and rioting in *les banlieues*, the poor suburbs of France's largest cities.

People in Gien also talked about the ways French society and the French state have reacted in various ways to these tensions. The most discussed response in Gien was the various restrictions on Islamic dress, but people also spoke frequently about state monitoring of Muslims and Islamic institutions, including closing a number of mosques, weaponizing deportation against religious leaders of foreign nationality that it deems threatening, and imposing financial restrictions on many Muslim associations. While I was in Gien, the candidate for Marine Le

Pen's far-right *Rassamblement National* party won Gien's seat in the national legislature, and Muslims in Gien frequently spoke about anti-immigrant political rhetoric and the surging popularity of the French far-right.

While all this talk about violent history, colonialism, terrorism, and restrictions placed on Muslims might appear to contradict my argument about the relative unimportance of oppression in the lives of my interlocutors, I actually think it strengthens my position (in addition to providing the reader with needed insight into the context of Islam in France) because it shows that my Muslim interlocutors are aware of their marginalized status. My goal in the rest of this paper is to demonstrate that despite this awareness, my French Muslim interlocutors in Gien are far more focused on cultivating a moral personhood rather than engaging in political resistance. Consistent with the complex nature of moral self-fashioning discussed above, the examples I will share reflect a system of values that at times places Islamic or Republican values in greater focus. The end result, though, is the same—a general morality that allows my interlocutors to pursue their own conceptions of the good in their everyday social lives in Gien.

## A Quick Note on Positionality

My three months of fieldwork in Gien were based primarily in the Grand Mosque and in social networks connected to it. I conducted participant observation with the Muslims of Gien in their mosques, homes, gardens, markets, and places of business. I also conducted conversational interviews with a number of Muslim and non-Muslim women and men in Gien. I had significant verbal interactions with at least 150 people, including over 20 key informants. For the most part, I conducted my fieldwork in French, though from time to time I would speak in Arabic with interlocutors who were less comfortable in French. And there were certain people in Gien with whom I could not effectively communicate, including a significant portion of the Turkish

community who spoke relatively little French or Arabic. Therefore, though I did spend time in the Turkish mosque and with people who prayed there, my sense of the Turkish community in Gien is relatively limited.

Furthermore, the large and diverse nature of Gien's Muslim community made it nearly impossible to talk to everyone. There were certain people who did not want to talk to me or participate in my research. For example, though several of many of my interlocutors told me they suspected there were Salafi Muslims (see discussion of Salafism below) in Gien, I never met anyone that self-identified as Salafi or discussed theological positions commonly associated with Salafism. Thus, there are likely certain elements of Gien's Muslim community that are not represented in my research. Nonetheless, the majority of Muslims I met were eager to participate in my research, and it is their perspectives on which this paper is focused.

Additionally, as a man I spent most of my time with men or in mixed-gender spaces and so my perspective on the experiences of Muslim women in Gien is necessarily limited. Nonetheless, repeated interviews with several Muslim women have been critical in informing my research, and my wife, who was with me in Gien for the entirety of my fieldwork, did spend time in women-only spaces. Her observations in those spaces have also contributed to my attempts to account for the experiences and perspectives of women in Gien's Muslim community. This is all to say that my positionality as a researcher was heavily influenced by both gender and language and that my research was focused primarily on actively practicing Muslims who attend the Grand Mosque and were interested in participating my research.

I also want to recognize the ways in which my positionality as a researcher may have contributed to the narratives that my interlocutors' put forward. As a white person who speaks French fairly well (having spent part of my childhood living in France), my interlocutors could

have come to see me as a kind of proxy for Frenchness to whom they could present a certain discourse focused more on their interest in morality than on oppression and resistance. However, I also think I was perceived as non-French in important ways. For example, in conversations about the unfair treatment of French Muslims, many of my interlocutors liked to ask questions about my experiences of American multiculturalism and compare it (positively) to their experiences. Furthermore, after a public talk I gave in the city event space, several non-Muslims and Muslims separately approached me to say that I had said things in my presentation that a French person, Muslim or not, could never say. This seems to indicate that my positionality as a non-French researcher could have been particularly significant in the kinds of discourses people presented to me. Nonetheless, this particular dynamic of positionally should not distract from my argument. My interlocutors' project as I describe it here is necessarily outward facing in that it is focused in part on the things that they wanted non-Muslim French to know about them.

## Data and Discussion

In what remains of this paper, I describe the ways in which my Muslim interlocutors in Gien emphasized moral concerns through religious ritual, everyday practices, and varying forms of discourse. I demonstrate how these diverse practices allow them to pursue a moral personhood informed by both Islamic and French Republican values. I then discuss my interlocuters' hope that their quest for moral personhood will be recognized by broader French society, and I conclude by outlining the various ways in which that recognition is affirmed or denied in Gien.

### "We're not into Victimization"

Early on in my fieldwork, my wife and I were invited to eat dinner with a large Muslim family in the home of the grandparents. We gathered with aunts and uncles, children and grandchildren in an apartment in the *Montoires* neighborhood on the east side of Gien. The room

where we ate consisted of three low, bright pink Moroccan-style couches, which, along with several chairs from other parts of the house, had been arranged around several tables. The walls were plain but for a powered-down television, a large clock, and a silver-colored metal wall decoration containing surat al-ikhlas, the 112th chapter of the Qur'an, in Arabic. "Say, He is God the one. God the eternal. He begot no one nor was he begotten. No one is comparable to him" (Translation by Abdel Haleem 2005).

