

Muslim, French - and proud to be both by

[By Katrin Bennhold](#) International Herald Tribune

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THURSDAY, MARCH 16, 2006 PARIS: He was born in Algeria, heads the main mosque of Paris and is the most prominent Muslim in a predominantly Catholic country. But Dalil Boubakeur, president of France's officially sanctioned Muslim Council, can sound Frencher than the French.

"I am not in favor of multiculturalism," Boubakeur, 65, said recently at his ornate office at the mosque, a soaring structure surrounding a mosaic-lined courtyard on the Left Bank. In a secular country like France, he added matter-of-factly, "there is only one culture: French culture."

This may not play well with the entire five-million-member Muslim community here. But Boubakeur shrugs off criticism, explaining that he considers himself a forerunner of a modern, liberal, apolitical Islam - an Islam he reckons will take root this century in Europe and beyond.

"When you're ahead, you are lonely," he said. "I was born a Muslim, I am of French culture and I love Europe. There is no contradiction."

These are tricky times to be in charge of Western Europe's largest Muslim community. The war against terrorism and bloodshed in the Palestinian territories and Iraq have added a broader sense of global injustice to the exclusion many Muslims feel in France.

But Boubakeur does not believe in a clash of civilizations pitting Islam against the West. Rather, he sees a battle playing out among European Muslims, between those willing to adopt Western values and those hostile to assimilation.

His attitudes made Boubakeur a natural choice three years ago when the government was seeking a president for its newly formed council, an umbrella organization set up to represent France's Muslims at a time when Paris was waking up to the need to address the concerns of this community, rather than leaving that task to foreign governments.

Boubakeur's secularist vision of the state, his opposition to affirmative action, and his classical French education had won him the trust of France's political class, starting with President Jacques Chirac, who knew Boubakeur's father (a previous director of the Paris mosque) and calls Boubakeur a friend.

It also helped that Boubakeur oozes European sophistication. His attire is Western, his face clean-shaven. His secretary in the front office does not wear a head scarf. He cites Voltaire, speaks German and holds France's highest honor, the Légion d'Honneur. He is what the newspaper *Le Monde* last month dubbed "the ideal Muslim."

But many French Muslims, most of whom are descendants of working-class immigrants, feel resentment toward a man they say is not one of them. They say that Boubakeur, who has never lived in an immigrant suburb and rarely visits one, does not understand their plight and that he has bought into a Republican vision of integration that has left them in limbo between formal equality and de facto discrimination.

"He is a good person, but he is the antithesis of a Muslim representative," said Mohammed Henniche, leader of the Union of Muslim Associations in the Seine-Saint-Denis district north of Paris, which is home to many families of North African origin and was a hot spot in last year's riots. "He speaks the language of the French elites, not that of ordinary Muslims. The youth in the suburbs don't understand him, and he does not understand them."

Boubakeur replies that his acceptance of French values is the wave of the future.

"That for me is being a modern man," he said, "and that is the message I would like to pass on to my Muslim brothers and sisters. I want them to adapt European culture without fear and to embrace it wholeheartedly."

It is a message with a powerful biographical undertone. Born in 1940 in the Mediterranean port of Skikda, in northeast Algeria, Boubakeur spent most of his childhood in Algiers, where his father, a conservative Algerian lawmaker and theologian close to the French colonial administration, drilled into him the notion that studying hard and absorbing French culture was a way of overcoming prejudices.

Boubakeur was 16 when he came to Paris, the age of many of the rioters who burned cars in the suburbs last November. He attended the distinguished Louis-le-Grand high school and went on to study literature in Cairo and medicine in Paris, becoming a respected cardiologist. He married a mayor's daughter from a village in Auvergne who converted from Catholicism to Islam after they met.

Although Boubakeur recognizes that there are "socioeconomic reasons" why many young Muslims do not share his views, he has little time for young fundamentalists who reject Western values.

"I don't like the bearded ones very much," he said. "They are small-minded and dangerous. Political Islam is the illness of the modern state."

For Boubakeur, who has written several books on the issue, religion is not political identity but rather spirituality, even poetry, and a way of life.

He argues that Muslim youths need not just jobs but a stake in France's heritage, a point he will make publicly in June when he joins Chirac in Verdun at the unveiling of a memorial honoring Muslims who died fighting for France during World War I.

At the council, which oversees Islamic affairs from the training of imams to mosque construction and halal markets, and is supervised by the Interior Ministry, Boubakeur has been presiding over a fragile collection of Muslim organizations often in disagreement.

One of them is the main Paris mosque, his own fiefdom, which is funded mainly by the Algerian government. Others include the National Federation of French Muslims, supported by the Moroccan government, and the Union of Islamic Organizations of France, close to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Boubakeur has seen his authority challenged more than once. One test was a law passed two years ago that banned ostentatious religious garb, including head scarves for Muslim girls, in public schools. Most Muslim groups opposed the legislation. Boubakeur says that he,

too, would have preferred to avoid a law, but when there was one he did not challenge the government.

Last year, when Iraqi militants kidnapped a French journalist, Florence Aubenas, and threatened to kill her unless the head-scarf ban was lifted, Boubakeur managed to forge a united stance among French Muslims rallying behind the government and rejecting such blackmail.

More recently, when several French newspapers reprinted Danish caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, Boubakeur distanced himself from a protest march organized by some Muslim groups but eventually spearheaded legal action against two newspapers that published the cartoons.

For him, these three challenges were milestones, not only for his own legitimacy but also for the evolution of the Muslim community.

The fact that the cartoon controversy did not lead to any violence or sustained protests in France, Boubakeur says, "was a crucial moment, a real turning point."

"It was reassuring that in France we managed to channel the anger into the legal system," he said.

"Our communities are maturing; they are beginning to act like Europeans. Here you have Muslims appealing to European institutions not to be discriminated against."

On a personal level, Boubakeur refuses to say whether he feels Muslim first and then French, or vice versa.

"I am completely Muslim and I am completely French," he says. "There is perfect harmony."

If a day comes when such questions of identity are no longer asked, he adds, "we will have come a long way."