



# The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism

By Mayanthi L. Fernando

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## **The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism** By Mayanthi L. Fernando

In 1989 three Muslim schoolgirls from a Paris suburb refused to remove their Islamic headscarves in class. The headscarf crisis signaled an Islamic revival among the children of North African immigrants; it also ignited an ongoing debate about the place of Muslims within the secular nation-state. Based on ten years of ethnographic research, *The Republic Unsettled* alternates between an analysis of Muslim French religiosity and the contradictions of French secularism that this emergent religiosity precipitated. Mayanthi L. Fernando explores how Muslim French draw on both Islamic and secular-republican traditions to create novel modes of ethical and political life, reconfiguring those traditions to imagine a new future for France. She also examines how the political discourses, institutions, and laws that constitute French secularism regulate Islam, transforming the Islamic tradition and what it means to be Muslim. Fernando traces how long-standing tensions within secularism and republican citizenship are displaced onto France's Muslims, who, as a result, are rendered illegitimate as political citizens and moral subjects. She argues, ultimately, that the Muslim question is as much about secularism as it is about Islam.

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# **The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism**

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**The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism** By Mayanthi L. Fernando **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

*"The Republic Unsettled* is a brilliant book, at once a concrete examination of the experiences of Muslim French and a compelling analysis of the structural and discursive obstacles they face. A major contribution to both ethnography and political theory, this provocative, beautifully written work will appeal to those interested in debates about Muslims in Europe and the possibilities for thinking difference differently."

(Joan Wallach Scott, author of *The Fantasy of Feminist History* 2014-03-10)

"This wonderful book about French secularism combines rich and sensitive ethnography with original argument and analysis. Mayanthi L. Fernando contends that the so-called problem of integrating Muslim immigrants from North Africa into French secular society tells us much about the questionable assumptions underlying French nationalist discourse on secular republicanism. This is an important contribution not only to the study of contemporary France but also to the theoretical debates on secularism. Essential reading for anyone interested in either."

(Talal Asad, author of *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* 2014-03-10)

*"The Republic Unsettled* is thick, sophisticated thinking, which should unsettle the comfortable certainties of French and American secularism and monoculturalism. . . . Anthropologists like Fernando comprehend the situation most fully, and we owe it to our fellow citizens and our own societies to get the message out as widely and loudly as possible."

(Jack David Eller *Anthropology Review Database*)

*"The Republic Unsettled* is invaluable not only for anthropologists and ethnographers but also for scholars wanting to deepen their understanding of how contemporary secularism functions as a theory of politics and society, including through its contradictions, tensions, inconsistencies, anxieties, and instabilities."

(Roshan A. Jahangeer *ReOrient* 2015-11-01)

"By taking the debate away from the well-worn lines of whether or not 'Muslims' can be or are 'integrated' (in other words, whether or not Muslims are an unsettling presence or not in the republic), and by instead underlining how the republic itself is inherently 'unsettled', this book will no doubt rile many French secular republicans and become a key point of reference in future studies of the French Republic, *laïcité*, and 'non-normative' identities."

(Natalya Vince *French Studies* 2015-10-01)

*"The Republic Unsettled* is a crucial and stimulating read for any scholar thinking about secularism and secularity, difference politics, contemporary France and Europe, and/or Western liberalism(s) and liberal (in)tolerance. The book (and especially its vivid, emotional, and purposeful introduction) can easily find resonance across a variety of social science, religion, and history disciplines."

(Carol Ferrara *Journal of Church and State* 2015-09-01)

"That her book ends with a legitimate comparison between William Connolly's notions of critical responsiveness and agonistic respect and the way in which her Muslim French interlocutors think shows that the history of colonization, immigration and the creation of diasporas does not have to lead to a conflict of civilizations or economically reductive globalization but can produce rich and complex hybrids or

mouvements aberrants that can genuinely contribute to human progress. What *The Republic Unsettled* manages to convey is that those who seem marginal to the present could be central to a better future, and that is indeed a very remarkable achievement."

(Nardina Kaur *Radical Philosophy* 2015-05-01)

"*The Republic Unsettled* is a dense, but extremely well written book that exposes and 'unsettles,' as the title indicates, secular republicanism by laying bare its numerous inconsistencies and paradoxes. ... In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo shootings, which has issued in an uncritical and self-gratulatory reinvigoration of secular republicanism in France, accompanied by a dramatic increase in anti-Muslim violence, Mayanthi Fernando's book is more timely and urgent than ever."

(Jeanette S. Jouili *Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World* 2015-08-04)

"Because Fernando makes a lucid argument based on extended ethnography and sophisticated reading in political theory, *The Republic Unsettled* will surely be read widely by all those engaged in thinking about the politics of diversity in Europe."

(John R. Bowen *American Ethnologist* 2016-02-01)

"I offer the highest praise for *The Republic Unsettled*: it is a beautifully written book that readers will be eager to continue discussing long after they finish it."

(Jennifer Fredette *Anthropos* 2016-02-01)

## About the Author

Mayanthi L. Fernando is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

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