While we ate quiche and sipped mint tea, we chatted with the middle-aged Franco-Moroccan couple across from us. When they told us about their respective jobs in business administration, I asked them if they had ever been victims of discrimination in the workplace because of their race or religion. They told me that although they had fortunately never been victims of explicit harassment, there were lots of situations where they could feel that they were being perceived and treated differently. But after telling us this, the woman, Nadia, quickly added, "but we're not into victimization" (*mais on est pas dans la victimisation*). She told us how they tried to focus on more important things in life rather than complaining about every little thing that went wrong.

Nadia then asked us a lot of questions about the United States. She was particularly interested in asking me about an American Muslim scholar she followed on YouTube and Instagram. Since I knew of this scholar, we ended up having a long conversation about him. She told me how much she appreciated this person's perspectives on Islam, which she said helped her focus on her inner spirituality. Nadia said it was important for her to be changed by her religious practice instead of engaging in blind performance, which she said she has struggled with in the past. She also expressed her wish for more Muslims in France to focus on their inner spirituality instead of just on outward behavior, which she said was a big issue among Muslims in France.

In this example, Nadia demonstrates her interest in understanding what it means to be a good person, in pursuing that good life through Islamic piety, and in encouraging others to do the same. Significantly, she was much more interested in discussing questions of morality than questions of oppression. As I continued my research, I repeatedly encountered similar responses to questions about discrimination: Muslims in Gien seemed to have relatively little concern for talk about politics, discrimination, and oppression. Instead, they were preeminently concerned with being good. Essential to their pursuit of goodness was understanding Islam as a force for positive change.

## Portraying Islam as a Means of Radical Self-Improvement

I frequently heard Gien's Muslims discussing Islam's capacity to change people for the better. The woman in the story above clearly associated Islamic piety with interior change. She indicated that proper Muslim personhood is intimately connected with changing through practice rather than simply practicing religion. This same idea was frequently conveyed in the *khutbah* (sermon) given each Friday at the mosque before the communal noon prayer, which was typically attended by 300-400 people during the period of my fieldwork. These sermons usually focused on a particular aspect of Islamic practice or belief, but also almost always included mentions of the capacity of Islam to change people. For example, on one Friday, the sermon giver spoke on the importance of teaching youth about Islam. He specifically mentioned how essential it was to not only teach children the proper practices or to send them to Islamic education classes at the mosque, but also to help them internalize what it means to be a good Muslim. He said that those who go to heaven will be those who truly change to align their will with God's.

This discourse on change through Islam was normative among my interlocutors and focused on the community as a whole, and especially on a perception that Islam in France is plagued by too much focus on outward performance, as seen especially well in Nadia's story above. I observed other discourse more focused on celebrating change that had already taken place. For example, one friend, Anas, told me that as a teenager he went through a difficult time. He said that even though his parents raised him in Islam, he did not actively practice his religion. He rarely went to the mosque or prayed. He told me that he was spending time with bad people and that he had stopped spending time with people who were different from him, shutting himself off. He felt lost and directionless in life. Eventually he returned to Islam and his life changed for the better. He told me that it was when he started to practice his religion that he started to feel happy again, that when he went back to the mosque and started to learn more about Islam and how to be a good Muslim, he opened up to society at large, including forming friendships with non-Muslims. He even said that coming back to religion allowed him to learn to speak standard French properly. He met his wife in an Islamic education class and now they have a little baby.

When I first met another friend, Selim, he told me a very similar story. He said that his parents taught him the basics of prayer but that growing up he never really understood what religion meant. He said that after graduating from high school, he felt "a great emptiness inside" (*je sentais qu'il y avait une grande vide en moi*) that he tried to fill "with a little bit of everything" (*avec un peu de tout*) but that nothing seemed to fulfill him. He said that eventually, he started to become more interested in religion. He said that now he prays every day at the mosque and that he has become "very happy" (*tres heureux*). I asked what this change had felt like. He said that for him, "Islam is a calming peace" (*l'Islam c'est un apaisement*). He also

mentioned that as he has studied Islam, he has been able to develop a positive outlook on life whereas before he was very pessimistic. I asked if his friends had noticed this change. He said he had a lot of non-Muslim friends from school but that they never really talked about religion before. But he said that once they noticed a change in him, he'd been able to discuss the religious reasons for his change in character and that they have told him they are happy for him.

In both of these stories, increased practice and understanding of Islam helps the young men in question to change to live what they see as a better life through Islam's capacity to produce moral persons. The young men juxtapose their former, less moral selves from their current, more moral selves through a discussion of interior state (empty vs. fulfilled) and outward engagement with others (closed-off from society vs. outward-facing and engaged with diverse friends). Such a discourse on personal and community change through increased Islamic piety is significant because it permits my interlocutors to engage in religiously significant action by encouraging other Muslims to increase their piety through testimonials of piety's power to improve their lives.

At the same time, this discourse allows my interlocutors to demonstrate to non-Muslims that Islam is a force for good. At an interactional level, Selim's ability to have positive discussions about religion with his non-Muslim friends was contingent on their noticing his change in character following his move towards more pious living. At a broad discursive level, these stories engage a common discourse in France that accuses Islam of creating bad people who are insular and engage in illegal activities like drug trafficking. However, through discussing spending time with bad people and past involvements with "a little bit of everything," both Anas and Selim index the kinds of activities typically attributed to Islam, but notably they link these behaviors to their impious selves before they turned more fully to Islam. In this way,

they suggest that it was a lack of Islam that led them to be closed off from society and engage in disvalued behaviors. And as they show that their turn to Islam led them to increased positive engagement with non-Muslims, they point to Islam's role in making them not just better Muslims, but also better people according to the definitions of non-Muslim French. Thus, they frame their Muslim self in a way that is broadly recognizable as a moral person and point to Islam as the source of that morality.

