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Virginie Andre, Fethi Mansouri & Michele Lobo

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## A Fragmented Discourse of Religious Leadership in France: Muslim Youth between Citizenship and Radicalization

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VIRGINIE ANDRE, FETHI MANSOURI and MICHELE LOBO

### *Abstract*

*At a time when public debates about radicalization of Muslim youth in the West are taking center stage and when questions about “home-grown” security threats are increasing in the wake of a number of terrorist attacks in many émigré societies, this article provides fresh empirical insights from the perspective of religious leadership. It outlines a picture of a highly diverse Muslim religious landscape where competing religious discourses are struggling to attract and support Muslim youth facing social dislocation and identity crises within increasingly contested social milieus. The article argues that a typology of religious leadership is clearly emerging where a spectrum of faith-based orientations and religious practice emphasize, to different degrees, notions of attachment to universal ethics and individual agency. The fact that conservative, sometimes radical, interpretations of such contestations represent a minority of voices is heartening even though the actual damage by such minority is often disproportionate to its actual size within the so-called silent majority. The empirical insights provided by the religious leaders interviewed for this study offer hope that the future of Western Muslims is more positive than we are led to think, if the possibility of combining devout faith with local political engagement becomes a real and sustainable conduit towards social inclusion and intercultural understanding and if necessary support and understanding are extended by the host communities.*

### **Introduction**

The recent demands imposed on French Muslims to express publicly their solidarity with the French Republic, and, most importantly, dissociate themselves from Islamic terrorists in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* terrorist attacks on 7 January 2015 reflect the lingering tensions between the state, Muslims and Islam in secular France. However, such demands and expectations, in a country where Muslims experience discrimination and marginalization, have the potential to lead to further social alienation; deepen the Muslim community’s sense of despair, anger, outrage and isolation, and potentially contribute to youth radicalization. France has been struggling to come to terms with its changing religious landscape where Islam, now the second largest religion in France, has become a salient feature of the social and cultural milieu but never fully recognized in this secular republic. Evidence of this is the sharp spike in Islamophobic incidents in the week after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks; adding to the growing number of such actions in general.<sup>1</sup>

One of the main characteristics of French Muslims is their relative sectarian homogeneity with the great majority being Sunni Muslims, even if their ethnic and national

backgrounds are diverse. The majority of French Muslims migrated from various former colonies predominantly from the Maghreb countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia (Figure 1), during the aftermath of national independence in the 1950s and 1960s. Algerian migration to France began in 1968 and was followed by waves of migrants from Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey that accelerated in the early 1970s. Sub-Saharan Africans, mostly from Mali and Senegal, became a major source of immigration from 1979 onward. These first significant migration flows were predominantly constituted of young, single adult males under 30 years of age brought to France (and other parts of Europe) to bolster its young and unskilled labor force.<sup>2</sup> The late 1970s and 1980s saw a feminization of migration with the reunion of families in particular under the spouse visa arrangement.

Geographically, French Muslims tend to live predominantly in the eastern part of the country, and tend to settle in highly urbanized and industrialized western and northern areas.<sup>3</sup> In terms of employment outcomes and social mobility, one-third of the current Muslim employees are found in low-skilled factory labor (32.9%), following a similar working pattern as their migrant parents. Compared to the overall French population, Muslims are exceptionally young with over 60% between 18 and 34 years.<sup>4</sup> Although children of migrants did not themselves experience migration, they have a direct relation with this migratory experience through their parents. This experience finds some of its expression in the transmission of their parents' cultural and religious affiliations in particular in relation to Islamic religiosity.

*Measuring Religiosity*

In this paper, we conceptualize religiosity in terms of participation in Islamic rituals and practices as well as ways of everyday life that are underpinned by the norms/tenets/ethics of Islam. Our research findings from interviews with Muslim residents in Grenoble and Lyon show that there are intensities of Islamic religiosity that vary with age, place of birth, ethnicity, gender and generation. In this paper, we focus particularly on the voices of Muslim religious leaders, a cohort who have been demonized within the Western public sphere but the focus of little in-depth research. We believe that their insights are valuable in contributing to a politics that affirms the contribution of Islam in Western societies. The paper draws on contemporary scholarship that acknowledges that religious leaders, particularly Imams, have a difficult role to play in multi-ethnic/multi-faith

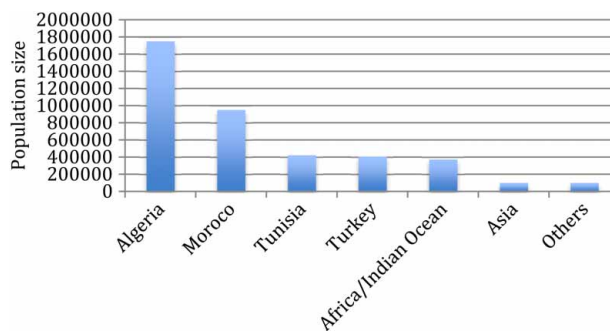


Figure 1. French Muslim population by country of origin. Source: *Trajectoires et Origines*, INED-INSEE, 2008.

Western societies.<sup>5</sup> For example, the spiritual training of these religious leaders is under scrutiny, but yet they are expected to negotiate emerging tensions between the state and religious communities that focus on security, religious extremism and counter-terrorism. In addition, even though they are frequently stereotyped as inciting hatred within a diverse Islamic diaspora, they must also assume leadership and responsibility in addressing the risk of radicalization among disenfranchised and angry youth that threatens to produce disharmony rather than peace.

