



Islamic Veil and National Flag

Rémy Leveau

Within less than a year, two crises—the Rushdie case and the “Islamic veil” affair—have bewildered European public opinion. This was particularly true in France, where many people felt that the very principles which, since the beginning of this century, have formed the basis of the modern Nation-State were being put into question. Albeit in different ways, both crises were the result of events originating on the international scene: on the one hand, the assertion of an Islamic identity which comes with the settlement of Mediterranean and Asian communities in Europe, and on the other, an awakening of religious feelings brought about, in the countries of origin of these immigrant communities, by the Iranian revolution.

Confronted by these crises, whose symbolic value was overall much greater than their actual content, several European governments felt they were witnessing the emergence of new rules of social and political behaviour which would escape from their influence and lead both to the upheaval of established conventions and to a rapid loss of control by the ruling elites. In the mind of many people, this evoked the spectre of seeing Europe sliding toward a “communal” situation, that is a situation characterized by endemic conflict between ethnic and religious groups living within the same country, as in Northern Ireland or Lebanon.¹

In his attack on a secular intellectual of Moslem origin settled in Europe, the Iman Khomeini was perceived as putting into question from outside Britain, that is from outside Rushdie’s country of citizenship, the very principles of individual freedom on which all European political societies are founded. The controversy petered out, however, for lack of any significant social response.

The Islamic veil affair, however, caused reactions of an entirely different magnitude. Many of the actors involved, in fact, felt that in this case there was a serious clash

between two different principles, a clash which was inevitably bound to cause a profound echo throughout French society as well as among the immigrants of Moslem culture settled in France.

To grasp these misunderstandings, one must first examine the relations the French political system maintains (not without some ambiguity) with an Islamic community which in the 1980's has established itself as a permanent component of French society.

Only quite recently has it been understood that the Maghreb immigrant community is here to stay and that it tends to assert its identity by stressing its Islamic character. The growth of this awareness has been punctuated by a series of events: by street demonstrations of North African immigrants (nicknamed *beurs* in French slang); by ethnic conflicts in those industrial sectors, such as the car industry, where the immigrant presence is particularly strong; and by the 1983 municipal polls and 1984 European elections, both of which witnessed the rise of the anti-immigrants National Front. For their part, the major political forces—the Socialists (PSF), the Gollists (RPR) and the Conservatives (UDF)—reacted by reaching a sort of implicit consensus on such a delicate issue, as became apparent during the Fabius-Chirac debate in October 1985. This consensus was based both on the acceptance of the permanent nature of Maghreb immigrant settlements and on the will to extend also to Moslems those basic principles of the Republic which, since the turn of the century, have confined religion firmly within the private sphere. At that time, Protestants and Jews bowed to these principles and since then have had a place of their own in French society and politics. The same pattern of integration is proposed today to the Moslems. To be sure, however, quite a few French politicians nowadays secretly hope that the immigrants will find these conditions unacceptable and will choose to return to their countries of origin.

This principled stance, rooted in the basic premises of the French polity, was accompanied (especially since the Socialists' rise to power in 1981) by cautious measures intended to ease relations between French society and settling immigrants. Expulsions were stopped, the length of residence permits was extended, and associations of foreign nationals were granted legal status. These measures were not reversed when the Right came to power in 1986, despite the fact that a national debate was opened on the opportunity to revise, in a restrictive sense, the French nationality code. Indeed, by entrusting the revision of the Nationality Code to an ad-hoc "Commission of wise men," the whole issue was pushed out of the field of daily political contention.

The main positive consequence of this tacit consensus was that immigration did not become a major issue at stake in the bitter confrontation between Right and Left during the presidential campaign of 1988. The negative side was the postponement of the inevitable debate over the conditions of settlement for a group, like the Islamic one, that does not fully accept the idea of relegating its religious identity only to the

private sphere. Being the last to arrive, the Muslim immigrants are clearly at a disadvantage in terms of places of worship, religious holidays and the organization of ritual sacrifices—not to mention the school calendar and timetable or the teaching of languages and religion.

The granting to foreigners of wider association rights has allowed immigrants to assert their Islam-based collective identity, and at the same time has prepared them for cultural assimilation, early enfranchisement and citizenship. A distinct cultural identity and citizenship are not mutually exclusive. Actually they can combine: among Moslem immigrants, the overwhelming electoral support for François Mitterand and the Socialist Party was found to be correlated (in about fifty percent of the cases) with the observance of a traditional religious holiday such as Ramadan. This was the finding of polls conducted in June 1988, at the time of the presidential elections, and again in March 1989, at the time of the municipal ones.

