

Naomi Davidson (2012). *Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth-century France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

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### **Post-colonial governance of Islam in France: deconstructing some founding myths about Republicanism and *laïcité***

Until the late 1990s the vast majority of studies on Muslims in France situated the beginnings of the process of “institutionalization of Islam” in the late 1970s. Around that time, it had become clear that immigrant workers were settling permanently, together with their families, and that they had specific demands concerning cultural and religious needs. If the previous relations between French society and Islam in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century were mentioned at all, they were usually represented as an anecdotal “pre-history”.<sup>1</sup> One of the few authors who paid fairly extensive attention to the colonial period, notably to the creation and operation of the Paris Mosque, was Gilles Kepel in his *Les banlieues de l’islam* (1987). Nonetheless, this book on Islam in France was still meaningfully subtitled “the birth of a religion”.

Over the past decade, however, an exciting new literature has emerged, exploring the interconnections between (1) French governance of Islam in the colonies (notably in North Africa, especially in Algeria, and in West Africa), (2) the accommodation of Muslim populations and Islamic institutions in France during the colonial period (roughly from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until the independence of Algeria in 1962), and (3) public responses and interactions between French society and Islam over the past 50 years. This literature focusses on the (dis)continuities between colonial governance of Islam (“overseas” and “at home”)—including discourses, practices, governing strategies and their contestations— and the post-colonial period. It bridges between scholars working on French colonialism (mostly historians) and those working on contemporary Islam in France (mostly political scientists and anthropologists). This research on French “colonial and post-colonial governance of Islam” (Maussen et al. 2011) is particularly exciting, because, on the one hand, it has opened up the extremely rich archival sources documenting the relations between French public authorities and Islam before the 1960s, and on the other hand, it challenges in fundamental ways two main founding myths of the French political ‘model’, namely that that model is based on Republicanism (as a model of civic and political integration) and secularism (as a model of dealing with religion).

The Republican ‘myth’ or the idea of a uniquely French model of ‘nationhood, citizenship and integration’, suggests that France integrates newcomers on the basis of a neutral, color

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<sup>1</sup> Insightfully, *The new Islamic Presence in Western Europe* was the title of a volume edited by Gerhold and Litman in 1988, which was one of the first comparative discussions of the development of Islamic institutions in Europe.

blind approach, i.e. without taking notice of their ethnic and cultural background. This is taken to guarantee both equality and inclusion. The idea of *laïcité*, on the other hand, suggests that French church-state relations are characterized by hands-off neutrality and strict separation (article 2 of the 1905 law on the “Separation of Churches and the State” stipulates that the Republic does not recognize, nor pay salaries or other expenses for any form of worship). These two founding concepts—Republicanism and *laïcité*—present the French model as *monist* (meaning it consists of a single, coherent tradition of government) and suggest that it exists *in and for itself* and is being applied in a similar way to all immigrants and all religions. Recently scholars have challenged these claims. With regard to French church-state relations many authors speak of a variety of traditions that have informed (and continue to inform) government approaches to religions: traditions of strict and moderate secularism (*laïcité de combat* versus *laïcité modérée*), a Gallican tradition of state control over religion, and a Concordatarian tradition in which the state privileges certain institutionalized interlocutors that speak for a particular religious group (cf. Bowen 2007). French church-state traditions have also had a very specific meaning in the context of colonial rule, and especially in relation to Islam (i.e. “Muslim exceptionalism in French secularism” [Davidson 2012: 12]). If we turn to immigration and immigrant incorporation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has been clearly established that France has dealt in very different ways with white, European immigrants than it has dealt with immigrants from the (former) colonies, and especially with North Africans. For the latter groups strategies and policies of accommodation were marked by exclusion and segregation.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, if our aim is to understand the pervasiveness of the exclusion of Muslims in the postcolonial period (Davidson 2012: 141), it seems more plausible to analyze the (dis)continuities of colonial approaches to North African populations, than to simply contemplate the role of the ‘French model of integration’.<sup>3</sup> Especially the way Algerians have throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century remained “outside the boundaries of French national culture” (Davidson 2012: 11) needs to be understood in terms of how they were perceived and treated in the context of French colonial rule.

