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## An Infidel at the Mosque

PARIS, France

April 9, 1999

By Jean Benoît Nadeau

As I stood in bare feet in front of the Mosque Omar, rue Jean-Pierre Timbault, I looked with envy at the dozens of empty pair of shoes piled on the porch. That Saturday was a freezing winter day in Paris and I zipped up my leather coat while trying to chat with the man who had just expelled me from the prayer hall. I tried to look casual while freezing passersby had a double-take at these two odd guys, an infidel and a outfidel, barefooted but dressed for winter.

"I have nothing against journalists," explained Ahmed. "But cameras are different. Some angry Muslims could mind." I did not tell Ahmed that he had been the only one to mind the camera among an entire mosqueful of believers and that the man who had taken me in, Rabat, had even held the camera.

"Some angry Muslims could mind." This was exactly the same argument I was given on the day before as I tried timidly to take a picture of a group of carpet sellers in front of the Mosque.

"Don't do this! It's dangerous! There are bad people!" yelled an old man with a beard and a half-tooth. Naturally, the bad people never showed up, but I had to erase my only digital picture of the Mosque. And again the next day, the mere sight of a camera brought my expulsion.

An old chemistry teacher of mine used to say, "To observe is to perturb", explaining how the mere act of looking into something modifies the object. No doubt, cameras do perturb Muslims, at least some of them.

My interest in Islam in France goes beyond the picturesque, however. Since my arrival, it has become plain that this religion, as well as immigration, will profoundly transform French society. Immigration from Arab countries began only recently, in the post-war years, but the children of the newcomers are already producing a tremendous artistic outpouring in all forms of arts, thus profoundly influencing mainstream French culture. With about 4 million believers,<sup>1</sup> Islam is now the second religion of France. There are more Muslims in this country than there are in Albania and Bulgaria together. Only Germany numbers as many Muslims, with one difference: most Muslims in France have French nationality, although they are unwill-

<sup>1</sup> Estimates vary from 2 to 5 million but nobody knows for sure. The reason is political. The French are so touchy about questions of ethnicity and religion that INSEE (*Institut National de Statistique et d'Étude Économique*), the government branch tracking national statistics, is not even allowed to ask the people it surveys their religion or ethnic origin, as is commonly done in the US, Canada and the UK. Numbers are therefore sketchy. The consequence is that the French government, which is currently in the process of making the population survey of the decade, has no definite picture of Islam in France, nor of the concentration and ethnic origins of non-natives in the suburban ghettos around French cities. At best, the French government's actions in the field are therefore ill-informed and done on a hit-or-miss basis.

ing to refer to themselves as French, as we will see.

Among the developed countries, France is therefore at the forefront of contact with Islam (and Islamic fundamentalism)<sup>2</sup>. The values of Islam, its codes of law, its customs are on a collision course with the Republican ideals of uniformity and primacy of the secular state. In a country that almost obsessively eradicated all forms of particularism and regional idiosyncracies as a means of building a strong central unitarian state and a national identity, Islam is a challenge, domestically as well as internationally. Indeed, most of the 1,430 French mosques are financed by foreign countries. Algeria finances and controls 193 mosques, including the Grande Mosquée de Paris, the oldest in Europe. And among their 200 imams (religious prayer leaders), 50 are even paid civil servants of the Algerian state!<sup>3</sup>

Naturally, before writing on the political and social phenomenon, I wanted to have a better grasp of what Islam is at the grassroots. I was fortunate to have a first experience quickly. And this contact, unexpectedly, opened a window into the underworld of Paris, that of social exclusion, about which I wrote in the previous newsletter.

So this is why I showed up in front of the Mosquée Omar that Saturday morning with the vague hope of meeting the old man with the white beard and the half-tooth, who had warned me on the day before about the danger of taking pictures. "Meet me here tomorrow at 11h00," he had said. "We will have cake and tea and you can take all the pictures you want." It was not the best first contact, but contact it was. But the old man with the beard and the half tooth never showed up.

I stood on the sidewalk, undecided about what to do next. Contrary to the Grande Mosquée de Paris, Omar is a nondescript building that would look like any other building, but for the carpet on the porch and two signs that read: "Ablutions room" and "Prayer Hall."

