French rabbi asks questions others hesitate to pose about Jews and Muslims

by Sara Miller Llana in the June 24, 2015 issue

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) Michel Serfaty, a French rabbi, serves a congregation in Ris-Orangis, south of Paris. Not far away is the housing project where Amedy Coulibaly, who killed four Jewish people January 9 at a kosher supermarket in Paris, grew up.

Serfaty was attacked in 2003. He was on his way to his synagogue when he heard someone shout “Jews, Palestine will prevail.” Two men pulled up in a car; one, who turned out to be a boxer from Morocco, punched him across the face.

The next year he started the French Jewish Muslim Friendship Association, or AJMF. In its “friendship bus,” plastered with messages of tolerance, the organization has made eight tours across the country—each six to ten weeks long—and ten tours across Paris.

One day recently in Montreuil, a gritty suburb of Paris, Serfaty approached passersby and peppered them with questions: What do you think of Jews? What do you think of Muslims? Do you think Jews are all rich? Are all Muslims bad people?

With this probing, he said, he discovers preconceived notions and can begin to break them down. “We look at where the actors of anti-Semitism are coming from; it’s not the pretty neighborhoods,” said Serfaty, who works with a team of Muslim youths, an imam, and a psychologist. “The amount of prejudice, stereotypes, and conspiracy is immense.”

Montreuil sits at the end of a major subway line to Paris. The community is home to many immigrants and asylum seekers from Africa, mostly Muslims. Serfaty’s team has charted 14 mosques and two synagogues in the area, as well as cultural centers that flourish around them. His team has visited them all, making three trips here since January’s twin terrorist attacks in France against *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical magazine, and a Jewish grocery store.

When two teenagers passed by, Serfaty made a beeline to them. He said he works with children or their mothers—who shape their young minds—whenever possible.

“What do you hear about Muslims?” he asked.

“Not good things,” offered one, Loica. “Like what?” the rabbi wanted to know. “Terrorism. They are robbers,” Loica responded.

“Let’s put it all on the backs of Muslims because they have strong backs,” said the rabbi, employing his trademark sense of humor, which he relies on to cut the ice.

“And what about Jews?” he asked. Loica’s friend, Logan, responded this time: “They are victims. They feel they are always targeted.”

Serfaty works in tandem with an imam, Mohammed Azizi, who arrived in France in 2003 from Morocco. “I was impacted by the hate between groups,” Azizi said, which drew him to this work.

Four years ago they went to the most troubled neighborhood of Nancy, in eastern France. The men in the housing projects rejected their message, threatening them to get them to leave. Instead they stayed and talked to whoever would listen.

They returned to the same neighborhood this February. “Some of them recognized us: ‘You are the imam and the rabbi,’” Azizi said. “They were happy to see us, to exchange their views with us.”

Serfaty said they also feel the effects of their work when they play with children at cultural centers. Muslim mothers often come up to him afterward with some version of the refrain, “Why do they lie to us about you?”

One of the organization’s volunteers, a Muslim woman named Fatima Karihila, said: “We try to show that a synagogue, mosque, or a church, they are all the same thing. They are places for prayer. If you are a real believer, there are no barriers.”

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