It is important to note that when Anas, Selim, and others of my interlocutors speak of Islam in this way, they are not referring to Islam as a (purely) social system. Rather, they are speaking of Islam as a transcendent manifestation of the will of God. My Muslim interlocutors would readily acknowledge that Islam, as a broad social system, has been used by certain groups to radicalize young people and lead them to engage in antisocial, even violent behavior. But what Anas and Selim are pointing to here is that such (bad) behaviors cannot be tied to the true Islam as they understand it. This true Islam, through its source in God, can only lead to good.

## Self-Improvement through Religious Ritual

For many Muslims in Gien, explicitly religious practices are an essential part of pursuing a moral life. Most clearly, the five daily prayers ensure that each day is divided and defined in terms of religious practice. Ousmane, a Malian father in his 40's who sometimes led the prayers at the Grand Mosque, told me that he planned his days around the completion of this duty, and that the necessity of planning allowed him and other Muslims to constantly refocus themselves on God's will. In addition to the ritual prayer, *salat*, people also performed *du'a*, personal supplications asking God for help. Another common practice I observed was reading or reciting the Qur'an. At the mosque and in houses, I observed people reciting the Qur'an in groups or alone. One middle-aged male interlocutor had a group of friends from his youth in Casablanca,

now living across Morocco and various countries in Western Europe, who would meet virtually throughout the year to recite the Qur'an or discuss Islam together. Many of my interlocutors, both men and women, told me that they like to read a few passages each night before going to sleep. During the summer when I conducted my fieldwork, many men would take time to recite during the hour and a half or so between the two evening prayers. While some socialized outside or worked on completing administrative tasks in their volunteer roles in the mosque administration, many others would stay in the prayer room and recite the Qur'an. Most would grab a copy of the Qur'an off one of the mosque bookshelves and find a quiet corner in which to recite quietly to themselves. Additionally, each night, a consistent group of older men would sit together near the front of the mosque and recite one *juz* (a division of the Qur'an equaling 1/30th of the total length). People told me it was good to listen as well as recite. One evening, I observed an older man scolding a group of teenagers for chatting outside when they could have been inside listening to "the elders" (*les anciens*) reciting. Some of my interlocutors also liked to listen to recordings of favorite professional reciters while they drove or completed housework.

When I asked people what these various religious practices brought to their lives, the almost universal response was some variation of "a calming peace" (*un apaisement*). One story from my fieldwork is particularly illustrative of the ways Gien's Muslims found inner peace through their religious practices. In January of 2023, I was staying with my friend Bilal in his two-story home on a modest-sized plot on the east side of Gien. Bilal had lived in Morocco until he was in his twenties. He had moved to Gien more than a decade ago to get married, though he was currently in the middle of a difficult divorce. Every night after dinner, Bilal would go into his room and recite the Qur'an. One night, after he had finished reciting and joined me in the kitchen, I asked him to tell me about his experience with recitation. He said he had begun

reciting regularly about 4 years ago and that it was "a calming peace" (*un apaisement*) for him. He told me that earlier that night, he had had a profound experience while reciting. He thought I had perhaps noticed the change in his voice. I said no. He responded "I had tears in my eyes. A verse really touched me. I don't know how to describe it. I was with God." (*J'avais les larmes dans les yeux. Une versée m'a vraiment touchée. Je ne sais pas comment décrire. J'étais avec Dieu*). Bilal told me that since his wife had left with his children, he often felt very sad and angry. Earlier that week he had apologized to me for not always responding to my texts because he sometimes felt too sad to function due to everything going on with his divorce. Bilal said that "when I am with God like that" (*quand je suis avec Dieu comme ça*) his worries seem less significant, and he is able to feel better and function again.

In addition to the frequency with which people described prayer and Qur'anic recitation as "a calming peace," Bilal's story illustrates the role in which personal and communal religious ritual plays a role in bringing about the kinds of inner change that my interlocutors are seeking. Almost universally, my practicing Muslim interlocutors structured their days around the ritual prayers, and many of them also engaged with separate recitation of the Qur'an on a daily basis. Various interlocutors told me that the frequency of their religious practice allowed them frequent opportunities to "reorient [themselves] towards God" (*retourner vers Dieu*] or to "call themselves into question" (se remettre en question] in order to change negative aspects of their behavior and ways of being. In all these practices, therefore, the aim is a change of character—to become a person who is at peace with God, with oneself, and with others. According to Bilal, his experience of calming peace through Qur'anic recitation allowed him to change his inner state from being upset and unable to function because of his divorce to feeling good and being able to

function because of his connection with God. Thus, religious practice aids the quest for moral personhood.

Many of the Muslims I met were acutely aware of the possibility of getting caught up in the practice, of staying focused on outward performance without reaping the benefits of inner change. I observed a strong focus on the need to constantly "focus [one's] intentions" (*prendre l'intention*) to perform a religious act for the right reasons. I have observed, for example, this Islamic injunction to "*prendre l'intention*" on posters in classrooms at the mosque as well as in children's books aimed at teaching young people the right way to pray. I also heard about it in Friday sermons and in many personal conversations. Interestingly, one person told me that one of the reasons why practices like the five daily prayers and the recitation of the Qur'an are so important is that they allow people to "re-focus [their] intentions" (reprendre l'intention) so as to better concentrate on fulfilling the will of God that leads to becoming a better person. The key point I want to emphasize here is that explicitly religious practices are an important part of the pursuit of the good life for observant Muslims. One might imagine that the constant imperative not just to complete but to improve one's practice of multiple daily rituals would be a burden, but most of my interlocutors see it as an opportunity presented them by God to pursue a moral personhood through the inner peace and self-improvement afforded by these rituals.

