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Sharif Gemie, *French Muslims: New Voices in Contemporary France*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010. ix + 220 pp. Bibliography and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb.) ISBN 978-0-7083-2320-5.

John R. Bowen, Washington University at St. Louis.

Towards the beginning of this intelligent, well-researched study of new Muslim public figures in France, the author asks of his book: “what, then, is the main topic?” before noting that it is quite difficult to respond (p. 3). The author aims to do several things in succession: revisit the debates around Islamic scarves in public schools; present the views of four quite divergent Muslim (or sort of Muslim) public figures; and trace the contours of problems occurring between Islam and the Republic. The result is a thoughtful and well-documented series of portraits and comments, well worth (enjoyably) reading as a way into some current debates in France. The book would be suitable for classes at all university levels.

The core of the work consists of four portraits of contemporary Muslim public figures, chosen to mark out a space of experience and debate. Chahdortt Djavann is the pseudonym of the Franco-Iranian author of a series of auto-referential reflections and pamphlets, in which she denounces Muslim practices and Islam itself for French audiences. Fadela Amara, from central France, created the movement Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores nor Doormats) to denounce violence against women in the poor outer suburbs of French cities (the *banlieues*) and to improve the lives of those women. Tariq Ramadan, surely the best-known of the four, grew up in Switzerland and became the most popular exponent for a “European Islam.” Houria Bouteldja, surely the least well-known of this group, emerged as one of the leaders of the movement called Les Indigènes de la République (The Natives of the Republic).

The book is structured in point-counterpoint fashion. The treatment of Djavann allows Gemie to show a French version of a “clash of civilizations” argument, and to remind readers that those from outside France who portray Islamic realities harshly in their country of origin inevitably provide a one-sided view. Turning next to Fadela Amara allows him to contrast her internal criticism of the behavior of some Muslims with Djavann’s blanket condemnations of Islam. He charts Amara’s rise out of the *banlieue* and her political affiliations with both the Socialist Party and now the government of the center-right. Gemie is at his best when skewering political pretensions and analyzing the reasons for movement failures, as he does with Amara’s movement.

The author next turns to two figures who stand for the other side, for positions more sympathetic to Islam. Tariq Ramadan had to have been included in this book, as he is the clearest spokesman for a new European view of Islam among contemporary European Muslims. Gemie gives us a fair portrayal of his writings, although their vagueness makes it difficult for him to show us why it is that this figure has had such an effect. In Bouteldja we have a name standing for a movement, and a rather small one at that. Perhaps because Gemie has limited himself to an analysis of writings, he finds some difficulty in finding out much about her life and career.

On these four portraits the author hangs a rather nice set of analyses and remarks about the state of public discourse in French concerning Islam and Muslims. Many of his observations reflect a long acquaintance with the subject. But the four figures providing this structure do not really give us a sense of the diversity of voices and orientations among French Muslims today, as the book’s title would

suggest. Djavann has little or nothing to do with “French Muslims,” and I disagree with the author’s claim that “there can be no doubt that her books have played a significant role in structuring the dominant French attitudes to Muslims” (p. 49). These widely-held attitudes have much more to do with the Algerian War, the National Front, everyday anxieties about security and “national identity,” and the electoral strategies of the mainstream parties. (Anyway, how would we know what role a book plays?) As Gemie convincingly tells us, Amara’s movement has remained largely on the surface, at times much celebrated in the media but with little local following. It followed SOS Racism in being nourished by a Socialist Party eager to combine a concern for popular welfare with opposition to religious communalism. Tariq Ramadan does indeed have a large following, but this has more to do with his many lectures and small meetings than with his more intellectually-aimed books, which Gemie understandably has difficulty summing up. Bouteldja is hardly on the radar screen.

Before and during these portraits, Gemie examines the debates in the 2000s around veiling and the roles played by some Islamic organizations in these debates. The first set of remarks adds interesting notes and information to a story already well-told; the second is not really a study of Islamic organizations in France, but an addition of a bit more sociopolitical context to the veil debate story.