With *Only Muslim* Naomi Davidson has made a major contribution to this literature. She provides a very readable analysis of the way ideas about Islam and Muslim-ness informed French governing strategies throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her focus on the *Mosquée de Paris* as a physical site that “reflected but also helped to constitute French perceptions of Islam and Muslim practices” (2012: 2) also deconstructs another set of pervasive myths—namely, the myths concerning the significance of the Paris Mosque. It is often portrayed as “the” crucial site of Islam in France, as “a monument” built to honor Muslims who fought and died in the French army, or a place symbolizing a “moderate and modern Islam” that is “open” to non-Muslims. Such images are constantly reproduced by the management of the Paris

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Péraldi (1990), MacMaster (1997), Rosenberg (2006), Saada (2012).

<sup>3</sup> See recently special issues of *Comparative European Politics* 2012 Vol. 10(3) and *The Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies* 2012, issue 10, on the role of national models.

mosque and by French politicians. Obviously, they contain some elements of truth, but they also hide many “inconvenient truths” from view.

Davidson’s book helps to trace the many significances the Paris Mosque had (and continues to have) and how these were linked to political struggles, strategies of domination over immigrants and Islam, ideas about Islamic religiosity and the centrality of rituals, and the particular role performed by this “temple of *islam français*” and its management since the 1920s (2012: 146). Just to mention one example, the Paris Mosque and the fact that it was built in the center of Paris in a “traditional” style can be understood (inter alia) in the context of the colonial exhibitions (2012: 56ff.). Much like the pastiche mosques that could be seen at the exhibitions, the Paris Mosque was supposed to be an object of “curiosity”, a pleasant “pass time”, and an authentic experience (requiring it to truthfully fulfill a religious function) for a French audience. As Davidson writes: “The experience of *being* in the Mosquée (smelling the flowers of its ‘Arab’ gardens, hearing the splash of water in its fountains or the muezzin’s call to prayer, touching one’s forehead to prayer rugs, scrubbing the dead skin in the *hammam*, sipping hot, sweet mint tea in the café) all produced understandings of Islam and of being Muslim in Paris.” (2012: 7)<sup>4</sup>

### **Immigrant workers and Islam**

Chapter 6, ‘*Culture’ and ‘Religion’: Immigration, Islams, and Race in 1970s Paris*, discusses the transformations in policies of accommodation of Islam in the period after the end of colonial rule, before it became clear to everyone that immigrant workers were in fact settling permanently in France. In Europe, policies to accommodate immigrant workers (providing housing, medical care, cultural and social facilities) were developed in the 1960s and early 1970s when governments and employers bound together to recruit a temporary foreign work force. One of the guiding principles in a “guest workers regime” is differential exclusion, meaning that temporary immigrants can participate in some spheres of the host society while being excluded from others (Castels 1995). The idea that guest workers were in need of a “cultural environment” became a crucial element in these policies of accommodation. A cultural environment could cushion feelings of alienation and distress and help keep alive the idea of “return” after working contracts had expired. In the second half of the 1970s these ideas came to be linked to newly emerging policies of “insertion” or “integration” that no longer assumed that a massive return migration would occur.

Davidson analyzes the way French administrations and local associations (employers among them) provided religious sites and other facilities for Muslims. As she observes, they assumed that for North and West Africans “the most significant factor leading to this sentiment of ‘uprootedness’ was their removal from a Muslim milieu” (2012: 170). The way in which special places and special types of housing (hostels) were provided for (Muslim)

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<sup>4</sup> See also my discussion of the way mosque building projects in Paris and Marseille in the first part of the 20th century borrowed from the imagery of the exhibitions (Maussen 2009, chapter 3).

immigrant workers continued the tradition of creating a “parallel social universe” (2012: 85). An important shift in the 1970s concerns the meaning of the mosque, which came to be seen as primarily a “prayer space” (*salle de prière*). This also illustrates how the meanings of mosques in Europe develop in relation with wider strategies of governance of diversity and immigration (Maussen 2005, 2007a and 2009). More independent types of prayer spaces also developed that enshrined a vision of Islam that was distinct from the visions of the leadership of the Paris Mosque (2012: 197). In this period the role of the Paris Mosque and its rector came to be extremely contested.