## Self-Improvement through Non-Ritual Practice

Moral efforts also (and probably more often) took place outside of explicitly religious, ritual contexts. I had the opportunity to observe my interlocutors' attention to moral considerations in various, seemingly mundane aspects of life. For example, many Muslims in Gien were very concerned with avoiding waste. I frequently heard people saying "we must not waste" (*il faut pas gaspiller*) in a variety of settings, including in in living rooms, in kitchens, in

gardens, at the mosque, and in restaurants where they worked. In the communal dining area of the mosque, there is a prominent, brightly colored sign with a Qur'anic quotation (from Surat al-Isra 26-27) saying, “Waste not carelessly, for those that waste are the brothers of devils” (my own translation of the French: *Et ne gaspille pas indûment, car les gaspilleurs sont les frères des diables*).

One day, I was chatting with two friends around a table when one of them made us mint tea. My friend made the tea, but it turned out pretty bad, and we all agreed it was disgusting. They decided the mint leaves must have been bad. No one drank their tea, and as we were cleaning up afterwards and my friend was pouring the cups down the sink, I heard him muttering "too much waste" (*trop de gaspillage*). When my other friend went to pour out the tea that was left in the kettle, the first man started waving his arms in protest. No, he said, I'll come back with a bottle and take the rest home. And he did.

I observed another example of waste avoidance at the construction site at the Grand Mosque. At the beginning of June, I was working with other volunteers to fill a cinder block wall with cement. Various measures were in place to ensure that no cement was wasted. Three of us followed the spout of the truck with a funnel to direct the cement more precisely into the wall. Others followed behind, leveling the cement and salvaging any surplus for use elsewhere. Any time a little bit spilled, there was a lot of shouting with volunteers laughingly berating whoever had spilled as they rushed to scoop up the concrete. After the concrete truck was apparently empty, the men I worked with made sure to ask the driver to help them remove the last bits of cement from the bottom of the truck. None was wasted.

In addition to these examples, I often observed my interlocutors discuss the injunction to avoid waste alongside juxtapositions of a proper, pious Muslim who avoids waste with

"consumer society" (*la société de la consommation*) whose sole concern is the material world, consuming more and more instead of dealing with more important spiritual matters and following God's will. *La société de la consommation* is a term popularized in France by Baudrillard (1970) and widely used by critics of capitalism and globalization. And wastefulness is something non-Muslims in Gien such as a vegetable seller at the Saturday Market also told me they were concerned with. Thus, my interlocutors' efforts to avoid waste, as seen in the examples that follow, brings together French and Islamic moral values.

Eating halal (Islamically permissible) charcuterie was another interesting example of Muslims enacting morality in everyday life in Gien. Food and the various practices related to its production and consumption have moral implications in various locations (c.f. Coveney 2006), including notable associations of morality with food practices in France (Shields-Argelès 2004, 2010). The landscape of Islamic dietary regulations and the production of halal food in France is morally complicated, as Islamic practices related to food are often tied up in the negotiation of perceptions of competition between Islamic and French values (c.f. Brisebarre 1997, 1998, 2008; Wright and Annes 2013). This tendency of food to be a common site of conflict over moral values makes the case of halal charcuterie particularly interesting for understanding the ways everyday practices allowed Muslims in Gien to pursue a simultaneously Muslim and French moral personhood.

Charcuterie, a branch of French cuisine focused on prepared meat products such as cured meat, dry sausage, and *paté*, is very important in France. The supermarkets in Gien all had (at least) an entire aisle devoted to charcuterie, the butcher shop on the main street of Gien offered an enormous selection of charcuterie alongside other meat offerings, and several stands devoted to charcuterie were usually present at the Wednesday and Saturday open-air markets. Almost

every meal I have eaten with non-Muslim French has included at least one form of charcuterie alongside other offerings. Needless to say, charcuterie looms large in the French culinary imagination, an imagination to which moral sentiment is frequently attached. For many French people I have spoken to, eating French food is an essential qualification for being a good French person.

However, most charcuterie is made of pork, the consumption of which is prohibited in Islam, and following dietary restrictions is something my interlocutors frequently told me separated pious Muslims from those less concerned with living according to Islamic values. Despite this, Muslims in Gien frequently ate various forms of charcuterie, albeit non-pork, halal versions of common French favorites. For example, one halal Kebab shop in Gien offered both "turkey-bacon" (*bacon de dinde*) and "turkey-ham" (*jambon de dinde*) as an optional add-on, and the Franco-Moroccan run pizza shop I spent time working at also offered halal charcuterie pizza toppings which both Muslim and non-Muslim customers would order. Along with the halal butcher shops, the "halal aisles" (*rayons halals*) of local grocery stores also had various forms of halal charcuterie on offer. My interlocutors' old guidebooks to halal restaurants, which many French Muslims used before smartphones to find places to eat while traveling, were full of adds for things like *cassoulet halal* (Cassoulet is a famous kind of pork and bean stew from Southern France). When I ate with a large extended family to celebrate *eid al-adha* (the feast of sacrifice), a carefully arranged charcuterie platter was placed on the table alongside the traditional mutton skewers. And when I went on a picnic with a young Muslim family at a local park, they had brought various kinds of halal charcuterie which we sampled, debating which one was best. In this way, Muslims in Gien pursue a moral personhood in their everyday, mundane practices. By eating halal charcuterie, Muslims in Gien to enact a moral personhood informed by Islamic and

French moral values. This, along with the avoidance of waste, shows how Islamic and French notions of morality often work in tandem in the everyday lives of Muslims in Gien.

