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French Muslims Find Haven in Catholic Schools

By KATRIN BENNHOLD

MARSEILLE, [France](#) — The bright cafeteria of St. Mauront Catholic School is conspicuously quiet: It is [Ramadan](#), and 80 percent of the students are Muslim. When the lunch bell rings, girls and boys stream out past the crucifixes and the large wooden cross in the corridor, heading for Muslim midday prayer.

“There is respect for our religion here,” said Nadia Oualane, 14, a student of Algerian descent who wears her hair hidden under a black head scarf. “In the public school,” she added, gesturing at nearby buildings, “I would not be allowed to wear a veil.”

In France, which has only four Muslim schools, some of the country’s 8,847 Roman Catholic schools have become refuges for Muslims seeking what an overburdened, secularist public sector often lacks: spirituality, an environment in which good manners count alongside mathematics, and higher academic standards.

No national statistics are kept, but Muslim and Catholic educators estimate that Muslim students now make up more than 10 percent of the two million students in Catholic schools. In ethnically mixed neighborhoods in Marseille and the industrial north, the proportion can be more than half.

The quiet migration of Muslims to private Catholic schools highlights how hard it has become for state schools, long France’s tool for integration, to keep their promise of equal opportunity.

Traditionally, the republican school, born of the French Revolution, was the breeding ground for citizens. The shift from these schools is another indication of the challenge facing the strict form of secularism known as “laïcité.”

Following centuries of religious wars and a long period of conflict between the nascent Republic and an assertive clergy, a 1905 law granted religious freedom in predominantly Roman Catholic France and withdrew financial support and formal recognition from all faiths. Religious education and symbols were banned from public schools.

France is now home to around five million Muslims, Western Europe’s largest such community, and new fault lines have emerged. In 2004, a ban on the head scarf in state schools prompted outcry and debate about loosening the interpretation of the 1905 law.

“Laïcité has become the state’s religion, and the republican school is its temple,” said Imam Soheib Bencheikh, a former grand mufti in Marseille and founder of its Higher Institute of Islamic Studies. Imam Bencheikh’s oldest daughter attends Catholic school.

“It’s ironic,” he said, “but today the Catholic Church is more tolerant of — and knowledgeable about — Islam than the French state.”

For some, economics argue for Catholic schools, which tend to be smaller than public ones and much less expensive than private schools in other countries. In return for the schools’ teaching the national curriculum and being open to students of all faiths, the government pays teachers’ salaries and a per-student subsidy. Annual costs for parents average 1,400 euros (less than \$2,050) for junior high school and 1,800 euros (about \$2,630) for high school, according to the Roman Catholic educational authority.

In France’s highly centralized education system, the national curriculum proscribes religious instruction beyond general examination of religious tenets and faiths as it occurs in history lessons. Religious instruction, like Catholic catechism, is voluntary.

And Catholic schools take steps to accommodate different faiths. One school in Dijon allows Muslim students to use the chapel for Ramadan prayers.

Catholic schools are also free to allow girls to wear head scarves. Many honor the state ban, but several, like St. Mauront, tolerate a discreet covering.

The school, tucked under an overpass in the city’s northern housing projects, embodies tectonic shifts in French society over the past century.

Founded in 1905 in a former soap factory, the school initially served mainly Catholic students whose parents were French, said the headmaster, Jean Chamoux. Before World War II, Italian and some Portuguese immigrants arrived; since the 1960s, Africans from former French colonies. Today there is barely a white face among the 117 students.

Mr. Chamoux, a slow-moving, jovial man, has been here 20 years and seems to know each student by name. Under a crucifix in his cramped office, he extolled the virtues of Catholic schools. “We practice religious freedom; the public schools don’t,” he said. “We teach the national curriculum. Religious activities are entirely optional.”

“If I banned the head scarf, half the girls wouldn’t go to school at all,” he added. “I prefer to have them here, talk to them and tell them that they have a choice. Many actually take it off after a while. My goal is that by the time they graduate they have made a conscious choice, one way or the other.”

Defenders of secularism retort that such leniency could encourage other special requests, and anti-Western values like the oppression of women.

“The head scarf is a sexist sign, and discrimination between the sexes has no place in the republican school,” France’s minister of national education, Xavier Darcos, said in a telephone interview. “That is the fundamental reason why we are against it.”

Mr. Chamoux said he suspects that some pupils (“a small minority,” he said) wear the scarf because of pressure from family. He acknowledged that parents routinely demand exemptions from

swimming lessons for daughters who, when denied, present a medical certificate and miss class anyway. Recently, he said, he put his foot down when students asked to remove the crucifix in a classroom they wanted for communal prayers during Ramadan, which in France ends on Tuesday.

The biology teacher at St. Mauront has been challenged on Darwin's theory of evolution, and history class can get heated during discussions of the Crusades or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2001, after the Sept. 11 attacks, some Muslim students shocked the staff by showing glee, Mr. Chamoux recalled.

The school deals swiftly with offensive comments, he said, but also tries to respect Islam. It takes Muslim holidays into account for parent-teacher meetings. For two years now, it has offered optional Arabic-language instruction — in part to steer students away from Koran classes in neighborhood mosques believed to preach radical Islam.

When Zohra Hanane, the parent of a Muslim student, was asked why she chose Catholic school for her daughter, Sabrina, her answer was swift. "We share the same God," she said.

But faith is not the only argument. Even though Ms. Hanane, who is a single mother and currently unemployed, struggles to meet the annual fee at St. Mauront of 249 euros (\$364) — unusually low, because the school receives additional state subsidies and has spartan facilities — she said it was worth it because she did not want her children with "the wrong crowd" in the projects.

"It's expensive and sometimes it's hard, but I want my children to have a better life," Ms. Hanane said. "Today this seems to be their best shot."

Across town, in the gleaming compound housing the Sainte-Trinité high school in the wealthy neighborhood of Mazargues, the rules and conditions are different, but the arguments are similar. Muslim girls there do not wear head scarves.

But Imene Sahraoui, 17, a practicing Muslim and the daughter of an Algerian businessman and former diplomat, attends the school, above all to get top grades and move on to business school, preferably abroad.

"Public schools just don't prepare you in the same way," she said.

Fifteen of the top 20 high schools in France are Catholic schools, according to a recent ranking in the magazine L'Express. Catholic schools remain popular among Muslims even in cities where Muslim schools have sprung up: Paris, Lyon and Lille.

Muslim schools have been hampered in part by the relative poverty of the Muslim community. And only one Muslim school, the Averroës high school on one floor of the Lille mosque, has qualified for state subsidies. To survive, the other three charge significantly higher fees.

Also, as M'hamed Ed-Dyouri, headmaster of a new Muslim school just outside Paris, said, "We have to prove ourselves first." For now, he plans to enroll his son in Catholic school.

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