CHAPTER 5

Muslim Bodies in the Metropole: Social Assistance and “Religious” Practice in Interwar Paris

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Introduction

This paper examines the interwar origins of Muslim histories in metropolitan France. It argues that the seeds for the racialization of people identified as Muslim in France were laid during this period with the creation of a mosque and other “Muslim” sites in Paris. By examining the creation and management of these Muslim spaces by French officials and North African religious leaders we are able to write a transnational history of Islam in Europe, one that acknowledges Islam’s long presence in European social and political life. In acknowledging not only the role of French colonialism, but also that of Muslim leaders and by elaborating on what I call “French Islam,” we discover how this collaborative construction of a particular vision of Islam ultimately contributed to the process of essentializing those people identified as “Muslim.”

I examine the Paris Mosque (Mosquée de Paris) and the Franco-Muslim Hospital (Hôpital Franco-Musulman), built between 1922 and 1935, in order to understand the elaboration of this particular vision of French Islam that blended “Muslim” and “French” civilizations. French Islam inscribed Islam firmly within a French republican model, yet it simultaneously maintained Islam outside the boundaries set by French secularism. The architectural and aesthetic plans for the Mosque, as well as the events that marked the milestones in its development, were essential to the creation and diffusion of French Islam. In this paper I argue that the social service and policing programs that emerged as satellites of French Islam’s most important site, the Paris Mosque, used Islam as the basis for their differential treatment of North Africans. In doing so, they set in motion a pattern in which the segregation of immigrants from the Maghrib was portrayed as protective and as preferential treatment based on religious difference. In other words, it was the panoply of interwar social programs that depended on the establishment of the Paris Mosque that helped establish Muslims as only and eternally Muslims in metropolitan France.
Building the Paris Mosque, Building French Islam

In the aftermath of World War I, French social scientists, orientalists, and politicians began to articulate a vision of Islam, and Muslim practices, that they hoped would communicate Paris’ respect for and commitment to its empire’s Muslim subjects. This vision, which I call French Islam, blended French republican principles with French understandings of Sunnī Islam as practiced in Morocco, and emphasized the embodied practices they argued were integral to the proper performance of Muslim religious ritual. The French emphasis on these embodied religious practices transformed an ostensibly religious identity into a racialized one over the course of the twentieth century. At the center of the story of this process of racialization is the Paris Mosque, a “cathedral” mosque built in the immediate aftermath of World War I by metropolitan and colonial leaders in cooperation with a transnational Muslim elite. The Islam embodied by the Paris Mosque served as the exclusive medium for the French state’s management of its interactions with Muslim subjects residing in the metropole during the 1920s and 1930s.

The Paris Mosque and its Muslim Institute were first conceived as a war memorial to be built in the shadow of Les Invalides, where the French army honored its greatest military heroes. Locating the complex near France’s shrine to its military victories was intended to reflect the sacrifices made by North and West African colonial soldiers during World War I, as well as to render the complex easily accessible to elite Muslims visiting Paris. The architecture of this “durable monument” was expected to conform to the “artistic demands” of a grand capital.1 When the ground for the construction site was broken six years later, in the 5th arrondissement across from the city’s natural history museum, the site had been reimagined as a reproduction of a mosque in Fez that would be built alongside French civilization’s most hallowed institutions of learning rather than the shrine to its military successes. The Paris Mosque was not merely a religious site, it was a monument to France’s power in the Muslim world, built to reflect its vision of Islam and Muslims. As such it was a “repositor[y] of meaning” where a wide range of events inscribed France’s relationship with its Muslim subjects on a daily basis.2 The placement of the Mosquée’s complex in the cradle of French civilization, and its “Muslim