

## Three religions meet in suburban Paris prayer space



Chief Abbess Manchen Shih gazed through a first-floor window of her vast wood and concrete temple as shaven-headed nuns in mustard robes prepared for midday prayers, cooking rice as an offering to the Buddha.

"Look! You can see the mosque and the Laotian temple," she said, gesturing at two half-finished buildings rising from a weed-ridden site in Bussy-Saint-Georges, 30 km (20 miles) east of Paris.

Like many of the new towns that have sprung up since the 1960s to ease urban overcrowding, more than half of Bussy's 25,000 residents are immigrants. Local mayor Hugues Rondeau says around 40 percent of the town's population is Asian.

With France - a secular nation with a long Roman Catholic history - battling to come to terms with its increasingly multicultural identity, Rondeau believes Bussy can set an example.

Worried by a dearth of prayer space for non-Catholics, he is breaking new ground by placing a synagogue, a mosque and two Buddhist temples side by side in a bid to tear down barriers between the faiths. Bussy already has a Catholic church.

"My concern was that if we don't provide some better organization for the religions, we could end up with anarchy and people praying in the streets," Rondeau, a practicing Catholic, told Reuters.

France, a nation of 60 million people, is home to Europe's largest Muslim and Jewish minorities, estimated at about 5 million and half a million respectively. They rub shoulders with about one million Buddhists, many of them immigrants from France's former east Asian colonies.

That has led to tensions. More than 100 anti-Muslim attacks and as many as 400 anti-Jewish acts are reported each year, ranging from threats and desecration of graveyards to violence.

The shooting of three Jewish children and four adults by 23-year-old Mohamed Merah in March - France's first domestic al Qaeda-inspired killings - has prompted calls for more inter-faith dialogue.

While Bussy has no history of violence, Rondeau fears it may not be immune and he recognizes that

the project - where the mosque and the synagogue directly face each other - is a gamble.

"If tomorrow the rabbi assassinates the imam, or vice-versa, because of tensions in the Middle East, I would certainly be responsible. But I would also be responsible if they decide to hold peaceful talks together," the centre-right mayor said.

## LACK OF PRAYER SPACES

It is a first in France where a strict 1905 law on the separation of church and state has made public officials reluctant to intervene in religious affairs.

Rondeau emphasizes that, while he asked public authorities to reserve a plot of land close to the city centre for the site, construction is entirely funded by religious communities, which have enthusiastically embraced the scheme.

Abbess Shih's box-shaped temple, the European headquarters of the Taiwan-based Fo Guang Shan Buddhist order, opened in July. A Laotian temple and a green-and-beige mosque should be ready by December with the synagogue due to complete the space in 2014.

"Our Grand Master asks us to be in harmony with ourselves, with others, with society and with the world so I think it's good that we're all neighbors," says Shih.

Islamic leaders hope the project can foster harmony after tensions flared in September when the previous conservative government banned street prayers.

The sight of hundreds of Muslims worshipping in the streets of northern Paris had stirred unease in a country where public displays of faith are frowned upon - prompting far-right National Front leader Marine Le Pen to brand it an "invasion" - but Muslims complain there are not enough mosques.

"This is a great initiative," Abdallah Zekri, president of the Observatory against Islamophobia within the French Muslim Council. "It could reinforce the spirit of living together and allow moments to be shared. I see that as positive."

Rondeau says Bussy's immigrant population makes it the perfect laboratory for promoting interreligious relations but he admits that many local people remain opposed.

"It's not always easy, considering the image of Islam in Europe, and especially in France", he said. "It's always hard for people to understand that the cultural and even ethnic landscape of Europe is changing."

According to Mehdi, a 23-year-old delivery man who lives in Bussy, the town was flooded with anonymous tracts opposing the mosque. "Muslims have been labeled for a long time," he said. "This project won't change it but at least we'll pray in better conditions."

Many French people are openly alarmed by the changing identity of their country. The National Front won 18 percent of the vote in April's presidential first-round election, drawing on frustration at high

unemployment and immigration.

Some Bussy residents voiced fears that supporting minority religions could foster the growth of ghettos in the town.

"It's very democratic but I don't want people to be ostentatious and start walking around town wearing djellabas", said David Moreau, a 41-year-old Christian, smoking a cigarette while taking a break from his insurance job. "I don't walk around with a cross around my neck."

## SYMBOLIC MINARET

To defuse concerns, Rondeau asked each community to build contemporary structures that would not look out of place in the new town. The mosque was, for instance, designed with a symbolic minaret discreetly attached to the main building.

He hopes the site will eventually feature an Armenian cultural centre, a Chinese evangelical church, classrooms and libraries where people can learn about the different faiths.

Every religious building will have its own cultural area. Visitors to the Taiwanese Buddhist temple will be able to learn Mandarin or attend a tea ceremony while the mosque will offer classes in Muslim civilization and Arabic.

One lawmaker for France's conservative UMP opposition party, which banned the wearing of full-face veils while in office, questioned the scheme's usefulness.

"This project seems laudable but rather utopian," said Jacques Myard, an outspoken supporter of the veil ban. "Geographical proximity will not create intellectual closeness so it's largely illusory."

For Odon Vallet, an historian of religion, there is little chance that putting religions side by side will automatically favor a dialogue that is already in retreat due to the economic crisis and rising unemployment.

Some residents were more pessimistic, fearing that proximity could create tensions. "At first, I thought it was fun", said Claude Tshilombo, a 42-year-old nurse. "But now, I think it's a time bomb."

(Editing by Tom Heneghan, Catherine Bremer and Daniel Flynn)

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