Compared to other migrants of non-Muslim background, such as Italians and Spaniards, who also migrated to France at this time, religiosity and the importance given to religion are more significant among Muslim migrants and their descendants<sup>6</sup> (Table 1). Simon and Tiberj distinguish three mechanisms of religious intergenerational transmission:

- (1) *Secularization* through which the religion of the parents is abandoned or their levels of religiosity are less than those of their parents;
- (2) *Reproduction* by which their religiosity is similar to those of their parents;
- (3) *Reinforcement* through which the descendants' religiosity is higher than that of their parents.<sup>7</sup>

For young French Muslims, the intergenerational religious transmission finds its expression through these three processes. Depending on their degree of religiosity, they may encounter tensions and difficulties of integrating and engaging in French society as citizens. This is articulated by one of the Imams interviewed in Grenoble for the current study:

There is a big challenge. The parents who came here to work in France, they are hardworking and respectable people. [And, with] The children who have grown up here and attended their [French] school; at some stage there is a blockage. (Imam Bechir, 2014)

### *Negotiating a Balance*

While many French Muslims succeed in living and practising their faith while maintaining a feeling of belonging to French society, others have difficulties in reconciling their parents' faith with the demands of an aggressive French secular state<sup>8</sup> in which they are expected to assimilate. This is the "blockage" which is underlined by the Imam in Grenoble. Surprisingly the majority of French Muslims negotiate a fine balance between the demands of their Muslim identity and French citizenship through what can be termed a modernist *identity tinkering*,<sup>9</sup> while others attempt to assimilate and

Table 1. Importance given to religion by Muslim migrants and their descendants.

Country of Origin	Migrants %	Descendants %
Algeria	77	73
Morocco and Tunisia	77	77
African Sahel	84	88
Guinean and Central Africa	77	64
Turkey	73	73

Source: Trajectoires et Origines, INED-INSEE, 2008.

render this identity dichotomy non-existent (“I am here, I live in France, so I am French”).<sup>10</sup> However, a small minority, already in rupture with society, have not found a symbiosis between their migrant heritage and French culture.<sup>11</sup> Olivier Roy argues it is difficult to classify the various expressions of Islam in a secularized context.<sup>12</sup> For example, some religious leaders may support the wearing of the *hijab* without wanting its imposition, while at the same time condemning radical Islamism. The religious discourse then becomes one of values, faith and the private sphere rather than a religious normative discourse dictating personal behaviour within a secular polity.<sup>13</sup>

According to French sociologist Hugues Lagrange, the Islamic revival at the level of beliefs and practices is a youth phenomenon found particularly among migrant youth who arrived in France before the age of 16 rather than those who arrived at an adult age.<sup>14</sup> What these youth do not find in the Republic, they seek in their faith. In other words, religious revivalism is a social indicator that the state, through its key institutions, is failing to generate sufficient hope and connectedness; thus leaving a social gap that is being increasingly occupied by alternative, often radical, Islamic ideologies.

Indeed, for the last 20 years, an imported Salafist proselytism has gained ground in France particularly among the young disenfranchised Muslims of the *banlieues*,<sup>15</sup> and has preached and imposed stricter practices, such as wearing the *niqab* for women. This specific current within Islam has a more normative religious discourse defined by binary codes of good and evil (*halal/haram*) and is enforced through communitarian boundaries.<sup>16</sup> Among the nearly five million French Muslims, the Salafist minority includes no more than between 12,000 and 15,000 individuals.<sup>17</sup> Although these individuals espouse a more fundamentalist approach to Islam, often in contradiction with the values of the French Republic as well as the silent Muslim majority, they do not necessarily advocate violent *jihad*. In fact, if a comparison is drawn with the 1200 French foreign fighters who departed for Syria and Iraq,<sup>18</sup> the Jihadists represent a very small fraction of the fundamentalist fringe (approximately 10%). Contemporary scholarship suggests that the majority of Salafis are peaceful and the greater knowledge of Islam often inoculates individuals against extremism.<sup>19</sup> So while those in the fundamentalist Salafi fringe may not all advocate for a violent *jihad*, they do provide, through their proselytism, a fertile ground for radicalization by exploiting Muslim youth’s feeling of disenfranchisement and alienation.

### *A Visible Minority*

With the first series of Islamist terrorist attacks in the summer of 1995 perpetrated by French Algerian youth Khaled Kelkal,<sup>20</sup> the 2005 riots in the *banlieues*,<sup>21</sup> the killings in Montauban and Toulouse in 2012 of paratroopers and Jewish schoolchildren by Mohamed Merah,<sup>22</sup> and the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in January 2015, French Muslims have become a hyper visible minority at the centre of public debate and social relegation. While a great majority of French citizens hold favorable opinions about Islam,<sup>23</sup> media have played a critical and decisive role in the creation of a reductionist binary image of Islam where the moderate Muslim majority is juxtaposed and often overshadowed in public debates by the radical more visible minority.<sup>24</sup> In fact, a semantic shift can be observed in French media and political discourses by which the “migrant” became the “Muslim”, leading to the spread of anti-Muslim sentiments and a more pronounced wave of Islamophobia that followed the attacks of 9/11 in America. Anti-Muslim sentiments in France (and other parts of Europe) can be understood as a response to a combination of hyper media visibility, difficulties of integration and terrorist attacks.<sup>25</sup> The debate about national identity in 2009, which evolved around the status of Islam

in France, and the related debate about *laïcité* in 2011, have further stigmatized French Muslims:

France is afraid of Muslims and Islam and will never accept them as equal citizens. We are not allowed to have proper mosques, nor can we have Islamic schools. (Imam, Grenoble, 2014)

With the increased visibility of Muslims and the media coverage of terrorist events associated with Islam, Muslims have become problematically linked by French institutions and their leaders to notions of insecurity and violence and French media routinely present Islam as threatening, alien and perilous.<sup>26</sup> What is more problematic, however, is that Islam as a religion is often portrayed as posing a “threat towards the laws of the Republic, towards secularity, towards liberty of expression and women’s rights”.<sup>27</sup> Put simply, Islam is painted as incompatible with French secular republican values by the media channels. While French people largely have a positive perception of Islam<sup>28</sup> in general, they do not however believe that Islam is compatible with democracy.<sup>29</sup> And, therefore this reduces the value of Islam significantly not only as a legitimate communitarian religion, but also as the basis for individual spiritual connection.

