

INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Laurence
Harvard University
and The Brookings Institution

Politicians and civil servants charged with the task of helping a “French Islam” emerge in late twentieth-century France faced a vast, transnational network of more than 1600 Muslim associations and mosques in dozens of French towns and cities. During the colonial era, Islam in French Algeria was exempted from the 1905 separation of church and state, and no one at the time imagined that one century later, 5 million Muslims would inhabit metropolitan France. The legacy of French and later, Algerian, state oversight of the Muslim religion is still felt within Islam in France today. In the post-colonial period up until the 1980s, French authorities relied on immigrants’ home governments for the accommodation of religious requirements, from the salaries of imams to the creation of prayer spaces. After a 1981 law liberalizing association law for foreigners, Muslim organizations linked to foreign governments and international NGOs established prayer associations and banded together in national federations. By the late 1980s, France judged its combined policy of outsourcing followed by laissez-faire attitudes to be counterproductive to Muslims’ social integration. French governments thus set about improvising a place for Islam in the secular room of *laïcité*—seeking a balance between official control and an equally undesirable absence of recognition or regulation. The French Council for the Muslim Religion (CFCM) emerged in 2002-2003 as the culmination of a fifteen-year political and bureaucratic process. Its complex institutional arrangement testifies to Islam’s permanence in the French landscape and marks the furthest any French government has gone to ensure Muslims’ presence in state institutions alongside the representatives of other major recognized religions.

This special issue of *French Politics, Culture & Society* offers a wealth of inside perspectives on the French state’s search for a representative Muslim interlocutor.¹ At this early stage of the CFCM’s activities, it is worthwhile to consider the Council’s institutional and ideological origins and to explore its potential roles in the life of French Muslims. The contributors to this issue—a mix of

practitioners, politicians and scholars—were asked to consider the logic and methods behind the French state’s intervention as well as the limits of the CFCM’s effective representation. Three of the authors are former high-level Interior Ministry officials, two are CFCM members, and four are scholars who have conducted extensive field research on Islam in France. Additional specialists join two round table debates in the “*Interventions*” section following the articles. Together, they offer a privileged glimpse of the consultations in their institutional, social and political context, from their inception in the 1980s through the Council’s birth in late 2002. A common theme emerges in these contributions: the delay with which the Muslim religion is taking its place alongside Catholic, Protestant and Jewish organizations, and how best to overcome the historical handicap Islam suffers due to its absence at the time of the 1905 law. What strikes the reader is not so much the novelty of the consultation process, although the international linkages of contemporary Islam can appear more crosscutting and complex than those of say, nineteenth-century Catholicism or Judaism. But several authors refer to the CFCM’s “fragility” and the need for some historical distance before assessing its efficacy.

Though the Interior Ministry has taken pains to ensure the CFCM’s broadly representative character, the Council is technically limited to representing the Muslim *religion*—not Muslims themselves—in state institutions. The CFCM was never intended to speak for the Muslim population, but rather to give voice to—and oversee—the religious associations frequented by observant Muslims. The working groups, assemblies and executive offices of the national CFCM and its twenty-five regional counterparts will only deliberate on questions of religious practice, providing a convenient forum for national and local administrators to consult Muslim religious leaders on issues like mosque construction, the starting time of major holidays, the appointment of chaplains in prisons, the regulation of halal food, and so on. To this extent, the Councils are the “state-church” equivalent of the Catholic *Conférence Episcopale*, the Jewish *Consistoire Centrale* or the Protestant *Fédération*, all of which serve as national and regional interlocutors.² The Council only aggregates prayer spaces registered under the *loi de 1901* or the *loi de 1905*—thereby excluding cultural, sports or educational associations (as well as the 400 or so prayer spaces not registered as associations). Youth organizations are among those absent, additionally, since they do not have their own prayer spaces, as are, obviously, associations of secular Muslims (*musulmans laïcs*) or Muslim intellectuals. Secular Muslims may indeed care little about the starting time of Ramadan or guidelines for animal slaughter during *Aïd al-Adha*. But many are wary of the visible community role seized by religious Muslims during the creation of the CFCM.

Alain Boyer, an academic and administrative expert on religion in France, provides in his essay a useful recent history of state-Islam relations. Boyer was brought in to the *bureau central des cultes* by Interior Minister Pierre Joxe in 1989, and he stayed through Charles Pasqua’s arrival in 1995.³ He discusses the consultation’s quest for legitimacy and calls attention to the persistence of “*des*

inégalités de fait" despite French Muslims' constitutional freedom of religious practice. One can sense in Boyer's account the degree of institutional and administrative energy that has gone into the fifteen years of consultation with Muslim representatives. After the strings have been pulled and the efforts are complete, however, the government will consider that the tent is up and running; Boyer predicts the administration will gradually recede into the background: "Les CFCM et les CRCM seront ce que leurs membres en feront."

