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Islam in France:

Balancing *Laïcité* with Liberty, Equality, and Brotherhood

France, long polarized by the issue of the Catholic Church and debate over the public role it should play, settled the church-state question a century ago. The 1905 Law of Separation relegated religion to a completely personal realm, formally establishing that France would neither recognize nor subsidize any religion (Decherf). Article II of the Constitution of 1958 says, "France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall insure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs" (Constitution, Article I).

This separation and secularization was an important step in unifying a country deeply divided by its feelings about the Catholic Church, but today questions about its implementation and application as it relates to other religions – read: Islam – is raising issues France thought it had long ago resolved. This, in turn, is complicating the already difficult integration of France's largest religious and ethnic minority, Muslim immigrants from former French colonies in North Africa, and their second and third generation descendents (Malik 128-9).

While no large scale integration of immigrants can be achieved easily or void of conflict, France's history is one of largely successful assimilation of different cultures. As Michael Roskin notes, "From 1880 to 1960 some 7 million Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Poles, and Russians were integrated into French society" (171). Muslim immigrants, who began arriving in

numbers around the same time and *en masse* during the First and Second World Wars, on the other hand, are still struggling to find their place in French society. Alienation is felt even – and especially – among young French-born Muslims who do not speak Arabic and, despite their religion, identify more with their French countrymen than with their parents' culture of origin.

Even without the current issue of religion, Franco-Muslim history is complicated. As Iftikhar Malik says:

> The relationship between Islam and France evokes such mixed images as the Battle of Poitiers, the Crusades, Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, the colonisation of Muslim lands in Africa and Asia, unnecessary bloodshed in Algeria, Muslim settlers in urban France, the Paris Mosque, the impressive Arab Institute in Paris, and prominent French Muslims including Dr Muhammad Hamidullah and Muhammad Arkoun, scholars of Islam such a Louis Massignon and Maxime Rodinson, and the sports star, Zidane. (Malik 121)

While France could, in the 1960s, claim a greater history of religious tolerance than, for example, the United States, by the 1980s immigrants were largely employed in the jobs the French wouldn't do, and 42 percent of survey respondents said that most immigrants would not "be able to integrate into French society" (Barber). The shifting attitudes, though, were a decade too late, as it was in the 1970s that families came to join the single men who originally came to France for ample job opportunities, and by the time racism became a serious problem, they were firmly settled (Malik 125). The socialist government of the 1980s promoted a "right to difference" (Kastoryano), but when Chirac's conservative Gaullists returned to power in the 1990s, they made it harder to renew work permits, and tightened immigration and naturalization controls, further alienating Muslims within France (Malik 126).

Riva Kastoryano points out that "When newcomers arrive in a new society, religion responds to the loss of past common references and establishes social bonds." When Muslim families began to immigrate to France, they brought Islamic leaders with them to organize and manage aspects of religious life. In secular France, this created a perception of a "permanent

difference" between immigrants and their adopted land (Kastoryano). It seems likely that this became something of a self-perpetuating cycle, with immigrants and their children increasingly turning to religion for identity because they were unable to identify with the secular French culture, even when they wanted to. Integrating these two identities in any meaningful way, even as a merely transitional bridge between cultures, was and is made difficult by France's longstanding secularism, *laïcité*.

Laïcité, though, is not a clear-cut separation, and is not without ambiguity. Originally established to resolve conflict between clericalism and anti-clericalism, it was highly effective in resolving rifts within the French population by allowing citizens to ignore their differences and come together as one people. "The principle of laïcité in France implies the participation of the individual in politics as a citizen, free of community and ethnic ties and equal before the law" (Kastoryano). However, the concept subjugates religious identity to national identity, at least in the public realm.

On the other hand, France grants legal status to religious organizations as groups and even maintains some financial involvement in religion, in the form of paying the salaries of religious school teachers and subsidizing religious schools or paying ministers working in prisons, hospitals, and military bases (Judge). It also owns "Catholic places of worship" built before the passage of the 1905 law, and finances their upkeep, maintenance, and restoration (LOC 32). In theory, all religions are afforded equal status – although the most economically favorable status may be denied if it is judged that the association disregards public order (LOC 34) – but for many years Muslims were not formally represented as Catholics, Protestants, and Jews were, and so did not receive any financial assistance from the government. Finally in 2003, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy created a French Council of the Muslim Faith to nationally

represent the religion (Kastoryano), and a Foundation for Islam, to finance the development of the religion, was set up in 2005 (“Foundation”).

Although the Foundation will rely on private donations, rather than funding from the French government, “its funds will be banked at the state-owned Caisse des Depots et Consignations – which will guarantee financial transparency” (“Foundation”). Funds will be used to build and renovate mosques, and to train religious leaders. This marks the first time there has been any public oversight over how financial support of Islam in France is spent, and Muslims leaders believe this is an important step in institutionalizing the religion in France (“Foundation”).

