# What are British Muslims' perceptions in regard to the situation of Muslims in France?

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This dissertation is submitted to Cardiff University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters degree

## 'Islam in Contemporary Britain'

2011—2012

Cardiff School of
History, Archaeology and Religion

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines British Muslims' perceptions and opinions regarding the situation of Muslims in France. A number of semi-structured interviews are used to provide in-depth case-studies through the point of view of British Muslim women. Britain and France are neighbouring countries, though fundamentally different in their approach towards the integration of religious minorities into mainstream society. The French republican notion of the ideal citizen entails the detachment from one's own religious and cultural traditions so as to become a true Frenchman. This is only attainable when republican principles and *laïcité* are prioritised over all other aspects of one's identity. The expression of cultural and religious differences is thus considered a threat to the harmony of society. This is the theoretical reason for the heated debates provoked by Muslim girls wearing the headscarf, and for the subsequent laws aiming at limiting Islamic religious expression in French society. Despite the French egalitarian ideal, Muslims are persistently marginalised and denied the free exercise of religious practises. By contrast, Britain embodies the opposite approach, centred on multiculturalism and the respect of religious expression. Given the substantial differences between the two countries, it is interesting to explore how those Muslims who benefit from a certain religious freedom perceive the difficulties experienced by French Muslims.

## INTRODUCTION

Following the attacks of September 11th 2001 in New York, there has been a rise in anti-Muslim feelings throughout Europe. It has however been demonstrated that prejudices and negative stereotypes of this religious minority did not suddenly appear with these terrorist attacks, but were already existent, albeit to a smaller degree. Peaks of anti-Muslim hostility often occur after certain events, the like of 9/11. Terrorism has been associated with Islam because violence is generally perceived as a natural element of this religion and its adherents (Allen 2010, pp. 15 and 183; and Amnesty International 2012, p. 14). This phenomenon of suspicion and hostility towards Muslim minorities is referred to as "Islamophobia". The Runnymede report defines it "as the shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and therefore to fear or dislike all or most Muslims" (Allen 2010, p. 15). It is worth defining a few other terms and expressions mentioned in this paper. By French Muslim, I mean any Muslim residing in France, whether he or she possesses the French nationality or not. When using the expression "Muslim community", I do not entail that it is a monolithic bloc. On the contrary, I am very well aware of the heterogeneity of Muslims, regarding notably their origins and cultures. The mention of this expression is therefore employed for reasons of practicality.

Arguably, religious discrimination towards Muslims seems to be particularly prevalent in France. This country has the greatest number of Muslims in Europe, estimations ranging from five to ten million French Muslims (Gordner 2008, p. 73). The difficulty of obtaining accurate figures lies in the fact that "religion" is an officially omitted category in statistics, as per secular principles (Bennhold 2005). The major flow of Muslim immigrants arrived after the Second World War, to compensate for the loss of men during the conflict. For approximately thirty years, migrant workers predominantly from the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) were recruited by French employers. The immigrants' intention was to stay for a relatively short time in their host country, sending part of their wages to support their families who remained in the country of origin. Accordingly, the practice of Islam was at first discreet, and thus many first generation Muslims are accustomed to maintaining their religious identity inconspicuous. With the economic recessions of the 1970s, the French authorities made several attempts to restrict immigration, in vain (Fetzer & Soper 2005, pp. 63-64). The Muslim population grew quickly and their families progressively joined them thanks to family reunification laws. Ultimately many Muslim immigrants remained in France.

Nonetheless, the presence of settlers from North and West Africa was not really appreciated, as the public did not consider them suitable for assimilation in French society (Fetzer & Soper 2005, p. 67). Since then, the integration of Muslims has been deemed problematic. This perspective is based on the perceived opposition between Islam and French values. The concept of *laïcité* or French secularism is particular to this country, and has generated a different approach to religious minorities, compared to Britain. It has led to a strict separation of state and religion, which has in a way reduced religious freedom, as will be demonstrated in this paper. The dissimilar situation of Muslims in France and Britain is due to the history and politics of these two countries.

In the first section, the specific French arrangements of state and religion will be explained. It will cover the theoretical foundations of French society, meaning republican ideals and the concept of *laïcité* as well as the assimilationist model of integration. Those ideologies will be briefly contrasted with the British arrangements of state and religion and its multiculturalist model of integration. The section will finally assess and criticise the implementation of French republican principles and ideals. In the second section, the research methodology will be accounted for; in this case the choice of semi-structured interviews will be justified. The third section entitled research methods will address the practicalities of the research process, notably looking at ethical issues and the selection of participants. The fourth and the fifth sections will both analyse the data derived from the interviews. In the fourth section, data analysis conducted with thematic analysis will be described, followed by the evaluation of participants' awareness on the situation of Muslims in France. The fifth and largest section will investigate various perceptions and thoughts participants have in regard to the difficulties experienced by French Muslims. Lastly, the conclusion will include a reflexive account of the research process as well as a reflection on the implications of the findings from this qualitative study.

## I) FRENCH REPUBLICAN IDEALS AND THEIR PROBLEMATIC IMPLEMENTATION

In recent years, France has passed several laws limiting public religious visibility, and these restrictions have been specifically targeted towards Muslims. This section will demonstrate that the situation of Muslims is strongly shaped by the history and politics of the country they live in. The particular case of France will be studied and briefly compared with Britain. Firstly, the historical context of republican ideals will be explored, and the assimilationist model of integration will be explained. These specific arrangements of religion and the state in France will also be compared to those in Britain. Secondly, the practical implementation of the fundamental ideologies of French society will be examined. The discussion will assess the difficult situation of French Muslims following various legislative measures seeking to limit the sight of religion in the public sphere.

### 1) Theological foundations of French society

The concepts of French Republicanism need to be explained in order to understand the current difficulties experienced by Muslims in France. The historical roots of French Republican philosophy are dated back as far as the French Revolution of 1789, and the Age of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment's profound influence on Republicanism is apparent in the secular and humanist perception of the individual. The basic belief of this ideology is that the individual is a citizen whose position is based on egalitarian and universal principles. The priority is given to the public good, as private interests and inclinations are set aside for the benefit of society as a whole. At the same time, Republicanism protects the rights of individuals, so as to guarantee autonomy and recognition to the citizen. The basis of national identity is civic, instead of ethnic or religious. This is reinforced by a clear separation between the public and the private domains (Laborde, 2008, pp. 3-4). By comparison, the British arrangements of state and religion differ considerably from its French counterpart. Britain possesses a state religion, the Anglican Church, and boasts the presence of various established churches throughout the English and Scottish territories. What is more, it welcomes the representation of religion in governmental bodies, notably in the Parliament. Unlike the traditional French suspicion towards religion, the majority of British people are

not opposed to religion, they are simply non-religious. Religious practice is limited but occasional, being revived at certain key periods of their lives, during weddings and funerals for example (Voas and Day 2007, pp. 95-96).

In order to fully grasp the particularity of the French case, it is worth expanding on the ideology of French republicanism. There are four major republican principles which are *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, and *laïcité*. The first one, liberty, lays the emphasis on individual autonomy, which is favoured over one's attachment to cultural traditions. The latter can be questioned and revised, through the critical abilities of the human being. The individual is thus encouraged to use his rational mind and strive to reject prejudices. Accordingly, state schools in France are devised with the goal of instilling critical thought in the pupils so that they can achieve self-determination. This leads on to the second republican ideal, equality, which goes in conjunction with liberty. Through the non-manifestation of cultural varieties in the public domain, the equal treatment of individuals is considered to be safeguarded. Regardless of community affiliations, no distinctions are made, as dignity and respect are offered to all citizens. No religion is allocated a superior status over another. Likewise, the idea of a State religion is dismissed, meaning that a religious belief cannot be promoted as the "official view of the state" (Taylor 2008, p. xiii). In the case there would be policies differentiating between citizens, as for instance with positive discrimination, it would threaten the third republican ideal of fraternity. Individuals are united through the bond of citizenship. To be a citizen must be accepted and considered as the most important element of their identity, taking precedence over cultural or social backgrounds. The argument is that it will protect society from fragmentation, containing social diversity within the private realm (Laborde 2001, pp. 718-719).

The last principle is *laïcité*, which can be described as "a certain version of separationism between religion and state" (Fetzer & Soper 2005, p. 69). As aforementioned, it originated in the French Revolution, and a strict type of *laïcité* was produced at the time. Nevertheless, it was soon terminated by Napoleon Bonaparte. By signing the Concordat with Pope Pious VII, the Roman Catholic Church was recognised once again as the majority Church. In 1882 however, the concept of *laïcité* was enforced in public schools with the "Ferry Law", which also made education free and compulsory. The historical turning point of this secular ideology took place with the Separation Law of December 9, 1905, which imposed the separation between religion and the state (Chadwick, 1997, p. 50 and Gordner 2008, p. 74). It

is worth pointing out that it does certainly not prohibit religious belief and practice, with for instance the preservation of the freedom of conscience and religion. An additional dimension has been included in the notion of *laïcité*, and that is public neutrality. All sorts of particularisms are restricted to the private sphere, so equality and civic unity can flourish in the public domain. Hence, individuals are entitled to rights, whereas communities are not (Laborde 2001, p. 720).