I was about to step in when a young man dressed all in white, with a white cap, and a half-beard, climbed the



Mosquée Omar. A nondescript building in front of the square where the men gather on Fridays after the sermon.

stairs. Rabat was his name, and he was giving time to the mosque, as I later learned.

"May I help you?"

I gave Rabat my very vague explanation about my waiting for an old man with a beard and a broken tooth who had promised pictures. Rabat said that everyone is welcome in the house of Allah if they perform the ablutions. He ordered me to remove my shoes and socks and took me to the ablutions room downstairs. I did not yet realize that he expected me to be the 100,001<sup>st</sup> French native to be converted.

I always thought that Muslims simply had to remove their shoes to enter a Mosque, but they obviously had to do more. Rabat took me off-guard with a rather crude question:

"Did you piss, shit or fart since you had a shower this morning?"

"Uh, no..."

"Then you'll perform the small ablutions only."

One section of the ablutions room was covered with tiles and was equipped with taps, stools and buckets.

<sup>2</sup> Islam and Islamic fundamentalism must be distinguished. Islam is a religion; fundamentalism is religion with a political agenda of intolerance to other faiths that militates for a religious state. Not all Muslims are fundamentalists. By analogy, not all Christians were Crusaders, not all Catholics supported the Inquisition and not all Protestants were Puritans. How many Muslims are fundamentalists? Maybe one in five in France, according to sources, but the numbers are even sketchier than estimates of the total number of Muslims in France.

<sup>3</sup> Source. *La France musulmane*, Figaro Magazine, January 30, 1999, pp.28-38



Portico. Only this portico on the sidewalk gives away the true purpose of the building.

While Rabat held my coat and my camera, I sat, filled a bucket and put it between my legs on the edge of a deep gutter. Rabat was so plain-spoken in his instructions that I couldn't help looking around in order to spot the hidden lens of Candid Camera.

The ritual of the ablutions begins with a short prayer and consists of a lot of splashing. There are two things Allah wanted me to be careful about. First, the left hand (the foul one) must never go into the bucket, which is pure. Second, the foul water must not fall into the bucket but into the tile gutter.

The first step of the ablutions consists of scooping up water with the right hand to wash the left hand. Repeat three times, then use the left hand to rub the right hand (thrice as well). Second step: the mouth. This time I had to scoop water with my right hand, put it into my mouth, rub my teeth and gums with the index and the thumb, and spit into the drain. Three times again. Third step: the nose. For this, I had to scoop water with my right hand, force it up my nose, blow my nose with my left hand down the drain and sprinkle my left hand with my right hand to clean it. Three times, alas! Step four: the face. It consists in rubbing the face with a particular emphasis on the forehead, which goes flat

against the floor during the prayer. Always thrice. Step five is the hair: I had to wet my hands, lock the fingers and rub my hair while repeating "Lah ilaha illa'Llah, Muhammadun rasulu'Llah". This eulogy, which means that there is no other divinity but Allah and Mohammed is the envoy of God, is the central creed of Islam. This step is done only once. The next step is the feet: I had to sprinkle the right foot with the right hand and rub it with the left, starting from the outside of the foot, with a particular emphasis on the heel and in between the toes. Three times like this, and then the left foot. Step seven: the forearms and elbows. This time, I scooped water with my right hand and let it trickle down my forearm to the elbow, which I have to rub inside and outside with the outside of my left hand. Three times, and then the left foot. I was

drenched by the time I pronounced the closing prayer.<sup>4</sup>

Handing me back my camera and my coat, Rabat took me upstairs to the prayer hall.

"Ablutions and prayers are essential rituals. They are what make us Muslims."

We entered the main prayer hall and sat in a corner. The 5,000-sq.-ft. room looks like an old industrial site converted into holy land. One side had windows, the south-east side, which happens to be the direction of Mecca. The Imam's chair has its back to those windows. Aside for the richly adorned tapestry of the Imam's chair, sobriety is the norm. The room is painted green, the carpet is blue and the pillars are white. I later realized that those pillars do not simply have a structural function: each is topped by a little bookshelf of religious texts in Arabic, and about half of the faithful that come in stand in front of the pillar to make their first prayer.

