

Suggestion that France replace Christian holidays with Jewish and Muslim ones doesn't go down well

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An appointee to the French Government's National Observatory on Secularism has sparked controversy by suggesting that two Christian holidays should be replaced on the calendar by the Jewish Yom Kippur and the Muslim festival of Eid.

Dounia Bouzar, an anthropologist specialising in religion and a recent appointee to the Observatory on Secularism made the suggestions last week in a magazine called *Challenges*.

She told the magazine: "At the moment, every French person celebrates Christmas, and I think it should be the case that we include one Muslim festival and one Jewish festival among our national holidays."

She said that it wouldn't be practical to add more holidays to the calendar, but two of the (unspecified) Christian holidays could be replaced by the Jewish and Muslim celebrations.

Despite France's much-lauded secularism, the majority of national holidays still mark Christian dates.

Ms Bouzar, herself a Muslim who served on the Muslim Council for a couple of years, told *Challenge*: "Today, French Jews and Muslims are very uncomfortable asking for days off to celebrate these two very important holidays. A Jewish holiday and a Muslim holiday becoming a celebration for all the French would fight sectarianism and advance the cause of secularism."

But Ms Bouzar's ideas went down like a stone with Christians and conservatives. Abbott Grosjean of Versailles told daily newspaper *Le Figaro*: "We must stop overturning all the cultural landmarks to which the French are attached. The calendar is the fruit of a history, of a culture – a reflection of the Christian roots that are part of our heritage."

Catholic priest and journalist, Fr. Stéphane Le Messin, rejected the idea out of hand. "Christianity is an integral part of French culture," he told *The Local*. "Yes, there have been Jews in France for many years, and Muslims as well, though to a lesser extent, but the difference is that these religions are not an important part of French history, in the way that Christianity is," he added.

"Also, the majority of French people are Christians. If we added Jewish and Muslim holidays, why not a day off for Sikh festivals, or a national holiday for Freemasons?"

He was supported in this opinion by Jewish and Muslim groups who were in no hurry to support Ms Bouzar's plans.

"It's totally normal to consider other [religious] communities, but we should simply add these two festivals, and not replace any," Abdallah Zekri, president of France's Observatory against Islamophobia, told *Le Figaro*. "Otherwise, people will say: 'They want to rob Peter to pay

Mohammed," he added.

Elie Petit, vice-president of the French Union of Jewish Students, said that there was "no great demand" among French Jews for the creation of a Jewish public holiday.

"We don't consider it discrimination that there are Christian national holidays – France is a secular country but with a long Christian history, so it's natural that the state would acknowledge that heritage in certain ways," he told *The Local*.

Since the controversy started Dounia Bouzar has been backtracking. "It was just a thought, not an actual proposal," she told *Le Figaro*. Bouzar claimed that radical Islamists in France were feeding off a widespread feeling of alienation and marginalisation among French Muslims, and that recognizing a Muslim holiday could undermine radical recruitment.

"So I said to myself that giving Jewish and Muslim festivals a symbolic place [in the French calendar] could be one way to pull the rug from under the feet [of sectarianism]."

Source: [Challenges magazine](#)

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