Naomi Davidson  

With the permanent settlement of postcolonial migrants from North Africa in France, Islam has raised sociological, political and normative questions. Public opinion wonders about the compatibility between Western values considered universal, and Islam, the religion of a minority seeking recognition. The question then has become how to integrate Islam into the exiting institutional setting, both in the society and in its mentalité.

Although tensions first emerged in the public space in the 1980s and have been crystallised with the first headscarf affair, Naomi Davidson in her excellent, rich and well researched historical account shows that these tensions are not new. The author discloses how the efforts of the Republic to create a French Islam were advanced through the construction of the Mosquée de Paris in the 1920s, how this reflects France’s perception of Islam and Muslim practices back then, and how the state has contributed to the transformation of a “religious identity into a racialised identity” that is Islam.

The book is organised chronologically starting from the construction of the Mosquée de Paris in the 1920s, complemented by the Institut Musulman, all the way to the massive economic migration from North Africa and the emergence of a new understanding of institutional representation of Islam. In the 1920s, Islam, as a foreign entity but at the same time a part of the French polity with regard to Algeria as a French Department, raised complex issues related to laïcité, education and Algerian identity. French Islam then was actually Algerian Islam. Ministries were involved in its construction: Ministry of Interior (in charge of worship), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of War...

The choice of the site—at the core of the Latin Quarter—representing the intellectual and secular faction of Parisian society symbolised, according to Davidson, the integration of Islam into the French secular Republican model... in short shaping a French Islam, yet leaving “Islam out of the boundaries of laïcité”. That means, she argues, that the construction of the Mosquée “was an active attempt to imagine an Islam and an Institute that was French and Other at once”. Moreover, the construction of the Mosquée was “an attempt to identify Islam with democracy, make Islam compatible with laïcité by making it simultaneously secular and religious, public and private” (p. 49).

Indeed, secularism, or laïcité, remains ambiguous about the boundary between culture and religion. Culture includes religious identity, while religion refers to beliefs or practices that may be culturally specific. Studies on French religious expression show a constant decline in practice, a statistic much easier
to measure than more abstract cultural references. This ambiguity has become
a source of contradiction. Policies have swung between a desire for continuity
with political traditions reinforced by Republican rhetoric, and a certain
pragmatism faced with its perverse effects which sustain the political motiva-
tions of groups organised around religious identities. In the discourse, national
ideology can be defined as universalist and objecting to all differentiation on
the basis of identity. But in reality, the competition created by the state among
those who wish to organise and express their identities, thanks to the libera-
tion of the law for associations for foreigners in 1981, leads to the emergence
on the political scene of religious communities in search of public recognition.

As Davidson stresses for the 1930s, “the French state made it impossible for
Muslim immigrants to be anything but Muslims”, an observation which is still
relevant for the 1990s, fifty years after the Vichy experience. Davidson reminds
us, however, that Vichy was not interested in making Islam compatible with
laïcité.

French Muslim or Islam in France? That is still the question. The debate that
Davidson discusses for the Vichy years has returned to the public space with the
efforts of institutional representation of Islam following the headscarf affair in
1989. Finally, on 16 April 2003, Nicolas Sarkozy, then the Interior Minister, suc-
ceded in creating the French Council of Muslim Worship (Conseil Français
du Culte Musulman—CFCM), proceeded by the election of its representatives.

This process clearly aims to organise a transition from Islam in France to an
Islam of France; from the simple presence of Muslims and their visible prac-
tices in the French space, to an Islam which will express itself and grow within
the framework of national institutions. The latter assumes its liberation from
foreign influences, especially those of the homelands. The discussion, though,
is far from over.

Islam is not only Algerian, neither now nor then. Davidson shows the impor-
tance of Morocco in “France’s differentiated relationships with its North and
West African Muslim territories and its subsequent valorization of their Islam”.
The predominance of Moroccan representation at the leadership of the CFCM
today—even though elected—leads to some questioning of the continuity of
the French approach to Islam.

Obviously, Islam appears empirically as the main cleavage in European
countries today. Its recognition can be seen as the means for incorporating
Muslims into the larger society. But this will require going beyond a solely insti-
tutional approach as not all Muslims necessarily recognise themselves within
such an institutional representation; they express their need for social and
cultural inclusion and mobilise against racism, discrimination, or any other
form of exclusion. How can this happen when the political approach becomes