There was barely anyone inside when we came in, save a man who read against one pillar, but we were soon joined by two of Rabat's friends, Moustapha and Abdelkédir, a student in electronics. As it turned out, the three of them came from southern France. Moustapha

<sup>4</sup> Those were the minor ablutions (*wudhu*). The major ones (*ghusl*) involve a shower, a bath or shower of water. Excrement is certainly an obsession of the most religious. For instance, later that morning, a colleague of Rabat's, Moustapha, explained to me how I should completely empty my bladder. Moustapha performs the task by compressing his closed fist against his bladder with his thigh as he crouches after relief. He even walks around the toilet to make sure that there is no urine left before he washes with water. Toilets are no place to rest for the zealous. For fear of foul spirits, any good Muslim steps in with the left foot first, with a special incantation, and then does his business as quickly as nature allows without reading, whistling or writing, after which he leaves by stepping out right foot first, while pronouncing a special prayer.

and AbdelKedir, both Moroccans, lived in Fréjus. Rabat, an Algerian, lived in Cannes. They had come all the way to Omar because of its high repute. They were there for ten days. Giving time to the mosque is one of the great works of a believer, as well as the pilgrimage and charity. It consists of cleaning the Mosque, feeding the faithful and preaching and proselytizing for periods of three, ten, or 40 days or even four months every two years.

Proselytizing is the most important work of a Muslim. Consequently, my escorts practiced proselytizing on me. Islam is an interesting cross between Catholicism and Protestantism. It is definitely Catholic in its emphasis on a rigid ritual and for the public dimension of the faith. But it shares an important feature with Protestantism: the believer has an unmediated relation with Allah through the Kuran. Only Allah decides who's worthy of redemption. Ablutions and prayers are no guarantee of paradise: they are simply the entry ticket. The heart of the Muslim must be good, and all the better if he can convert infidels.

Since every Muslim is a missionary, I was showered with doctrine and theology for an hour. Rabat, the most sympathetic of the three, was also the most rambling and incoherent. He did not make sense during the half hour he spoke. Two things seemed central in all he said: what matters is a good heart and Allah took me there. At one point during his monologue, I underlined that, aside from Allah's contribution, which was no doubt great, I was brought there by a desire to write something on Islam in France. This provoked some kind of wavering in the group, and Moustapha took over the discussion. Moustapha was more capable of conversing so I learned in the course of our discussion that he had only recently returned to Allah after leading a very dissolute life.

Moustapha attempted to explain the greatness of his faith through scientific evidence. Didn't Mohammed foresee DNA, since the Kuran says that man had been made from a blood clot? And wasn't he proven right by satellites for having said that the waters of the oceans, though all the same, never mix? And who but Allah could have spoken through Mohammed, who was

an illiterate caravaner? Who indeed?

I was deluged with this kind of theology for an hour but I wasn't moved. Even though I have always had a great interest in the social, political and moral function of religion, I am a crass materialist and unbeliever.<sup>5</sup> And this is not for lack of trying, since I have written about a dozen articles about Catholic and Protestant fundamentalisms and various cults. My first journalistic investigation was about a religious sect that used treatment for drug and alcohol addiction as a cover for indoctrination. I did not tell Moustapha that his personal background was rather typical of the clientele.

Having a fairly good grasp of religious discourse, for an infidel, I had a number of objections to his confused theology, but I refrained from bringing them up. I did,



*Soundiata Community Home, on rue de La Fontaine du roi: the basement kitchen is home of the 9FF meal. I was kicked out when I asked permission to take pictures inside.*

however, bring the conversation to the topic of conversions. Moustapha told me that about 15 converted Frenchmen were regulars at Omar. The number struck me less than his use of the adjective.

“Aren't you all Frenchmen?”

He did not answer but changed the topic. This issue is at the root of the difficult relationship between Islam and France. Most Muslim fundamentalists do not regard

<sup>5</sup> Around the time of the release of the movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, a friend of mine was ordained an Anglican priest in Quebec City. Driving back with a group of Anglican priests, we naturally began discussing the film, which they regarded as blasphemous. I remember telling them that in my opinion one may agree with the moral lessons of the Bible and religion without believing a single bit of the reality of what was written, and that as far as I was concerned, this could be an entire fable and still have a reality in what it produces. This, exclaimed one of them, made me a humanist, but believing is the condition of faith. It had never occurred to me that faith and belief could be so literal in nature..

themselves as French, but as Muslim first, then as Moroccan or Algerian, and then as French if convenient. Which did not prevent one preacher to greet a friend with the quintessential French expression: *Salut, mon pôte* – Hi chum!