## Differentiating Muslim Moral Personhood from "Bad" Muslims

In addition to speaking to the capacity of Islam to create moral persons and working to become moral, my Muslim interlocutors in Gien often spoke in ways that juxtaposed their own quest for morality through Islam against the failure of others to effectively do the same. As the following examples illustrate, my interlocutors' quest for a recognizably moral personhood involved differentiating between correct and incorrect conceptions of Islamic practice. In order to demonstrate this in action, I describe two parts of a conversation which took place outside of the Grand Mosque between myself and three 20-something young men. Two, Bassam and Mourid, were of Moroccan origin and one, Olcay, was of Turkish origin. In both examples, the young men compare their own moral personhood to the immoral beliefs and practices of others—in the first example, to Moroccan relatives they say have racist attitudes and, in the second example, to Salafi Muslims. In both cases, the juxtaposed group is presented as a foil to proper moral personhood.

### *Differentiation on grounds of tolerance*

While talking outside of the mosque, two of the young men, Bassaam and Mourid, told me that growing up in France had opened them up to diversity. Bassaam mentioned that Paris had the most nationalities of any city in the world, and Mourid replied that there is even a lot of diversity in their neighborhood, Champs-de-la-Ville (where we were standing during this conversation). Bassaam then mentioned that a lot of his relatives in Morocco are racist against "black Africans" (*les africains noirs*). He said that while visiting them in Morocco, he has heard them making negative comments when they saw black people. He said that, in contrast, he

doesn't have a problem since he grew up with lots of different kinds of people and knows they are just people. Bassaam then told a story about his cousins from Morocco coming to Gien for his sibling's wedding. He said his cousins had been surprised to meet all the different people that had been invited to the festivities, including non-Muslims and Black people. Bassaam said that they had told him "we didn't know there were good people like this" (*on savait pas qu'il y avait de bonnes personnes comme ça)*. Mourid added that at the mosque here there is a diverse array of people who come to pray. They both specifically mentioned Ousmane, a Malian mosque congregant, and praised his knowledge of Islam as well as his ability as a *khatib* (sermon giver) and a Qur'an reciter.

In this instance, Bassaam and Mourid, in speaking about racism and tolerance, assert a morality informed by cohesive notions of French and Islamic moral values. Especially in recent years, the discourses emphasizing the importance of diversity have been promoted by the state, including portraying tolerance as a manifestation of *laïcité* (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de la Jeunesse 2021). At the same time, when speaking about tolerance and diversity, many Muslims in Gien would tell me about Islamic injunctions to treat all people with respect. Many told me about the tolerant example of the Prophet or the Qur'anic teaching that all humans will be equal before God on the day of judgement.

But in popular French discourse, one of the critiques frequently directed at Muslims is their intolerance for difference, often with reference to the oppression of various groups in Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan. Such discourses are clearly indexed in this turn, especially in Bassaam's stories about his experiences in Morocco and at the wedding. By juxtaposing his Moroccan extended family's racism to his own sensitivity to race and his immediate family's having invited a diverse array of guests to the wedding, he makes it

clear that he is not an intolerant kind of Muslim. Perhaps some of his family members in Morocco are intolerant, but not him. Significantly, both Bassaam and Mourid attribute their own tolerance to life in a diverse France, giving a distinctly French quality to the value of tolerance they express. This ties their tolerance to the values of Republican France.

At the same time, when discussing the experiences that led them to developing tolerant attitudes, Bassaam and Mourid reference the diverse nature of the community they interact with at the mosque. Mourid also makes sure to express that diversity and tolerance are not the unique provenance of the big city, but that they are also present in Gien, and specifically present in the Champs-de-la-Ville neighborhood which has a large Muslim population. This ties their tolerant attitudes to Islamic values. In this way, they propose tolerance as a mutually French and Islamic moral value. And by demonstrating their own morality-through-tolerance in a way that points to both the Islamic and French nature of that value, they implicitly assert their own simultaneous Frenchness and Muslimness.

In so doing, Bassaam and Mourid also juxtapose their own tolerance of diversity against the intolerance of those who (intolerantly) dismiss Islam's ability to produce good persons. Their conversation on tolerance immediately followed their discussion of the intolerance of some non-Muslims in France who are hostile toward religion generally and Islam particularly. In contrast to such intolerance, they point to Islam's role in allowing them to become tolerant, inclusive individuals striving to live by the French values their critics seem to lack. In this way, they indexically demonstrate that they are living closer to the true values of Republican France than those non-Muslim French who intolerantly criticize those for whom religion is important. And they assert that their ability to live those Republican values is at least in part thanks to Islam.

*Differentiation on theological grounds*

At another point in the conversation, the three young friends began to discuss the way the French media portrays all Muslims as fundamentalists and *salafis*. Terms such as *le salfisme*, *l'islamisme*, and *l'islam politique* are often used in the French media and other popular discourse on Islam in often indistinguishable ways. In such usage, these terms connote separatism, extremism, and violence—in other words, what people tend to view as the "bad" kinds of Islam. In this case, my interlocutors ended up having a lengthy discussion about Salafism, a particular manifestation of Islamic theology, and Salafis, those that practice Salafism. Salafism is an approach to Sunni Islam intent on emulating *al-salaf al-salih* (pious predecessors; generally meaning the first three generations of Muslims after Muhammad) in as many aspects of life as possible by studying the Qur'an and the *sunnah* (traditions about the life of the Prophet). Salafis typically reject other sources of Islamic knowledge as *bida'a* (heretical innovation), most notably the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence.

