

Response to Naomi Davidson's "'Culture' and 'Religion': Immigration, Islams, and Race in 1970s Paris," Ch. 6 of *Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth Century France* (Cornell University Press, 2012).

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My response to Naomi Davidson's chapter on the relationship between culture and religion in the French state's dealings with Muslim immigrant communities in the twentieth century comes not from the perspective of an historian or scholar of religion and culture, but rather from theoretical and practical concerns at the intersection of law, religion, and human rights around religion, rights, and identity. These concerns have taken a higher profile in recent years as a result of attention to the increasingly visible presence of Europe's Muslim communities in such recent controversies as the ones surrounding the Swiss constitutional referendum banning the construction of minarets in 2009 and the banning of face-obscuring Muslim veils by the French Parliament in 2010. They also implicate a larger context of global attention to Islam in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, international debates, led by the Muslim nations of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, over "defamation of religions" at the United Nations, and recent riots in North Africa and the Middle East said to be inspired by a U.S. film denigrating the Prophet Mohammed. Through its case study of the treatment of Muslim immigrant groups in twentieth-century France, Davidson's research sheds light on a number of issues facing Muslim immigrant groups, in France and elsewhere, when it comes to the often conflated identity categories of "religion," "culture," "ethnicity," and "race."

At a conference on “Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Africa” convened under the auspices of Emory University’s Center for the Study of Law and Religion in 2008, participants spoke of the difference between “religion” and “culture” as constructions of legal (state) and religious powers. The bonds of culture and ethnicity are still perceived by many Africans as more fundamental to identity than religion. This is particularly so since both Christianity and Islam, the main religions in Africa today, are both imported faiths—longstanding in some areas, but the product of waves of proselytism and conversion over the twentieth century in many others. The sense was that, while one can never escape one’s culture, one can choose one’s religion—and have that choice recognized by law. As an illustration of the power of law to construct religion and to accord it supremacy over both religion and culture, our African consultants provided examples of the way in which the “constitutionalization” of religious rights and religious freedom in postcolonial independence constitutions has caused disputes that might once have been considered cultural or ethnic in nature to be reconceived as matters of religion in a way that reifies and elevates religion as a category of both law and identity. In such cases, when the law is the hammer of power, religion becomes the tack by which identity is nailed down in the process of cultural construction.

Davidson’s careful parsing of the twentieth-century French state’s use—some might say manipulation—of religion in order to manage the racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious differences of its mostly North African and West African Muslim immigrant communities reveals similar a logic at work, raising important questions about the nature and limits of Muslim identity and the state’s power to constitute it. Davidson describes a common diaspora context in which “[q]uestions of Muslim ‘identity’ were weighed differently than they had been in previous generations, and the complicated overlaps of race, culture, and religion were increasingly

visible” (169). The French government was, by Davidson’s account, quite taken with the narratives of “uprootedness” (*déracinement*) and “rupture” (172) that it ascribed, along with normative judgments of “helplessness,” “loss,” and “lack” (173), to the Muslim immigrant experience. Muslim immigrants were “shared, torn between two universes, two civilizations” (173)—each of which was thought to be “universal” and comprehensive of most, if not all, aspects of life.

Resolving the paradox of the putatively incommensurable “Muslim universalism” and “French republicanism” (170) would become a project of the French state in the interest of assimilation and social harmony, in what Davidson describes as a “new cultural politics” of “sedentarization.” This new politics would be manifest most directly in the “funding and creation of Muslim religious sites as the centerpiece of its [the French state’s] cultural politics for managing North and West African immigrant populations” (170). Central to these policies, Davidson notes, was the “identification of Islam as the central aspect of these immigrants’ lives and as an important area for integration” (170). Thus, the purpose of the chapter that forms the basis for the discussion here is to examine the “conflation of Muslim religious sites with racial, national, and cultural identities during a period where observance was said to be on the wane”; and this is undertaken in order to interrogate the “deep-seatedness of the French belief in the fundamental inability of certain Muslim immigrants to be anything other than Muslim subjects” (171).

The French policies would be defended as efforts to protect the Muslim immigrants’ “right to ‘cultural identity’” (172). The objective was “to facilitate cultural exchanges which were supposed to help immigrants retain their identities” (174). Both Muslim identity and French

policies to address it were seen to be framed primarily in terms of religion. Davidson quotes the conclusions of one government study of the time which queried:

What importance does Islam have in the lives of Muslims to push a secular state like France to take the Islamic religion into account and to decide to help in the construction of religious sites?