Undoubtedly, there continues to be a *malaise* and anxiety within French society about the increasing visibility of Islam; which is probably best captured in the book *Submission* written by controversial French writer Michel Houellebecq.<sup>30</sup> Ironically, the book was published on the same day that the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks took place. The question of Islam in France, however, cannot be understood solely within the terms of its conflation with terrorism, but rather in relation to its undesired *visibility* in the public sphere. Today, there is consensus in French society that there is no place for religious expressions or symbols.<sup>31</sup> In fact the visibility of religion in the public sphere is seen as threatening the French secular state, and the nature of French citizenship.<sup>32</sup> Rajeev Bhargava questions such “aggressive secularism that results in one-sided exclusion that precludes intervention by religion in state affairs but justifies state interventions that inhibit religious freedom”.<sup>33</sup> A close examination of the discourse of Islamic religiosity by French Muslim religious leaders is therefore timely and relevant.

### **Conceptualizing Islamic Religiosity**

A discourse of Islamic religiosity by French Muslim religious leaders emerged through a close examination and analysis of relevant literature and in-depth interviews conducted in Lyon and Grenoble. In this paper, Islamic religiosity is defined in terms of a minimal scale that contains the two key dimensions of faith and practice: belief in the basic tenets of Islam, performance of religious rituals, and observance of overall religious norms as they pertain to personal behaviour.

In the context of secular France it is important to acknowledge that while a majority of Muslims identify themselves as being of “Muslim culture” or of “Muslim origin” they do not necessarily self-identify as practising Muslims. In fact, an important empirical distinction must be made between those who hold the Islamic belief at a cultural level and those who practise religious rituals such as the prayer, observance of Ramadan and adhere to strict dietary requirements, such as the consumption of *halal* food and non-alcoholic drinks. According to a French study conducted in 2011, 75% of the respondents who identified as being of “Muslim origin” identified as believers, but only 41% indicated that they perform religious rituals and 25% attend mosque; in addition a significant number (34%) declared they did not follow religious rituals at all.<sup>34</sup> The remaining

individuals of “Muslim origin” declared that they had no religious affiliation and were simply of “Muslim culture”.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, and in many ways, Islamic religiosity in France has become an individualistic rather than a communitarian pursuit.

From the discussion so far, it follows then that religion is experienced in a modern form through the tripartite of beliefs, religious practices and collective identity as elaborated by Talal Asad.<sup>36</sup> Through the politicization of Islam, the notions of belonging and believing have become more important but also disconnected. A person’s religiosity changes through the increasing disjunction and multiple interactions of beliefs, religious practices and collective identity: “A person can believe, without behaving or belonging; can belong without believing or behaving; or can behave without believing.”<sup>37</sup>

Tariq Ramadan goes further by purporting that “there is no Islamic conscience without a social conscience, and no social conscience without any political conscience”.<sup>38</sup> Ramadan advocates for what he calls a *religiosité citoyenne* or *citoyenneté religieuse* (religious citizenship) by which the act of believing is conjugated with a determined social act. His notion of religiosity is more socially centred and calls for the emergence of a more civic Islam. According to Ramadan:

For Muslims to understand who they are and what they stand for means that they are able to determine their identity *per se*, according to their Islamic references, and no longer through the image that others develop of them, as if they were but some objects of some alien elaboration. It is only by acting in this way that European Muslims will feel that they are subjects of their own history, accountable before God, responsible before mankind. To be subjects of their own history also means that they will eventually go beyond this pernicious feeling of being foreigners, of being different, of being an obvious manifestation of an insoluble problem. By having a clear awareness of their identity, a new sentiment will grow, based on a more rooted self-confidence, and this will enable them to realize that their presence can be positive, that they can provide Europe with more spirituality, and a greater sense of justice and brotherhood along with a greater involvement in solidarity.<sup>39</sup>

## Participants and Data Collection

Twenty interviews were conducted with religious and community leaders, as well as members of the Muslim communities, in the cities of Grenoble and Lyon in 2014. The religious leaders included *imams* and *sheiks* from mosques and smaller places of worship. Some play significant roles both at the community and state level and are engaged in interfaith dialogue, and cultural and educational activities. This article focuses on the discourse of Islamic religiosity among religious leaders in France, and how such discourses reveal diverse approaches and understandings of Islamic religiosity in the context of secular French society. The empirical insights reported in this article focus not on the diversity but also on the fragmentation of religious leadership discourses, which can have a direct impact on young French Muslims’ perspectives on civic engagement and social belonging. For the purpose of anonymity, religious leaders have been de-identified and pseudonyms are used in place of respondent names.

## Muslim Leadership and the Question of Islamic Visibility in French Society

For the participating *imams*, the question of *visibility* of Islamic religiosity is an important one that distinguishes intensities, degrees or levels of Islamic religiosity. Predominantly,

greater significance is given to the degree of observance of Islamic norms/ethics rather than to the *visibility* of religiosity through rituals and practices (although visibility of certain religious norms remains essential to a Muslim's piety). This *visibility* to which a radical minority of religious leaders and Muslim followers are particularly attached has become problematic in the hyper mediatized French debate about Islam. More critically perhaps is that this polemical debate tends to overshadow the orientations and social contributions of a great majority of Muslims who often embrace a moderate approach towards Islamic religiosity, *albeit* with less emphasis on a visible observance of Islamic ethics and norms.