As a matter of fact, the vision of French republicanism which has hitherto been outlined has not been endorsed by everyone. Indeed, strong criticisms have been voiced, notably by left-wing multiculturalists in France, concerning the coherence and logic of French republicanism. The radical camp has accused it of being fundamentally hypocritical in nature for dissimulating a form of neo-colonial imperialism. On the one hand, the neutrality of the public domain is highly questionably since it has been moulded with the principles of the dominant group in society. On the other hand, its Eurocentric approach has led to the presentation of Islam as inherently incapable of assimilating into French society. In the end, the aim of French republicanism is defeated, with the maintenance of the status quo characterised by inequalities, thus acting as a mechanism of exclusion (Laborde 2001, p. 721). Another condemnation of the republican ideology concerns its attitude towards cultural diversity on the national level and on the international level. In reaction to the threat of globalisation, the imperative need to protect national culture has been defended by some republicans. Hence, they consider it as a right for other nations as well to hamper the standardisation of culture. Yet, their opinion changes with respect to particularisms within the nation. They claim that the public acceptance of cultural differences would jeopardise the unity of the nation. This contradiction discloses a flawed view on the link between cultural identity and citizenship (Laborde 2001, pp. 727 and 729).

As far as the model of integration is concerned, assimilation is a product of French republicanism. It contributes to sustaining universalism, a key feature of the ideology. The relinquishment of certain aspects of individual identity is deemed inevitable to achieve full integration. In clear, ethnic minorities are required to absorb the local culture while abandoning their own norms and traditions. Any religious or cultural affiliations should not take precedence over the republican ideal lest it would generate disunity and social fragmentation (Ramadan, 1999, p. 23; and Idriss 2008, p. 268). By contrast, the British model of integration can be qualified as cultural pluralism. It is based on the recognition of the

presence of cultural diversity in the country. Ethnic minorities are encouraged to preserve aspects of their ethnic identity, so as to counter the pervasive influence of the dominant group. It not only allows the expression of religious and cultural differences, it also seeks to assist minority groups in achieving this, if necessary. At the same time, full social participation of all segments of society is required within a shared framework of practises and procedures (Favell 1998, pp. 127-129). Both Britain and France's approaches to integration are products of their distinct ways of managing their former colonies during the time of colonialism (Favell 1998, pp. 3-4).

## 2) Issues with practical implementation

Having analysed the theoretical underpinnings of French society, the practical implementation of assimilation and French republican concepts will be criticised. Traditionally, *laïcité* has endeavoured to reduce the influence of the Church in governmental affairs. This oppositional relationship shifted towards Islam with the arrival of Muslim immigrants of North African origin in the 1960s. Their stigmatisation has strengthened a clash between Muslims seen as the "Other" and French values, permeated by republicanism (Gordner 2008, p. 73). In regard to the assimilationist model of integration, they are presented with three choices. The first option is to strive to achieve the requirements of assimilation. Nonetheless it can represent a dilemma for some Muslims who may see it as an approval of the superiority of French ideals over their own Islamic values. The second option is to isolate oneself from French society. The resulting problem is that this may be considered as a confirmation of the idea of Islamic and Western incompatibility. Thirdly, Muslims may try to cultivate both the Muslim and French dimensions of their identity. Unfortunately, this "may be perceived as either contradictory by the West, irrational or a barrier against the West, or even an attempt to infiltrate the West" (Idriss 2008, p. 267). They have often been accused of not willing to mould into mainstream society, making comparatively less efforts than groups of other religious or ethnic backgrounds. Due to the stigma and hostility directed towards them, many Muslims have increased their attachment to their religious and cultural heritage (Idriss 2008, p. 268). In reality, the blame for this situation rests also on the shoulders of the French authorities. Notwithstanding their insistence on assimilationist principles, they have not seriously put into practice policies in accordance with the guidelines of this model of integration. Their lack of consistency between their discourse and the actual treatment of

immigrants is apparent in many ways. In terms of geographical location, newcomers to the French soil are clustered in the suburbs of the major cities, separated from the rest of society. Similarly, this isolation is also valid in their professional life, as they have traditionally been concentrated in jobs with low wages, often located in the same areas where they live (Silverman 1992, p. 102).

The fact is that the inconsistency of the theory and the practise has not been dealt with, and the French government has only intensified its cries for the protection of *laïcité*. The French expert on secularism, Baubérot, notes that:

Increasingly, secularity resembles what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called a 'civil religion': the values and dogma of a state that individual citizens must submit to - or be made to respect (Crumley, 2010).

Indeed, the French government has adopted legislative measures to gradually eliminate all forms of religious expression in the public sphere. In effect, it started with the "headscarves affair" of 1989, when three Muslim schoolgirls refused to take off their hijab in their public school. It provoked a heated debated about the balance between the freedom of religion and public neutrality. Approximately one month after having been expelled from school, the schoolgirls were reinstated. The minister of Education, Lionel Jospin made that decision following the legal advice provided by the *Conseil d'Etat*. The court had come to the conclusion that the wearing of religious symbols is not a breach of secularism (Idriss 2008, pp. 272-273). It was however not allowed if the expression of religious convictions was identified as proselytism, provocation or propaganda, or when it constituted health and safety risk or disrupted the good order of the school. This did not offer a clear solution, especially as the responsibility of assessing whether this was the case or not was from then on allocated to individual heads of schools. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the French authorities sought to settle the issue definitively (Laborde 2005, p. 326). The result of months of extensive deliberations by the Stasi Commission created at this effect, was the 2004 law, which stipulates that:

> in primary and secondary public schools, the wearing of signs or clothes through which pupils ostensibly express a religious allegiance is forbidden (Laborde, 2008, p. 7).

Naturally, French republicans were not unanimously in favour of the law. Yet, the debate among republicans had been largely dominated by the voice of those backing the law. The arguments of the anti-ban camp are manifold. Firstly, the intrinsic goal of *laïcité* is not to restrict the freedom of religion but to protect it; and it solely applies to school staff and public officials. Secondly, the prohibition of ostentatious religious symbols in schools undermines the principle of equality, with the exclusion of Muslim pupils wearing the hijab. A third valid argument is that despite the official separation between the state and religion, French society is in effect still hugely influenced by elements of Catholic culture. Consequently, the secular ideal should help guarantee a fair treatment of all religious minorities (Laborde 2005, pp. 328-329).

Instead, the French government has attempted in the last few years to implement the strict form of *laïcité* with legislative measures targeting specifically Muslims. On April 11 2011, the ban prohibiting the wearing of the burqa was effectively enforced in France. The law is named: "The Bill Prohibiting Facial Dissimulation in a Public Place" (Groskop 2011). Interestingly there is no mention of the words "burqa" or "Islam"; though it is evidently directed towards Muslim women wearing the full-body veil. The sanctions to those refusing to unveil their face, is 150 euros or lessons in French citizenship. Ironically the number of women actually wearing the burqa is considerably low, as they number less than two thousand in the entire country (Chrisafis 2011). In the same year, street prayers were also forbidden, during President Nicolas Sarkozy's mandate. The root cause of the problem however is the insufficient number of places of worship available to French Muslims. (Reuters 2011 and Alexander 2012). Once again such a restriction leads to higher stigmatisation of certain members of the Muslim population. This pervasive stigmatisation of Muslims has engendered an increase of anti-Muslim hostility or Islamophobia. The CCIF, A Muslim organisation, combating this phenomenon and lending a listening ear to victims has provided alarming statistics. According to their annual report, the year 2011 has witnessed six times the number of islamophobic aggressions targeting individuals compared to 2005; that corresponds to an increase of 72 per cent (Collectif Contre l'Islamophobie en France 2012, p. 11).

To conclude it is clear that the situation and treatment of Muslims are strongly shaped by the history and politics of the country. Being a Muslim in Britain differs considerably from being a Muslim in France. It would seem that France is making a highly unfair demand, by

requiring that ethnic minorities exchange their own religious and cultural heritage for French values and ideals. As Gordner (2008, p. 79) expresses it particularly well:

> Formative components of one's identity include, for many, being Muslim and North African, and grounding one's historical narrative in a country of origin is not a privilege, but a right. The French path to ideal citizenship therefore demands too much. It is untenable to expect that persons can leave one identity for the company of another.

As demonstrated above, the possibility of successfully implementing the assimilationist model of integration remains highly disputable. It would seem that the French government, in its attempt to implement certain ideals is on the brink of perpetrating officially accepted discrimination on the Muslim population.

## II)      RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To begin with, the terms research methodology and research methods need to be defined so as to clarify the difference between the present chapter and the next. Kumar (2008, p. 4) defines research methods as 'the methods the researcher use in performing research operations'. Research methodology is 'a science of studying how research is done scientifically' in the sense that 'we study the various steps that are generally adopted by a researcher in studying his research problem along with the logic behind them' (Kumar 2008, p. 5). In the first place, qualitative research will be briefly compared to quantitative research, while demonstrating the appropriateness of the former for the topic in question in this paper. In the second place, the advantages of research interviews will be examined, so as to justify the rejection of other qualitative research methods in the present study. In the third place, the reasons for specifically selecting semi-structured interviews will be explained.

### 1)  Why qualitative research methods?

Qualitative research methods were used to carry out research for this study. It is worth expanding on the reasons for choosing qualitative research methods instead of quantitative research methods. First and foremost, it is essential to note that qualitative research is diverse in terms of paradigms and methods of data analysis (Punch 2005, p. 134). Still, its basic characteristics can be identified and will serve to justify the choice of qualitative research methods in this paper. The main objective of the present study is to explore the perceptions and views of British Muslims in regard to the situation of Muslims in France. Likewise, a key topic within qualitative research is to explore "the different opinions people have about an issue" (Kumar 2011, p. 13). The data is usually gathered with semi- or unstructured methodology from a relatively small number of participants (Kumar 2011, p. 13). Examples of these methods are focus groups, observation and interviews, just to cite a few. Qualitative research is characterised as inductive in that it has the capacity to formulate theories from data. In terms of data analysis, it searches for themes and categories, resulting in an in-depth understanding of the participant's perspective (Instructional Assessment Resources 2011).

