

Integrating Islam

A Conversation with Jonathan Laurence
Author (with Justin Vaisse), *Integrating Islam*
Assistant Professor of Political Science, Boston College

BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE
BOSTON COLLEGE, CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS
OCTOBER 4, 2006

Q: What do you see as the central challenges of integrating Muslims into French culture today?

A: There has been much progress in the integration process, which takes generations, not just a few years. In educational opportunities, especially at the elite level, the challenge now is making sure that children of immigrant origin can access spots in the top schools that lead to the top jobs, whether in government or business. And over the next twenty years, whether the glass ceiling is eliminated for many young Muslims who go on the job market with good qualifications will be a measure of how well the economy does.

Q: Do you see it as more of a structural challenge, then, rather than a cultural problem? That is, is this the same problem every immigrant group faces—that it needs to break into the political-economic structures of society to succeed?

A: There is definitely a cultural component to the problem as well. There's a feeling of relative deprivation amongst youth of immigrant origin who essentially bought into the French dream—meaning the universalistic values of Frenchness or "*francité*." But then society doesn't remove all of the stigmatizing elements of being of immigrant origin, of being of Muslim origin. This is not pure "Islamophobia," but rather is rooted in a very complex relationship between what is perceived as French and not-French.

Q: The universalistic language I think you're referring to—this bill of goods that has been sold to the current wave of Arab and other Muslim immigrants—predates the last 20 years of immigration. Given the very particular ways in which immigrant communities assimilate, how is the current wave of immigration different than those in the past?

A: It's not that different. It's perhaps slightly better organized because of technological advances in communication and a strong network of associations representing the Islam of these home states. But there is an equally strong network of associations and voluntary groups that are striving for something very different, whether it's a more politicized form of Islam or something else. There is a vibrant associational field of groups to which government can reach out when that's appropriate. That was not always the case for previous waves of immigrants, especially in France. For example, trade unions, schools, and the army did much of the work of integration for earlier generations. Those institutions aren't there for many immigrants today, so instead we are seeing a greater turn towards associations of the local civil society, which may be imported or home-grown. Therefore, there is a slight increase in community-mindedness that is likely here to stay. This is largely a question of interaction

between citizens and their government. With any interest group, politics is going to be a give and take.

Q: But previous generations of immigrants must have felt some of this disappointment also, and you're suggesting that they dealt with it by integrating themselves through these various associations, right?

A: The universalistic values I mentioned earlier promised certain rights and asked certain duties of all French citizens. They originated at a time when France was extraordinarily unequal in terms of social orders—still a feudal order. Fast-forward a couple hundred years, and you see the same values, which are inscribed in gold letters on the ceilings of the various official halls and institutions, being sold to a new group of immigrants. This group is being asked to make the effort to integrate, not in ways that are terribly different from previous groups, but in a much more self-conscious era of cultural identity.

Q: You start your book by describing some blatant misconceptions about the demographics of Muslims. Would a better-informed French polity change anything?

A: Well, the most common misconception is that Muslim birth rates are extraordinarily high. It doesn't take much digging to find the data on this. When you compare the birth rates of, say, a Tunisian woman who comes to France versus a native-born French woman, you find a gradual convergence. Now this isn't absolute and it hasn't run its full course, but the indications are that instead of 3.5- 4.5 children per woman, we're seeing something in the two to three range. The expectation is not that this is somehow culturally driven, but rather, as social scientists know, it is an interaction of people and families with their environment.

Q: Do you think that if the French citizenry knew this, things would change?

A: I'd say that fears of the "Islamic invasion," the "Eurabia" arguments, are more preponderant here than in other European nations. But it's going to come down to a matter of perspective and faith in public institutions and the integrating ability of democratic society. For example, you could say yes, birth rates have come down, but they are not at the sub-two level of so-called "native" European women; you could make a very strong, reasonable argument that is pessimistic and hard to prove or disprove. My book suggests that we look at the facts and consider their implications for domestic and foreign policy. What are the priorities of this immigrant group? What do they ask for? The answers are not what we expect. It's not a constant clamoring for justice for Palestine or the insurgency in Iraq or whatever Muslim immigrants are usually perceived as caring about. Like any other group, they're a population with various hopes and fears, including an interest in world affairs. But much higher on their list of priorities are things like jobs and housing and the environment. My book tries to clarify who French Muslims are in their full diversity, how governments have interacted with them and what the determinants of future interactions are likely to be. It is a somewhat optimistic portrait. There are some systemic problems, but there have also been honest and vigorous attempts by successive governments to do something about them.

Q. Are there other lessons we could learn that would be useful for the American context?

A: Just get to know the Muslim population in its full diversity. Don't necessarily be distracted by the loudest or the most provocative voices. Don't allow those who claim to be representative to speak on behalf of people without verifying whom they actually represent. That means getting to know the associations and prayer spaces that Muslims have created in America. Also, you don't have to use my somewhat rigid categories of state or official Islam versus politicized Islam, but this is an attempt to start nuancing the discussion. Be careful of collapsing real differences among people—it's often assumed that there is a collective "Muslim interest," but this crucial point has not been proven. At the very least, try to understand who people are when considering how best to integrate them into society.