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Naomi Davidson, *Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth-Century France*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012. xvii + 299 pp. Bibliography and index. \$25.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8014-7831-4.

Review by Bronwyn Winter, University of Sydney.

The construction of “French Islam” and its embodiment by “French Muslims” has much preoccupied scholars in the Western English-speaking world over the last two decades. That scholarship has often, however, focused on recent history: post-World War II or even post-*trente glorieuses*, when the children of North African immigrants became the curiously-named “second-generation immigrants.” Then, following the Islamic headscarf debate at the end of the 1980s and the increasing concern over the religious radicalisation of North African-background minorities in particular, and most especially over the last decade or so, the immigrants and their second or third or fourth generation descendants became, simply, “Muslims.”

Les trente glorieuses refers to three decades of post-war economic growth and concomitant growth in France’s North-African-background minorities, at first workers from the colonies brought to service the industrial boom, then increasingly numerous yet disenfranchised postcolonial immigrants. Economist Jean Fourastié coined the term *trente glorieuses* in 1979, in an obvious echo of the *trois glorieuses*, the July revolution of 1830, which resulted in the abdication of Charles X and the beginning of the period known as the July monarchy, under Louis-Philippe. Just as the *trois glorieuses* resulted in a profound political transformation in France, Fourastié argued that the *trente glorieuses* were a period of equally profound economic transformation.[1]

Naomi Davidson’s book has the great merit of tracing the historical foundations of the present “Muslimisation” of these minorities in the French political imaginary. She demonstrates, through a careful examination of the history of the constitution of “North Africanness” within metropolitan France, that the supposed embodiment of an *Islam français* by those same North Africans is far from new, and certainly does not date from 1989 (first headscarf debate), 1974 (symbolic end of the *trente glorieuses*) or even the Algerian war. She also carefully demonstrates the role of North African elites in shaping that *Islam français* to the exclusion of the vast majority of Muslims in France, however these people’s Muslimness is defined. At the same time, by focusing almost exclusively on Muslims’ own religious practice, even in its diversity (rather than the diversity of attitudes towards the place of religion within North African cultures), the book seems to fall into the same trap: that of characterising those of North African background in France as essentially, inherently and religiously *Muslim*, as being wholly defined by this Muslimness even if not wholly united by it.

Davidson begins with the now familiar premise (although she does not express it in quite the same way) that dominated groups—she refers in particular to women and in general to the colonised—are marked and thus embodied as a particular identity (woman, *indigène* [“native”] and so on). As such, they cannot accede to the abstract and thus disembodied republican quality of individual citizen. They have a group identity that sets them apart; they are the differentiated Others at the periphery (to borrow conceptually from both Simone de Beauvoir and Immanuel Wallerstein) not the homogenous One at the centre of the

Republic's self-image.[2] In the case of "French Muslims," this process of Beauvoirian othering has occurred most especially through the construction of an irreducible cultural difference. Davidson explores this differentiation in *Only Muslim* by retracing the twentieth-century history of the embodiment of French Muslimness through, among other things, the built environment.

The author then moves on to a discussion of the development of the political narrative of "French Islam" and "French Muslims," in a progression that is at once chronological and thematic. The discussion begins with a brief treatment of the construction of religion and race in the colonial Mediterranean in the nineteenth century when Algerian Jews and Muslims, for example, had differentiated statuses, and then moves on to focus on the development of *la laïcité* (French secularism, encoded in, most importantly, the 1905 law on the separation of church and state) and the first waves of labour migration of North African colonial subjects to metropolitan France around the time of the First World War. During this period, "French Muslims" came to occupy quite specifically—and religiously—defined "liminal spaces in French law and immigration politics" (p. 35). Unlike other minorities, who were certainly racialised at the time (these include southern and eastern Europeans, sub-Saharan Africans, and both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews), "Muslims" were seen first and foremost as hardwired with religion-based culture. I would argue, however, that construction of other minorities as religion-dependent or certainly tradition-dependent was far from absent from the French political landscape, even in relation to its own regional minorities. That said, the legal and political encoding of "Muslimness" as some sort of protected state is certainly unique in France at that time.