In comparison, quantitative research seeks "to quantify the variation in a phenomenon, situation, problem or issue" (Kumar 2011, p. 13). The focus is particularly narrow, with the aim of testing hypotheses, in other words it has a deductive approach. Its aim is to explain and predict, as opposed to exploring a phenomenon. It is based on structured methodology, such as close-ended surveys, which are employed on a larger sample of respondents. Quantitative research generates a general comprehension of the participant's perspective through the identification of statistical connections in the data, which is primarily numerical (Instructional Assessment Resources 2011; and Kumar 2011, pp. 13 and 20). In light of the comparison between quantitative and qualitative research, it is clear that the latter is indeed best suited to the present study. The purpose was to explore perceptions of a religious minority, generating particularistic findings.

### 2) <u>Why research interview?</u>

The qualitative research method used in this study is the research interview. It can be defined as follows: "An interview is typically a conversation between two people in which one asks questions and the other answers" (Reinharz and Chase 2002, p. 224). The reasons for this choice are manifold. The most obvious is the following: "If you are carrying out qualitative research that attempts to gauge the beliefs, feelings, opinions, experiences or attitudes of people, effective interviewing is an important skill for you to acquire" (University of the West of England, Bristol 2007). Although the present research study partly aimed at assessing the degree of knowledge participants possessed regarding the situation of Muslims in France; the main goal was to explore their perceptions and opinions on this situation. As Duggleby (2005), cited in Morgan (2012, p. 163), points out "the goal of the research must determine the use of the methods." An advantage of research interview is that misunderstandings of interview questions can easily be corrected. The researcher can clarify a question or even reformulate it, if need be (Kumar 2011, p. 150). If the respondent provides incomplete answers, the interviewer can follow up and ask for clarification or further elaboration (eVALUEd, 2006). This is certainly not possible with surveys, which have a predetermined list of written questions, which cannot be altered. A third advantage is that the participant's answers can be recorded; thus avoiding changing the meaning. With participant observation however, the researcher has to write down notes of what was said in the field at

the end of the day or whenever he has the opportunity. This can naturally lead to deformation of participants' words due to lack of memory.

One could argue that focus groups would have been more suitable for this research topic; a claim that will presently be refuted. As a matter of fact, there are several similarities between these two research methods, as focus groups are considered a type of interviewing. Indeed, it is the researcher in both cases that decides on the topic of the discussion, asks questions and receives the answers (Morgan 2002, p. 150). Yet, the objectives and nature of focus groups simply do not fit the criteria for this research study. A focus group can be defined as:

> a qualitative data collection method in which one or two researchers and several participants meet as a group to discuss a given research topic (Mack et al. 2005, p. 51).

Members of a focus group may influence each other's responses during the discussion. Interviews are preserved from this particular disadvantage, although the interviewer might still influence the respondent, which is also the case with focus groups. For the purpose of this research, it was crucial that the participants would be able to speak freely without fearing to be judged for their opinions (eVALUEd 2006). Furthermore, a fundamental trait of the focus group is to discover group norms since "the source of the data is the interaction among the participants" (Morgan 2012, p. 162). It is particularly helpful in understanding the impact of an issue on a community, by identifying the cultural and social values that govern the community in question and how the respondents view these norms. By comparison, the interview has no interest in group dynamics, but rather focuses on the individual. It is the appropriate method when looking at a person's own experiences and viewpoints. It provides a depth of data through its interpretive aspect, in that it allows the understanding of how the participant makes connections between certain experiences, events and beliefs (Mack et al. 2005, p. 52). Consequently, the research interview is more adequate in this research study than other qualitative research methods, such as focus groups or participant observation.

### 3) <u>Why semi-structured interview?</u>

There are several types of interviews, and the preference for the semi-structured interview in this project will be explained. The discussion will start with examining the two other types of

interviews, the unstructured and structured interviews. The former is typically used in fieldwork, when conducting participant observation. It is suitable for the researcher who has plenty of time and has the opportunity to interview the same person on several occasions. The ability to return to an informant for further questions is vital in this type of long-term projects, as the researcher's understanding of the field is continually developing over time (Bernard 2000, pp. 190-191 and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2008). The nature of this specific research method leaves the participant with a great amount of freedom, as the interviewer lets the conversation flow relatively freely (Harrell and Bradley 2009, p. 26). Building rapport with the respondent beforehand facilitates the process of the interview; which is why, long-term fieldwork is the right environment for unstructured interviewing. In a way, it has a formal aspect to it, in the sense that both parties would have agreed on a time to meet beforehand and are clearly conscious of the fact that it is an interview. Hence, the participant is surely not duped into thinking it is simply an informal conversation (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2008). This form of interviewing can produce rich and in-depth information (Harrell and Bradley 2009, p. 26).

As far as structured interview is concerned, it is placed at the opposite end of the spectrum. It requires a fixed set of questions, previously prepared, and which must be asked in an identical order to all respondents. Interviewers must also be careful to formulate the questions in the exact same manner and emphasis (Economic and Social Data Service 2011). The control over the course of the discussion is strengthened by the dominance of close-ended questions. As opposed to unstructured interviewing, building rapport with the respondent is not a necessity (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2008). Interestingly, this type of interview can be equated to a survey, although there are a few dissimilarities. First, the most obvious difference is that the interviewer is reading directly the questions to the respondent. Second, the percentage of non-response is much lower with structured interviews, since the researcher can ensure that the respondent hears every question; whereas with surveys some questions may be ignored, either purposively or not. Third, the interviewer is able to reduce irrelevant answers. Nevertheless, a main shortcoming of structured interviews, which they share with surveys is that the researcher is not allowed to rephrase or explain a question if the respondent expresses a lack of understanding. In this case, the interviewer is usually only permitted to repeat the same question or reply: "whatever [the term] means to you" (Harrell and Bradley 2009, p. 28). It is therefore not surprising that this type of research method generates essentially descriptive data and is conducted relatively quickly. Unlike unstructured

interviews, it is associated with large samples, with the goal of generalising findings to a sizeable population (Knight and Arksey 1999, p. 8).

Last but not least, the semi-structured interview gathers characteristics from both previous interviews, as its name indicates. While the researcher must prepare an interview schedule with topics to cover, he is at liberty to improvise additional questions if he deems it beneficial. That is the case when following up on themes emerging during the interview or clarifying the participant's responses (Economic and Social Data Service 2011). The questions are close-ended but also open-ended, thus providing a certain degree of flexibility to the respondent. The duration of the interview is usually longer than with structured interviews, and the sample size is smaller. The semi-structured interview is the most common form of interview used in qualitative research studies (Knight and Arksey 1999, pp. 7- 8). The advantages of the interview guide are to facilitate comparison between findings from several interviews, as well as enhancing their reliability. Indeed, it leads to a more structured conversation in comparison with unstructured interviews. Consequently, this research method is specifically adapted to researchers who are able to conduct only one interview with each participant (Bernard 2000, p. 191). Besides, the benefit of preparing an interview schedule is that it bestows a positive impression in regard to the interviewer's competence. As is often the case with structured interviews, the researcher can conduct observation or unstructured interviewing before starting the semi-structured interview, so as to increase his knowledge of the topic to be discussed (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2008). To conclude, the semi-structured interview is the most appropriate research method for the present study, notably because it allows for an in-depth understanding of the participant's viewpoint.

## III)    <u>RESEARCH METHODS</u>

This section will cover the practicalities involved in conducting a research interview by providing an overview of my investigation for this qualitative study. I explain some of the phases of my research project, starting with the thematising process and the design of my interview schedule. Next, I look at the ethical issues associated with the present study, followed by a description of my selection and recruitment of the participants. I end with a brief justification for recording and transcribing the interviews.

The interview inquiry can be divided into seven stages, although there are no standard rules. It is however worth mentioning them here as these have been quite useful in the present study. First of all, the first and indispensable technique for the interview investigation is thematising. It entails determining the objectives of the research project and acquiring necessary knowledge about the topic. The research methods should also be chosen. The second stage is to design the project. The researcher should make the adequate preparations for the interview; that is anticipating any ethical issues and produce an interview schedule, among other things. The interviewing itself constitutes the third stage of the research process. The use of an interview guide is recommended to carry out the interview in a scientific manner. The fourth stage usually implicates transcribing the interview; that is transforming it into a written form; so as to facilitate the analysis of the data. As for stage five, an appropriate analytical method should be chosen to undertake the analysis. Subsequently, the validity and reliability of the interview data should be verified, this being the sixth stage. The results should be consistent and answer the research questions. Finally, the researcher produces a report, discussing the implications of the findings in regard to theory and practice (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p. 102).

### 1)    <u>Thematising and the design of the interview schedule</u>

As a matter of fact this section will focus on stages one, two and four, while stage three, five and six are covered later on in this paper. My initial idea for this research study was to conduct a comparison of Islamophobia in both Britain and France. Due to the broadness of the subject, I was advised to narrow it down. I chose to focus on Britain as it is more practical to conduct the interviews in this country. I retained the element of comparison with France by

investigating how British Muslims perceive the situation of French Muslims. Regarding the literature on the topic, I needed to expand my knowledge and keep it up-to-date it with current issues affecting Muslims in France. My sources have been diverse in nature, ranging from newspaper articles on the internet and journal articles to books, as well as specific websites of organisations combating Islamophobia. It is worth pointing out that I noticed a lack of qualitative literature on British Muslims' views on Muslims in France and on the difficulties they are encountering as a religious minority. As for my choice of research methods, it has already been justified in the previous section of this paper.

