Response to Naomi Davidson, "'Culture' and 'Religion': Immigration, Islam, and Race in 1970s Paris."
by Tara Zahra (University of Chicago)

In 1947, French demographer and historian Louis Chevalier wrote a book entitled *The North African Demographic Problem* in which he insisted that the assimilation of Muslim migrants from North Africa was a lost cause. Without explicitly invoking race, Chevalier claimed that the religious and cultural divide between metropolitan French citizens and North Africans was so profound as to be unbridgeable. "Much more than a faith, much more than a religious practice, much more than a community pride, Islam is a manner of being, of feeling, of understanding, in sum, a temperament, a psychology that creates a profound refusal of all assimilation behind all the secondary appearances of Europeanization," he argued.[i]

In *Only Muslim,* Naomi Davidson demonstrates that such assertions, far from being the product of a radical, xenophobic fringe, formed the basis of French conceptions of Islam for much of the twentieth century. Chevalier's words reflected what Davidson calls "French Islam," a vision of Islam that emerged in the early twentieth century and was anchored institutionally in the *Mosqueé de Paris*. Originally intended to underscore the compatibility of Islam with French republicanism and secularism, French Islam was defined in terms of "distinct embodied practices and aesthetics drawn from the French imaginary of orthodox Moroccan Islam" (1). Based on the supposed embodiment of Islamic religious practice, French authorities, social scientists, colonial officials, and urban planners increasingly insisted that French Muslims were so permeated by their faith that they could be "only Muslim." In this framework, religion defined Muslims so completely that it rendered assimilation into French society impossible. Religious practice and identity, after all, was supposed to be a purely "private" affair in the secular Republic. By insisting on the totalizing, embodied nature of Islam, French authorities gradually racialized the Islamic faith, Davidson argues, reducing Muslims to their Muslimness. Muslimness thereby became "as essential a marker as gender or skin color" (2).

This persuasive argument not only helps us to make sense of the persistence of discrimination against French Muslims and Muslim immigrants in France, but also points to contradictions and exclusions inherent to French republican ideology. On the one hand, particularly since 1945, the French state has supposedly been color-blind—refusing to officially count racial minorities lest this give rise to the racial profiling discredited by the Vichy Regime. And yet, as Davidson points out, the "cultural" arguments used to describe French Muslims embedded racial hierarchies in a language of religious difference. French colonial rule was also widely justified in terms of a civilizing mission, which presumed that colonial subjects could eventually become French citizens. But through the embodiment of Islam, French authorities gradually came to insist on the immutability of Muslim subjects and citizens—one could stop practicing Islam, but one could not stop being a Muslim.

Davidson's book also illuminates how and why an officially secular state, which has not publicly financed Christian or Jewish sites of worship since 1905, has nonetheless managed its relationship with French Muslims and Muslim immigrants through religious institutions (and even funded those institutions). This exception to the basic principle of

laicité was justified by the conviction that religious practice was the essence of Muslim cultural life and identity. Ironically, it only bolstered the presumption that Muslims could not (like Protestants, Catholics, and Jews), ever "transcend" their faith, and could not be truly French. This story also calls into question the contemporary assumption that European Muslims have become more observant only in response or resistance to official repression of Muslim religious practice. Seen over the longer term, Davidson's narrative suggests the extent to which the French (secular) state was potentially complicit in the "Islamicization" of French Muslims through its own support for and institutionalization of a particular variant of Islam.

In the chapter presented here, Davidson examines the 1970s, a decade supposedly marked by dramatic changes in French policies toward Muslim citizens and immigrants. A growing number of immigrant families from North Africa were reunited in metropolitan France in the 1970s, and they increasingly made plans to settle there permanently. The 1970s also brought new forms of "social Islam," including state-sponsored mosques in public housing complexes and prayer rooms in factories. But in spite of these changes, there was significant continuity with earlier iterations of French Islam. New agencies continued to mediate the state's relationship to Muslims through the provision of sites for religious worship, even when it became clear that religious observance was declining. The recteur of the Mosquée de Paris, Si Hamza, himself began to internalize French Islam, defining the North African community in ethno-cultural terms. Davidson argues that this demonstrates just how deeply attached Republican authorities were to their conviction that religious practice defined Muslim identity.