Alain Billon served as *conseiller technique* in the *Al-Istichara* phase of the consultation: the relaunching of state-Islam relations in 1999 after several years of inactivity. As the representative of then Interior Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement, Billon was responsible for negotiations and community relations leading up to the consultation's final round, and he testifies here to the "*changement d'esprit*" that signalled Chevènement's arrival at Place Beauvau. Billon shows how his administration's efforts built on previous governments' accomplishments and notes the consultation's subsequent survival of political "*alternance*." The basic structure was maintained when the Center Right returned to power in 2002, which indicates a new consensus and the victory of what might be termed "technocratic pragmatism" in state-Islam relations.

Vianney Sévaistre became head of the *bureau central des cultes* under Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and stayed on while Dominique de Villepin found his footing in 2004. Sévaistre presents a first-hand account of the tightrope he walked between offering necessary support to the CFCM without violating the principle of *laïcité*. His narrative is a lively illustration of his office's need to improvise between legal constraints and shifting political realities. In the remarks of Fouad Alaoui, Vice President of the CFCM, it is possible to note satisfaction, even pride, at Islam having received state recognition and the respect of ministerial contacts. However, Alaoui states that it is ultimately "aux Français musulmans d'organiser leur culte et non aux états," an innocuous assertion but clearly a sensitive issue.

In Pierre Joxe's contribution to the "*Interventions*" section, the former interior minister articulates the need to take a step back and to bring a "*regard d'historien*" to the momentous question of Islam's institutionalization. Joxe, who initiated the first state-Islam consultation in 1989 and later served as a leader of the Fédération Protestante, explores points of historical comparison with the Protestant and Jewish representative bodies that emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Joxe argues that Muslim citizens present the French state with the familiar dichotomy of "*la question civile et la problématique religieuse*," and he recommends patience before judging the CFCM's accomplishments. This sentiment is echoed by Aslam Timol, who represents one of France's five *grandes mosquées* on the Council: "On ne peut pas attendre du CFCM qu'il résolve les problèmes que d'autres ont mis des siècles à résoudre. Tous nos travaux s'inscrivent dans la durée."

As I discuss in my own contribution, the government's ambition to help integrate Muslims into French society through the creation of the CFCM

reflected a change in inspiration from previous integration policies based on civic or political participation. Somewhat paradoxically, religion policy has offered the secular French administration an arena where it can actually grant recognition and representation to one facet of Muslims' lives. This is partly in acknowledgment of the younger generations' increasing identification with Islam, but the consultations also harken back to state traditions of "domesticating" religion for compatibility with republican citizenship. Dounia Bouzar's resignation as one of six government appointed experts on the CFCM in January 2005 confirms the tensions over what role religion should play in the lives of everyday second- and third-generation immigrants: "Pendant vingt ans, on a demandé aux musulmans de laisser l'islam à la frontière pour s'intégrer. Aujourd'hui, on veut les définir uniquement par la référence musulmane!"⁴ In her article in this issue, Bouzar expresses concern over the tendencies of re-Islamization and explores the consequences of a new literalism—"le recours aux textes"—and its impact on gender dynamics.

This is a central paradox of the CFCM: while the government insists that the CFCM is strictly for questions of religious observance, its national visibility and heavy *médiatisation* grant it a *de facto* role in Islam's—and Muslims'—public image. Given the paucity of political élites "*issus de l'immigration*," the Council has sometimes appeared to be the only game in town for leaders of Muslim background. There have already been moments when the CFCM is asked to offer the Muslim "community's" view on issues that exceed the bounds of religion strictly defined. During national debates in 2003-2004 over the propriety of headscarves in schools, anti-Semitic incidents, the Iraq war and the French hostage crisis, for example, there was constant slippage towards a community spokesman's-like role for the CFCM. Some of this confusion was encouraged by critics of the consultation, who suggested that the government hoped for the CFCM to play a role in "pacifying" the *banlieue* in times of crisis. After the American-led invasion of Iraq, a CFCM press release noted French Muslims' "consternation over this aggression, which is contrary to international law," but called for "calm and dignity" as the appropriate response. And following President Chirac's proposal to ban conspicuous religious symbols in French schools in December 2003, the CFCM again issued a statement urging "calm and serenity" among French Muslims. The CFCM is thus more than just an instance of religious representation: politicians may expect it to act as an instrument of social peace.