The second stage of an interview inquiry involves the preparation of an interview schedule, ethical considerations as well as the recruitment of participants. In the first place, I will start with briefly outlining the design of the interview questions. My interview schedule was composed of a mix of closed and open questions. The former was meant to facilitate comparison between the interviews and obtain factual responses. The latter, which comprised the majority of questions, aimed at exploring the views and feelings of interviewees in relation to the topic. This type of questions is a feature of semi-structured interviews (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2008). Indeed, open-questions, which usually start with "what", "why or how", have the advantage of expanding the parameters of an answer, therefore generating rich information. By contrast, closed-questions elicit an affirmative or negative response from the participant. While the interviewer has greater control over the conversation, it excludes context-specific responses and reduces the variety of information (Wang and Yan 2012, p. 238). Since I had a number of interviews, I knew that some participants may be talkative and cover several topics in a single answer; whereas others may give short answers and only talk when questions are posed to them. Accordingly, as part of my interview plan, I wrote down a few standard prompts to aid the flow of the conversation in case an interviewee becomes silent (Rugg and Pertre 2007, p. 90).

### 2) <u>Ethical issues</u>

In the second place, it is imperative that the researcher ponders on certain ethical issues, before carrying out a research interview. These are usually divided into four main categories. The first one is referred to as informed consent, which entails several guidelines, which will be briefly mentioned. Respondents need to be informed of the objectives of the investigation

and whether it may involve risks or even benefits for the respondents. The latter will be asked to confirm that they are voluntarily taking part in the qualitative study, in other words, accepting to be interviewed. The researcher must also ensure that the participants are aware that they can withdraw at any moment from the project. The second ethical question to keep in mind is confidentiality. It is the right of the respondents that their identity remains confidential, it cannot therefore be disclosed to anyone. In certain cases, some ethical dilemmas may emerge. This is the case for example when the subjects are implicated in a criminal environment, and the researcher has witnessed or learnt that they have perpetrated an illegal act. The answer is not straightforward because of the agreement of confidentiality and trust between the two parties (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, pp. 70-72). The third ethical area concerns the possible consequences of the research project. The interviewer has a duty of care towards participants. This means that he must ensure that they do not unduly suffer any distress due to the topics raised. Moreover, he has the responsibility of anticipating potential benefits and weighing the risk of harm, which should be minimal or non-existent (Rugg and Pertre 2007, p. 56; and Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p. 73). The last significant ethical issue is the role of the researcher. It is essential that he is endowed with moral responsibility and integrity since he represents the principal tool for obtaining data. He should thus be aware of the ethical issues associated with research and take these into consideration. Furthermore, the scientific quality of the final report must be ensured. Although building rapport is necessary, the researcher should avoid excessive identification with the respondent. He must strive to maintain a balance between a professional distance and a close friendship, so that the fruits of his work remain unbiased (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, pp. 70-72).

In accordance with the guidelines above, I prepared an information sheet explaining the aims and procedures of the study and guaranteeing confidentiality of participants. A consent form was also drawn up, so as to obtain written consent from respondents, confirming their acceptance to participate in the interview and be recorded. The last administrative procedure was to fill in an ethical approval form, which was to be submitted to the Ethics Committee of the relevant university school department. I subsequently received an email from the university officer in charge of verifying my ethical approval form. She wanted to clarify how I would securely store the data derived from the interviews. The answer I provided raised some confidentiality issues. Indeed, I had naively thought that keeping it in my private laptop would be sufficient. I was advised to use the university computer for this purpose since it grants me a secure account. Due to the lack of practicality of storing the data in solely one

place, I procured myself a password-protected USB stick; which has been immensely useful. Naturally, I was granted permission to go ahead with the interviews.

As far as confidentiality issues are concerned, a few aspects needed to be taken into consideration. Because a few of my respondents are attending common community places, such as the mosque, I had to be discrete if I met them and discussed anything in relation to the interview. The aim was to protect their privacy, and it could prove challenging in a gathering of people. In addition, I had to think about how much information I should divulge to the participants in regard to the research. Part of my project goals was to assess their degree of knowledge regarding the topic. Nonetheless, my fear was that they may consider the interview as a test of knowledge and adopt a defensive attitude if they were unable to answer my interview questions. I had however already revealed this research question to the participants when outlining the various aspects of the investigation in the information sheet. Consequently, when the interviews took place, I sought to divert the respondents' focus from the degree of knowledge to their own thoughts and impressions about the topic. Indeed, my main interest was to explore their perceptions of the situation of Muslims in France and I wanted it to be clear.

### 3) <u>Selection and recruitment of participants</u>

In the third place, the selection and recruitment of participants will be described. I was aware that it is preferable to search people who had some knowledge about the topic in question; otherwise the interview would produce very little data. In priority I approached Muslim women who have an interest in France or have some sort of connection with French Muslims, for example family living there. Other eligible candidates were those who are up-to-date with politics and international affairs, as they may be informed of the issues facing Muslims in France. Although these were my priority, due to the relatively short time available for recruitment, I also decided to attract participants through advertising. On the one hand, I solicited my network of contacts, making use of my mobile and social media as well as asking people face-to-face. Through those means, I obtained respondents with whom I was more or less acquainted with. On the other hand, I broadened the search by putting up advertisements in the local community, particularly in the mosques, and at university. I would

advise fellow researchers working in this field and seeking potential respondents to attend community places so as to become a familiar face to the local people. This helps build trust and it seems to be the easiest way to recruit participants in the Muslim population. It does therefore not come as a surprise that the vast majority of my interviewees were acquaintances.

I purposively selected participants from a variety of origins. The objective was to evaluate their level of knowledge on the topic and their viewpoints. My sample comprised two Arabs, two White British converts, two Bengali and two Pakistani. As a matter of fact, a Chinese convert from Malaysia might have also participated in the study, though her profile did not completely satisfy the criteria. She had agreed to take part in the research if I did not have sufficient candidates. The problem was that she categorically refused to be recorded; which would have undermined comparison with the other interviews. Besides, I had the impression that she was not particularly interested in the interview topic. In the end, when I informed her that I managed to secure enough respondents, she seemed relieved. Her lack of enthusiasm showed that she was not really willing to be interviewed. I assumed that she intended to do me a favour, as I was acquainted with her. Consequently her non-participation turned out for the best since it is vital that respondents wilfully consent, as compulsion or lack of interest in the research topic may weaken the quality of the interview data. Lastly, emailing and particularly mobile texting were my principal means of contact with the participants. Mobile texting proved particularly beneficial in building a closer relationship owing to its informal nature.

## 4) **Recording and transcription of interviews**

The fourth stage of the interview investigation prepares the data for analysis, and most of the time that means transcribing it. It is usually recommended to record the interviews rather than taking notes. The first method has the benefit of facilitating interaction with the participant. In contrast, the major disadvantage of taking notes is that the interviewer will have to continually break eye contact in order to write the responses down (Rapley 2004, p. 18). At first, I thought of not transcribing each interview, because of the immense time it would take, and instead listen to the audio recordings and write down elements of interest. Nevertheless, I

ultimately decided to transcribe the interviews despite it being time-consuming and repetitive (Rugg and Pertre 2007, p. 90). The two main reasons that motivated me are that my choice of analytical method, thematic analysis, requires a text to conduct the analysis; and transcribing is actually also a part of the analytic process (Kvale 2009, p. 180).

## IV) <u>THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND THE LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE OF BRITISH MUSLIMS REGARDING THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN FRANCE</u>

### 1) <u>Data analysis</u>

From among the various data analysis methods, thematic analysis has been chosen in order to conduct a data analysis of the interview findings. Thematic analysis is a tool used by researchers from various fields, including physics, cultural anthropology and sociology. It can be defined as "a process for encoding qualitative information" (Boyatzis 1998, p. vi and 6). As its name indicates, the objective is to identify themes deemed of sufficient significance for the understanding of the phenomenon under study. Thematic analysis can be applied in a variety of ways. On the one hand, the search for patterns within the data is guided by either a theoretical approach or an inductive approach. The former which is also known as the deductive approach is inspired by the researcher's theoretical ideas drawn from existing literature in the field. The research question plays a prominent role in what particular themes emerge from the text. Hence, there is often a focus on some parts of the data, rather than a description of the entire text (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 12). By contrast, with the inductive approach, the themes are generated almost exclusively from the data itself, avoiding the influence of the researcher's own theoretical interest in the subject. It can even result in a substantive distinction between the patterns and the original research question posed to respondents. Ultimately, the researcher is able to formulate theories after analysis of the findings (Boyatzis 1998, p. 30; and Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 12).

On the other hand, the data analysis must also take into account whether the identification of themes is at a semantic or latent level. When using a semantic or explicit approach, the researcher simply pays attention to the manifest meaning of the text. It goes beyond the description of the text, stressing on interpretation, endeavouring to theoretically grasp the significance of the themes and their larger implications in regard to existing literature (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 12). The disadvantage of the semantic level is that it mainly excludes the depth of the data from the analysis. This type of approach can however be attractive insofar as it seemingly facilitates the comprehension of the information, and gives the impression to be in control of the data, as opposed to the latent level (Boyatzis 1998, p. 28). The latter seeks to progress further with the analysis in the sense that it attempts to:

examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 13).

The elaboration of themes is carried out through an interpretative process. Also, the latent approach usually espouses a constructionist perspective, which will be defined hereunder. In this case, thematic analysis will have strong similarities with certain aspects of discourse analysis, which is looks at how discourse is constructed by respondents (Joffe and Yardley 2004, p. 57; and Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 14).

A third dimension necessary to bear in mind for a solid analysis is the epistemological approach adopted by the researcher. The constructionist view, mentioned above denies the existence of an objective reality and claims that social reality is socially fabricated through the cultural and historical contexts (Burr 2003, pp. 1-4). Accordingly, individual motivations have no place, as the latent thematic analysis with a constructionist perspective observes the role socio-cultural and structural elements play in the participant's discourse (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 14). The other main epistemology in relation to thematic analysis is the essentialist or realist paradigm. Language is believed to be a clear reflection of meaning as well as experience, therefore the researcher can form theories in a direct manner in regard to the motivations and experience of the respondent. To sum up, the researcher has to choose between an inductive or deductive thematic analysis with a semantic or latent approach, and the theoretical basis being either essentialist or constructionist. The specific shape and results of the analysis will vary according to the approaches used. The present project has opted for a thematic analysis with a theoretical approach, at a semantic level of analysis, and epistemologically founded on the realist paradigm (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 14).

