

# Review article

## Crescent concerns

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**Integrating Islam: political and religious challenges in contemporary France.** By Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press. 2006. 342pp. Index. £29.99. ISBN 0 8157 5150 8.

**Why the French don't like headscarves: Islam, the state and public space.** By John R. Bowen. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2007. 290pp. Index. £17.95. ISBN 0 691 12506 6.

*Amalgame* means 'confusion', and it is a word you hear regularly if you talk about Islam with the residents of Clichy-sous-Bois and Les Bosquets. I was there just before the 2007 presidential elections, filming a documentary for Al-Jazeera. These leafy-sounding suburbs in north-east Paris are, in reality, more hoods than woods. They are what the French delicately call 'sensitive urban zones'—tower block housing estates or *cités* which are home to millions of France's Muslim immigrants and their families.

The *cités* are grim places, with crumbling, rat-infested infrastructure and poor transport links to neighbouring towns. Young men hang out in doorways, the products of sky-high dropout rates in schools and unemployment topping 40 per cent for the under-25s. There are few businesses and virtually no leisure facilities; instead, petty crime and hard drugs fill the hours. People here, and particularly the younger generation who were born and bred in France, complain bitterly of discrimination. They blame a 'system' which they say treats them as apart from, rather than a part of, mainstream France.

This frustration exploded in riots that spread across the country in late 2005. When the violence erupted, some French commentators rushed to blame radical Islam. But Islam does not factor in to these daily problems, says Gounédi Traore, a 20-something freelance photographer and social worker who lives in Les Bosquets. 'The authorities, they mix up Islam, and terrorism, and immigration and unemployment until it becomes a real *amalgame*,' he explains. 'Then things are so confused, it is impossible to do anything about them.'

A good first step, however, is understanding the role of Islam in the challenges facing French Muslims. And *Integrating Islam* by political scientist Jonathan Laurence and historian Justin Vaisse is an excellent guide to this complex journey.

Aimed squarely at an American audience, it sets out to correct the ‘pessimistic and sometimes amazingly alarmist’ views that some US observers hold about Islam in France, a vision in which ‘Muslim populations are uniformly impoverished and disgruntled, on the verge of revolt and ready to take over the French Republic.’ The authors’ exhaustive research, clear analysis and sensible—indeed optimistic—conclusions are just as valuable to readers in Europe and further afield.

France is home to approximately five million people of Muslim origin—‘approximately’ because France does not keep official statistics on the ethnic or religious affiliations of its citizens. (Publicly quoted figures range from 3.65 to six million, depending on who is talking and whether the aim is to accurately reflect or politically inflame the situation.) This generally accepted estimate means that close to 10 per cent of France’s people are Muslim, making Islam the second religion of the land (after Catholicism) and giving France Western Europe’s largest Muslim population. Three-quarters of French Muslims trace their origins to just three countries—Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia—though there are sizeable numbers whose links extend to Turkey and West Africa as well.

France has a long and tumultuous history with the Muslim world; landmarks include the Battle of Poitiers in 732 which routed invading Muslim armies, Napoleon’s ill-fated Egyptian expedition and France’s imperial enterprise of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which vast swathes of North and West Africa, as well as the Levant, came under its sway. But it is the last half-century which has done most to shape the current situation facing France’s Muslims. In the 1950s, France absorbed legions of workers from Algeria to power its postwar expansion. Struggles for independence in its restive colonies in the 1950s and 1960s—including a bloody conflict in Algeria—brought further waves of Muslims to France.

However, the 1973 oil crisis put an end to France’s wholesale labour imports. Instead of workers going home, however, their families came to join them, bringing yet more Muslims to France over the following decade. Today, half of the country’s Muslim population was born in France. Although there is ongoing immigration (and plenty of problems for the so-called *sans papiers*, or illegal aliens, since the government started tightening up immigration laws in 2003), the millions of Muslims in France today are largely the product of these historical factors.

As *Integrating Islam* explains, the challenges facing Muslims in France have changed over the years. The first wave of Muslims was primarily interested in better rights for foreign workers. The second generation began to forge an identity as French-born Arabs—or *beurs*—fighting hard against racism and discrimination with a largely non-religious, left-leaning agenda. The new generation, however, increasingly identifies with the global Muslim community—or *ummah*—and looks to assert Islam as a religious and cultural identity.

This new generation is numerous—half of Muslims in France are under the age of 24. And like their parents, they tend to be poor—half of all North African immigrants live in state-subsidized housing, concentrated in Paris, Marseille and Lyon. Young Muslims, who account for less than 10 per cent of all French between

18 and 24 years old, make up an astonishing 40 per cent of all inmates in French prisons. They are twice as likely to be unemployed as the rest of the population, whether they have college degrees or not. And they face serious discrimination in some fields, such as housing and employment. One study found that job candidates with North African-sounding names were six times less likely to get an interview than those who sounded traditionally French. This despite laws, government agencies and NGOs battling religious and racial discrimination.