The project for the construction of the Mosquée de Paris, argues Davidson, follows logically from the construction of French Muslims as the ahistorical religious exception to French *laïcité*, and discussion of the Mosquée is the subject of her second chapter. The original impetus for the construction of the Mosquée was the French state's wish to recompense its soldiers from the Empire and to ensure their continued allegiance, but the ongoing motivating force was the state's desire to fashion an *Islam français*, built not from the ground up but top-down. Although the group that had ownership of the project was the Moroccan-based Société des Habous des lieux saints, the French state donated the money and the Parisian municipal government donated the land (through a grant of money enabling the land's purchase), and as Davidson points out, the Mosquée ended up as a peculiar manifestation of *Islam français*. Davidson draws a parallel between aspects of the Mosquée's imaginings and realisation and the Exposition coloniale of 1931, in that both folkloricised Islam as a commodity for international consumption. As a space that would become at once public and private, at once reserved for Muslims and opened as a secularised yet exotic tourist destination in the heart of Paris, the Mosquée was also at the heart of the embodiment of French Muslimness.

Davidson's third chapter focuses on the mismatch between the officially constructed and Mosquée-de-Paris-enhanced *Islam français* on one hand, and the actual religious and cultural practices of North African immigrant workers on the other hand. Apart from certain segregationist practices (such as those in the hospital system in the 1920s and 1930s) that were, once again, justified on the basis of "protecting" religious difference, North African immigrant workers were, argues Davidson, not considered proper Muslims by French observers because of their "pagan" observances (p. 63). These last did not follow what the French state, as advised by North African religious organisations and colonial administrators alike, understood to be Islamic practice. I note in passing that this criticism has come from neo-converted Muslims themselves in the hijab debates since 1989: newly devout young Muslims have criticised their religiously-practising parents and grandparents for not "properly" observing Islam.[3]

Davidson describes a whole network of services for (largely Algerian) workers set up in Paris in the interwar period that distinguished them from all other immigrant workers on the basis of religion. Prayer rooms, halal food and so on were the hallmarks of such services (Davidson focuses in particular on the Hôpital Franco-Musulman). When the workers themselves refused this segregation (for example,

by refusing to follow halal diets), they destabilized the French state's idea of them and rejected their maintenance at the periphery of French society on the basis of such an idea. Again, these debates about "proper" Muslimness have in more recent times been rekindled by "born-again" Muslims, often with the tacit or even explicit assent of sections of the French anti-racist left. And again, the image has been vociferously contested by many "of Muslim culture" who have varying allegiances to Islam as a religion. Perhaps the other major difference today is that, to borrow Davidson's phrase, the "pagans on the periphery" (p. 76) have become, at least to some extent, part of the intellectual and political class, whereas in the 1920s and 1930s, they were largely blue collar and overwhelmingly male, and had little access to a political forum from which to contest the French state's construction of them.

Davidson's fourth chapter focuses largely on the period during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath, both in Paris and, particularly, the provinces. As Davidson notes, little attention has been paid to the history of Muslims in France during this period and particularly in the provinces under Vichy, but her own research as communicated in this chapter suggests a certain continuity. If anything, the treatment of Muslims as strictly religious was reinforced, as the Vichy regime more broadly re-injected religion into the political sphere, and its grounds for differentiating French citizens and residents combined the racial and the religious for all of the monotheisms and their associated cultures. One noteworthy difference between Paris and the provinces was in the built Muslim environment: mosques were not conceived as public monuments to imagined and orientalist Muslimness, as had been the Mosquée de Paris, with their private-Muslim and public-French spaces and interactions, but as places of worship and community gathering used solely by Muslim minorities themselves. The Vichy regime supported this development in its funding of some social services for this still religiously-defined population. Most significant, perhaps, is the dismantling of the Bureau des affaires musulmanes and the transfer, in November 1945, during the time of the Constituent Assembly of the Fourth Republic, of management of "Muslim social affairs" to the Ministry of Labour. This act signals a recognition that the culturally important sites for France's Muslims at that time were in fact within the workplace. Davidson argues, however, that the flipside of that coin was the French state's desire to exercise some control over a secularised and newly politicised North African proletariat. In this, she argues, the post-war Republics maintained a Vichyist stance in reinforcing this minority's religiousness as an attempt to avert a more dangerous secular political agitation. In this, the regime shifted from the somewhat secularised and folkloricised *Islam français* of the Mosquée de Paris to an "Islam in France."