In order to understand how the analysis was carried out in practice, the six stages of thematic analysis will be explained. These guidelines are also valid for some other qualitative research analysis. The starting point is situated at the moment the researcher seeks patterns and topics of possible interest, and this can even occur in the early phase of collecting the data. The termination of the analytical process takes place when the analyst reports the themes with their meaning and content. Even though stages have been delineated, it is neither rigid nor linear in nature, since the whole analysis is characterised by recursion, with the researcher returning constantly back to the various phases. The first step is to familiarise oneself with the data. If the research method creates verbal data, such as interviews, as is the case in this

study, it is crucial to convert it into a text. At the same time, the transcription work is helpful to increase familiarisation with the data. Subsequently, it is also advisable to read several times all the information collected. The researcher can then use the opportunity to detect potential patterns so as to prepare for the next stage, which is the coding of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006, pp. 16-17). The second step is to code the data, in other words, to describe "the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis 1998, p. 63). It is a means of organising the collected information to construct meaningful groups. One piece of text can be coded a few times if it is relevant to different patterns, which constitute the third stage of thematic analysis. A definition of a theme is provided by Boyatzis (1998, p. vii): "a theme is a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organises possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon". The goal is to create broader units of analysis from the codes, and generally a set of codes will form one theme. They may alternatively be integrated into sub-themes or be eliminated after analysis. In stage four, these initial themes are further examined and refined. From this process, some of them may be divided into distinct themes and others may assemble to produce one theme. At this point, the researcher needs to check that the themes accurately represent the meanings apparent in the data, therefore reading all of the data is once more recommended (Braun and Clarke 2006, pp. 17-20). The fifth phase involves an in-depth analysis of each theme, which must be clearly defined. Its position in the analyst's narrative of the data must be clarified in respect to the research question. The reflection on the final names of each theme can also be started. The last phase consists of producing the written report. Obviously, it should not be limited to a descriptive account of the data, but it should take the form of a coherent narrative based on the analysis undertaken, and defending an argument (Braun and Clarke 2006, pp. 20-23). To finish, it is worth expanding on the reasons for choosing thematic analysis in this research project, through exposing the advantages of this analytical method. Firstly, it is highly flexible as demonstrated above. Secondly, it is appropriate for beginners in qualitative research. The third advantage is that it facilitates comparison by revealing similarities and disparities within the body of the data. Last but not least, it has the capacity to summarise the fundamental traits of a substantial size of data (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 37).

Having explained thematic analysis, I will now provide a brief account of the practical implementation of this analytic method in the present qualitative study. I endeavoured to follow the different phases of the analysis as described above. I started with transcribing the

interview data with the intention of notably familiarising myself with the information. During this time-consuming process, I marked points of interest and a few ideas of potential codes. Personally, this initial stage was particularly beneficial in that it contributed to my understanding of the data. Next, I coded the data using various colours for each code. The whole analytical process was conducted on the computer, using colours available on Microsoft Word document. I looked at the text with several questions and detected segments of the data which answered them. I also discovered extracts that brought new material and coded accordingly. The challenging aspect of coding proved to be the requirement of attributing codes to the entire text. Subsequently, I classified the codes according to the similarity of topic and wrote down headings for each group. I ended up with a mix of themes and sub-themes. In the reviewing phase, some of the sub-themes were assembled to form a broader category or were conflated with another theme. Other sub-themes were ultimately transformed into whole themes in themselves, due to their distinction. What is disturbing and difficult to accept is that the themes can vary in their sizes. I endeavoured however to prioritise the content of the categories and divide them accordingly. Throughout the whole process, I would rearrange the places of certain codes and their headings. My aim was to end up with a narrative, issued from the discourse of the participants.

## 2) **The evaluation of British Muslims' degree of knowledge regarding the situation of Muslims in France**

To begin with, British Muslims' knowledge of French society in general will be assessed. Some quantitative data will be derived from the qualitative data collected from the interviews. As described in section one of this paper, French secularism or *laïcité* is part of the country's theoretical foundations. Its history and evolution through time bear a huge influence on the way religion is placed in relation to the state. It impacts directly on the lives of Muslims in France. This concept is thus fundamental for understanding the current legislative measures, which seem to gradually eat away the religious freedom of the largest religious majority in the country. Hence, the significance of verifying how many respondents were aware of the existence of such a concept and its implications on society at large. As a matter of fact, most participants, more precisely six out of eight, had heard about secularism in France. Yet, only few knew how it exactly translates in practice, as will be shown later on in this section.

Another essential information to understanding the particular situation of Muslims in France is the difference of origins between French and British Muslims. One the other hand, the results were relatively positive insofar as a good number of respondents, precisely five of them, mentioned that the Muslim population in France is chiefly composed of Arabs, and especially North Africans, from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Those who could not pinpoint the main ethnic background of French Muslims were interviewees number one, five and six. It was a pity that none of the respondents were able to identify the other major Muslim minority as being West Africans. Participant number eight even referred to South Africans instead, which is totally incorrect (Fetzer & Soper 2005, p. 65). What was encouraging was that a few of these interviewees were aware of the colonial past between France and North African countries. That point is actually of high importance in regard to the way these Muslims are perceived and treated today. Algeria suffered a war with the French colonisers in order to obtain national independence. The image associated with the headscarf during this period has remained embedded in French society and is still relevant today. This religious covering symbolised resistance to the French domination; while from the coloniser's perspective, it represented the backwardness of Algeria. Accordingly, the act of taking it off was considered as a sign of the victory of France's civilising mission. Nowadays in France, the headscarf worn by young women may therefore provoke feelings of incomprehension and hostility as it can be interpreted as a sign of rejection of French culture. More importantly it constitutes a reminder of the failure of the colonising enterprise in Algeria, which consisted in assimilating the local population to French culture and values (Scott 2007, p. 66 and p. 136).

The next theme looks at the state's attitude towards the wearing of religious attire in certain areas of society. The prohibition of religious symbols in public places in 2004 excluded particularly the wearing of the hijab in primary and secondary state schools. Interestingly, all respondents had heard of this restriction on the religious practice of Muslims in France. Some of them however were ignorant of the details of this law. This is the case for example of interviewee number three who had assumed that the headscarf is also banned in universities, which it is not, as seen in section one of this paper. Respondent number five thought that the law solely applied to the hijab itself in state schools, whereas it prohibits other religious symbols as well, as long as they are deemed of an ostentatious nature. On the contrary, interviewee number two was well informed as to the details of this law, ranging from its enforcement on all ostentatious religious symbols to the places where these are forbidden. As

clarified in section one of this paper, this legislative measure not only affected state schools but also all public places. These instances of erroneous knowledge testify to the limited awareness of the British Muslim participants as far as the 2004 law is concerned.

Similarly, the niqab ban, which is much more recent, in 2011, was known of all participants. Even though interviewee number seven was not certain whether the law had passed, she remembered the debate preceding it. The interviewees generally revealed a limited degree of knowledge regarding the details of the law. Most respondents were not informed of the sanctions imposed on those who would defy the new law. Interviewee number five stood out in that she knew about the fine and there being ironically a very low number of Muslim women wearing the burqa in France. By comparison, a greater number of participants were able to talk about politics, especially about former President Nicolas Sarkozy. Most of them demonstrated a relatively up-to-date knowledge on this issue owing to their awareness of the recent presidential elections and Sarkozy's failure to be re-elected. This encouraging point was subsequently mitigated by the fact that the new President, François Hollande, was largely unknown. Nevertheless, interviewee number five proved to be once more better informed than her colleagues. Indeed, she was the only one who was able to tell some details about the victorious President, notably that he is a socialist. In addition, she was well informed about the politics and reputation of Sarkozy. She had knowledge about certain recurrent themes in his speeches, such as immigration, the integration of Muslims and the niqab. Furthermore, the majority of respondents had heard about his anti-Muslim image, except participants number one and six. Among the recent legislative measures restricting Islamic religious practice in France, only the burqa ban has been unanimously heard of. The respondents had no idea about the law enforced in beginning of 2011 which prevents Muslim mothers from accompanying children in school outings. Likewise, the ban on street prayers did not reach the ears of my participants, with the exception of interviewee number seven. Hitherto her knowledge about the topic cannot be qualified as extensive, nevertheless she was the only one aware of this recent law on street prayers.

In order to get a glimpse of the reasons for such disparate degrees of knowledge among the interviewees, their sources of information will be explored. Their various attitudes towards mainstream media are particularly interesting. Bailey et al. (2008) cited in Le Masurier (2012, p. 386):

define mainstream media as large-scale and directed towards large audiences, owned by the state or commercial companies, vertically structured and staffed by professionals, and 'carriers of dominant discourses or representations'.