This contested notion of observance of Islamic norms and ethics is undeniably significant, particularly in understanding Muslim adaptation and integration in the context of French secularism, where religious *visibility* is inherently problematic. Without denying Islamic heterogeneity in France, two types of Islamic leadership can be distinguished. While rituals and practices are important for some *imams*, ethics or deeds are often more significant than other aspects of faith; including the visible observance of certain norms. Inward faith and observance of deeds, therefore, become more important than the outward signs of Islamic religiosity. These religious leaders preach an Islam that is based on tolerance, acceptance and fraternity with more of an outward orientation, whereas the others who form a radical minority follow a more closed type of Islamic faith that is more communitarian and inward in its outlook vis-à-vis society and the French state.

Focussing on the outward, almost cosmopolitan tendencies within the more progressive approaches to Islamic faith, a number of religious leaders advocate passionately for an *outward*-oriented version of Islam. They argue that this approach can be defined as one that spreads a peaceful message of tolerance and love of the Prophet, and which is open and inclusive of differences:

We try always to transmit the message with wisdom, through discussion, with the best arguments and this is what is thought in our religion. Islam is a religion of openness towards all, of cohabitation with others. The Prophet, when he was in Medina at the mosque, he received the Christians of Najran. And, when they wanted to do their prayers, the companions of the Prophet were a little reluctant but the Prophet let them pray in the mosque. So, we cannot now say nor listen to those rumors that suspect Islam is a closed religion, a religion of intolerance. No, Islam is not a religion of restraints. It is a religion of peace, tolerance, and openness to all. [...] Islam is a religion of transparence [*sic.*]. It is an Islam of openness, an Islam of good heart towards all.<sup>40</sup>

This Islam often manifests in an engagement with the wider French society through positive intercultural relations and inclusive interfaith activities. These religious leaders play an important role in engaging their own communities as well as non-Muslim groups through grassroots interfaith activities. According to Imam Bechir in Lyon:

This mosque is a mosque that has very often a seat in councils and inter-communitarian and interfaith organisations. Very often we are members of these councils and intercultural organisation such as the association of the sons of Abraham, the association Open Hands, and we also organise open days.

### *The Pedagogical Role of Religious Leadership*

Religious leadership is vital to creating an openness of the mind and involves building an understanding of each other, of each other's culture and of each other's religion. Such a



leadership defines Islam not only as a faith but also as a pedagogical tool that allows Muslim migrants and their descendants to integrate while still recognizing their own unique cultural distinctiveness, thereby contributing positively to diversity. As such, faith is not a sterile sentiment; it manifests in social behaviour. Imam Bechir characterizes this as a form of “triangulation” within Islam:

The faith of a Muslim translates outwardly by acts such as religious practices and rituals but at the same time [also] by a good behaviour towards others; that is the fruit of his faith. If I had to draw something that would illustrate Islam, I would say it is a tree that has a trunk. It is faith. The branches of this tree are the religious rituals and practices. The fruits are the good behaviours. Therefore, what would be the purpose of a tree without fruit? It is like a cloud without rain.

This allegory is particularly useful in understanding why the notion of the deed can be more important than the notion of religious *visibility* in an outward Islam. Through this framework a Muslim becomes a good Muslim by reaching out to others and society—he or she becomes an active citizen through his or her own daily actions. This captures the idea of religious citizenship put forward by Ramadan and other contemporary Muslim thinkers, such as Fethullah Gulen and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, who underline that religious practices are important but not sufficient if they do not command the individual to embrace “good behaviour” and universal ethics as mechanisms for better social relations and political engagement. Some religious leaders strongly feel it is the role of religious and community leaders to instil through their teachings these notions of universal ethics and good civic behaviour. Everyday good deeds, therefore, become more important than the *visibility* of religious rituals and practices. Imam Ahmed in Lyon explains further how this becomes even more important within the context of French Muslim youth:

I am a strong believer in behaving and doing things practically and hopefully our behaviour will be enough to overcome these problems. When we strive to be successful, to be active in positive ways, to support our children’s education ... I would say our priority should be our youth. They need to see good role models and they need to be supported. They can only succeed if they have a good education, otherwise they will face more problems both social and economic.

Such religious leadership is preaching an Islam of tolerance that distinguishes itself from a more visible inward Islam advocated by the more conservative minority of Muslims in France. While outward Islam emphasizes ethics and deeds, an inward-oriented Islam exhibits a narrow, sometimes literal, interpretation of the Islamic Scriptures, focusing mainly on the rituals, restrictions and prohibitions. According to religious leaders who advocate an inward Islam, a comprehensive knowledge of the Scriptures becomes critical. The dimension of knowledge within Islamic religiosity becomes equally important in shaping one’s observance of ethics and norms. But, an Islam that propagates a narrow understanding of the religious teachings limited to *visibility* and prohibitions is perceived as problematic, as it propagates and reinforces a negative image of Islam. As Imam Bechir explains:

There are individuals now that give a bad image of Islam and a bad example in relation to their understanding of the text. I have spoken about the literary

understanding of the text, which is about comprehending the text through its letters and not through its finality. In the latter, we will close doors and the space of the forbidden will become predominant although in Islam everything is permissible, except certain things that are indicated in the text. But we cannot close the door to others. Everything becomes illicit, everything becomes forbidden. They find themselves forbidding certain things without any knowledge nor literary understanding [of the Scriptures]. This [current within Islam] is followed by individuals that are called Salafists. They have an understanding of Islam that is about appearances [visibility]. [...] However, you can find someone who is always with us at the mosque, but then [propagate] insults and has a bad attitude despite observing the prayer, fast during Ramadan and doing the *hajj*; he adopts the *visibility* of Islam and once outside the mosque he oppresses others, frauds, insults. [...] Islam is not a religion of appearances but a religion of the heart. [...] Acts are based on intention; it is intention that changes an act, an habitual act to an act of devotion, or a good act into a bad act or vice versa. It is intention that inspires the act. Good intention, good faith. We can change our relation to God, horizontally towards people and circularly towards one's self. This is perfection. [...] You should have the presence of God in your acts [...]. (Imam Bechir, Lyon, 2014)<sup>41</sup>

#### *Compatibility with French Laïcité*

According to these religious leaders, Islam is not perceived to be incompatible with French *laïcité*. In fact the degree of importance of the *visibility* of Islamic religiosity and the emphasis on the deeds rather than *visibility* can be better understood within the French context of secularism. While French Muslims have had to adapt to an increasingly aggressive version of secularism (particularly with the rise of the French far right political party Front National) which relegates its visibility from the public to the private sphere, it has managed to adapt to its socio-political environment by focusing on individual faith and observance of deeds rather than the external manifestation of the faith. This is what Oliver Roy describes as the “individualization of Islam”<sup>42</sup> where there is higher valorization of faith, primordial significance of individual choice and rationalization of belief.

While an everyday Islam has adapted to survive the aggressive tendencies within French *laïcité*, a reactionary minority of religious leaders, out of a deep sense of alienation, have retreated and found refuge in a communitarian Islamic identity. Such an identity is defined around the notions of *haram* versus *halal* and where the notion of *visibility* in asserting this identity becomes even more critical. One religious leader interviewed explains why this retreat from society to religion is significant in a non-Muslim country such as France:

We find refuge in our religion; it gives us strength and inner belief. We think this is the land of God so we will stay here but we have to be careful when we deal with the non-Muslims. We have to remain vigilant if we want to survive. (Imam Kareem, Grenoble, 2014)

The way religious leaders approach, preach and practise Islam within France helps determine whether Muslims fully integrate into French society or not. By focusing on deeds and individual faith, accommodation and adaptation become possible. Believers are presented with a paradigm that goes beyond belonging to community or assertion of a

communitarian identity. According to these religious leaders, it is this paradigm that allows Muslims to adapt to new host societies:

We can adapt; there are no objections at all, nor any restrictions in regards to our religious practices. We are free to practice here at the mosque or at home. No one can influence you and no one can oblige you to do something. However, we live in a society that is neither mine nor ours and we have to adapt properly and to live in mutual respect. [If] he or she who has only a literal understanding of the text that limits itself to the *visibility*, therefore he or she may or may not be able to understand that finality [of Islam]. By focusing on the finality, we can adapt correctly and appropriately without constraining our religion and at the same time without causing conflict with others. (Imam Bechir, Lyon, 2014)

### **Role of Religious Leadership in Navigating Tensions**

The focus on values of individual faith and universal ethics among leaders is particularly important when dealing with young people and converts who may already be experiencing a sense of alienation and discrimination, and who have a very limited knowledge of their religion. As the cases of Mohamed Merah and the Kouachi brothers (the *Charlie Hebdo* attack perpetrators) have shown, without proper religious pedagogical guidance, there is a risk for some to be attracted to radical religious leaders. Very often these are individuals who are already experiencing social difficulties; they are often uneducated, unemployed and petty criminals. As Imam Bechir explained:

The biggest challenge is at the youth level. They have no professional situation; they have no job, no adequate training that could alleviate their level [of life]. But there is failure at school; the prisons are filled with Muslims. 80% to 85% of the prisoners are Muslims. It starts with aggression and racketeering among them. To survive they create small illegal markets such drugs dealing. And, as it works and very quickly they become rich instead of considering to earn money appropriately, and this unfortunately a serious social scourge. (Imam Bechir, Lyon, 2014)

Religious leaders, in this context, see the lack of religious knowledge as a reason why so many young men have departed to fight in Syria. In 2015, France accounts for approximately 1200 French foreign fighters, in Syria and in Iraq mostly aged between 16 and 30 years.

I suffer now when I see someone who is 18 years old, 20 years old or 22 years old to leave for Syria without even having a small knowledge of Islam, the objectives of Islam and its finality. He leaves and he says “So, I am going to kill there, I want to be a martyr and save. Seventy percent of my family will go to paradise”. (Imam Bechir, Lyon, 2014)

These religious leaders feel they have failed in their responsibility to provide guidance to these young Muslims.

It is indispensable to teach first, transmit [knowledge] through wisdom and discussion, to give an instructional basis to the people who want to convert to Islam [and young people who are drifting]. If they don't find answers [to their questions] with us, then they find them elsewhere. This is why I say that we have

failed in our work and if we had done our work, we would not have reached this stage [departures for Syria] today. (Imam Bechir, Lyon, 2014)

Religious leadership in Islam is particularly critical as they play a significant role in guiding and shaping their community and the individual members of that community. Understanding discourses of Islamic religiosity by listening to the vision and voices of religious leaders is particularly revealing because they have the potential to shape attitudes within a diverse Muslim community. It is this vision that provides insights into reaction and interaction with French society, determines whether there can be a French Islam as well as how or whether this Islam can be accommodated within French secularity in ways that promote civic engagement and active citizenship.