Gemie relies completely on published works, not having carried out interviews or observations in France, apart from some casual conversations with acquaintances. He is, therefore, at the mercy of what happens to make it into print. This research strategy works well when he is analyzing the writings of his four figures, or the historical events of the 1980s. Even for more recent events, he has done a superb job of mining newspaper articles and web sites, as well as the major published books.

But this research strategy carries with it two weaknesses. First, and apart from an intriguing televised encounter that serves as the red thread through the chapters, we know the four major figures from their written “voices,” but not through their ways of engaging with other Muslims or non-Muslims. Newspaper accounts help, but of course journalists are looking for the most telling anecdotes and not for everyday practices. This limitation is relatively trivial in some cases, but not so regarding Tariq Ramadan, who is perhaps less important for the content of his writings (admirably dissected here) than for his encounters with Muslims in his hundreds of speeches and small-group discussions. We miss here his pastoral qualities, which are his main appeal to Muslims: his no-nonsense “tough love” answers to questions, and one-on-one responses to the many who line up to speak with him after his speeches.

Secondly, again because the author is forced to rely on journalistic accounts, he sometimes misses what to Muslims (but not to the non-Muslim correspondents from *Le Monde* or *Libération*) is the essence of an event. For example, in a short account of France’s largest confederation of Islamic associations, the UOIF, he discusses their annual meetings at Bourget. Here he follows journalists in emphasizing that (a) a lot of Islamic books and objects are sold and that (b) politicians sometimes attend. But for Muslims who attend, the key events (judging from attendance and emotions) are the lectures given by prominent non-French Islamic scholars. These are ignored by the French major media and thus cannot make it into this work.

Of course, the author does not intend the work to be a sociological account of the lives of Muslims in France or of the activities of the four figures profiled here. We learn little about the activities or composition of the major movements mentioned, other than a few meager statistics. And yet three of the four figures (Djavann is the exception) gained their stature from their involvement in social movements. Even Tariq Ramadan would not have attained his current stature without the years spent involved with the Lyon-based movement and its communication arm, the Tawhid bookstores and publishing house. He has sold many more cassettes and pamphlets in France than the broader-market books analyzed here. For these four individuals, it is difficult to “re-construct the life-world from which their thinking emerges” (p. 7) without probing into their activities and their social roles. He does so reasonably well for

Fadela Amara because the media found her both a sympathetic puzzle and a political animal, less well for the others, and we learn next to nothing about the life of Chadortt Djavann.

Gemie is only the latest among a number of commentators to review the events leading to the March 2004 law against conspicuous religious signs in public schools. The added value is in the depth of his research into written materials and the liveliness of his prose style. One would want to complement this account with long-term historical accounts of the formation of Republican ideas. We can only understand the strange and tense dialogue between politicians and Muslim leaders by placing them into that deeper context, that of the previous two centuries of feints and attacks by those promoting the positions of the Republic or those on the other side, that of the Catholic Church.

Two intersecting issues surface again and again through that history: Should religious leaders answer to the State? And who gets to educate the young? The first issue is itself one version of a long series of efforts by kings, emperors and presidents to encompass and domesticate the French church. These efforts are not in and of themselves anti-clerical, although they often are used to bolster anti-clericalism; rather they are against the autonomy of the cleric. Early modern kings told the Vatican that clerics would answer to the king for their temporal concerns; Napoleon pluralized governance of religions through the Concordat and the Consistory, placing the recently emancipated Jews into a corporatist political logic along with Protestants and Catholics; French Presidents since the 1980s have worked to do the same for Muslims, creating a privileged religious interlocutor for the benefit of the State. Time and time again, those battles and debates have concerned schooling. Should the State, in the name of universal ideals, monopolize schooling? Or does liberty of expression extend to the right to teach one's children as one wishes? These issues came together in the debates over scarves in schools. Gemie's book adds one more dimension to our efforts to understand the heat generated therein.

John R. Bowen
Washington University at St. Louis
jbowen@wustl.edu

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