Most participants however understood mainstream media as just comprising major television channels, especially the BBC. Interviewee number five who demonstrated strong knowledge on the research topic deemed mainstream media untrustworthy, therefore did not watch the BBC for instance. Instead she read newspaper articles on the internet, including The Independent and the Guardian. Similarly interviewee number four avoided television news and prefered to listen to radio 4, her major source of information. She was also a member of Amnesty International, thus receiving regularly their magazine. Ironically, respondents number two, three and eight watched mainstream news programs, while admitting their lack of trust in it. According to interviewee number two these types of news do not tell the whole picture, insofar as they are biased and deliberately conceal certain aspects of issues reported, so as to manipulate public opinion. As a result, she relied on a variety of sources to help her form her opinion. She cited Al Jazeera channel on television, the internet, social media, and newspaper articles, as well as through conversations with people who come from France or who are aware of the issues there. This seems to partly account for her superior knowledge on the situation of Muslims in France, compared to most of the respondents. In the same vein, interview number three watched occasionally British media, although her focus remained on Middle Eastern channels. In spite of her wariness towards BBC channel, it is however the principal source of information for interviewee number eight, but not the only one, since she sometimes looked at "youtube" and the internet. Unlike the aforementioned participants, the three remaining ones, respondents number one, six and seven, affirmed relying on mainstream media and did not consider it untrustworthy. What is striking is that none of them read the Islamic press to inform themselves on current issues. Interviewee number four mentioned simply that her friend receives regularly "Emel magazine", so she would sometimes borrow it. The comment made by respondent number six regarding Islamic newspapers seems to apply to all other participants:

> I sometimes read it; if it happens to be lying there, I would read it but I wouldn't go out and buy one.

If this represents a general trend among the Muslim population in Britain, the Islamic press has not succeeded in supplanting mainstream media in becoming the major source of

information for Muslims. In light of the observations made above, it appears that the most knowledgeable interviewees rely on a diversity of sources, and if they watch the BBC, it is with a critical eye. The internet provides a wealth of information which has the benefit of offering a plurality of views on contemporary affairs. As far as their ethnic background is concerned, it does not play a role in their level of knowledge in that interviewee number two is Indian and interviewee number five is Arab, and those two are particularly aware of the difficulties Muslims endure in France. Their common trait is their strong interest in international issues and politics. Interviewee number seven who has moderate knowledge is working in a Muslim organisation and has therefore some insight on problems linked to the community, even internationally. From this case-study it could be argued that British Muslims are aware of the legislative impositions limiting French Muslims' freedom of religious practice.

## V) BRITISH MUSLIMS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SITUATION OF MUSLIMS IN FRANCE

### 1) Human Rights abuse

The focus of this paper is participants' perceptions and thoughts about the situation of Muslims in France. The analysis will start with looking at the image they have of the country in relation to Muslims. In the first place, many of the respondents denounced certain aspects of the treatment of this religious minority as a violation of Human Rights. In regard to the burqa, interviewee number six remarked that: "it's impinging on your freedom as a human being". The law prohibiting the hijab in state schools particularly stimulated incomprehension among a few participants, insofar as this religious practice was considered a basic Human Right. Another comment made by interviewee number two echoes this thought: "I'm sure it must be against Human Rights". Indeed, some scholars vehemently criticise French ideals of *laïcité* and ideal citizenship, which necessitate the collateral damage of impeaching on the individual rights of the Muslim population in France. As explained in section one of this paper, one can only be recognised as a true French citizen with the relinquishment of one's own religious and cultural traditions. Ethnic minorities are to become *laïcised*, moulded with French values. The problem is that Islam is presented as the opposite of these ideals, stigmatising Muslims as "the Other". Consequently, even before they strive to integrate, Muslims are disadvantaged, as from the beginning they are deemed unassimilable; unless they renounce certain aspects of their identity (Gordner 2008, pp. 72-73). The majority of respondents were not aware of this specific requirement of this strict form of French secularism, nonetheless several of them deduced that this was the objective of the laws targeting Muslims. As interviewee number four for instance states: "It feels like they're trying to strip Muslims of their religion, their identity". This impression was recurrent among the participants and they reiterated that the religious dress is part of their identity and physically part of themselves. Interviewee number two expresses well this point: "The hijab is your identity, it's not a choice, it's like taking a limb off."

Opponents to the ban on the burqa believe that it embodies the abrogation of individual liberties. As a matter of fact, not all participants were opposed to this law. Interviewee number one claimed that the full-face veil is not part of Islam and somewhat justified the ban for reasons of identification. Her argument was a reflection of the official dominant

discourse, on how the niqab may represent a menace; however she did not agree with the imposition of sanctions, which she thought was wrong. Interviewee number four, who is a White British convert used to wear the niqab at some point, but then she suffered pervasive hostility from the public. Today she wears the headscarf and thinks that the niqab is an inappropriate dress when living in Western societies. She therefore did not disapprove the law. Two other respondents did not specifically support the wearing of the burqa, though they voiced their objection to the fine and French citizenship lessons being imposed on non-compliant Muslim women. There was however a clear and strong opposition to the ban from half of the participants, while only one interviewee wore the niqab. They deemed this legislative measure as a breach on the freedom of religion.

These condemnations are repetitively found in the literature. Pierre Tristam (2012) does clearly not support the wearing of the full-face veil as he somewhat agrees with the quote by Sarkozy whom he cites: "The burqa is not a religious sign, it's a sign of subservience, a sign of debasement". All the same, he objects firmly against a law prohibiting the burqa in the streets, for several reasons. First, it is the element of compulsion that is reprehensible, the ban symbolising a breach on individual liberties. Even if one disagrees with this religious garment, it remains the individual's choice and personal right to wear it. Whether it is Iran who forces women to wear the hijab, or France who forces them not to wear the burqa, both are forms of repression. The ban was enforced during the time of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency, and he admitted in effect being on the side of the strict republican secularists, who instigated the 2004 law prohibiting the hijab in public schools. Sarkozy justified the need for the ban in the name of women's rights, as seen in the quote above; while at the same time impinging on individual freedom. Secondly, the consequences of the law would be contrary to its original goal. It is very likely that the number of women wearing the niqab would not decrease. More importantly, it works against the claimed intention of delivering Muslim women from subservience and offering them greater freedom. Instead, it has made the possibility to go out and participate in social life considerably more difficult for these women. They may choose to stay at home rather than go out without their full-body covering. As a result, prohibiting the burqa increases their exclusion from society and does in no way provide more freedom, nor does it convince these women to unveil and adopt Western clothes (Tristam 2012). This legislative measure has been such a breach on Human Rights that a wealthy property developer, named Rashid Nekkaz, has offered to pay the fines received by women wearing the burqa. He is married to an American Catholic, but he simply

cannot tolerate the violation on individual liberties. As one respondent narrated, this man is currently taking the French government to court because of the ban (Alexander 2012).

Since these laws impinge on the religious freedom of a specific social group, they are seen as discriminatory. From the interview data, it is clear that some participants perceived France as a racist country. Interviewee number three stated that:

> I know a lot of people, friends that live in France, they say a lot is from verbal racism, physical racism. They feel that even without the headscarf, they are oppressed as Muslims or as Arabs.

Likewise, interviewee number eight remarked on the prohibitions of the hijab and the burqa: "We don't know if this is prejudice or racism". It could be argued that Muslims are associated with Arabs and vice-versa, so the rejection of Islam translates as well by a rejection of Arabs, or the other way round. In terms of employment for instance, the major immigrant group, Algerians and Moroccans suffer from over 30% unemployment; in other words, it equals thrice the national unemployment rate (Bennhold 2005). The 2005 riots are a telling illustration of the social exclusion of many Muslims in France, though only a few interviewees had heard of them. Only interviewee number two demonstrated a wealth of knowledge in the matter: "I know that a lot of them [Muslims] live in ghettoised areas … It seems they live in very hard conditions". She made a pertinent comment with regard to the conflation of religion with the public violence:

> They blame it on Islam and on Muslims, actually the whole reason was that the system was not providing for them.

The urban disturbances erupted in the *banlieues* or suburbs of Paris, principally involving the first- and second-generation immigrants from North Africa. Some international media coverage at the time, especially from the United-States portrayed the riots as the manifestation of Islamic radicalism. Nevertheless, these were in fact the consequences of the stigmatisation and socio-economic marginalisation of these populations (Cesari 2005). Other respondents had some sense of this marginalisation of Muslims in France, like participant four who said: "I feel like they're segregated, they are kind of on the periphery of society, almost as pariahs".

### 2)  **Contradicting French values**

In the second place, the laws restricting religious freedom are not only condemnable in terms of Human Rights, but they also personalise a contradiction with French values of freedom. This constitutes another theme derived from the analysis of interview data. Respondents number three and four both repeated that "it doesn't make sense" and "it's nonsense" in regard to these restrictions and French ideals. Respondent number five went on further and pinpointed to the absurdity of it all since "it goes against their own legislation; what they stand for". Officially, freedom of religion is guaranteed in the state's legal documents. The Ministère de l'Intérieur (1999) cited in Fetzer and Soper (2005, p. 76) quotes article 1 of the 1958 Constitution of the Fifth Republic:

> France is an indivisible, laïque, democratic, and social Republic. She ensures the equality of all citizens before the law without regard for [their] origin, race, or religion. She respects all beliefs.

Evidently, France is acting against its own foundational values with these various restrictions on Islamic religious expression. Moreover, interviewee number five added that "it goes against freedom […] and secularism as well". It may appear illogical in that *laïcité* is the very concept at the origin of these laws. Nevertheless, as clarified in section one, the features of this ideal are not uniformly agreed upon, and this causes heated debates. French secularism is divided into two major strands, the soft and strict forms of *laïcité*. The bans on religious symbols in public places are in accordance with the latter, as it promotes public neutrality to the detriment of the free exercise of religion. Some critics even claim that the initial objective of the proponents of this ideal was to defend atheism. Fetzer and Soper (2005, p. 71) cite the famous secularist Jules Ferry, who explained that the aim of secularising state schools is to "organise humanity without God and without a king". This view is certainly disputable, especially as the first advocates of *laïcité* may not have had such pro-atheist motivations. A few of them were actually agnostic or liberal Protestants and did not necessarily reject religion altogether (Fetzer and Soper 2005, p. 71). In any case, their viewpoints on the separation between the public and private spheres are the basis of official republicanism dominating the scene in France today. By contrast, the current laws targeting Muslims contradict the soft type of secularism, which rejects discrimination, including on religious grounds. Even better, the state is expected to facilitate the freedom of religion through supplying financial assistance to private religious schools. Hence, religion is not to be

confined to the private domain, and religious expression is permitted in schools. The underpinning idea is to respect pluralism and improve interreligious understanding (Fetzer and Soper 2005, p. 74). In respect to this interpretation of *laïcité*, the statement of interviewee number five is correct. To summarise, interviewee number two remarked:

> In France, it's not secularism per se, it's a dictatorship of secularism […] France is trying to detach God from all aspects of society.