Clearly, it becomes difficult to confine religious behaviour to the private sphere when one is dealing with a group whose culture is rooted in a religious identity. More than that, it seems quite apparent that the present assertion of religious identity among the younger Moslem generations is part of a negotiating strategy for integration into French society: while accepting on the whole the values of this society, these young people wish to maintain their own group identity. Such a strategy, to be sure, puts the Jacobin model for the integration of minorities into question. In fact, while this model does accept the individual Moslems, it is not ready to deal with Islam as a separate culture. Yet the time when France could deal with Islam by turning to Algeria, Saudi Arabia or even to the Sheikh of Al Azar, is probably for ever bygone.

Satanic verses

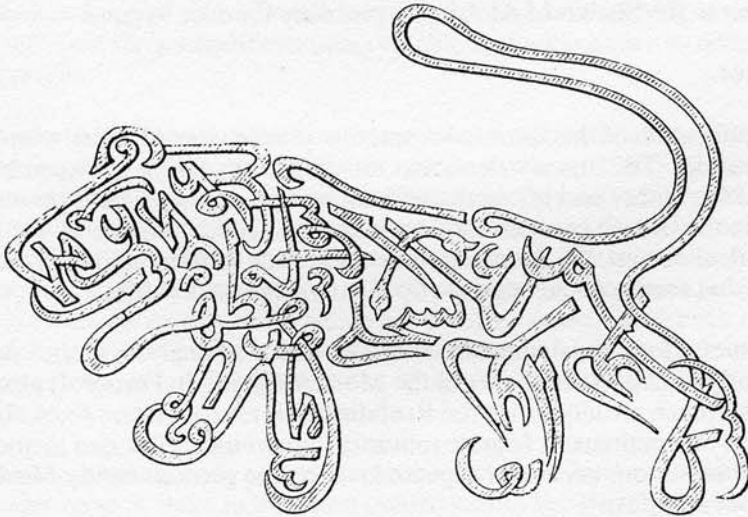
Before the publication of the *Satanic Verses*, few people were familiar with the work of Salman Rushdie. The first articles about him began appearing in December 1988, and presented the author and his works without imagining they would provoke controversy in the French context. It was not until the condemnation by the Iman Khomeini and, above all, the demonstration at Place de la République on the first of March 1989, that some people began to openly express their worries.

This intrusion of a foreign Islamic authority allows for an analysis of the confused and often poorly explained reactions of the Moslems living in France. It also sheds some light on French society, since the Rushdie affair revived latent fears concerning the installation of a permanent Islamic minority and brought back bad memories from 1982, when serious problems appeared among the predominantly Moslem workers of the car industry.

At the outset, the publication of the *Satanic Verses* was an opportunity to introduce Rushdie in a sympathetic manner, as the author of several successful books up to then

of interest only to readers from the Indian sub-continent. Thanks to his British citizenship and London residence, the author had always been able to express himself with a fair degree of freedom. Surprise and some interest for his latest work came only with the circulation of a text in which Rushdie treats with the same impertinent irony both the British prime minister and the Prophet of Islam. The weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* as well as the daily *Libération* introduced the author and his work under this light. The Catholic paper *La Croix* added a few words on the negative reactions to *Satanic Verses* among the Moslems of England, emphasizing not only their profound attachment to Islam but also their successful integration into the British political system (exemplified by the Moslem mayor of Bradford). The occasion led the continental public to discover the existence, across the Channel, of a community of Indo-Pakistani origin which, thanks to its Commonwealth citizenship, has become part of the British political system and yet retains a very strong community cohesion—something very different from the French reality.

Sure, it was already known that a Turkish Islamic community existed in Germany; but those Turks were still perceived as *Gastarbeitern* (guest workers) destined to return to their mother country. Only with the Rushdie affair, public opinion began to understand, however confusedly, that there exists in Europe an Islamic presence which is shaped more by the culture and politics of the different countries of settlement than by its ties to the Islamic world of the countries of origin. Albeit vaguely, the idea also took root that these various Islamic communities in Europe could interact among themselves, and thus find, in respect to both the European context and the external



Ali, Lion of God

world, the way to avoid the inevitable confrontation with the Nation-State. Despite all that, death threats against the publishers of *Satanic Verses* and the booksellers who dared sell it were still taken with a shrug of the shoulders, as if such threats could never really materialize in France.