For me, as a historian of migration and of Central and Eastern Europe, Davidson's chapter raises interesting questions about French specificity. Were French Muslims alone in being considered "Only Muslim" in the twentieth century? Many of the arguments against Turkish inclusion in the European Union seem to rest on a similar racialization of religious difference. Whether or not Turkey is a secular society, the argument has been made that Turks cannot be Europeans. Is that because Turks are seen as "Only Muslim," regardless of how secular they are? Or is it because "Europe" is actually deeply saturated with a (Judeo?) Christian bias, no matter how secular *it* claims to be?[ii] Were Algerians "Only Muslim," or were French citizens "Only Christian"? Muslim immigrants and citizens in other countries in Europe (Switzerland, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands) have historically been and continue to be subject to discrimination. I wonder whether exclusion in those countries has rested on similar assertions of embodied religious difference.

A claim for French specificity can be found in Davidson's subtle analysis of the treatment of non-Algerian Muslims. Even as Islam was racialized in twentieth-century France, this did not occur evenly or uniformly. West African Muslims, she argues, were subject to multiple forms of official and unofficial discrimination (including by other Muslims), but they were seen as less totally defined by Islam than Algerians. This may have been in part because they practiced a different kind of Islam, or because they were considered to be less militarily and politically threatening to the Republic. But it underscores the ways in which in which French conceptions of Islam were grounded in Algeria's particular history as a settler colony and its violent decolonization. Following the same logic, I wonder if men were seen as more "Only Muslim" than women, because they were generally considered more political, violent, or threatening? And were parents

seen as more "Only Muslim" than their children, who might otherwise have been seen as more assimilable?

As Davidson herself points out, Jews stand out as an important case for comparison. I very much look forward to her next project, which will explicitly compare the history of Jewish and Muslim communities in France (and examine their interactions). In *Only Muslim,* Davidson argues that Jewish faith, unlike Islam, has come to be seen as compatible with a secular French identity. It will be fascinating to learn more about how, why, and when Jews transcended the perceived embodiment and racialization of their faith that drove their deportation and murder during World War II. Was this simply an immediate response and reaction to the Holocaust? Or did Jews gain status as more than "Only Jews" in relationship to the influx of (more threatening, from a French perspective) Muslim migrants who arrived in France in growing numbers after World War II?

Davidson's theoretical framework also offers provocative insights for scholars of anti-Semitism. For decades, historians of anti-Semitism have distinguished between "religious" and "racial" anti-Semitism. Davidson offers a powerful way of understanding the extent to which the two forms of prejudice have been (perhaps inseparably) intertwined. But given the specificity of "French Islam," is it valid to apply her framework to the anti-Semitism of twentieth century Central and Eastern Europe or any other context?

This is an exciting and stimulating book that deserves to be widely read within and beyond academia. Davidson has generated a new and persuasive way of understanding the history of "French Islam" and the religious and racial politics of contemporary France. She challenges traditional understandings of French secularism and republicanism, and offers new insights on the perceived intersections of race, religion, and culture in twentieth century Europe. All too often, we operate on the assumption of layered hierarchies and exclusionary codes—racism is presumed to be "really" about religion; anti-Islamic or anti-Semitic violence "really" about race or class; race "really" about culture or class or gender. By showing us precisely how religion, race, and culture came to be entwined in twentieth century France, Davidson helps us to get beyond the search for a single core of exclusionary logic.

---

[i] Louis Chevalier, <u>Le problème démographique Nord-Africain</u> (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1947), 209.

[ii] See Leora Auslander, "Negotiating Embodied Difference: Veils, Minarets, Kippas and Sukkot in Contemporary Europe," *Archiv fuer Sozialgeschichte* 51 (2011), 401-18.