Moustapha eventually left me alone because he wanted to listen to a preacher. After a two-hour barrage of dogma, this was a relief and I could finally pay attention to the surroundings, as more and more people were coming in for the 14h00 prayer. I had not yet taken a single picture and was doing my best to hide my camera.

There were red-headed Caucasians dressed like Hell's angels, Africans in boubou, Turks in fezzes, Maghrebans in djellabas. The variety of dress is in striking contrast with the uniformity of the ritual. Any believer coming in would walk to a pillar or stand in front of the windows for a first sequence of prayer including standing, bending, kneeling and prostrating. They all start with an interesting gesture which consists of swinging the arms towards the face and then throwing them forward like someone who would exclaim, bah! After this first prayer, they go listen to a preacher or sit against a wall, a pillar or in the middle of the place. A few chat, some read sacred texts, humming or chanting *ad lib*. Nobody minds.

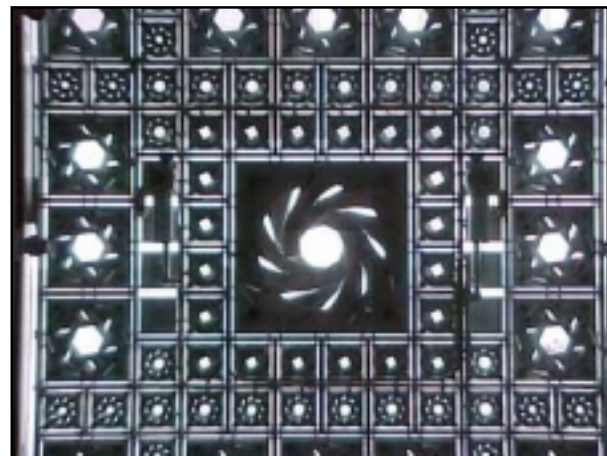
At one point, one man dressed in white with a cap on his head got to the front and began chanting at the microphone. At this point, the men put their books back on the shelves and started praying in complete disorder. Then the muezzin made the ritual call for prayer at the microphone.<sup>6</sup> All men stopped their individual prayer and began to line up shoulder to shoulder, in very tight order, to form a very compact mass. I stood in the corner and lost sight of Rabat, Moustapha and AbdelKedir.

I never saw the prayer, unfortunately, because Ahmed, one of the last people to come in, noticed me standing alone in the corner and came to invite me to join in. Apparently, staying apart is a major *faux pas*. Ahmed is shorter than I, about 39 years old, with a beard and a boxer's nose that is scraped as if someone had rubbed it against the pavement. He did not look easy, but he became hostile when he noticed my camera. "You can't expect to stand there and take pictures of us while we pray." I whispered to him that I had been invited by Rabat, Moustapha and Abdelkedir. To no avail. He grabbed me by the arm and escorted me outside.

This is how I found myself in bare feet on the sidewalk. As we waited for the end of the prayer, Ahmed



Institut du monde arabe (*Arab World Institute*). Studying the Arab world, as France is increasingly becoming a part of it.



Art. The Institut du monde arabe (*Arab World Institute*) showcases a whole facade of diaphragms that open and close depending on the amount of daylight. A perfect blend of art and technology.

became less angry and even congenial. I explained to him that I was a journalist doing a story on Islam in France. Ahmed told me that journalists were not welcome and that 48 Algerians had been arrested in front of the mosque the Friday before.

When prayer ended, Ahmed went back in and Rabat found me in the crowd. I explained to him what happened and he replied with another stream of theology. "Not all Muslims are good, but only Allah can judge. There must have been a good in your coming, and a good in your rejection." Exit Rabat.

I later realized that my expulsion was due to a misunderstanding. Ahmed did not know that I had been welcome, that I had gone through the entire ritual of the ablutions

<sup>6</sup> The French government forbids minarets and public calls for prayer outside. Muslims pointedly argue that the French government should ban the ringing of church bells as well.



*Hallal butcher shop on rue Jean-Pierre Timbault. When you see more than one, there is usually a mosque in the vicinity.*

and he took me for another journalist who had come a few weeks earlier and had written nasty things about them.<sup>7</sup>

“Besides, those three guys that took you inside the Mosque are not from here. They don’t know the ways.”

“No hard feeling, Ahmed.”