Uneasiness grew with the demonstrations that took place in Islamabad on February 12, 1989. As a matter of fact, however, the target of these demonstrations were the government of Benazir Bhutto and the American embassy—and thus were perceived as far remote from domestic and European political domains. The real shock came on February 15, when Khomeini issued a death sentence against Rushdie. This was an overt act of intrusion of a foreign Islamic authority claiming the right to penal jurisdiction over European citizens of Islamic culture. In spite of this, French editorialists commented the fact as if it did not really concern the French situation. The feeling of being able to handle the events all the while showing solidarity with a writer who had had a price put on his head still prevailed in the press. Various papers, notably *Libération*, *l'Événement du Jeudi* and *le Nouvel Observateur*, published controversial excerpts from Rushdie's book. The rationale behind the whole affair was found alternately in the Iranian domestic situation and the quarrels over Khomeini's eventual succession; in Khomeini's conflict with the leaders of Sunni Islam for the control of orthodoxy; or in the need to take some kind of revenge for the setbacks suffered in the Gulf war with Iraq. According to these commentators, the affair could still not affect the French political scene, for, as it was said, "French Islam was not following the queue" and "the Moslems themselves were judging Khomeini".² In sum, Rushdie's death sentence was presented as the last squirmings of fundamentalism.

Death sentence

The affair resurfaced with the Pakistani demonstrations in Bradford, soon followed on February 26 by Moslem demonstrations in Paris which took to the streets protesting against the publication of the *Satanic Verses*—some people even evoking Khomeini's death sentence. The fact that the demonstrators numbered no more than one thousand, for the most part Pakistanis, did not prevent the subsequent opening of a debate on the position of Islam in France and its relations with Islam abroad. In the days that followed, the shocking image of a anti-Rushdie mass prayer at Place de la République was related by political commentators to Middle East terrorism and to the worry of a possible failure of Islamic integration in Europe. The temptation to throw things together became very strong. Anxiety about the situation grew to such heights that the Muslim immigrants were even requested formal disavowals in the name of the secular state, the Rights of Man and the principles of the French Revolution. Although the majority of Muslim opinion leaders interviewed within the community rejected Khomeini's death sentence, they nevertheless also condemned, whether in their own name or in the name of their parents, the blasphemy contained in Rushdie's work. The fact that in this case the Moslems of France did not align themselves with French politicians caused both surprise and concern.

Khomeini's intervention put everything into question, since no one in France was sure of being able to mobilize an Islamic force superior to his. Besides, engaging in negotiations aimed at identifying an institutionally-French Islamic authority carried its own risks, the first being extremism. It cannot be forgotten that the Sheikh Gatbeni, president of "The Voice of Islam" and organiser of the Place de la République demonstration, is himself a French national, and thus could qualify for such a delicate role. Other French Muslim figures, such as Youssef Leclerc (a Frenchman converted to Islam), were also seen as fundamentalists, and for this reason were not selected to fill the position of director of the Paris Mosque, which went instead to the Algerian Sheikh Abbas. As for the writer Mohamed Arkoun, whom no one could accuse of "integralisme" (that is of having a vision of society entirely based on religion), his controversial statements to the press made him an unacceptable candidate to those attached to the traditional notion of a secular state. Perhaps the crux of the matter lies precisely here: in the risk that opening negotiations with French Islam on the basis of recognition of its community character might bring about similar demands from other religious groups.

Islamic veils

How is it that the three little Moroccan girls who out of religious modesty decided to wear their veil to the classroom ended up mobilizing the highest government authorities and sparking an intense public opinion debate?

In the Fall of 1989, after the bicentennial celebrations of the French Revolution, this minor event in a suburban high school took on, thanks to television, the significance of a threat to the founding principles of the very French nation-state that had just been glorified. The matter can be understood only by following François Furet's thesis that the Revolution was not achieved until 1880 with the arrival of the Republicans to power and then with the separation of Church and State. This evolution valued as its ideal-type the individualist *libre-penseur*, detached from any allegiance to a prescribed order other than the rule of reason. While religious faith was admitted, it could only exist in the private sphere. Legislation and court rulings thus erased all traces of "proselytism" at school. As late as the 1920's, judges would meticulously check that students did not wear the crucifix, and would make subtle distinctions between those shapes and pieces of jewelry that could be tolerated and those signs of religious identity that should be hidden from view in order to avoid accusations of proselytism.