According to Imam Bechir, the role of a religious leader is:

... to convey the message with wisdom and we try to do this in consideration of our responsibility, which is a critical responsibility. In the end, what are we here? We are vicars<sup>43</sup> on earth, and a vicar is a representative who represents God on earth to do good and to promote good. To do this, we always act with hope and trust. Our objective is to transmit with gentleness and wisdom. Whether we have the means or not, we have to fight [to transmit this message and values], we have to act. (Imam Bechir, Lyon, 2014)

Another religious leader, Imam Badawi, who subscribe to a more conservative interpretation of Islam also agrees on the importance of teaching Islam:

Unfortunately, many of our people here do not understand the religion very well. They perform it like they are eating fast food ... no meditation, no inner submission, nor real connection to God ... it's just a matter of habit ... and our job is to teach them better. (Imam Badawi, Grenoble, 2014)

The values and teachings advocated by religious leaders often represent the core basis that will shape the individual's understanding of not only their faith, their community and society but also their place in their community and in the wider French society. This is particularly significant when it comes to young French Muslims or converts who may already feel marginalized and are in need of spiritual guidance and a certain sense of belonging, meaning and purpose which French society has thus far denied them.

What is really difficult for young Muslims is this non-recognition of Islam in the public space, the lack of representation of places of worship. A part of the youth rejects this, and [espouses] a fringe Islam that advocates adverse ideas of the host country. They say that this country does not respect us and, here, we are in the extreme. This is a dangerous factor. We need politicians to give appropriate space for Islam so that the Muslims can feel at home instead of feeling targeted, marginalized. If not, he [*sic.*] will reject and this manifests in alienation and calls to leave the country. This is a negative point. (Imam Ahmed, Grenoble, 2014)

### **Fragmentation of Religious Leadership**

In the aftermath of the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris and in light of the increasing and dangerous appeal of Islamic State (IS) among young Muslims in France and other parts of Europe, a fragmented leadership is deeply problematic. The fragmentation of French Islamic leadership can partly be understood as a reactionary manifestation of

Islam's interaction with French *laïcité*, but it is also symptomatic of tensions and internal division within Islam itself. The result of which has the ability to push French Muslim youth further away from mainstream society and towards adopting increasingly anti-social violent behaviours. Such a behaviour is characterized as exhibiting a literal, minimal and communitarian understanding of Islam centred around *visibility* and the domain of the forbidden and permissible—the *haram* and the *halal*.

Frankly, today, the exported religious discourse leaves little space to spirituality and gives more space to practices, or in other words the [religious] law. [...] The problem is that when you speak of practices, it refers to the law. The religious discourse today is the one that permits or forbids whereas the discourse focused on faith is diminishing. Here, [in France] we need both the law and the faith, and shouldn't have to choose between the two. Moderation is the solution. (Imam Hameed, Grenoble, 2014)

According to Dousset this process of rendering Islam more focused on external visibility among younger Muslims can sometimes take the form of “re-Islamisation and the development of [...] a gestural, a certain discourse and an Islamic dress code and a scrupulous faithfulness towards religious teachings coupled with demands for a much more active citizenship”.<sup>44</sup>

For fringe conservative religious leadership, the sense of alienation is so great that they describe France as foreign to them and as a promoter of the oppression of Muslims:

We live in a land of *kafir* [unbelievers] and we are not treated well. [Take] For example, Australia [which] was part of the invasion of Iraq. They [Australia, like France] are our enemy. Their agenda is to subjugate Islam and Muslims and keep them in their place. [...] I have lived in this area since 1985 and I have never witnessed any positive interaction with the French authorities. They do not like us to establish Islamic schools, they do not help our youth and they attack our Muslim countries. So, that is why we can't trust them even when we have to come in contact with them. [...] Our Muslim youth should not interact or collaborate with the *kafir*, because they will always reject us. (Imam Badawi, Grenoble, 2014)

Religious leaders find themselves in a position where to teach only about God is no longer enough. They need to teach in a way that brings the believer closer to all dimensions of Islam: how faith in God translates into religious practices and rituals that unfold as good social behaviour, ethical responsibility as well as civic and social engagement. Islam appears to have the qualities and values to help disillusioned young men to fully participate in their community and integrate in France:

There are many youths who come here at the mosque to pray and listen [to our preaching]. They find the real values of Islam, which helps them to integrate [society] but with globalisation and the Internet, there is always manipulators. And for a youth who has no job and no income, he retreats into marginalization [and becomes an easy prey for more radical preachers]. (Imam Ahmed, Grenoble, 2014)

Young French Muslims tend to live their religiosity within the contours of the *visibility* paradigm and therefore often experience the exclusion of their religion from the public sphere as an intense experience of societal rejection. For the minority of Muslim youth who follow a visible Islam, religiosity is a tool of identity and resistance. According to reli-

gious leaders, young people who follow a more visible strand of Islam in France are those who did not have a religious education since their early childhood. Family, they argue, is the first place for religious education, and too often the role is left to the mosque.

I think there is a problem of pedagogy, of comprehension of Islam among the youth. You know, in general, most of the youth in France follows too much the *visibility*. These are the youths who did not follow a religious curriculum since their childhood. As they experience the dislocation of their families, they discover Islam. At 25 years old, it is radicalisation, and this is why it is this category of youths today who have a problem of *visibility*, and not those who have received a religious education in their family. Very balanced, this category [of young people] does not have a problem of *visibility* of Muslim identity, but those who discovered Islam at 25 years old; they have experienced a problem of societal rupture and rejection. (Imam Hameed, Grenoble, 2014)

Religious leaders and Muslim families are also facing the new challenge of addressing the circulation of information through social media and its impact on the French Muslim youth:

Our biggest challenge is the exported discourse through the Internet. This has really damaged our community. Such a *fatwa* declared by a *mufti* from Saudi Arabia that forbids or allows something is not necessarily applicable here in France, and I think that it is not a challenge only link to France but it is everywhere. (Imam Hameed, Grenoble, 2014)

The role of religious education needs to be questioned and see how it can contribute in assisting young Muslims to become full-fledged citizens.