Salafis are generally viewed as more puritanical, and the term Salafi has had an increasingly negative connotation to many, both inside and outside of Islam, since 9/11 and the War on Terror. This means that, at least in France, it is relatively rare to find a Muslim who would categorize themselves as a Salafi. Scholars generally categorize Salafis, based on the ways the interact with the state, as either quietist Salafis (who try to avoid interaction with the state entirely), political Salafis (who seek to control the state through electoral politics), or jihadi Salafis (who engage in political violence) (Wagemakers 2016). The belief held by some Salafis that it is wrong to vote is particularly important in the interaction I observed. This belief is rooted in the theological importance of the unity of the Muslim community. For example, some Salafis believe that political parties, debates, and demonstrations divide the Muslim community and so oppose participation in electoral politics. Some also oppose certain political activities due to

concerns about the un-Islamic nature of electoral politics or because of objections to enabling a given political regime's immoral actions such as their participation in oppressing or even killing Muslims at home and abroad (c.f. Olidort 2015). It is also important to note that not all Salafis hold this belief—those referred to as political Salafis, for example, often campaign for and hold political office and seek votes from their supporters.

After complaining about all Muslims being lumped in with Salafis, the three friends told me that they wished that people would just come to the mosque so they would see that Muslims are normal people and not salafis. I mentioned that I had heard other Muslims in Gien talking about Salafis in relation to a story about someone posting an anonymous note at the mosque saying it was wrong to vote in national elections. Olcay was surprised to hear this, but Mourid and Bassaam knew the story. Bassaam said that a while back "*le president*" (the president [of the Mosque association]) had given a speech at the Friday communal prayer encouraging people to vote. Bassaam said that the president had said that people needed to vote in order to change their situation instead of just complaining about conditions in France. Bassaam said that he and many others approved of this message but that the next week someone had left an anonymous note at the mosque saying it was "*haram"* (forbidden) to vote for various reasons. Bassaam said this made the president very angry, not just because he disagreed with the theology, but because the person had not had the courage to sign their name to the letter. The president had then given another speech about it. Bassaam then said that it is theologically acceptable for Islam to adapt for new times and contexts, for example, by allowing voting in places where that is an important institution. He said that "it's not natural" (*c'est pas normale*) for everything to always stay the same. Mourid gave an example of slang. He asked Olcay if was familiar with the word, "*chop*" (a slang word for car). Bassaam replied to Olcay that if in 20 years he told his child to go get in

the *chop* they wouldn't understand. Bassaam said that this shows how contexts change with time, just like language does.

In this conversation, the speakers discuss a story about a debate within the mosque about the correctness of voting, with the anonymous letter writer arguing against the Mosque association president's position that Muslims had a responsibility to vote. Obviously, not voting or believing voting is immoral is not the unique providence of Salafis, but a belief in the amorality of voting and other forms of political engagement is a theological position often associated with quietist Salafis (Wagemakers 2016). This was certainly the case in Gien. Whenever my interlocutors would bring up Salafism, resistance to voting was also discussed, perhaps in part because of this relatively recent incident at the mosque. In all the conversations about Salafism that I observed in Gien, speakers were sure to distance themselves from Salafis. Many Muslims I spoke with in Gien, including Bassaam, Mourid, and Olcay, voiced their disapproval of Salafism on theological grounds, for example by maintaining the legitimacy and importance of the schools of Sunni jurisprudence.

This certainly seems to be what is happening in this particular conversation. Bassaam tells the story of the voting incident in such a way that emphasizes what he perceives as the cowardice of the anonymous letter writer and the righteous indignation of the president of the mosque. Representative democracy being a core value of French Republicanism, demonstrating acceptance of voting clearly reflects alignment with French moral values. And when Bassam and Mourid bring up the acceptability of change, they further distance themselves from Salafis who are indexically linked to resisting change. Significantly, they dismiss what they portray as Salafism's regressivism based on their understanding of Islamic theology's acceptance of

change. Thus, by condemning Salafism and distancing themselves from it, the speakers seek a moral personhood in line with both French and (their own) Islamic values.

In these examples, my interlocutors carefully differentiated themselves from the kinds of intolerant and retrogressive Muslims commonly criticized as dangerous by non-Muslims in France. This sort of differentiation was common among my Muslim interlocutors in Gien, especially in regard to Salafism as the foil for their own conception of Islam. By pointing to Salafis as the ones who are doing the things that mainstream French society thinks ALL Muslims are doing, and then by pointing out that they themselves are NOT Salafists, this is another way that they show that they are aligned with the values of mainstream French society. Such discourse is a clear example of the ways in which my interlocutors' project of pursuing moral personhood allowed them to seek recognition from their broader society.

## Recognition as Moral Persons

Throughout this paper, I have hinted at the ways my interlocutors' moral personhood might be recognizably moral to non-Muslim French as well as to Muslims. This is because in many cases, the French Muslims I spoke with told me they saw gaining recognition as moral persons as a potential positive side effect of their general quest to become good. This points to a conception of recognition that is relatively uncommon in current scholarship.

By taking an approach to Islam in France that emphasizes citizenship, political and legal frameworks, and oppression and resistance (as outlined above), current scholarship privileges a conception of recognition where Muslims are seeking recognition as *political persons* vis-à-vis a sovereign state and its universal value system. For example, in discussing the French state interactions with Islam, Fernando employs a conception of recognition focused on state sovereignty. She states that "the project of recognizing and including Islam in the Republic is a

disciplinary project of secular governmentality" and goes on to demonstrate how (at least some) Muslims engage in a process of refashioning themselves in order to "make them[selves] recognizable to the secular state" (Fernando 2014, 122). In this way, scholars have often addressed the suffering of French Muslims by emphasizing the seeking of state-based recognition of political personhood as Muslims' primary recourse in mitigating their suffering.