The suggestion, however, that “the funding and creation of Muslim religious sites” was the “centerpiece” of the French State’s “cultural politics for managing North and West African immigrant populations” seems to be somewhat exaggerated (2012: 170). There were many other aspects of what can be called “cultural policies” (including language classes, showing movies etc.), and some were set up closely in relation to social policies (cf. Grillo 1985). The fact that Davidson primarily looks at French politics in relation to Muslim religious practice may mistakenly lead to the conclusion that this was the only or most important thing going on in French immigrant integration (or ‘insertion’) policies in the 1970s and 1980s. The idea that all this illustrates a “deep-seated belief” that Muslim immigrants could not be “anything other than Muslim subjects” and that issues related to “inadequate housing, unemployment, and legal status” were constantly linked to Islam (2012: 171), may say more about the focus of the book than about French policies or the strategies of migrant organizations (many of which were non-religious after all). Also the argument about the “centrality” of Islam in the policies of the National Office for the Cultural Promotion of Immigrants (ONPCI) (2012: 174ff.) is very thin, mainly referring back to the policy declarations that were made by French Ministers and officials around 1976 (cf. Kepel 1987). Saying that the French state decided to “use Islam as the medium for managing its relationship with populations presumed to be Muslims” (2012: 14) (i.e. North Africans) does not seem correct to me if we take the totality of those relationships into account.

### **Concluding observations**

Some of the arguments employed by Davidson follow in the lines of interpretations by, among others, MacMaster (1997) and Rosenberg (2006). But she has added a great deal of historical detail about the government and politics of Islam and, of course, about the history of the Paris Mosque. This robust empirical basis makes for an original and important contribution.

Still, I remain unconvinced by some of the more general claims that are made throughout the book. First, there is the concept of “French Islam” itself, which according to Davidson is a “system” and a “vision of Islam” (2012: 1). If I understand correctly, what is meant is that particular ideas about Islam and Muslim-ness informed and shaped French policies (at different administrative levels, with regard to different issues and goals, in different geographic contexts and time periods). This particular conceptualization of Islam was based

on French perceptions or “imaginings” of Moroccan Islam, and it was developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (2012: 8-9, and chapter 2). In a crucial way, these ideas informed the way the French conceived of the personhood, identity and very “being” of (especially) North Africans. These ideas became crucial in strategies of governance and the treatment of this population, and involved a kind of “racialization of Islam” (2012: 2). In comparisons with Jews, Catholics and other European immigrants, their “Muslim-ness” kept Muslims from becoming republican subjects. Because theirs was an “embodied” religion, tied to their very being, they supposedly could not abstract from their religion.

According to Davidson this particular “vision of Islam” also informed those policies that aimed to create and support a particular form of Islam (including its institutions), i.e. a “French Islam” that would correspond to something that existed in the real world. A certain image or perception of what Islam essentially was and who Muslims essentially were, was necessary “in order to determine what kind of Islam the French state should be defending” (2012: 17). That image of Islam would in the end be found in the attempt to “define an Islam that was French, republican, and *laïc* and at the same time based in a set of elite Moroccan religious and aesthetic norms” (2012: 42). In this latter sense, the concept “French Islam” is similar to the way it is used by John Bowen (2007) or to how French colonial officials would speak of the need to “fabricate” a particular type of Islam. “French Islam” then becomes a prescriptive picture of what Islam in France *should* look like, for example that it should be “modern”, “moderate”, “compatible with secularism”, etcetera. Some of the real, existing institutions (notably the Paris Mosque) should stand for this “authorized” French Islam, whereas other prayer houses and outdoor festivals, for example, would stand for “independent Islam” (2012: 6).