In this context, the school system became the symbol of the French model of individual integration into a common Republican culture—a model aimed at molding into Frenchmen not only regional minorities, but also religious ones (such as the Protestants and Jews), as well as foreigners settling in France. In the name of the free-thinking citizen that it intended to create, the system swept all peculiarities—notably religious ones—into the private domain. In the beginning many ideologists even

entertained the idea that the triumph of the values of reason brought about by the school system would progressively render obsolete any religious reference.

Even though it could be maintained that such a militant notion of secularism became lax over the years, a come-back of this principle was clearly perceived after 1981, when the Socialists came to power and attempted to unify and secularize secondary education, providing it a public service. This attempt failed in 1984 following mass demonstrations by millions of people in defence of the autonomy of the *écoles libres*, most of them Catholic. In the case of the "Islamic veil," the assertion of a Moslem religious identity occurred within the public school system and soon had the support of all confessions. As with the prohibition of the Martin Scorsese film "The Last Temptation of Christ," also the Rushdie case and the veil affair brought about an unusual solidarity among such different religious figures as the Catholic archbishop, the Chief Rabbi and the director of the mosque of Paris.

From October to December 1989, the debate solicited reactions from various political authorities and movements linked to immigration, all declaring themselves for or against the wearing of the veil and the expulsion of the girls from the public school system. As hierarchical superior to the scholastic authorities, the Minister of National Education, Lionel Jospin, had to express his opinion as to whether the veil was to be permitted or not. He did so during the course of November, reaffirming the official secular principles as well as the need to keep schools open to all students, whatever their faith, but without proselytism. In line with the minister's reasoning, it was the idea of not expelling the Moslem girls which finally prevailed, and this in spite of the strong pressures from the teachers' unions and a majority of Socialist Party leaders, who wanted a firmer position over an issue which had traditionally distinguished the Left from the Right. The Prime Minister, Michel Rocard, shared the Education Minister's opinion, whereas the head of the National Assembly, Laurent Fabius, took a subtler stance. For his part, the President of the Republic remained silent. Nevertheless, the tolerant statements of his wife regarding the wearing of the veil were credited to him among immigrant circles.

The majority of the leaders of immigrant associations were annoyed by the veil affair, insofar as they had always rallied around a model of integration that gave great importance to the state. In the end, however, they could not condemn an assertion of religious identity coming, as it was, from a minority which enjoyed very little visibility. These leaders were greatly disappointed when, following François Mitterand's 1988 re-election, they were again denied any form of recognition as a community. With stubborn shortsightedness, official statements kept preaching patience, explaining that it takes time to solve problems such as housing, employment and schooling, which in France are not exclusively Moslem problems. Experts were working on those issues but results could not be expected from one day to the next. The advice was to wait in the suburbs without getting too excited, lest an extreme-right shift occur in the municipal elections of March 1989.

The government attitude was perceived by the immigrants as a denial of identity—as an invitation to disappear by “converting” to the ways and values of mainstream French society. Such an attitude was clearly unacceptable to the immigrants, and the response that followed—more so from the collective subconscious of the group than from strategies devised by its recognized leaders—came once again in terms of Islam. The religious factor became the mobilizing element at the same time most readily available and most provocative within French society. The Rushdie affair and the veil incident were the most significant elements of this reaction. Yet they are nothing more than the visible aspects of a deeply rooted social movement which rests on the twofold desire to remain in France and to negotiate the terms of its own settlement as a distinct, recognized collectivity. By so doing, Moslem immigrants have demonstrated that they do not intend to delegate to others the right to speak for them—for this would constitute in their eyes a disavowal of their own existence. Since they lacked both elites and top leaders to represent them with the French authorities, the mobilized Moslem groups had no other way to react to the Government’s call for patience except by resorting to political, cultural and religious initiatives of a purely symbolic nature.

Conflicting views

In both the Rushdie and the veil affairs, the assertion of a religious identity was interpreted differently by the different actors. French public opinion saw it as a refusal to integrate, whereas the major protagonists of these “affairs”—the Moslem immigrants—saw it as the genuine expression of their right to remain in France without having to stop being themselves.

In this kind of situation, the major risk certainly is a refusal to negotiate from the French political system. Yet also the middle-level elites who have pushed the settled Moslems to show the banner of their identity did refuse to take into account the meaning of this gesture with respect to the political identity, the historical past and the founding principles of the French majority. Subsequently, once they asserted themselves as a community, the Moslem immigrants tried to gain recognition as partners from both the French state and the countries with an Islamic majority. This strategy of adding one revendication to the other, however, failed to take into account the reactions of a disconcerted French public opinion, still strongly attached to values and political symbols that go back to the beginning of the century. Due to the lack of a clear debate and reciprocal concessions agreed upon by the leadership, large sections of public opinion today have ended up on positions close to those of the National Front.