However, I argue that rather than seeking to be recognized as citizens by the state, my interlocutors are, quite simply, seeking to be recognized by their neighbors as "good" persons. Thus, the situation of Islam in France is not just a question of citizenship, of Muslims seeking to gain recognition as political subjects vis-à-vis the nation state. Rather, it is also a question of recognition of moral personhood and of who has the right to determine what defines "the good" and thus who can be good. In contrast to the dominant conception of recognition which tends to focus on "the state as the always already-sovereign institution" (Markell 2003, 155), here I am pointing to the less well studied forms of recognition that emerge from and are immanent in the discourses and practices of everyday life that seek to realize 'the good.' In this way, I have sought to explore the practical and discursive articulations of "the good" at play in these moments where recognition of moral personhood is sought by French Muslims in Gien as they pursue their broader project of becoming moral persons.

In analyzing the ways in which my Muslim interlocutors in Gien are able to portray themselves as recognizably moral persons, I don't want to imply that their efforts towards self-improvement are only performative. As I have demonstrated above, their primary goal is to become good. In this way, persuading non-Muslims in France of Islam's potential to produce moral persons is simply a side effect of the true goal—becoming good because it was what God wants them to do.

## Practical Challenges to Recognition

In January 2023 I briefly returned to Gien to give two public lectures on my research, one at the Grand Mosque and the other at a conference room in the municipal event space. Both events were locally publicized and attended by both Muslims and non-Muslims. My goal in making this trip was to share my research with the people of Gien and receive their feedback on the ways I had interpreted my fieldwork. The responses I received from Muslims and non-Muslims in Gien serve to further illustrate the moral focus of questions about Islam in France, as well as to point towards some further considerations.

During the question and comments session following my lecture in the municipal building, one white, non-Muslim Frenchman told me he thought I had not spoken adequately about the oppression of Muslim women. The same man came up to me privately after the event and told me he thought the only way I could have observed a synthesis of Republican and Islamic values was if my interlocutors had been operating under a corrupted version of both. The next day at the mosque, I was approached by Haja Samia, an older Algerian woman who had attended the public lecture the day before. She told me that she was very concerned by this man's comment about women and wanted me to tell people her side of the story. "We aren't submissive/subjected, we're different" (*On est pas soumises, on est differentes*).

This sequence of interactions captures an important caveat to my argument. For some non-Muslim French, the compatibility of Islamic and Republican values in creating moral persons seems out of the question. Furthermore, while my interlocutors' project seeks recognition as moral persons from neighbors and co-workers, many in France would probably still assert that legitimate recognition can only be given by the state. This is certainly apparent in the way the two men from the community organization (from the beginning of this paper) insist

that only the state can form proper persons with shared Republican values. Such conceptions of a (morally) sovereign state are thus one of the biggest challenges facing my interlocutors as they seek moral recognition at a more local, personal level.

But French Muslims like Haja Samia continue to insist that there is room for different value systems and different-but-legitimate kinds of recognition in the formation of moral French persons. And many of the non-Muslims who attended my lectures in Gien were those who, largely through their relationships with Muslims, have come to accept this possibility. A large contingent of Catholics attended my lecture at the Grand Mosque and stayed afterwards for the communal meal. This group of Catholics has been co-organizing and attending interfaith events at the mosque for several years now, and various Muslims in Gien told me that they see this as a sign of hope for the future, that their efforts to become moral persons are being recognized by some outside of their community.

On Saturday morning just before I left Gien, I walked through the market with Lami. We encountered a friend of his, a vegetable seller who has been selling her home-grown produce in Gien for close to 40 years and has known Lami since he first arrived in Gien as a boy. When Lami introduced me and told her about my research on Muslims in Gien, she responded with a story. She told us that several years ago her truck had broken down in a city far from home and that a young man "*d'origine*" (literally, "of origin;" meaning someone with origins outside of France) who came to service the vehicle had ended up helping her above and beyond what was professionally required of him. She said he had not only taken care of her truck but had also sent her home that same evening in his own car, letting her borrow it until her own vehicle was repaired. She told us that, as it turned out, this young man had grown up in Gien and remembered her from the market, as his mother always came to her stall.

Memories like these are the kinds that my Muslim interlocutors told me they hope their non-Muslim acquaintances will form if they strive to live morally upright lives. It is a perfect example of what I argue is a major feature of my interlocutors' moral project—a person striving to be good by helping others contributed to this non-Muslim's woman's positive view of Islam through her recognition of a particular Muslim's moral character. Significantly, this story also points to the potential influence of Gien's relatively rural context. The events in this story, as well as the chance meeting that led to the storytelling itself, happened at least in part because Gien is the kind of place where you know the lady who sells you vegetables. At least some of my interlocutors told me that they believed their town's size was conducive to their project because in Gien people talk to each other and know each other. Compared to big cities, they said, it was harder to stick to your own kind in Gien.

My interlocutors were constantly talking about Islam's capacity to change them, about the ways that bringing their behavior into line with the will of God has allowed them to experience inner peace and better relationships with others. They believe Islam allows them to become better people. And against direct and indirect accusations of the incapacity of Islam to produce moral persons, they hope their lived examples of goodness will change people's minds. But this does not mean that they are content with the current state of affairs—regarding either their personal morality or their situation in France.

