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commentary

Practicing Islam in Dijon, France: Interviews with Muslim Residents

—Bridget Farmer (Edited by Kyle Flynn)

As the world becomes more interconnected and travel among countries and cultures increases, understanding how two cultures and/or religions can coexist is increasingly important. For Americans, as our country continues to be involved in the Middle East, it is especially important for us to learn more about Muslim religion and culture. I used my academic studies of political science, international affairs, and French to explore French law as it pertains to Muslim life in Dijon, France. Due mainly to immigration from North Africa following World War II, France has become home to Western Europe's largest Muslim community (Benhold, 2008). Currently, five to ten percent of Dijon's population is Muslim (Dijon Travel Information, 2009).

During the spring semester and summer of 2009, I lived as an exchange student in Dijon, a mid-sized provincial capital of the Burgundy region in east central France. After devoting the semester to familiarizing myself with Dijon and its traditions, I spent June and July observing life at five different locations, where I asked fourteen residents their opinions about practicing Islam in the city; about the French principle known as *laïcité*, which has inspired a series of laws; and about a proposed law to ban the wearing of the burka in public. (See Appendix) During these interviews, I also learned more about the religion of Islam.

My five weekly observation sites were in predominantly Muslim neighborhoods or in areas central to life in Dijon. They were Place Darcy, a park in downtown Dijon; the weekly open air food and clothing market in downtown; the shopping mall in Quetigny, a suburb of Dijon; Place Wilson, a park; and the Gresilles neighborhood. Twelve of the fourteen residents I interviewed were either practicing Muslims or of Muslim heritage. Six were born in France; the rest were immigrants from Algeria or Morocco, who had lived in France from three to thirty-two years. Half of the residents interviewed were female and half were male, and the ages ranged from nineteen to sixty-plus.



The author sitting on the fountain at Place François Rude in the center of Dijon.

Dijon and Religious Life

When I asked about religious life in Dijon, the responses were mostly positive. According to one young woman, "Dijon was a hard place to live at first, but it has definitely gotten better . . . the people are friendly here." The structure of Dijon's neighborhoods is such that immigrants of similar backgrounds are often placed in the same neighborhood, which may make the transition to life in Dijon easier for newcomers. While some residents described instances of religious intolerance in Dijon, overall the city seemed to be a welcoming and easy place to settle in and practice Islam.

These responses did not surprise me as Dijon already had a reputation for religious tolerance and integration. It is home to three mosques, a Muslim cultural center/school, and a Muslim outdoor market as well as a number of Catholic churches and a synagogue. Place Wilson, the rotary (which is also a park) on which I lived, is symbolic of integration in the city: a mosque, a Catholic Church, and a synagogue are near it. At times, the communities from these three establishments come together at the park to mingle and get to know one another.

Another example of integration is the neighborhood of Gresilles, which in the 1950s was predominantly Catholic with a number of low-income housing units and small family homes. As more and more Muslims and other immigrants began moving to Dijon, many were placed in the housing units in Gresilles. According to one Catholic resident, when the priest saw that the Muslims did not have a mosque nearby, he offered to rent them an unused section of the church as a temporary mosque. Relations between the Catholics and Muslims flourished during the years that the mosque and church were in the same building. Apprehensions about each other disappeared as each religion learned about the other. Once the mosque was built and the priest was reassigned, the relations between the two religions weakened. Even so, many of the residents in the neighborhood continue to see everyone as neighbors.

Other areas of Dijon are less integrated and tolerant than is Gresilles. Two girls whom I interviewed told of going to the large, downtown market after the Friday mosque service, both wearing headscarves. There, a man approached and told them that they should be ashamed of themselves and of their religion, which forced them to cover up. They should be “more French,” he said. This expression of intolerance, however, was balanced by another shopper’s comment. The girls continued shopping, and later a woman told them they were beautiful in their headscarves and should not be afraid or ashamed to wear them in public as a declaration of what they believe.

French Laws and Religious Symbols: *Laïcité*

When I asked for opinions on the principle of *laïcité* and a proposed burka ban, the residents of Dijon had much more varied responses.

Laïcité, the principle of the separation of church and state, was embodied in a 1905 French law intended to ensure the independence of the Roman Catholic Church and the neutrality of the French state (Asselin, 2001). Essentially, the 1905 law separates religion from the public sector. Though it may seem that *laïcité* is identical to secularism in the United States, there is a major difference: In the United States, secularism means that every person is free to practice whatever religion he or she desires. In France, however, the principle of *laïcité* means that every person may practice his or her religion, so long as religion of any kind is absent from the public realm and, most specifically, from public schools below



The fountain and park at Place Wilson, an observation site.

the university level. Since the 1980s, conflicts have arisen regarding the wearing of religious symbols in schools, especially headscarves by Muslim girls (Bowen, 2007). Most recently, in 2004, the government under President Chirac passed an addition to the law stating that the wearing of “conspicuous religious symbols” in public school was against the law of 1905 and was inappropriate in France (Kastoryano, 2006).