### *Mosques as Vectors of Counter-radicalization*

With Europe experiencing an increasing number of terrorist attacks, mosques are now perceived to be places where individuals become exposed to narrow teachings of Islam and ideas that lead to their radicalization and potential engagement in political violence. Heated debates are currently taking place in Europe about a closer monitoring of mosques. In fact, Western secular countries, particularly in France where there is a quasi-sacralization of *laïcité*, tend to interpret this symbol of Islamic identity, particularly Muslim demands for building mosques, as an alien and an aggressive assertion of a particular religious identity, which they often view as being incompatible with secularity. In France, the lack of sufficient religious places for worship has led to Muslims praying in the streets of public places—a practical solution perceived by many as a spilling of the religious into the public secular sphere, if not “an occupation” of the national territory. In Switzerland, demands for the building of new mosques met resistance in 2009 with a referendum effectively banning the building of new mosques in the country. In 2010, the rector of the Myrha street mosque in Paris XVIII district, Salah Hamza, explained that he fears incidents when he sees people praying in the street on Friday prayers. “It is with a heavy heart that we pray in the street. We need space. That’s all. Give us space and you will not see anyone pray outside”, he declared.<sup>45</sup> To cater to the needs of the five millions French Muslims, of which an estimated 500,000–1.5 million attend prayers, the praying surface would need to double in size from its current 300,000 square meters.<sup>46</sup>

In 2012, France counted 2449 Muslim places of worship—a number that has doubled since 2000—but with only 64 proper mosques (Figure 2).<sup>47</sup> Muslim places of worship in France are generally modest cultural or community centres and are often very discrete. Mosques are mostly in urban areas, and only represent 1% of the Muslim places of worship. In comparative terms, there is one church for every 275 Christians while there is one place of worship for every 1200 Muslims.<sup>48</sup> Many of these worship places are small, and cannot cater for the needs of a growing community. These statistics paint a very different image and challenge the dominant discourse of a threatening Muslim omnipresence in France.

Mosques play undeniably an important role at the heart of any Muslim community as a physical and spiritual place of gathering where a community of believers comes together to commune. Very often, however, their role as places for socialization, civic engagement and social insertion are often overlooked and misunderstood.

For many religious leaders in France the mosque is a place through which they can reach out to Muslim youth who live in the margins of society and are at risk of falling in delinquency. Imam Ahmed in Grenoble explains:

I see young Muslims every day and they are lost and not sure where to go for help. The local authorities treat them with suspicion; some of them have been dealing in drugs and other illegal activities. We are now trying to help them, and take them off the streets. The local mosque, with its many educational activities, is helping a lot. It is important for us, religious leaders, to try to embrace these young men and steer them to the right path. We are going to be here forever, and we might as well work out how to survive and coexist with others. (Imam Ahmed, Grenoble, 2014)

In fact, Islam has the qualities and values to help these young men to fully participate in their community and integrate in the French society.

A religious leader explains that before a mosque was built many of the youth were engaged in criminal activities in his neighbourhood of Grenoble. The police were afraid to patrol the area unless they came with at least 20 patrol cars. But after the mosque was built, this religious and social space created peace and youth learnt about

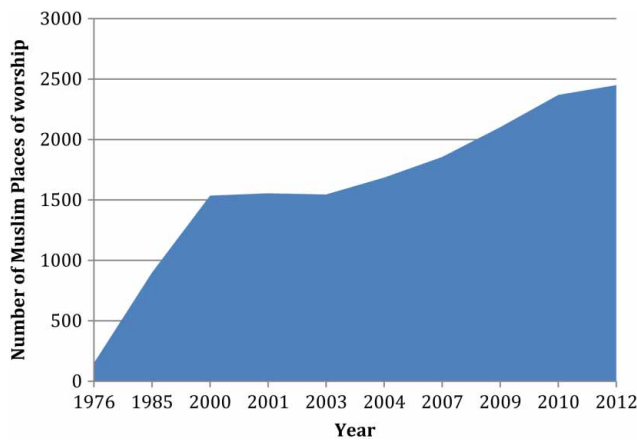


Figure 2. Number of Muslim places of worship in France, 1976–2012. Source: French Ministry of Interior and Cults.

Islam in ways that made them more positive and active. The presence of mosques as places of socialization, spirituality, guidance and education had the effect of distancing youth from more anti-social behaviour:

As a religious leader, I want these youths to impregnate themselves of their religion to help France, to fortify France and to enrich France rather than to retreat in themselves, to sulk and to withdraw [from society]. (Imam Ahmed, Grenoble, 2014)

And, therefore the role of mosques is important in actively engaging French Muslim youth, assisting in creating feelings of belonging and avoiding outbreaks of violent anti-social behaviour:

... The solution is to build mosques because where there are mosques, they bring back peace and the youths [*sic*] start to be educated again, to respect themselves, to respect family, and they start to find small jobs and build families, and they come out of the margins towards normal life and [ultimately] citizenship. (Imam Ahmed, Grenoble, 2014)

Accessing education and employment is viewed as essential in the distancing and disengagement from violent anti-social behaviour and criminality among French Muslim youth. Indeed mosques can play a central role in facilitating feelings of inclusion. The role of the mosque, Islamic centres or prayer rooms, has facilitated the support of a majority of youth who try to live as good Muslims while at the same time not rejecting French society and the culture in which they live, according to Imam Ahmed.