An essential part of my Muslim interlocutors' moral project is a constant striving for self-improvement. After my talk at the Grand Mosque, where presented my observation that French Muslims are more concerned with piety and morality than with oppression and political resistance, a European convert who commuted to the mosque from a village near Gien raised his hand to comment. After someone passed him the microphone, he told me and the others listening

that "[I] had just said what every Muslim in France already knew" (*tu viens de dire ce que tous les musulmans de France savaient déjà*) but that I also needed to be careful of saying that Muslims are good. He said that judgement should be left to God, and that there was a big difference between *efforts* to be good and *actually* being good. In a similar vein, a few days after my presentation, I received an email from another Muslim attendee:

> "You made a lot of positive comments about the Muslim community of Gien and that warmed my heart, being from Gien. Thank you for your constructive and pragmatic approach. But all the same, could you give us some areas for improvement based on your observations?" (*Tu as fait beaucoup de commentaires positifs sur la communauté musulmane giennoise et cela m'a fait chaud au cœur étant giennois d'origine. Merci pour ton approche constructive et pragmatique. Peux tu quand mème nous donner quelques axes de progrès en fonction de tes observations*?)

I think this demonstrates that, for many French Muslims in Gien, their moral work is never finished. They know Islam helps them to improve and they want non-Muslims to recognize that, but they also believe that constant, self-conscious effort is needed in order to continue the process of pursuing the moral personhood that I have been describing.

This pursuit of moral personhood was almost always tied up in values that my interlocutors saw as being informed both Republican and Islamic conceptions of morality. In the following *du'a* (supplicatory prayer), given by a visiting imam at an interfaith dinner at the Mosque during my visit to Gien, the imam asks God to bless France, not the France that marginalizes Muslims, but the France of Republican values. This part of the *du'a* was the final piece of a long series of supplications in which the imam asked God to assist the Muslims of Gien in their various efforts to be moral. It was a prayer filled with affect, as the imam gradually increased the volume and intensity of his intoned, rhythmic speech, ending the crescendo in a supplication for the central values of the French Republic – *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité*.

| | |
|---|---|
| Imam: | May God bless France! (*Que Dieu bénisse la France*) |
| Congregation: | Amin! |
| Imam: | May the xenophobic and racist France fade away! (*Que la France du racisme et de la xénophobie puisse disparaître*) |
| Congregation: | Amin! |
| Imam: | May God bless the France of liberty, of equality, and of brotherhood! (*Que Dieu bénisse la France de la liberté, de l'égalité, et de la fraternité*) |
| Congregation: | Amin! |

This utterance is obviously performative in a number of ways. But what is being performed captures exactly the kind of project I argue my French Muslim interlocutors are engaging in through their everyday speech and actions—recognition that Islam can produce moral persons, moral persons whose Islamic values are also those of the Republic.

## Conclusion

I this paper, I have demonstrated how my French Muslim interlocutors hope that by seeking to become moral persons who are at peace with God, themselves, and others, non-Muslims with whom they come in contact will see their stiving for goodness and come to acknowledge the potential of Islam as a force for good that my interlocutors believe it is. In this way, they aim to show their detractors that Islam is conducive to Republican personhood, that it is possible to become a good French person by becoming a good Muslim. For my Muslim interlocutors, Islamic and Republican values are not in conflict because both value the same thing—creating moral persons.

Because much of the above-mentioned current literature on Islam in France focuses primarily on issues related to the (state-based) recognition of political personhood, it effectively ignores the projects of Muslims like my interlocutors in Gien who describe their struggles in very different terms—terms that not only shift the focus from politics to morality but also reject the very premise that a conflict between Islamic and French values really exists. Thus, somewhat ironically, current research focused on oppression, political resistance, and the recognition of political personhood often silences the voices of the very people whose oppression scholars set out to highlight.

In contrast, I have sought through my analysis to highlight the voices of the many French Muslims whose life projects focus primarily on moral as opposed to political considerations. When my interlocutors seek to live morally, as informed by (non-conflicting) Islamic and Republican values, they assert a kind of morally based agency. But if one were to maintain a politically focused lens of analysis, this would be taken as evidence that my interlocutors have simply submitted themselves to the demands of the state. Such an analysis would deny my interlocutors' life projects and agency where moral (instead of political) concerns are preeminent. Thus, I have sought to follow my interlocutors lead in reframing the analysis of the experiences of French Muslims in moral as opposed to political terms.

The point here is not to jettison considerations related explicitly to state-centered power, but neither is it to reduce the phenomena we study to the state-centered power dynamics in which they are embedded. My analysis addresses my interlocutors' awareness of the oppression of Muslims in France while remaining markedly different from "suffering slot" approaches which assume that resisting oppression in order to gain political recognition is the primary value and preeminent enterprise of social life. This difference is crucial because the concentration on

suffering and oppression typical to many accounts of Islam in France tends to limit the agency of the oppressed to explicitly political resistance. In contrast, my approach enables a sense of agency by presenting French Muslim voices and their life projects as they describe and enact them. Without ignoring power, my analysis acknowledges the preeminence of moral values in the lives of my interlocutors and demonstrates how morality is a means of producing a good life, primarily through submission to the will of God and secondarily by making my interlocutors recognizably moral persons in the eyes of non-Muslims. Examining my interlocutors' project of moral personhood suggests that scholars attempting an anthropology of the good in relation to migration need not ignore suffering. Rather, we might consider following my interlocutors in analyzing the pursuit of moral lives as a way of mitigating the challenging circumstances they face.

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