It seems to me, then, that in the book “French Islam” refers to a particular vision of Islam that informs the management of “Muslims as subjects” and to the “management of Islam as a religion”, while the (more or less successful) outcome of the latter is also called “French Islam”. It is clear that, according to Davidson, the management of Islam as a religion and the management of Muslim subjects were “joint” (2012: 15), but by using the concept “French Islam” in these two meanings, some degree of confusion is created.

After reading the book, three things remain unclear: (i) It remains ambiguous whether, when the concept “Islam français” is used in the book, it should be understood as an ‘endemic’ concept (i.e. used by French policy makers) or as the conceptual lens to reconstruct practices and strategies of governance. A phrase such as that mosque building plans were developed “with the aim of creating a French Islam” (2012: 41) does not clarify whether we are speaking here of an (implicit or explicit) policy objective or of a reconstruction of underlying assumptions and expectations by the historian.

(ii) The Paris Mosque was a vital institution and focal point for successive French governors to help develop a “French Islam”. Davidson has shown very clearly how the purposes of supporting such a French Islam were contested and changed over time: it could be seen as

an Islamic institute that could have radiation throughout the French colonies and protectorates, it could be an institution that would supervise all other mosques in France (and staff them with imams, for example), and it could be a privileged counterpart for the French state to discuss issues such as the production of ritually sacrificed meat and education of imams (as was tried in the mid-1990s). But it is clear that in this sense “French Islam” was never a “reality”: the French state and the management of the mosque did not succeed in orchestrating the institutions of Islam in France in such a way that the Paris Mosque effectively controlled the landscape of Muslim practices, beliefs and organizations. French Islam may have existed as a strategy (both on the side of French authorities and of the leadership of the mosque) and as an idea, but as Davidson observes, “the state’s *Islam Français* was far less influential than its proponents would have hoped” (2012: 128), and “Much of the religious and cultural life for the Paris region’s Muslims took place far from the confines of the *Mosquée de Paris*” (2012: 80). If this is the case, however, it is not clear what is meant when Davidson writes that at a certain moment for Muslims in France “the republican and *laïc* ‘Frenchness’ of the *Mosquée*’s Islam français lost currency” (2012: 87)? This suggests that she believes it was a form of Islam that *existed* or that was practiced by a (substantial) part of the Muslim population in France.

(iii) Finally, there is what Davidson considers to be her innovative interpretation of what was crucial about this particular “French vision of Islam”. The French understood Islam as an embodied religion, grounded in the performance of rituals making Muslims “incapable of letting go of the rituals that were the outward symbol of their innate nature” [2012: 4]), and this view emerged out of French perceptions of orthodox Moroccan Islam, which they perceived as more truly Islamic than what was being practiced in Algeria or West Africa (2012: 8ff.). The significance of this view of Islam as “embodied” is stated in rather vague terms that cannot really be corroborated on the basis of historical analysis, for example: “Many influential French politicians and intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were incapable of imagining North Africans as anything but Muslim” (2012: 20), or “West Africans, whose bodies were perceived to have been broken and emasculated after centuries of enslavement, no longer held the same menace as Algerian bodies in the French colonial imagination” (2012: 10). When this view about “embodiedness” is used as an explanation for French policy responses it is not always very plausible either. Davidson maintains that French efforts to accommodate (or shape) Islam were focused on “embodied rituals” (ablutions before prayers, consumption of halal meat, burial of corpses, prayer [2012: 18]) because they believed Muslims were incapable of “letting go of their rituals” (2012: 4). But couldn’t these efforts also be explained in far more practical terms (e.g. that these are the aspects of Islam and Islamic practice that require “accommodation” in a non-Muslim context)? To be truly convincing, Davidson needs to show that the French were obsessed with accommodating these “bodily rituals” whereas other colonial powers were not, or that there was a near absence of accommodation of other aspects of Islamic practice

(e.g. no provisions for imams or education, or no accommodation of Islamic law), which would be a quite doubtful claim in my view.

Despite this call for clarifications I have greatly enjoyed reading this book and warmly recommend it, especially to staunch believers in French myths about Republicanism and *laïcité*.

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