In other words, mosques have become more than simple places of worship, particularly, in countries such as France where there is an increasing number of young people who are drifting away from society. Mosques are not simply “a space between four walls” and religious leaders are no longer there to simply teach about God. They have become places of spiritual guidance, parenting, education, socialization, training and civic engagement. In wake of the departures of many young French Muslims to fight alongside ISIS (IS in Iraq and Syria) overseas, it is becoming obvious that mosques could serve as important vectors of counter-radicalization for young people who feel lost and in search of meaning and purpose in their life, rather than places of extremism.

There is no denial, however, that a minority of places of worship (estimated at 89 out of the 2445) under radical Salafist influence are tarnishing the positive role that many religious leaders at mosques play in engaging Muslim youth across France. In fact, Salafist hi-jacking attacks<sup>49</sup> deliberately establish “religious” centres in close proximity to what they perceive as corrupted places of worship in an attempt to bring down and delegitimize those religious leaders who preach a progressive open Islam of tolerance and peace. Forty-one places of worship are currently facing these types of attacks and are becoming attractive to young people.<sup>50</sup>

With their increasingly evolving and demanding role, the pressure is mounting on religious leadership to play a more proactive role of social containment. But the critical question remains as to the availability of adequate infrastructure as well as state support towards assisting leaders in shielding youth from radicalization and contributing to their integration within French society. The question of building mosques in France and other places in Europe is no longer limited to the vexed issue of *visibility* of Islam, nor does it relate to an assertion of a particular identity; rather it is about engendering social integration, civic engagement and active citizenship to ensure a peaceful and harmonious community.



## Conclusion

In their study of the evolution of Islam and Muslim's secularization in Europe, Vaner, Heradstveit and Kazancigil identified three possible trajectories, two of which were an increased spirituality that focuses on inner faith rather than a normative Islam of *haram* and *halal*, and another where the increased spirituality expresses itself in the form of a claim of belonging to Islam in a non-Muslim and religiously pluralist environment which combines faith with a determined social act (*citoyenneté religieuse*).<sup>51</sup> While this study of religious leadership discourse on Islamic religiosity indicates that these trajectories are happening simultaneously, the assertion of some young French Muslim's religiosity and increased faith as a determined social act have taken on a new manifestation in reaction to the French Republic's response to the process of Muslim secularization and adaptation in France: that is the embrace of extremism and recruitment into ISIS.

This reflects common difficulties encountered by Muslim migrants in Western cities around issues of representation and legitimacy of those who claim to speak on behalf of Islam. Indeed, and especially in a post 9/11 environment, Muslims living as minorities in the West have been repeatedly asked to explain and at times dissociate themselves from those more radically violent elements of their faith and communities. Often, the emergence of second-generation Muslim youth willing to embrace violent extremism is accounted for in terms of failed community leadership. This paper has provided in-depth insights into the diversity, often including contradictory voices, within the French Muslim community. The paper argues that while certain radical voices within the religious leadership are able to draw and influence certain youth, as they emphasize a discourse of victimhood and binary values, others are chartering genuinely open and inclusive forms of Islamic religiosity capable of reconciling the demands of political and civic engagement with those core spiritual and theological requirements of the faith.

## NOTES

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7. Vincent Tiberj and Patrick Simon, "Vie Citoyenne et Participation Politique" [Citizen Life and Political Participation], in *Trajectoires Et Origines*, ed. Cris Beauchemin, Christelle Hamel et Patrick Simon, Paris: INED-INSEE, 2010, p. 128.
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9. Farhad Khosrokhavar, *L'islam Des Jeunes* [Youth Islam], Paris: Flammarion, 1997.
  10. Interview with religious leader in Lyon, October 2014.
  11. *Ibid.*
  12. Olivier Roy, "L'individualisation Dans L'islam Europeen" [Individualisation in European Islam], in *Paroles D'islam, Individus, Societes Et Discours Dans L'islam Europeen Contemporain* [Islamic Words. Individuals, Society and Discourses in Contemporary European Islam], ed. Felice Dassetto, Paris: Maisonneuve et Laros, 2000, pp. 87–88.
  13. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
  14. Lagrange, Hugues, *Pratique Religieuse Et Religiosity Parmi Les Immigres Et Les Descendants D'immigres Du Maghreb, D'afrique Sub-Saharienne Et De Turquie En France* [Religious Practices and Religiosity Among Immigrants and Their Descendants from the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa and Turkey in France], Notes et Documents de l'OSC [Notes and Documents of the OSC], Paris: Sciences Po, 2013.
  15. In France, the term *banlieue* has a very negative connotation. It usually describes, "a territory of exclusion, social relegation, marginalization in which the excluded accumulates, a place of violence, traffics and criminalities of all sorts take place" (in Zahra Amirsad, *Les Banlieues Francaises*, Berlin: Grin Verlag, 2013, p. 2).
  16. Roy, "Individualisation", *op. cit.*, p. 88.
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  23. Pew Research Centre, "Global Attitudes Survey", 2014.
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  26. Deltombe, [Islam Imaginaire], *op. cit.*
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  29. Pickel, [Understanding Common Ground], *op. cit.*, p. 30.
  30. Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission* [Submission], Paris: Flammarion, 2015.
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  34. IFOP, [Analyse: 1989–2011], *op. cit.*

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42. Roy, “Individualisation”, *op. cit.*; Olivier Roy, *L'Islam Mondialisé* [Globalized Islam], Paris: Seuil, 2002.
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