The question is whether these problems have anything to do with being Muslim in particular, or just being different in general to the *Français de souche*, or 'French French'. The answer, according to *Integrating Islam*, is complicated. Opinion polls show that the majority of French know that Muslims are in the firing line of discrimination, and believe it should stop. Surveys also show a majority consider immigration a source of cultural enrichment, but at the same time there is a substantial minority who think there are too many foreigners, and too many Muslims, in the country. And more than half of those polled in 2004 thought that the values of Islam are incompatible with the values of the Republic.

France is no stranger to foreigners. The country took in millions of Italian, Polish and other European immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite the occasional French backlash—usually triggered by economic troubles—the new arrivals have fitted in to French society. So too have many Muslims in France—at least by some indicators. They speak French at home and Muslim women go out to work in the same proportions as the rest of the population. They socialize with and even marry non-Muslims, and the percentage who say they are religious is about the same as French Catholics. As Vaisse and Laurence rightly point out, 'Many of the challenges of integration—perhaps most of them—have nothing to do with Islam ... and everything to do with the poor social conditions and lack of educational capital of recent immigrants and their children and grandchildren.'

In some ways, the difficulty lies more in French attitudes towards Islam than in Muslim attitudes towards France. Certainly French Muslims come with baggage—not necessarily of their packing. Recent events—violence in Algeria, 9/11, the Danish cartoon controversy—have all heightened French uncertainties about Islam. Matters have not been helped by the actions of a small minority of French Muslims engaged in extremist activity, from terrorism abroad to anti-Jewish attacks at home. But as Vaisse and Laurence explain in their discussion of anti-Semitism in France and in a revealing portrait of Zacarias Moussaoui—the Frenchman convicted of the 9/11 attacks—such extremist behaviour finds its origins in social problems such as alienation and family collapse, not being Muslim per se.

That being said, Islam challenges some fundamental tenets of the French Republic. *Why the French don't like headscarves* by anthropologist John Bowen is a thoughtful, albeit meandering, exploration of these more philosophical issues. Many in France have a horror of *communautarisme*, or communalism, in which people would define themselves by religion or ethnicity. It contradicts the ideals of French Republicanism, which emphasizes general interests and shared values and

requires the state to create institutions and policies which induct newcomers—be they infants or immigrants—into the established ways of thinking and acting.

One of the bulwarks against communalism is *laïcité*. This is often translated as secularism, but it is quite different from the separation of church and state seen in the United States. From the 1880s to the 1920s, the French state struggled to assert itself over the Catholic Church, to keep organized religion in the private sphere and regulate its presence in the public domain. This does not mean that the state keeps clear of religion. Quite the contrary: according to the provisions of various laws from the early 1900s, the French government is intimately involved in the institutions of many faiths—for example, financing the upkeep of churches, organizing chaplain's offices in hospitals and prisons, and paying the salaries of teachers at specially contracted religious schools. That involvement extends to Islam as well. The French government was instrumental in the creation of the French Council of the Muslim Religion, its official interlocutor in Islamic affairs. The Council has managed to bring together members of France's sometimes fractious Muslim organizations such as the Great Mosque of Paris and the Union of Islamic Organizations of France and is tackling such tricky issues as the training of home-grown imams, a move away from relying on foreign money and manpower to lead France's mosques.

When it comes to the battle for *laïcité*, France's public schools are on the front-line. 'Many teachers and intellectuals see the contemporary presence of Islam in the schools as turning back the clock on at least two struggles: the fight to keep religion from controlling young minds, and the struggle to forge a common French identity,' says Bowen. All of which helps explain the *affaire foulard* or fuss over schoolgirls in Muslim headscarves.

There were never very many girls who went to school with their heads covered in the first place—only 1,254 out of roughly 250,000 female students of Muslim origin in 2003, according to the Ministry of the Interior. There had been incidents in 1989 and the mid-1990s in which girls in scarves had run up against complaints from teachers. But these were usually resolved quietly, thanks in part to the government's State Council which ruled that girls could wear such scarves in school so long as they did not proselytize or disturb school life.

But in 2003, two sisters on the outskirts of Paris turned up in headscarves and were subsequently sent home. The girls did not exactly fit the stereotype, or rather the caricature, of the oppressed Muslim woman, bullied and kept under wraps by her Islamic fundamentalist menfolk. The girls' Jewish father hoped they would give it up, their Muslim mother had never worn a headscarf, and the girls themselves were articulate on why they had made this choice. Nonetheless, this incident exploded into political grandstanding and a media frenzy. France is not unique in this regard; even in Muslim countries, such as Egypt, what women put on their heads is highly controversial, in part because it is an obvious symbol of other issues brewing in society. In France, the headscarf came to stand for anxieties about global Islam, about problems in the *cités*, about the changing nature of French society and the place of France in the world. As Bowen neatly sums up, 'It is never just about scarves.'

