

The reality of Islam and the Republic

A study of the Muslim population in France reveals how distorted are some external views of it, says John Thornhill

A standard riff is developing among the rightwing commentariat in the US when discussing Europe's 15m Muslims: they are the potential enemy.

Largely marginalised in low-growth economies, culturally adrift in secular, permissive societies, cut off from their families' roots in North Africa, many of these Muslims are poor, angry, disorientated and prey to radicalisation by al-Qaeda extremists. The "intifada" launched by rioting Muslim youths in France's suburbs last November and the murderous bombing campaign conducted by "home-grown" terrorists in London last July are just a foretaste of things to come.

Moreover, the argument goes, Europe's political leaders are held hostage by their Muslim vote, ensuring that they are "soft" on terrorism and antagonistic towards Israel and the US. A process of "reverse colonisation" is occurring as Muslim immigrants breed faster than the indigenous populations, threatening to turn Europe into Eurabia. France, home to about one-third of Europe's Muslims and the "arch-appeaser" President Jacques Chirac, is singled out for particular scorn.

The great virtue of *Integrating Islam* is that it demonstrates how distorted and offensive many of these views are. After examining the everyday reality of the Muslim population in France, the two authors, an American political scientist and a French historian, reach a

more complex and optimistic conclusion challenging the "gloomy and alarmist view of France's (and Europe's) inevitable 'Islamisation'".

For a start, France has had a long and successful history of integrating foreign populations. Unlike Britain, Germany and Italy, France became a country of immigration, rather than emigration, in the 19th century, absorbing waves of Poles, Belgians, Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese and east Europeans (including many Jews). Almost every generation of immigrant was deemed "unable to integrate".

The public school system, the military and the workplace have been the main mechanisms for turning immigrants into French citizens. All are proving less effective today than in the past because of high unemployment, the fragmentation of education and the ending of compulsory military service. But the authors suggest France's 215-year-old concept of citizenship, based on the revolutionary principles of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* and the separation of church and state, still holds appeal for many immigrants and is an invaluable tool for integration.

Second, the authors contend that it is often misleading to identify Muslims solely by their religious beliefs, especially when many do not do so themselves. France's Muslim population is marked by huge sectarian, ethnic and ideological diversity.

Besides, opinion polls among those

who do identify themselves as Muslims show a strong attachment to France and a profound desire to integrate. These respondents also tend to be more optimistic about the future of the country than those from most other backgrounds. Many of the youths who rioted in the suburbs last year were not screaming about their rejection of French society but of the desperation to become fully part of it.

Integrating Islam

Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France

By Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse
Brookings Institution Press, \$22.95

The authors acknowledge that integrating France's Muslim peoples does pose challenges. Many of them came to France in the 1960s and 1970s following the brutal war of independence in Algeria, which left a scar on the French psyche. The religious practices of some Muslims have also clashed with the secular traditions of the French state, most notably over whether girls could wear headscarves in schools. Terrorist ideology has indeed infected some disaffected Muslim youths, posing a potentially lethal threat.

The book does not gloss over these issues but puts them into perspective. Most Muslim schoolgirls have accepted the ban on headscarves. The govern-

ment has also been robust in dealing with extremism, monitoring radical groups and expelling extremist imams. But it should be noted that of the 361 people in jail on terrorism-related offences at the end of 2004, 153 were Basque, 79 Corsican and 103 Islamist.

Some politicians, notably Nicolas Sarkozy, the interior minister and presidential contender, have also made strenuous efforts to embrace France's Muslim minority. He has helped establish a state-sponsored Muslim council to create an "Islam of France" rather than an "Islam in France" and has pressed for limited affirmative action.

Such initiatives have been criticised by Republican diehards and are proving hard to implement. In response, Mr Sarkozy has rhetorically asked: "If you find Islam incompatible with the Republic, then what do you do with the 5m people of Muslim origin living in France? Do you kick them out, or make them convert or ask them not to practise their religion?"

The authors conclude that government and community leaders are making efforts to ensure that Islamic beliefs and practices become compatible with Republican values. But the success of these attempts will ultimately depend on how far the French themselves can live up to the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity.

The writer is editor of the FT's European edition