



FRANCE - Article published the Sunday 08 May 2011 - Latest update : Tuesday 10 May 2011

Can French Muslims be funny? And can they get on TV?

By Sarah Elzas

Who says Muslims can't be funny? That's the tagline for a project by a French team that has produced 18 short movies in the last two years that take a humorous look at being a Muslim in France. With 14 million hits on its website, the project has attracted attention, but it has had trouble moving into mainstream television.



Still from *Islam School Welkouw*
A part ça tout va bien website

The Bordeaux-based filmmakers - known collectively as *A part ça tout va bien* (Besides that, everything's fine) - have taken on the tricky subject as the French government has been debating secularism and the role of Islam in society.

RADIO REPORT: MUSLIM
COMEDY HITS FRANCE



One of the most-viewed videos on the site is *Les nettoyeurs* (The clean-up crew). In it, a teenaged boy sits on a couch, looking forlorn; something very bad has happened. He has asked a friend to come over to help deal with "it".

"It's not my fault," he says. "It was for my little brother."

His friend finally agrees to help get rid of "it". In the end, the camera reveals that "it" is a small Christmas tree, with blinking lights.

Some of the films are longer, with more involved plotlines, but all deal with what comedian and co-founder Hassan Zahi, 29, calls "human folly".

"When you consider human folly, there are thousands of sketch ideas: about problems with France, about living together, about conversion, about the relationship, about girls. We have found quite a few subjects," he said.

But it stays in the realm of the human. For Zahi, a practicing Muslim, there is a difference between poking fun at religion and laughing at the humans trying to practice the religion.

"We are not going to do a sketch about things that don't make us laugh personally. I'm not going to make fun of God, for example, because it doesn't make me laugh," he said. "Instead, we talk about the human follies, human weaknesses."

The project was the brainchild of film director Zangro - an atheist - who approached Zahi two years ago. Zahi, who had his own one-man show (and still does), says he was not interested at first.

"I said, 'No, leave me alone; I don't want to touch it.' The subject of Islam for me was too sensitive in France," he said.

But it stays in the realm of the human. For Zahi, a practicing Muslim, there is a difference between poking fun at religion and laughing at the humans trying to practice the religion.

"We are not going to do a sketch about things that don't make us laugh personally. I'm not going to make fun of God, for example, because it doesn't make me laugh," he said. "Instead, we talk about the human follies, human weaknesses."

The project was the brainchild of film director Zangro - an atheist - who approached Zahi two years ago. Zahi, who had his own one-man show (and still does), says he was not interested at first.

"I said, 'No, leave me alone; I don't want to touch it.' The subject of Islam for me was too sensitive in France," he said.

“Then I asked myself: Why don't I want to laugh about what scares me? I realised that dedramatising something is to appropriate it. If you laugh about it, you can appropriate it. So I said OK, let's start.”

The first sketches were filmed in Morocco. Then the group started making movies from their home base in the Bordeaux suburbs. Maria Himmich, the group's communications director, says the idea is to focus on France.



“Here in France some people make you feel like you cannot be French and Muslim - that you have to choose one of your identities, it's very tense,” she explained. “We really want to laugh at all the stereotypes, in order to make the atmosphere less tense.”

Himmich and Zahi particularly like one of the films called *Le côté obscur* (The Dark Side).

In it, two French women sit on a park bench watching a little girl who is wearing what looks like a black Islamic headscarf. They comment on how shocking it is to see a child so young taken in by religion.

The punchline is that right after the women leave the park, the little girl's father - played by Zahi - tells his daughter it's time to go to a birthday party and hands her a Darth Vader mask to complete her costume.

Short, one-joke comedy sketches are shown on French TV all the time. The format is mainstream, but *A part ça tout va bien* has had trouble moving beyond its website, into that mainstream.

But there is interest outside of France.

The group received funding from the US consulate in Bordeaux to produce a film based in Chicago: *Sweet home*, in which Zahi plays a devout Muslim living there.

His cousin from France comes to visit and wants to eat a hamburger and meet Americans. But Zahi's character wants to show how well you can live as a Muslim in the US.

EXPLAINER - THE
BACKGROUND TO FRANCE'S
BURKA DEBATE



Zahi says it's a comment on the differences he saw between France and the US.

"I was shocked that there are people in some neighbourhoods who don't speak English!" said Zahi of his visit to Chicago.

"Either we live together and don't wear the jelaba [traditional clothing], the beard and the veil. Or else each lives in his own territory, and you can wear a beard or a veil, but you stay in your neighbourhood and you don't know anything but your own culture.

"What's the better solution, the American style or French style?"

The group is working on another partnership with the US embassy, this time to send young people from Bordeaux to Los Angeles to learn about the movie business.

And they will continue to work on making French movies for a French audience.

"The goal of this whole project is to show that we actually can live together," said Maria Himmich. "We are trying to fight ignorance and the fear of the other."

And, lest you think this is too idealistic, Zahi insists it is actually very down to earth.

"Let's be logical," he says. "Why are we afraid of the dark? It's because we don't know where things are. After a year, you know where things are in your room, and you are no longer scared.

"It's the same with people. Go and meet what makes you afraid."

And humour, he says, is the best way to do this.

TAGS: BORDEAUX - COMEDY - FRANCE - ISLAM - ISLAMOPHOBIA - MUSLIM - RELIGION - TELEVISION - UNITED STATES