Man, according to Islam, is a Man who has submitted himself to God, who is present throughout his life. He is also a communitarian man. . . . The personal and community status of a Muslim . . . is eminently religious and informs every aspect of public and private life for the faithful. (175)

As Davidson observes, such statements had the effect of supporting the view that the identities of North African Muslims--whom Davidson distinguishes from their West African counterparts on the basis of their violent overthrow of French colonial rule—were “first and foremost, if not exclusively religious,” based on a primary “allegiance . . . to their fellow Muslims,” and, ultimately, based on an incapability of “separating their public and private spheres, rendering their participation in secular French public life difficult, if not impossible, and necessitating the creation of separate structures for their use” (175). Davidson describes these as “politicized public spaces” (177). The remainder of Davidson’s chapter chronicles the cultural implications of these and other aspects of the French state’s support of religious spaces for Muslim immigrants, which support was carried out in ways that, in American constitutional terms, would raise serious questions of state “establishment” of and “entanglement” with religion in the context of this supposedly benign, postcolonial, religio-cultural politics.

The extent to which the French state was simply recognizing a “right to cultural identity,” or, alternately, actively or passively constructing Muslim identity, becomes an important underlying question for the chapter, and presumably the book as a whole. Davidson notes the irony that Muslim critics of the arrangement “turned to the French state as a potential arbiter and protector of religious freedoms” and that “Muslims whose vision of Islam had little to do with

‘traditional’ *Islam français* sought the assistance of the secular state to guarantee their right *not* to be secular and to promote their own version of Islam” (191). In this case, French state secularism, known as *laïcité*, seems to have produced both state entanglement in religion in the *politique musulmane* and a desire by some of the Muslim beneficiaries of these policies to disentangle themselves from the state’s program of assimilation into a more “universal” version of Islam that was more sedentary, domesticated, and manageable through the assertion of a politics of difference.

Thus far, I have written of the implications of Davidson’s thesis for the relationship between religion and politics, culture, law, and government policy. It now time to address, more briefly, the concepts of “ethnicity” and especially “race” that are often thrown into the mix with religion and politics when it comes to Muslim identity, in France and other parts of the Muslim world. (The conflation of religion and race has even entered, often to detrimental effect, into discussion of “defamation of religions” and related concerns at the United Nations and other international fora in recent years.) In her examination of the conflation of the less mutable categories of race and ethnicity with the more fluid categories of religion and culture by the architects of France’s *politique musulmane*, Davidson treads territory that has also been given excellent exposition, in regards to another more recent French controversy, by Joan Wallach Scott in *The Politics of the Veil*. Scott’s chapters on racism and secularism are particularly worth reading alongside Davidson’s account. Davidson’s description of the French understanding of its Muslim communities in terms of *déracinement* also conjures up what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls “rooted cosmopolitanism” in his exploration of the ethics of identity in the context of modern globalization, though Appiah refers, of course, to a rootedness that is more organic and

negotiated by individuals and communities in their constitution of identity, as opposed to being supplied by a state engaging in religio-cultural politics.

But from the perspective of the field of law, religion, and human rights—a field with origins in the religious, racial, and ethnic confluences that fueled the Holocaust and in the concern to learn from and avoid future genocides, such as the ones that have occurred in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur—another especially potent and cautionary text to read with Davidson’s account of the French *politique musulmane* is Amartya Sen’s recent account of religious reductionism in *Identity and Violence*. Therein, Sen argues against a “solitarist’ approach to human identity” that reduces identity to a single category, particularly religion or culture, in favor of an approach that recognizes the “pluralities of human identity,” particularly the way in which identities “cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division” (Sen, 2006, xii, xiv). Indeed, Sen further argues that “a major source of potential conflict in the contemporary world is the presumption that people can be uniquely categorized based on religion or culture. The implicit belief in the overarching power of a simple classification can make the world thoroughly inflammable” (Sen, 2006, 10).

Davidson’s account of the political uses of religion and culture by the French state in the instant chapter closes with the suggestion that, rather than fuelling violence, the French policies may have achieved a short-lived “peace,” of sorts, between its North and West African immigrants and French republican culture, at least through the 1980s and 1990s. But that tranquility of assimilation would be tested by the influx of immigrants from the rest of the Muslim world, which would challenge the monolithic Muslim universalism presumed and imposed by the French government. The value of Davidson’s account for those of us who analyze these more contemporary controversies is its careful chronicle of the historical

underpinnings of these more recent events in a manner at once descriptive and normative. It deduces from historical phenomena fissures in secular democracies that have become ethical and at times violent flashpoints over the nature of Muslim and other religious identities.

Bibliography

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