Even so, a large number of Muslims don’t feel that they are represented by the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) – or any of the four different divisions of Islam of which it is comprised – and as Dounia Bouzar of the Council notes, “A lot of Muslims [...] think the government is trying to control them through the council” (qtd in Ford). They see further evidence of this in the government’s deportation of imams thought to be too radical – eight were deported in 2004 alone – and the recent establishment of a program to “educate imams in French language, history, and culture” (Carreyrou). Bouzar acknowledges, though, that “There is an abyss between the imams’ vision of the world and that of the young Muslims born here.” An estimated 90 percent of imams are foreign citizens, many sent by the Algerian and Moroccan governments (Ford), and elections for the CFCM have resulted in representation of views more extreme than those held by most French Muslims (Judge).

Gaining more press than the deported imams, or even the establishment of the CFCM, is a fifteen year dispute regarding headscarves in schools, which culminated in 2004 with the passage of legislation banning them completely. Michel Wieviorka argues that any examination

of the headscarf debate must include three distinct dimensions. The first, he says, is the challenge to French secularity posed by the new dominant religious minority, most obviously as related to the display of religious symbols, but extending also to other Muslim rejections of contemporary French society. The second dimension that must be considered is, as Wieviorka puts it, “the problem of prejudice.” Although it is estimated that 30,000 to 40,000 *Français de souche* (those of “French stock”, a politically correct way of distinguishing between “native” French and immigrants) have converted to Islam, the vast majority of Muslims in France are immigrants of North African descent, and thus recognizable not only by their beards and headscarves, but also by the color of their skin (Malik 126-7). Latent racism, especially in the wake of September 11, 2001, can only serve to exacerbate the divide, especially when “it is discrimination in the guise of universalism” (Wieviorka). The third dimension is the question of whether or not the headscarf law actually provides protection to young girls who might otherwise be threatened with violence for refusing to cover their heads. While this is a valid question, and certainly in keeping with French values, the commission that recommended the law be enacted heard only from Muslim girls who said “they veil themselves out of deep conviction and personal choice,” rather than out of fear of retribution (Wieviorka).

Before the headscarf law went into effect in September 2004, education minister Francois Fillon decreed that it would be enforced on an individual basis, and that “dialogue” would be opened with any student found to be in violation before further action would be taken (Wieviorka).

Though Wieviorka’s discussion centers on the headscarf debate, the perspectives he considers are relevant in the larger discussion as well, and the evolution of this question may be a good indicator of what is to come. Unfortunately, far from resolving the issue, the ban is likely

to have little positive impact, or, worse, to push young North Africans, or *beurs*, into the folds of militant Islam, further alienating those already feeling disconnected from mainstream French culture. Lee Smith argues that although these *beurs* were born Muslim, their initial desire was to participate in French culture and integrate into society. France, though, has let them down.

Suggestions on how to ameliorate the situation abound. In 2002 the Open Society Institute's European Union Accession Monitoring Program released a comprehensive report on Minority Protection in Europe, including the situation of Muslims in France. At that time they issued recommendations to the French government focusing largely on fighting discrimination (OSI 71). Some of their recommendations have been implemented, such as the creation of the CFCM to provide an official communication channel between mosques and the government, and providing support for the training of imams. Others are harder to quantify, like the broad recommendation to "Affirm commitment to the fight against all forms of discrimination, including religious discrimination; create an official communications policy to encourage more visible public and official involvement in the fight against discrimination" (OSI 71). This is, of course, the direction in which the French government needs to be moving. Beyond these easily recognizable abstract necessities, though, opinions are sharply divided when it comes to the concrete.

Gilles Kepel believes that banning headscarves "stops France's social unraveling", and "could initiate the process by which France finds its way to a new secularist covenant between all the children of the country". He remembers the days when "promising young immigrants" were "boosted ... with scholarships into the elite", and argues that the same should be done with young Muslims. Such action, though, would surely raise cries of "positive discrimination" – a term with decidedly connotations in a country where equality is a primary value. Others,

including many Muslims, are outraged at the ban ("Gentle Jihadist").

Nicolas Sarkozy, a prominent French politician and former finance minister, has taken the liberal view and has suggested allowing "the government to help finance the construction of mosques" ("French Politician"). Sarkozy argues that driving Islam underground fosters the growth of militant fundamentalism, while Muslims point out that the current separation of church and state benefits Catholics, as many of their churches are maintained as historical monuments by the government. Some municipal leaders, taking a similar view, have granted long-term land leases and used government funds to build cultural centers that can also serve as mosques ("French Politician"). Others, though, argue that this liberal interpretation of the 1905 law weakens laïcité. Regardless of the wisdom of these kinds of solutions, they do not get to the root of the problems.

Indeed, a single root is hard to identify, but the disconnect between the *Français de souche* and French Muslims is self-perpetuating, and perhaps widening. Devout followers of Islam believe that their religion comes first, their country second – exactly the opposite of the implicit deal the French made with themselves regarding the Catholic Church. While France demands that Islam make concessions to fit into the secular framework of French society, it fails to recognize that its own foundations are Catholic. A traditional but non-practicing Catholic's lifestyle is seen as secular, while a traditional but non-practicing Muslim will still have trouble fitting in. While the long term secularization of Islam doesn't seem out of the question, especially given the low percentage of French Muslims who attend mosque weekly, French perception of what it means to be French will also have to change as well if these two cultures will ever be fully integrated.

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