*Why the French don't like headscarves* does a service in explaining just how the French came to tie themselves in knots. Then-President Chirac set up the Independent Commission of Reflection on the Application of the Principle of *Laïcité* in the Republic, more commonly known as the Stasi Commission, to investigate the issue. Its 19 appointed experts heard from hundreds of witnesses over six months. Curiously though, there was no testimony from expelled students, nor from any of the sociologists studying why women put on headscarves in the first place. As a Muslim with relatives who wear the headscarf, I know the reasons can be as varied as the women themselves. For some it is tradition; for others it is a way to rebel against their secular parents; some see it as a way to identify more closely with Islam (although the Qur'an itself does not require women to cover their heads); others use it as a defence against unwanted male attentions; and some because of family pressure. The headscarf can just as easily be a form of liberation as suppression.

In the end the Stasi Commission issued a raft of recommendations—from specific measures such as introducing Muslim and Jewish holidays into the official calendar to such general exhortations as teaching *laïcité*. But only the one on headscarves was taken up immediately by the National Assembly and Senate. The result was a 2004 law forbidding students in public primary and secondary schools from 'wearing signs or clothes by which pupils clearly display a religious affiliation'.

The response was strangely anti-climactic. Opinion polls revealed that only a slight majority of Muslims in France were against the ban. Protests lost steam after a group in Iraq kidnapped two French journalists, demanding a repeal of the law. Ironically, this development actually served to further rally Muslims behind the legislation in protest at the outrage, and gave the Muslim Council a chance to show its tricolours by trying to help negotiate the hostages' release.

As for the first school year of the ban, after some initial friction, just under 200 girls left the public system because of their headscarves; in 2005, only twelve students turned up in headscarves in the first place. Some Sikh boys got caught in the crossfire, as there was no way round their turbans. But on the whole, the issue died down; I heard many, many complaints about the 'system' from Muslims in the *cités*, but headscarves were rarely mentioned. Undeniably, there are still tensions around Islam in public spaces. Can Muslims demand separate hours for men and women at swimming pools? Do they have the right to refuse a doctor of the opposite sex? These questions have yet to be fully resolved.

Though not a fan of headscarves in general (and especially not in identity photos), the then-Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy was one of the few politicians to publicly oppose the ban in schools. Given his recent election as president, both books are interesting reminders of Sarkozy's track record on Islam. When I was in Les Bosquets, few had anything good to say about him. There he is best remembered for his comments about the 2005 riots, in which he pledged to clean out the 'rabble'.

Sarkozy's strong line on immigration during the election—and his creation of a new ministry of immigration, integration and national identity—has done little to endear him to the residents of the *cités*. But as minister of the interior, he

was, by and large, sympathetic to Muslims. Sarkozy pushed for the creation of the Muslim Council, and called for changes to the law to allow state funding of more numerous and salubrious places of worship (France has half as many prayer spaces per 1,000 Muslims as Germany). He even advocated something close to positive discrimination—which was firmly rejected by his party. ‘We cannot ask Muslims in France to respond to the values of the Republic if we do not invite them to the table of the Republic. I am of the conviction that a humiliated identity is a radicalized identity,’ he said in 2002.

Both *Integrating Islam* and *Why the French don't like headscarves* are hopeful about the future for Muslims in France. Opportunities for minorities in general are improving in some areas. A massive plan of urban regeneration—20–30 billion euros from 2004 to 2012—holds the prospect of making the *cités* more attractive places for both those of immigrant origin and the *Français de souche* who fled long ago. Affirmative action in education, including such prestigious institutions as Paris's Sciences Po which has pioneered schemes to admit more minority students, is knocking down some hurdles. A small but growing number of private firms, among them such corporate giants as the insurer AXA and IBM, are moving to anonymous resumes. Sarkozy's plans to liberalize the job market will hopefully make it easier to start and sustain new businesses, another route off the dole for some young Muslims. And there are emerging role models for young Muslims, not just football heroes and rap stars, but political figures like Rachida Dati, the new minister for justice, who comes from a working class Moroccan–Algerian family.

One of the most encouraging signs I have seen is the growing political engagement of young Muslims after the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen's far-right National Front and the 2005 riots. Voter registration in Clichy-sous-Bois grew by almost 20 per cent from 2005 to 2007; sweet are the uses of adversity. Vaisse and Laurence are right to say there is no real Muslim voting bloc in France—half of all Muslims are ineligible to vote because they either lack citizenship or are under age. Claims that its Muslim communities have pushed France towards a pro-Arab stance in international affairs are exaggerated—opinion polls show that Muslims in France are overwhelmingly preoccupied by domestic issues like housing and education (although it will be interesting to see how French Muslim groups react to their new President's warmer talk on America and Israel). *Integrating Islam* is also spot on when it says that the real impact of Muslim voting will come at the local level—many newly registered voters I met were looking forward to next year's mayoral contests as a chance to flex their electoral muscle.

Ultimately, making sense of the *amalgam* of French Islam tells you as much about the state of Muslims in France as the state of France in itself and in the world. Both are changing, and for all the controversies and passing conflicts, Vaisse, Laurence and Bowen are right to conclude it is for the better. As *Integrating Islam* argues, ‘The birth of a tolerant, moderate, and “modern” Islam in France and Europe offers an opportunity to reverse the flow of Islamic ideas, customs, theology, books, imams and so forth, which until now has come from Muslim countries, and so broaden the discourse on what it means to be Muslim.’ As we Muslims say, *insha'allah*.