In this chapter, as in the earlier chapter on the Mosquée de Paris, Davidson discusses at some length not only the actual buildings that were constructed, notably those constructed under the aegis of the Mosquée de Paris, but also the original (and successive versions of) the plans for the buildings and discussion of them in related documents. In chapter four, in fact, she focuses on St Etienne and Marseille in particular, establishing contrasts in style, purpose and integration into the city landscape between each city and between them and Paris. Through this discussion, she reveals the ongoing tension between the secularised *Islam français* as developed in Paris and the *Islam in France* of the provinces, notably as engineered and maintained by Mosquée de Paris founder Si Kaddour. Si Kaddour consistently placed the accent on the mix of religious and social functions of the Mosquée de Paris, but just as consistently represented the provincial mosque projects as relating to religious worship only.

Following the chronology, Davidson turns in her next chapter to the period of the Algerian war. Here, she argues that, despite the more common use of the vocabulary "Arab" and "Algerian," both the French state and the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale used Islam as a tool of propaganda, to delimit the Algerianness and/or Frenchness of those of Algerian background living in metropolitan France. While the French state used the Mosquée de Paris to reaffirm its *Islam français*, the FLN had no such symbolic site to embody its Algerian Muslimness in metropole. In fact, its symbolic site became "Arabness": the FLN, highly receptive to pressure from the organisation of Ulemas, conflated Algerianness with both Islam and Arabness. I would like to add that the French state adroitly played during this period, as it

had throughout the colonial era, on the Arab-Berber-Jewish and religious-secular fracture lines within the Algerian left. Algerians in metropolitan France found themselves being heavily policed by both the FLN and the French state, and the Mosquée de Paris became the site of tensions both between the FLN and the French state on one hand, and the FLN and the Moroccan state, acting through the Mosquée, on the other.

It is in this chapter that Davidson finally addresses the question of gender in the construction of Islam in France. One might argue that prior to the Algerian war, “Muslims” in France were an overwhelmingly male population and thus the question of gender is irrelevant. Yet it is precisely *because* it was an overwhelmingly male population that gender was centrally relevant. Prior to the Algerian war, although North African women were a small minority in relation to North African men, they were not absent, and their very invisibility in Franco-French and Franco-Maghrebian conversations about “Islam” and “Muslimness” that focused even on the marked Muslim other as being exclusively male was telling. Just as telling was their sudden appearance on the political stage as a tool of propaganda during the Algerian war: by the French state, that argued for women’s emancipation from the inequalities imposed by religious tradition, and by the FLN, with the ulemas whispering in its collective ear, that argued just as strongly for the reaffirmation of Islamic values in gender relations.

Davidson does devote a section of this chapter to this discussion, but it is regrettable indeed that, although she mentions de Gaulle’s 1958 directive to undertake reform of the status of Muslim women, she does not mention the first North African and Muslim member of any French government, who was given the job of enacting this directive and was herself a strong advocate for it. Nafissa Sid Cara was appointed Secretary of State responsible for social issues in Algeria and personal status matters under Muslim law. She was in fact one of the three Algerian women among eight women elected to the first lower house of the Fifth Republic (she was replaced in parliament by a man following her appointment), but all three were, of course, to lose their seats as Algerian deputies following Algerian independence. Sid Cara’s role in the government as the *only* Algerian-background minister in the whole of the Fifth Republic until the appointment of Rachida Dati and Fadela Amara in 2007, and her uneasy status as both pro-French and pro-sex equality, would have at the very least deserved a mention in passing, all the more because this book is about the *embodiment* of “Muslims” in France. The conversations happening in France about Algeria and French Islam at the time of the Algerian war were *not* solely conversations among men.

Davidson closes her fifth chapter on a lengthy discussion on the reinforced role of the Mosquée de Paris (as of 1957, under the new direction of Si Hamza Boubaker, born in France, but of Algerian background) in the construction of an Islam that was at once the French republican version of *Islam français* and connoted as “North African” in its identity. Si Hamza’s appointment was to culminate, at the end of his term, in the transfer of the Mosquée from the Moroccan Société de Habous to the Algerian government, although this transfer was to be the subject of several years of legal wrangling, as Davidson outlines in the subsequent chapter.