Over time, but especially since the 1980s, there has been much discussion about whether the laws supporting *laïcité* discriminate against the Muslim population. The symbols of other religions, such as crosses for Christians or the Star of David for Jews, can be inconspicuously worn. However, garments worn by some Muslim women, such as headscarves (which cover the hair and neck) and the burka (a loose garment covering from head to toe with a slit or screen for the eyes) are conspicuous and easily connected to their religion.

While the French do not usually discuss politics with foreigners, I had no difficulty teasing out the wide range of interviewees’ opinions of *laïcité*. About half of them saw the concept as positive: “*laïcité* allows everyone to live together easily,” noted one young woman; “[it] lets everyone practice what he or she wants,” confirmed another. These supporters saw *laïcité* as necessary in a country with as much religious and cultural variety as France. By keeping religion out of the public sphere, everyone can live together and practice what they want.

One interview resulted in a seemingly neutral view of *laïcité*. This person described it as “the current political response to the question of integration” and noted that different French governments over the years had tried various approaches—assimilation, ignoring cultural differences, and now integration—which the interviewee believed would soon give way to something else. This was an interesting notion put forth by someone who was clearly well-versed in French history and had spent much time researching the topic.

Those who had a negative view of *laïcité* thought the concept was hindering integration, that everyone should be able to wear whatever he or she wants, whether it is religious or not. As one person stated, “*laïcité* turns Muslims into outsiders. It is too bad we will never be included.” One should note the diversity among those who held this view: some were French born, others were immigrants; some were working, others stayed at home; one was a convert, the others were lifelong Muslims. Despite these differences, all who had this viewpoint were devout Muslims who went often to the mosque and, for the women, almost always chose to wear a headscarf. They are clearly passionate about their religion and want to be able to practice freely.

While I was at first surprised by the broad range of opinions in a group of fourteen people, the 2004 public debates over the addition to the 1905 law assured me that division on this topic is normal, even among French lawmakers. Essentially, the debates hinged on whether *laïcité* encourages diversity and allows people to live together or whether it encourages social exclusion and discrimination based on religion and religious practices. This unresolved question makes it difficult for lawmakers to come to clear conclusions about a proposed law regarding the burka.

The Burka Ban and Understanding Islam

During my time in France, the National Assembly was discussing a law which specifically targeted Muslims: the banning of the burka from being worn in public. In the proposed law, the Assembly claimed that this garment is not only a conspicuous religious symbol but also damages the dignity of the women who wear them, that the women are forced into “reclusion, exclusion, and humiliation.” (*Il ne s’agit plus seulement d’une manifestation religieuse ostentatoire mais d’une atteinte à la dignité de la femme et à l’affirmation de la féminité. Vêtue de la burqa ou du niqab, elle est en situation de réclusion, d’exclusion et d’humiliation insupportable. Son existence même est niée.*) (France, 2009)

As of June, lawmakers pushing for the ban supported this claim that burkas harm women’s dignity and, therefore, are unacceptable in France. Yet no one that I interviewed agreed with this view. The men claimed that wearing the burka is a woman’s choice, while the women noted that most girls (there are always exceptions, they said) are not forced to wear the burka or the headscarf but make the choice themselves. Therefore, why would a garment be banned if it was causing no harm to the women wearing it? Indeed, the women continued, it would be pointless to force a girl to wear a burka or headscarf, as the garments are meant to be symbols of the girl’s acceptance of Allah in her life. If she does not truly accept Him, then clothing is not going to change that. One young man noted that everyone—Muslim or not—should be outraged by the proposed ban because “the ban is the first step to outlawing public symbols of other religions.”

Some had other views on the proposed ban, with one person noting that “the law is an attempt to create an Islam that the French can accept;” while another stated that “it’s silly to outlaw the burka, which fully covers women, yet still allow miniskirts.” One participant suggested that perhaps some citizens are afraid of the burka, and the ban would take away that fear. However, if fear is the problem, then the situation in Dijon’s Gresilles neighborhood—where Muslims and non-Muslims see each other as neighbors—suggests that further exposure and understanding between two cultures can help temper that fear.

Perhaps the most rewarding part of conducting interviews was when the people shared their religion with me in an attempt to dispel any “incorrect ideas” that I may have, and to explain, in their own words, what it is to be Muslim. The primary emphasis from many participants was that Islam is a peaceful religion. They wanted me to know and to understand that persons who act out, who are violent and commit crimes in the name of Allah, are not practicing true Islam. Those who were practicing explained that Islam is founded on a personal relationship between a person and God, while some of the non-practicing participants expressed their inability to understand the faith and reconcile it with their scientific knowledge, a problem not uncommon among other religions. Twelve people identified themselves as Muslim and claimed to observe Ramadan (a major holiday) and to eat *halal* meat (prepared according to Islamic religious law); however, this number was split between religious and cultural Muslims. Those who identified themselves as religious Muslims regularly practiced their faith and followed religious customs such as going to



The garden at Place Darcy, another observation site.

mosque. Cultural, non-practicing Muslims were usually brought up with Islamic customs but did not regularly follow all religious practices such as attendance at mosque and traditional dress.