We ended up in the small café across the street. It is one of the last true cafés of Paris, in the sense that it doesn’t sell any alcohol out of respect for its patrons.

Ahmed and I talked for a long hour. To be frank, it was mostly a long rambling monologue on his part. I learned that Ahmed had been in Canada for a week to find work but could only be employed as a gravedigger, that most Muslim immigrants in France wished to go to Canada or elsewhere, that he washes his buttocks with water after wiping himself with paper like a good Muslim. I was also harangued about the fact that immigrants are the biggest industry of France, even bigger than tourism, that if only journalists were fair, they would say that the plight of Algeria and other Maghreb countries was the fault of European powers, and that journalists should open their eyes and recognize that Saddam Hussein was right. Not exactly a cartesian conversation, but good proof that even an illiterate Muslim could speak as if he read *Le Monde* every morning.

“You want to write on Islam in France, Canadian? Here’s what Islam in France is.”

He produced the stub of his social welfare check to show

me how little he received from the government in social welfare. Exactly 2,463 FF per month (U.S.\$400). According to him, about half the people at the mosque were RMIists, that is, people who collect RMI (*Revenu Modulé d’Insertion*: social welfare).

From then on, Ahmed became more personal and I learned his life’s story. Born in Algiers, he migrated to France 25 years ago at the age of 14. Illiterate, without a trade, he lived for about 20 years doing the jobs typical of unskilled labor until he couldn’t find anything four years ago. An alcoholic, he was apparently getting violent against his bosses. He has not worked since, and he won’t until he can control himself. He followed a number of alcohol-addiction therapies, but he has not drunk ever since he found Allah two years ago.

“Islam saved my life. Only Allah will decide what to make of me, but I wash myself with water after I’ve wiped myself with paper.”

I did not contradict him. Ahmed manages to live on 2,463 FF per month by renting a small 500-FF room beyond EuroDisney, in Marne La Vallee, in the far East of Metropolitan Paris. He travels by RER (*Réseau Express Régional*: the suburban train network), for which he pays (25 FF each way) when he can afford it. He was caught a few times by fare-cheat controllers, and had to pay a 400-FF fine. But after he finally explained his situation to them, the controllers now let him jump on or off when the train slows down. Ahmed manages to get his main meal at a nearby community home for 9FF per meal; he manages to buy his cigarettes and to buy himself a 6FF (dirt cheap) coffee once a day at least. When all goes well, that leaves him about 200 FF per month. So it is possible to live with so little in a town where everything is so expensive.

He took me to lunch at the Soundiata Community Home a few streets away. It houses Malians, Senegalese and Nigerians, but anyone who can pay the 9FF per meal will be fed. The cafeteria looks like what it is: a basement kitchen painted in green. It is also used as a half-clandestine Muslim butcher shop. When I came in, half the tables were red with blood. The knife-wielding butcher was talking to people while cutting meat and filling bags that he handed to people. At the back, a dozen African women worked in front of huge flat pans, some as wide as yard and a half, full of meat, wheat, rice or fries. Most of the butcher’s patrons were African, while most of the kitchen’s were Caucasians.

<sup>7</sup>Which goes a long way to prove that we all look the same to them.



The meal is simple: a chunk of chicken on top of a pile of rice or wheat or fries, with a few stewed carrots and leaves of cabbage, which my friend Ahmed simply dumped on the table while eating with his hands. He obviously had not followed madame Masson's etiquette course, but nobody cared. Although he was a left-hander, he ate with his right hand, which was a sign of good man-

ners. We were allowed a fork, a spoon and a plastic glass, but no knife, which was not a surprise given the psychiatric profile of most patrons.

One man at the table, one Abdullah, upon hearing I was from Quebec, showed me a form from the Quebec government.

"What did I tell you!" triumphed Ahmed. "You see: every one who migrates here wants to go somewhere else."

At first I thought that Abdullah was as illiterate as Ahmed and wanted me to fill in the form, but he only had questions about Canada. Was there work? Do I need a visa? A plane ticket? Etc. We talked for a while and I gave him the address of the Quebec Delegation and the Canadian embassy, which he wrote down. Ahmed seemed to think that Abdullah was insane — but then everyone at the table seemed to be some kind of misfit, including me.

We returned to the café, but Ahmed left me somewhat abruptly when he realized that he had missed the prayer once more.

"When will I see you again? I asked."

"Allah knows. I'm always here."

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