The sixth chapter deals with the 1970s, the decade in which the idea of the temporary immigrant worker disappeared, as North African workers not only settled in France permanently but also truly *became* immigrants in the proper sense of the word, following the Algerian war and the decolonisation of Tunisia and Morocco. Yet even though the French state policies changed, with new services being set up for immigrant workers, and to some extent the discourse changed to the subsequently much-criticised *misérabilisme* of the *déraciné* caught between two cultures with only negative effects, the characterisation of North Africans as primarily Muslim (while Sub-Saharan Africans remained primarily African) remained. Again, Davidson focuses on the role of the Mosquée de Paris and of Algerians’ changing role towards it. Their involvement in its politics became more pronounced and they were vocally critical of *recteur* Si Hamza who was himself equally critical of many of the Algerians’ protests against racism and of their continued closeness to the FLN. Davidson documents some of the uglier

criticisms launched against Si Hamza, which called him a Zionist sympathiser and traitor to Algeria. Again, one sees the echoes of these criticisms today, with often heated debates in recent years about Zionism and Muslim anti-Semitism in the “Muslim” and anti-racist left, leading to some high-profile resignations from the MRAP [Mouvement contre le Racisme et pour l’Amitié entre les Peuples] in 2004.

As Davidson points out, however, the Mosquée de Paris was now very far from being the centre of the action in Parisian practices of Islam, which were becoming more diverse and more firmly outside the control of the state. Davidson cites in particular the case of the Tabligh mosque in Belleville, associated since its creation with a Muslim religious revivalism. But she also notes that the Belleville mosque and other, supposedly more democratic sites of religious practice were almost exclusively male; women remained quite marginalised.

Davidson concludes the book on the current French framing of *Islam français* through three lenses: that of the Islamic headscarf debates and ensuing legislation, that of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, and that of the new Institut des Cultures d’Islam to be set up in the Goutte d’Or district in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. La Goutte d’Or is a working-class and heavily immigrant neighbourhood, that has also at various times been connoted as a crime-and-drug area and is currently in the process of being *embourgeoisé*, like many formerly working-class and/or immigrant areas of central Paris.

Davidson sees in these initiatives and debates a continuation of a process of French institutionalisation of a certain form of Islam that began during colonisation and started to emerge in concrete terms in the metropole with the construction of the Mosquée de Paris, now nearing its one hundredth anniversary. She comments that “a religious system conceived by the state in cooperation with other elite actors and designed to serve as a tool to mediate between them and a subaltern immigrant population is doomed” as both a spiritual and a political project (p. 217). Most importantly, she concludes, *laïcité* is an insufficient or indeed inappropriate analytical category for discussing Islam and Muslims in France, as it constructs Muslims’ non-acceptance of secularism as the problem and masks the ways in which the French state has constructed embodied Muslim minorities.

This conclusion, however, is somewhat problematic. I agree that secularism should not be the only analytical framework for discussing racism in France—indeed, it really should not be the framework at all, as it simply becomes a distractor of the *défaut d’assimilation* type. At the same time, the analytical framework of secularism is no more “the problem” than is the analytical framework of religion. Many of Muslim culture in France are atheist and many practising Muslims are perfectly comfortable with French secularism. This brings me full circle to my uncertainty as to the actual argument Davidson wishes to make. She seems in this book to be wanting to do three things: provide a history of Islam and Muslim practice in France over the last century, as configured largely by the French and North African political elites, with some brief references to oppositional practice; discuss the embodiment of Muslimness through its architectural expressions and the role of religious sites (the Mosquée de Paris in particular) and their internal demarcations of space within urban locations; and discuss the embodiment of Muslimness as variously imposed on and claimed by North African populations in France since the First World War, with some passing references to their gendered, ethnic and national demarcations. The first objective is well-realised; as for the other two, *je reste un petit peu sur ma faim*.

NOTES

[1] Jean Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).

[2] Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) and Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: New York Academic Press, 1974).

[3] See Bronwyn Winter, *Hijab and the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

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