The attitude of strict secularists are increasingly compared with religious extremism, and their movement can be qualified as "secular fundamentalism" (Crumley 2010).

### 3) Official causes and real causes for the laws restricting Islamic religious expression

The third theme examines participants' suggestions regarding the apparent and real causes of the current laws, products of the strict form of *laïcité*. The official motivations for these laws are usually centred on secularism, and this was known by most respondents. Additionally, the government appeals to security reasons, associating the Islamic dress with a potential threat. A recurrent justification for the ban on the burqa for example has been the need for identification. The majority of respondents were aware of these reasons; however they provided their own opinions on the hidden agenda of these politicians. Interviewee number five thinks that while they claim to be protecting secularism by restricting religious expression, they are in reality undermining the very values of the French Republic. The prohibitions on Islamic clothing are fundamentally contradictory to individual liberties, especially freedom of religion. Because of this incoherence, participant number five thinks that the politicians' motives are actually political. Their aim is to increase their support for Presidential elections, through focussing on issues relating to Muslims, with the hope of gaining votes from the supporters of the far-right party. This hypothesis is echoed by other participants. These politicians succeed in their plan by pretending to defend the French identity. She suggests that the French people are suffering from an identity crisis, meaning that they cannot give specific criteria of what defines a French person. To alleviate this anxiety, the common discourse is to define French identity only in opposition to Islam; so

that they can specify what it is not. Asad (2003) cited in Gordner (2008, p. 78) confirms this point:

> For both liberals and the extreme right the representation of 'Europe' takes the form of a narrative, one of whose effects is to exclude Islam.

In contrast, interviewee number eight sees a particularly materialistic motivation. She suggests that the ban on the full-face veil is a means to get financial aid during a time of economic crisis. Finally, interviewee number two has several reasons in mind, including the pre-elections strategy. She argues that the attacks of 9/11 have provoked fears about Islam and politicians have come to view it as a threat on two levels. Firstly, they want to eradicate Islamist extremism and prevent it from breeding within French society. Secondly, they fear the effects of the intensification of religious practice among Muslims in France. She explains that in time, Muslims may detach themselves from the secularist influence of society, and gradually reject the notion of the superiority of Western culture. Politicians may be concerned about the possibility that Muslims may then succeed in creating the Islamic State, and ultimately take over the Republic. Accordingly, interviewee number two interprets the enforcement of these repressive laws targeting Muslims as a way of saying that they are not wanted in this country. This point is shared by other critics of these restrictions on religious expression. Rakhida Diallo, for instance, the founder of the organisation *Les Indivisibles*, strives to encourage the acceptance and tolerance of a diverse but united French population. She affirms that "*laïcité* will become synonymous with the state's interference in how Muslims practice their faith." (Crumley 2010).

### 4) The secularization of French Muslims

The fourth theme assesses the secularisation of Muslims in France. To some extent, they have absorbed some of the French values and culture. Interviewee number four shared her impression that Muslims there have become secular. She had heard a French survey asking the Muslim population their thoughts about homosexuality and having homosexuals in their families. On the whole, the responses were rather positive, so she thought that many had kept loose ties with their Islamic heritage, and absorbed certain French values. The level of religious practice among French Muslims is generally higher than the religious observance of

the Catholic population in France. The religiosity of Muslims however varies depending on different factors. In terms of ethnic origin, Moroccans are statistically the most practising on a regular basis. Also, the second generation of Muslims show a lower level of religious observance compared to the first generation of immigrants (Hunter 2002, p. 6; and Fetzer and Soper 2005, p. 77). A striking example of the diverse level of practice among Muslims from Britain and France is the wearing of the hijab. According to Amnesty International's recent report, only 13 per cent of female Muslims wear the headscarf in France, in contrast with 53 per cent in the United Kingdom (Amnesty International 2012, p. 14). Some French Muslims, mostly Leftist intellectuals, even declare themselves as strictly secular and promote intensive Westernisation (Hunter 2002, p. 10). These segments within the Muslim population may represent those who strive to assimilate, relinquishing aspects of their Islamic background. The secularisation process has therefore succeeded to a certain degree.

### 5) **Islamophobia**

The question is, why do the restrictions on Islamic religious practice enjoy a somewhat significant support from the masses? Anti-Muslim sentiment constitutes the fifth major theme resulting from the analysis of the interviews. The respondents provided an answer, which focused on the prejudices and stereotypes associated with Muslims. There is a feeling of frustration among these interviewees, because the openness and acceptance of differences are reserved to certain social groups, while excluding others, such as Muslims. Some participants emphasised the injustice of the intolerance towards the Muslim population comparing it with the increasing tolerance of other types of lifestyles, notably the homosexual one. This attitude may be attributed to the stigmatisation and negative image of Islam in the Hexagon. In regard to the headscarf and the burqa, interviewee number six remarked that the public sees these as symbols of oppression. Interviewee number seven added that:

> Obviously certain people in France think that's different, they think the burqa is not what France represents in a way; it's contrary to French culture and French ideas.

According to the literature, such prejudices and Islamophobia are dangerously augmenting in Europe, and notably in France. Manifestations of anti-Muslim sentiment are not diminishing, on the contrary. In addition to the aforementioned laws targeting Muslims, a decree was

enforced in March 2011, prohibiting mothers wearing the headscarf from accompanying children on public school outings. The argument of Luc Chatel, the then Minister of Education, is that in these circumstances, parents are "temporary collaborators" (*collaborateurs occasionels*) with the public sector, therefore they have the same duty as professors to uphold the secular principle of public neutrality. This move is in contradiction with the 2004 law which exempted parents, as solely pupils and school staff were concerned. Instead of passing a new law, the category of "temporary collaborators" was to be added to the 2004 law (Soulé 2011). Respondents were totally unaware of this new restriction, to which they generally expressed surprise and deplored it. Interviewee number seven for example commented that: "it just doesn't even make sense, it's just excluding people for no reason".

Another manifestation of the French government's stigmatisation of Muslims is the elections campaign of former President Nicolas Sarkozy, this year. As interviewee number two pertinently asserted: "During elections time, they were using the Muslim card as the way to bring in votes." Sarkozy focused on trivial issues, such as "protecting" French people from inadvertently consuming halal meat. He reacted to Marine Le Pen, the far-right contender, who had instigated this paranoia, by affirming that all meat in Paris and its suburbs is actually halal. Such a claim was obviously proved wrong, but it served Sarkozy and his team in diverting the attention of the public from more serious issues. According to a poll, French people are in reality mostly preoccupied about the issue of employment (Alexander 2012; and Sangha and Walsh 2012). Not surprisingly, the majority of the interviewees partially put the blame for the difficulties affecting Muslims in France on politicians. Interviewee number two told how she viewed their role in fostering anti-Muslim hostility. She accused politicians throughout Europe of conveying a negative image of Islam and Muslims, especially Sarkozy whom she qualified as "Islamophobic". As politicians, they should set the example and show their population that Islam is totally distinct from terrorism. Yet, they have contributed to the amalgamation of Islam with violent extremism, increasing stigmatisation and intolerance towards Muslims. Respondents referred to the British and French participation in the wars with Afghanistan and Iraq, which have contributed to the worsening of public perception of Muslims in the West. In brief, they are guilty of normalising and encouraging Islamophobia. Sangha and Walsh (2012) affirms that "today, la *laïcité* represents little more than state-sanctioned Islamophobia". Interviewee number two argued that at the same time, particularly French and British politicians promote a certain form of Islam, while demonising other forms

of it. For instance, those who believe in the Islamic notions of the khalifate (Islamic State) or the Ummah (the Muslim international community) are classified as extremists. In the report written as a response to the "Prevent paper", this simplified categorisation of Muslims into binary opposites of "moderates" and "extremists" fails to take into consideration the diversity of religious strands and opinions within the British Muslim population (Kudnani 2009, p. 39). A recurrent remark made by participants concerned the speeches of Sarkozy, whom, as seen above, was in power when most of the laws targeting Muslims were passed. Having asked them to comment on the following quote by Sarkozy:

> La France, on l'aime ou on la quitte […] Mais, quand on habite en France, on respecte ses règles: on n'est pas polygames, on ne pratique pas l'excision sur ses filles, on n'égorge pas le mouton dans son appartement" ("France, you love it or you leave it. […] But when living in France, you have to uphold its principles and rules: we are not polygamous, we don't practice FGM, we don't slaughter sheep in our flats").

The majority of participants expressed dismay and outrage. Respondent number four made an interesting observation: "That is inflammatory, it's just ignorant. […] It's just saying 'go home'". It remains highly unlikely that the French government intends to clear France of all Muslims knowing that they number between five to ten million citizens (Gordner 2008, p. 73), but they may well be trying to pressurise those who do not fit their criteria of "secular Islam" into leaving the country. This is the opinion of respondent number two: "either you compromise or if you don't want to compromise, basically get out".

