

A national campaign for 'Islam a la Francaise' takes root amid growing radicalization

by [Elizabeth Bryant](#)

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LYON, France (RNS) Sunlight slants across a classroom at the Catholic University of Lyon, where the Bible dominates an evening lecture.

The subject may not seem surprising in this ancient city that was once a bastion of French Catholicism and a hub for Christian missionaries. But the dozen or so people jotting notes are not theology students.

One young woman wears a headscarf. A man sports the beard of a devout Muslim. Still others are non-Muslim civil servants working for the local government.

All are enrolled in a program on the French concept of secularism and religious tolerance that is jointly run by two Lyon universities and the city's Grand Mosque. They're the unlikely foot soldiers of a national campaign for "Islam a la Francaise."

The drive has taken on new urgency since January's terrorist attacks in Paris and the departure of hundreds of French youths to join jihadist movements in the Middle East.

The country's leftist government has responded with a raft of new measures to fight homegrown extremism. Among them: plans to enroll hundreds of imams, and other key Muslim figures in civics training programs, and to make those programs mandatory for chaplains working in prisons and the military.

"We need French chaplains and imams ... who learn French, who love France and who adhere to its values," Prime Minister Manuel Valls said in March, warning against those embracing radical Islam and terrorism.

But Lyon's program has broader ambitions, as it reaches out to include government officials in the training.

“If things are going to change, they need to change in all directions,” said Michel Younes, co-director of the initiative at Lyon’s Catholic University. “That means not only training imams about secularity, but also civil servants—because the subject of religion in public spaces has almost become a taboo.”

France has always had an uneasy relationship with Islam, the country’s second-largest faith. Clashes over issues such as wearing headscarves in public schools, now banned, halal butchering, and Muslim burial grounds have deepened divisions and misunderstandings.

It doesn’t help that many imams here are imported; few second- and third-generation French Muslims are interested. So the clerics come from North Africa and Turkey, regions that finance their salaries and sometimes the mosques they preach from. Many only have a sketchy idea of French laws and customs. Some can’t even speak the language.

“These imported imams are not efficient,” said Hacene Taibi, who heads the Muslim teaching institute at Lyon’s Great Mosque that helps run the civics training.

“Sometimes the faithful here won’t even accept imams who don’t preach in French. This training program helps them understand how this country functions.”

The 24-week program includes classes on law, religion, and how French principles of secularity are applied to daily life. The students visit churches, mosques, and synagogues. At the end of the training, they receive certificates. Since it began in 2012, the program has trained dozens of imams and other key Muslim figures.

“I knew nothing about Christianity and now I see similarities with Islam, ” said Karim Ghanemi, vice president of a local mosque association, who attended the Bible class. Asked how the training can help fight extremism, he said: “Muslims here feel oppressed, when in fact freedom to worship exists. It helps remove prejudice and misunderstanding.”

French authorities are not just worried about cultural misunderstandings. The number of mosques controlled by strictly orthodox Sunni Muslim preachers has doubled from 44 to 89 over the past four years, according to a recent article *Le Figaro* newspaper, which cited French Interior Ministry statistics. France has also expelled a number of radical imams over the years.

Muslim leaders argue that in most cases, however, imams and other Muslim leaders are working in exactly the opposite direction.

“Go to Friday prayers, everyone speaks out against extremism,” said Taibi, of the Lyon mosque. “We do the same work with our teaching programs in the mosque.”

Whether they can influence a new generation of French Muslims, who are increasingly becoming radicalized through the Internet, is a matter of debate. And it ultimately raises questions about the limits of the civics training.

“These people are very far from the mosque,” said Tareq Oubrou, rector of the Bordeaux mosque, referring to radical Muslims. “They don’t have beards, they don’t wear hijabs, they don’t even do their five prayers regularly. They’re just delinquents. You can’t expect imams to resolve problems created by society.”

Younes of the Catholic University acknowledges the limits of the training.

“But we have to start somewhere,” he said. “As more Muslims are trained, they can spread another message. That’s what’s important—to introduce diversity and debate. Without that, we can’t confront radicalism on the (Internet).”

But the Lyon program appears to be meeting another key objective. During a pause in the Bible class, Laurent Jacquelin, a senior official for the regional prefecture, described shared meals and conversations with his Muslim classmates.

“It’s a chance to strengthen what brings us together, our mutual humanity,” he said. “And that helps build mutual respect.”