This split between the two could be part of the confusion over the application of the 1905 and subsequent laws. Is what is being banned a religious or a cultural practice? Furthermore, one person noted, and others reaffirmed, that Islam in France is different from Islam of France. The first is Islam as practiced by Muslims in their home country and brought with them to France. The second is Islam as it has developed in France, influenced by French culture and practiced mainly by the sons and daughters of immigrants.

Through my informal interviews and casual conversation with residents of Dijon, I came to better understand the debate over the place of Islam in France; the struggles of immigrants trying to make their way in a new country (a situation which I, as a foreigner, understood quite well); and the eagerness everyone had to explain their religion (or culture) in their own terms and not as seen on television. After spending two months trying to understand the Muslim population in Dijon, I find that I have a greater respect for and understanding of religions in general, of their customs, and of the struggles that the practicing face when trying to live according to their religion in a foreign land.

I would like to thank my mentors, Claire Malarte-Feldman and Nadine Berenguier, for their patience and endless support with this project and with all my French endeavors. I would also like to thank the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research, the International Research Opportunities Program, and my donors for making this research opportunity possible. Finally, I am eternally indebted to the city of Dijon and my participants for welcoming a foreign student researcher, and for being willing to share their stories.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Is your religion difficult to practice in Dijon? (*Votre religion, est-elle difficile à pratiquer à Dijon?*)

Do you/Did you wear religious symbols at school? Why/Why not? (*Vous portez les symboles religieux à l'école ? Pourquoi/Pourquoi pas ?*)

If allowed, would you? (*Si vous pourriez, est-ce que vous les portiez?*)

Where do you work? (*Où travaillez-vous?*)

Have you ever been discriminated against at work because of your religion? (*Est-ce que quelqu'un a jamais établi une discrimination contre vous à cause de votre religion?*)

How did you come to live in your neighborhood? (*Comment est-ce que vous avez décidé d'habiter dans votre quartier?*)

Do you like your neighborhood/neighbors? (*Vos voisins, ils sont sympa ou pas? Et votre quartier, vous l'aimez ou pas?*)

What is your opinion of the law, *laïcité*? (*Que pensez-vous de la laïcité?*)

How does/Does this law impact your life? (*Cette loi, comment a-t-elle une influence sur votre vie?*)

Are you familiar with the proposed burka ban, and what is your opinion on this? (*Que pensez-vous de la proposition à propos de la burqua?*)

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Author Bio

*Senior **Bridget Farmer**, from Springfield, Massachusetts, is completing a dual major in political science and international affairs (University Honors in Major program) with a minor in French. Her summer 2009 research was part of an international affairs capstone project and was funded by an International Research Opportunity Program grant from the University of New Hampshire. Discussions in her French courses of *laïcité* and the 2005/2006 Paris riots combined with her background in politics to interest her in interviewing Muslims in France. As Bridget reflects upon her experience, she notes how living in a foreign city such as Dijon, though intimidating at first, was essential to becoming familiar with the city, its residents, and its culture. Bridget's summer project and her Inquiry article (her second) allow her to reflect on the research process while continuing to satisfy her interest in minority groups. After graduation, Bridget would like to continue doing research, with a focus on minority groups and children.*

Mentor Bios

***Claire Malarte-Feldman**, Professor of French in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures as well as the faculty director of the Center for International Education and the Study-in-Dijon Program, has been on the faculty of the University of New Hampshire since 1984. Although she specializes in seventeenth-century and contemporary French children's literature, she particularly enjoys teaching topics in contemporary French culture. Dr. Malarte-Feldman can proudly claim to be a major influence on Bridget's research interests as she taught the Honors seminar, "France and the European Union," in which she and Bridget found their mutual interest in issues of French identity. "Bridget is a particularly bright student," Dr. Malarte-Feldman said. "Her topic is quite timely: the issue surrounding French identity and France's Muslim population is a burning question that begs for further investigation. Her research among some of Dijon's Muslim communities is an important start in the right direction."*

***Nadine Berenguier**, Associate Professor of French in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, has been on the faculty of the University of New Hampshire for fourteen years and specializes in eighteenth-century French literature. Bridget was a student in several of her courses in which issues of immigration and French identity were discussed. Dr. Berenguier was in France herself during Bridget's research and became her foreign mentor. Not only did Dr. Berenguier gain an appreciation of Bridget's ability to incorporate feedback from a mentor, she also valued Bridget's first-hand knowledge of the effects on Dijon Muslims of the French principle of *laïcité* and the laws that embody it.*