Like the Rushdie affair, the veil crisis quietened down faster than had been predicted, but not without leaving scars. At the beginning of December 1989 the supreme administrative court, the Conseil d’Etat, very wisely defused the issue by making each individual school responsible for regulating the wearing of the veil. By avoiding a clear-cut position, the Conseil allowed for diverging and conciliatory interpretations.

Rémy Leveau

**Rémy Leveau is Tenured Professor at the
Institut d'Etudes Politiques of Paris.
A scholar of Arab societies,
he devotes his research to problems
of immigration in Europe.
His most recent book is
Les musulmans dans la société française,
(with Gilles Kepel), FNSP Press, Paris 1988.**

Nearly all parties accepted this decision as the basis of a possible compromise. The return to peace and quiet was made easier as well by the intervention of the King of Morocco who, through his embassy, pressed the families of the girls to voluntarily abandon the veil, thus bringing the crisis to an end.

The affair is now seemingly over, but conflict could erupt again over any type of symbolic behaviour by individuals or groups seeking to assert their identity outside the framework commonly accepted by French society—that is, seeking to challenge the French Republican model and to sow, consciously or unconsciously, the seed of a multi-community model similar to the American one.

In both occasions, however, French political society has showed to be invariably hostile to such a “communal” approach. As a matter of fact, even the most liberal French elements can only go as far as to accept transitory, divergent behaviours, provided that they do not question the final objective: the survival of the secular Nation-State. The majority held tight to the well-established model, leaving the immigrants with the choice of either adapting or leaving. Yet, as we have seen, the immigrants want to remain in France while preserving their identity and bringing about those transformations of the host society which will lead to their collective recognition.

The immigrants’ demand for equality in religious matters in fact cloaked collective pressure for social recognition as a community. This pressure was organized with the aim of negotiating the division of scarce resources such as social aid, housing, day care and schooling—and of course employment. In the short term, Communist municipalities are the most concerned by this development. At the end of the 1970’s, in 55 percent of the Communist-controlled municipalities immigrants accounted for more than 10 percent of the total population. In certain municipalities of Seine-Saint Denis, the proportion exceeded 25 percent. Faced with the impossibility of mastering

such a situation, the local Communist officials were unsure whether to resort to old policies of patronage with regard to the newcomers or whether to put in place a quota system to defend the gains of the long-established working class. They more or less succeeded in the latter strategy, with the complicity of local state representatives.

The Muslims' response to this exclusion was a fragmentation along religious lines of both society and behaviour, which recreated in their homes and neighborhoods the same situation that was already well-known on the workplace, ever since mosques were opened in 1976 in the Renault factory at Billancourt and the Citroën one at Aulnay-sous-Bois. The network of associations which sprang up after the liberalisation of the law in 1981 little by little escaped from the hands of municipal administrations. These networks became the basis of a community structure, where culture and religion were subtly blending together.

The threat over the control of Communist strongholds became real when the majority of social brokers helping the settled immigrant groups began to favour an active policy of naturalization and registration. These immigrant leaders then began to gravitate toward the Socialist Party, which corresponded with their aspirations better than the contradictory strategy of the Communist Party. In many ways, these associations opened the road to political participation. Contrary to the Jacobin model, however, this did not occur on an individual basis, but rather according to a community model in which the religious factor played an increasingly central role.

Taking these communal aspirations into account, associations such as "SOS racism" or "France-Plus" played a remarkable integrative role among all minorities in order to prevent the demands of the Maghreb Moslems from standing out alone. Thanks especially to the prestige of the Communist Party and the labour unions, this scheme had worked rather well in the past with other waves of immigrants. As we have seen, however, the first generation of Maghreb immigrants were not touched by this influence, both because of the bad memories of the Algerian War and because of the indirect consequences of the French immigration policy of the 1970's.