The articles by Nancy Venel and Claire de Galember/Mustapha Belbah offer a reality check on these expectations by providing a view of how the CFCM is experienced by individuals and associations on the ground. Galember/Belbah discuss what "*normalisation*" of state-Islam relations would mean in terms of regular administrative practice on the local level. Their research findings speak to the fundamental question of the consultation's legitimacy. Some Muslim associations incorporated into the CFCM project feel dragooned into a Parisian obsession: "l'on subit plus qu'on ne la choisit." Nancy Venel's

contribution introduces a four-part typology of young Muslims of North African origin, further complicating the term "*les musulmans*" that convenience has accustomed administrators to using. In her discussion of individual Muslims' attitudes to the new CFCM, Venel problematizes the notion of "*communauté*" and lowers expectations for the Council's reception by its intended audience.

The CFCM's first, eventful year in operation quickly put the new institution to the test and laid bare the Council's limited influence in some Islam-related policy debates: the line between technical questions and politicized issues is still uncertain. The Council's Hajj and Halal commissions made some notable achievements in improving the experience of French pilgrims to Saudi Arabia and the quality control of halal meat. But both the parliamentary and presidential commissions on *laïcité* and headscarves ignored the CFCM, leaving the Council to issue a press release stating "le port du foulard est une prescription religieuse." (See Sévaistre's appendix 2.) Nor did the interior ministry consult the CFCM upon the fourteen high-profile expulsions of foreign Islamic radicals, half of whom were practicing imams in French prayer spaces. The Interior Ministry's plans for a *Fondation nationale pour les œuvres musulmanes* and its design of a theological training course at the *Université de Paris* (Sorbonne and Assas) include a consultative role for the CFCM, but do not cede full control of either to the Council. Ironically, the CFCM acquired new vitality during a hostage situation during fall 2004 and the concurrent application of the headscarf ban in schools. CFCM members demonstrated an impressive degree of unity, sending a delegation to Baghdad in September 2004 to demand the release of the two French journalists being held by Sunni insurgents and to reject the terrorists' "*chantage*." (In an interesting twist, the kidnappers had demanded the repeal of the headscarf ban.) The CFCM's press releases urging the respect of French law and release of the French hostages were given ample coverage by French and international media (including *Al-Jazeera*), and even Jean-Marie Le Pen applauded the delegation's visit to Baghdad.

This unity was somewhat short-lived, as internal disputes re-emerged in late fall 2004 over the Council's electoral rules and the alleged advantage they grant fundamentalist organizations. Such bickering is to be expected among the CFCM's central participants; after all, these leaders are personally associated with very diverse strands of international Islam: Moroccan, Algerian, Turkish, the Muslim Brotherhood, and so on. Alain Billon raises the issue of the consultation's ideological inclusiveness in his article, and suggests that the most extreme elements are contained in the CFCM, which should itself be considered a success. But, he asks, "Qu'en sera-t-il en quelques années?" Dounia Bouzar's disappointment that the CFCM has been unable to participate in debates that affect the everyday social reality of Muslims suggests the Council will continue to feel out its role as it goes along. If, as Alain Boyer writes, "*le CFCM sera ce que les Musulmans en feront*," this collection of essays permits reflection on what Muslims will be able to make of it. And, given the Interior

Ministry's strong involvement in its creation, it seems fair to invert Boyer's conclusion and ask, what will the French state make of the CFCM?

Notes

1. I wish to thank Francis Verillaud and Pierre Bollinger of the Centre Américain and the Direction Scientifique of Sciences Po for hosting the November 2003 conference that led to this collection of essays, as well as Trisha Craig of Harvard's Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies for her support and Frédéric Gloriant for transcription assistance. I also wish to express my special gratitude to Herrick Chapman and Marie-Caroline Olson of *French Politics, Culture & Society*.
2. The CFCM bears little resemblance to the Jewish CRIF (Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France) because the CRIF includes cultural and political associations under its umbrella and therefore can act as more of an all-encompassing lobbying group. The CFCM only includes prayer spaces and thus has more in common with the Jewish Consistoire (1807), a strictly religious representation for technical matters of religious observance. Both CFCM and Consistoire were more or less forcefully brought forth by the French state to act as interlocutors for public authorities, whereas the CRIF was founded by Jewish associations (in 1943) without any encouragement from the government.
3. A table indicating the chronology of interior ministers can be found in my article later in this issue.
4. "Lettre de démission de Dounia Bouzar, Paris, le 4 janvier 2005," available at www.sezame.info.