### 6) <u>The role of politicans</u>

The blame for the difficult situation of Muslims in France is not only attributed to politicians but also to Muslims themselves. The sixth theme looks at their responsibility and respondents' viewpoints of their duty to improve their condition. Interviewee number one deplored the state of Muslims worldwide, reproaching them with lacking solidarity and sagacity. She saw these factors as contributors to their own oppression, with reference to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Participant number three urged Muslims to improve relations with the local community so as to tackle misconceptions. Her impression was that some of them separate themselves from mainstream society and disrupt the good order, with acts of

vandalism and rioting. Subsequently they complain of racism. She highlighted the tendency to resort to victimisation, considering oneself to be the victim, rather than questioning one's own actions. She recommended that they redouble their efforts to integrate and show a positive image of Islam. Lastly, participant number five emphasised the need for unity among Muslims in France:

> To make a united but diverse society, you have to unite the Muslim community first, as the first stage and then the united Muslim community can be integrated easily within the wider French society.

In her perspective, the process of integration starts within the social group, which subsequently integrates into society. Her belief that Muslims in France are divided finds echo in the literature. Their diversity is manifest in various domains. As aforementioned, they come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, from Algeria to Senegal and Turkey. Ideologically, there are different Islamic religious orders. A large number of French Muslims, especially North Africans are Sunni; with a minority of Shi'as, mainly Iranians and Lebanese. The Ismaili sect has a stronghold in Paris, where their leader's headquarters are based. Many Black Africans in France belong to Sufi brotherhoods, which are particularly well organised. Other Sufi orders exist among some Algerians and Turks. Moreover, their differences are also perceptible in their degree of attachment to their Islamic traditions. As stated above, a small number of Muslims are absolute secularists, whereas the majority are "moderate conservatives", meaning that they follow the basic Islamic prescriptions and respect the French republican principles. The "fundamentalists" represent another group, which is far from monolithic. They are characterised by a rigorous observance of Islamic principles and practice, which are deemed immutable. Their goal is the revival of Islam. It is understandable that the diversity of French Muslims on several levels has generated division and rivalry (Hunter 2002, pp. 7-10).

### 7)  <u>Comparing Britain and France</u>

The seventh theme focuses on the comparisons made between living as a Muslim in Britain and in France. The respondents were predominantly relieved and glad about residing in Britain, with many positioning it as the best country in the West for Muslims to live in. Indeed, it was commended for facilitating and making the integration of Muslims possible.

Their arguments are manifold. First, religious freedom has been allowed and even encouraged. Many expressed satisfaction and gratefulness for being allowed to practice Islam in a relatively free manner. Interviewee number one for instance emphasised the possibility for Muslim girls and women to wear the headscarf in school, university and work. A handful of respondents explained that British people respect religious differences, as is illustrated with this quote from interviewee number three: "They respect your headscarf, your religious beliefs, all your practises". Britain was described as the paragon of tolerance in the West, a country which has succeeded in combining multiculturalism, secularism and tolerance. Secondly, some claimed that religious discrimination is almost non-existent in employment. Participant number four suggested that when discrimination takes place, the causes are not necessarily religious, but could instead stem from the gender or skin colour of the candidate. The literature confirms that other factors, including professional qualifications and the state of the economy, must be taken into consideration in regard to discrimination in employment. Even so, it cannot be denied that those from a Muslim background suffer from repeated disadvantage and discrimination. Indeed, in the United-Kingdom in 2004:

> Muslims had the highest male unemployment rate at 13 per cent and the highest female unemployment rate at 18 per cent (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia 2006, p. 45).

Even worse, in France, according to a study carried out by the Monitoring Centre on Discrimination, in 2004, North African job seekers were five times less likely to obtain a position (EUMC 2006, pp. 44-45). Respondent number five highlighted the unity of the Muslim community in Britain, compared with the sectarianism of Muslims in France. The latter were seen as "passive and weak", due to their internal divisions. In brief, the British context has favoured the development of a British Muslim identity, rather than an Arab or Pakistani Muslim identity. As interviewee number three pointed out: "The way they're tolerating me, I feel as a British Muslim." By comparison, the French context rejects the expression of religious differences and attributes the notion of "French identity" solely to those who are totally assimilated, who have become French, by their values and culture. These conditions seem to have had the reverse effect; that of marginalising and stigmatising portions of the national population (Gordner 2008, pp. 72-73).

Notwithstanding these largely positive opinions of Britain, negative aspects were also mentioned by a few participants. On the whole, they declared that the turning point for

Muslims in the West was 9/11. They described how British Muslims used to live in relative peace and contentment with their conditions and treatment from the public and government alike. Nevertheless, in the subsequent years, the media propaganda against Islam led to a rise in Islamophobia. They deplored the multiplication of aggressions against women wearing the headscarf and men with beards. Still, these interviewees insisted on Britain's dominant qualities of tolerance and freedom in comparison with other countries. Respondent number two held a distinct viewpoint on the matter. Although she acknowledged certain benefits of living in Britain, especially before 9/11, she contended that the government's treatment of Muslims poses some problems. With the "war on terror", there has been a constant focus on the Muslim community, with the intelligence services sending secret agents to Islamic places of worship. The British act in an under-handed way, whereas the French are blatant about their rejection of Islam. Her observation is accurate in that Britain and France have dissimilar ways of expressing anti-Muslim feelings, because of their distinct history and politics, notably the theoretical foundations of each society. She felt that anti-Muslim sentiment is covert, and particularly rampant within the British authorities. This is notably apparent in the anti-terrorist measures adopted, and she cites "Contest 2" and "Prevent". The Prevent project has indeed been criticised for stigmatising and turning Muslims into a 'suspect community' (Kundnani 2009, p. 15). In addition, respondent number two was pessimistic about the future of Muslims in this country: "Even though France is going through a rough time at the moment, the rough time in Britain is still to come".

The literature confirms the disparate conditions of Muslims in France and in Britain. As far as education is concerned, the availability of faith schools varies depending on the country. Compared to other religious groups in France, the Muslim population lacks educational institutions and places of worship. In 2009, they counted only two Islamic schools, as opposed to eight thousand Catholic and Jewish schools (Sangha and Walsh 2012). In contrast, in Britain, eleven Muslim schools were state-funded, in 2012 (Department for Education 2012). To conclude, the findings from the interviews have provided an insight into how British Muslims perceive the situation of Muslims in France and how they consequently view their own position as Muslims living in Britain.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this paper has examined British Muslims' perceptions on the situation of Muslims in France. In order to enhance the quality and validity of this qualitative study, I will now provide a brief reflexive account of the interviewing process. Finlay (2012, p. 318) defines:

> reflexivity as being thoughtfully and critically self-aware of personal/relational dynamics in the research and how these affect the research.

Part of reflexivity is to consider one's own background, physical appearance and strategy; and how these factors may impact on the research (Finlay 2012, p. 319). I wrote down a few potential challenges in regard to the interviews, and methods to overcome them. Firstly, I feared that the way the interview objectives were formulated might bear some consequences on the respondents' approach to the interview. My research goals outlined in the information sheet supplied to the participants included the question: "To what extent are British Muslims aware of the situation of Muslims in France?". I realised that the respondents might approach the interview as a test on their knowledge about the topic and they might therefore feel pressured to search for further information prior to the interview encounter. I thought that this could undermine the validity of the findings insofar as their responses might not accurately reflect their usual level of knowledge. Consequently, in my email conversations with the participants preceding the interview, I endeavoured to clarify that the focus of the study was their perceptions on the situation of Muslims in France and that I am mostly interested in what they have to say about this subject. I soon realised however that they intended in any case to increase their awareness of the issues affecting Muslims in France and acquire up-to-date information about the topic. In the end, I became convinced that this reaction can actually be of benefit to the research, in that it would prevent the interview findings from being poor in quality and content. Besides, most participants admitted having researched very little, due to a lack of time, among other things. Hence, their previous and new knowledge were not as dissimilar as I had feared. Another reason for my decision to allow interviewees to inform themselves beforehand was to cultivate their confidence in their knowledge. If they were to be hesitant and doubtful during the interview it would have only impeded the progress of the conversation. The exception was interviewee number one who demonstrated little awareness about the topic. It came as a surprise knowing that she had volunteered to

participate in the research. She had contacted me after seeing the advertisement I had put up in the mosque. My assumption is that she was keen in participating in a project, though she might have not realised that she would need to be informed about the topic.

Secondly, issues associated with my identity were considered. I was aware that my identity as a French-speaking Muslim having lived in France would definitely influence the way the respondents viewed me. From their point of view, my background positions me on a higher level in terms of knowledge compared to them. As a result, I anticipated that they might look for approval or disapproval from my part regarding their responses, and change their discourse accordingly. I decided to show leniency towards the participants and encourage them, which proved to be the appropriate tactic. When an interviewee would hesitate in her answer, I would contribute with my knowledge; and if she would demonstrate strong knowledge on the topic, I would felicitate her; and this positive attitude appeared to increase the confidence of the respondents.

Following this process of self-reflection, the implications of the findings from the interviews will now be addressed. The vast majority of respondents consider France as a particularly intolerant and discriminatory country, where basic Human Rights are not upheld. Their outrage and surprise regarding the situation of French Muslims show that they take freedom of religious expression for granted. If this is representative of a large portion of the Muslim population in Britain, it is very unlikely that laws restricting Islamic religious practice, such as those existing in the Hexagon would pass in Britain. For instance, the burqa ban generated discussions in Britain on the possibility of imitating the French law. Nonetheless, the Home Secretary Theresa May totally rejected prohibiting the Islamic full veil in public places. In contrast with France, the majority of the public and politicians did not support the enforcement of the ban in Britain. What is more, the government viewed such a measure contrary to the traditional British value of tolerance (Morris and Morrison 2011). Even so, one cannot assume that Islamophobia is necessarily lower in Britain. As interviewee number two pointed out, anti-Muslim sentiment is manifested in France through official measures, whereas in Britain it is expressed in an indirect and discreet manner. A vigilant eye must therefore be kept on Britain, as an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment can be difficult to monitor.

**Word count: 15, 970.**

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