Middle-class aspirations

The new generations, having gone through French schooling, have middle-class aspirations and are even less open to the Communist strategy than their parents. They need Islam as culture and roots, in order to unite among themselves. This Islam, however, has a more local character, and its doctrinal content serves more as a response to the group's needs in terms of internal cohesion than as a manifestation of solidarity toward the outside. Forming a common front toward the outside remains important as long as neither social nor economic integration is complete. It can be estimated that among the associations' militant members and the new voters, only one third has a stable job. Another third is unemployed, and yet another is in temporary situations of extended studies or professional training. The development

of an associational movement and the considerable resources given to it have largely contributed to stabilizing the immigrant community. However, the need for a high public profile and for social ties based on Islam still remains, since economic and social integration have not proceeded far enough as to offer adequate opportunities to the rising expectations of these younger Moslem generations. One must keep these factors in mind when assessing the importance of today solidarity with foreign Islam, as shown by the Rushdie affair. Only when the Moslems in France will be more fully integrated into society and will be recognized as a legitimate cultural and political presence, will they be able to distance themselves from, and even oppose, the intrusions of foreign Islam. By then, in fact, such an Islam will no longer answer their needs.



To some extent, a comparison with the working class of the 1930's or the 1950's can shed some light on the situation. Let us look at the French Communist Party. Up to the 1960's, that is as long as its economic integration into French society had not occurred, the Communist Party was able to maintain a strategy of unshakable solidarity with the Soviet Union, despite the horrors of Stalin's times. With the Communists no longer able to play this integrating role for the Maghreb immigrants, the task now falls on the Socialist Party and in particular on its president, François Mitterand, who, both in the polls and in interviews, appears as the symbol of a successful integration policy.

Moreover, the Socialist party is an acceptable intermediary both for those immigrants who choose an individualist strategy for integration in accordance to the traditional Republican model, and for those who instead nurture the aspiration of remaining part

of a community. The party's organization into currents allows a subtle game of negotiation not only at the national level but also at the municipal and provincial ones. The new immigrant elites born of the associations' network have very quickly learned to play one against the other these currents and shades of opinions that divide the party. Yet while the Socialists are ready to accept the immigrants' votes, they are still reluctant to recognize the distinct social groups which exist within their ranks.

The Socialist attitude mirrors that of the Jacobin state in its treatment of minorities, and represents a sort of consensus which has been reached among the three major French parties. Even though the immigrant vote seems safely on François Mitterand's side, its support for the Socialist Party cannot be taken for granted. Under certain circumstances the Greens could just as well gather the immigrants' protest vote. This has already happened in Germany with the Turks, a group with a much lower rate of political participation.

Many people are interested in bringing about the failure of this strategy of integration through political means: first of all those who contest the immigrants' right to remain Moslem, and secondly those who refuse the prospect of a secularized Islamic minority. For its own part, the state cannot afford to exclude itself from the debate, lest it run great risks: a return to violence, such as the 1982 bombing of the mosque at Romans; dangerous situations, such as the one that occurred in the summer of 1989, when the freedom of worship was denied; or situations where Islam is deliberately used to challenge state authority, as in the case of the veil affair. A laissez-faire policy is not viable. Administrative judicial control over local arbitration can be slow and unproductive, and this leaves the field open to the establishment of some sort of regulation by the European courts.

The difficulties immigrants face in asserting an identity of their own is ultimately rooted in the conflicting reactions they arouse within French society, itself in crisis. Opinion polls on Islam in France support this statement. On the one hand, one finds an immigrant group that resorts to Islam as the main element of its settlement strategy, and does not consider this incompatible with the rules, values and institutions of the host society. On the other hand, we have an established society that accepts Islam only if relegated to the private domain, and requests that, at the very least, the Moslem settlers surrender unconditionally to the rules of the secular French state. The polls give the impression of two groups on a collision course, with conflicting priorities, yet possibly still able to avoid the worst at the last moment. In fact there is much left to be done in order to change perceptions. The response to requests that have a highly symbolic content can no longer be a mere call to social patience.

Should we perhaps devise a new type of institution with decisional powers, and yet independent from state structure, along the lines of the British Commission on Racial Equality? How can the recent settlers' highly symbolic requests be managed without offending, either out of ignorance or lack of imagination, the principles and interests

of the old-established religions? No doubt, the religious and spiritual authorities representing France's different faiths will have to be involved in this endeavour of arbitration and conciliation .

In this light, the Rushdie affair and the veil crisis have perhaps speeded up such evolution and shown the need for a national debate on immigration and Islam in French society. The tensions and fears which have surfaced reveal a society which deeply dislikes change, but which in the end realizes that it will not be able to propose for ever the same integration strategy throughout Europe. If this debate is finally opened, then perhaps Khomeini's aim of disrupting the integration of the Islamic minorities in Europe will have fewer chances of success.

References

¹ - See Maxime Rodinson, "La peste communautaire" in *Le Monde*, December 1, 1989.

² - *Le Nouvel Observateur*, February 23, 1989.