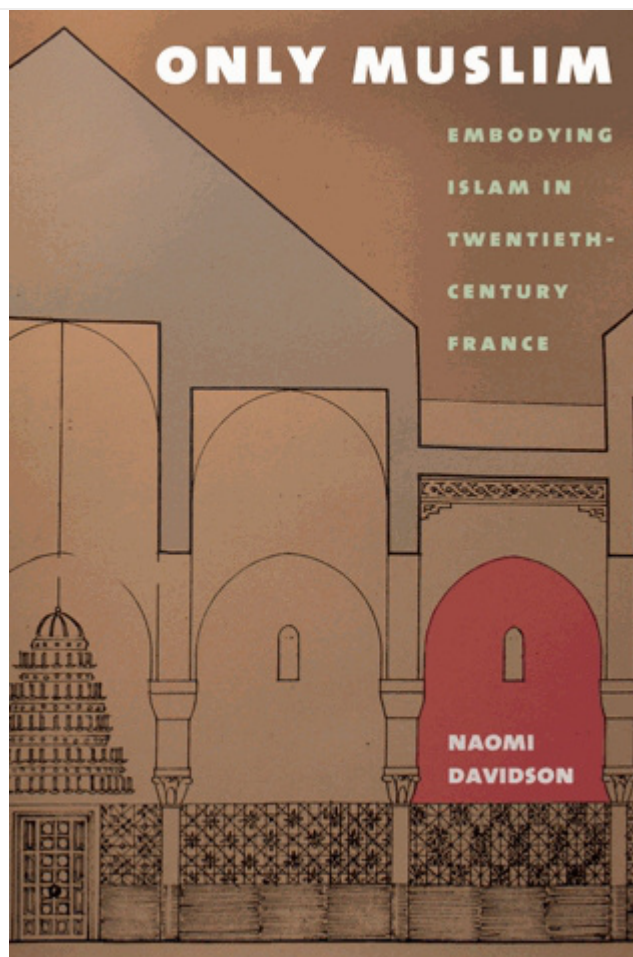


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Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth-Century France



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Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth-Century France. By Naomi Davidson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). Pp. 299. Hardcover, \$75.00. Paper, \$25.95.

Naomi Davidson's *Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth-Century France* is a thoughtful and provocative history of French *laïcité* and Islam. Alongside scholars like Joan W. Scott and Todd Shepard, she uses French republicanism as her focus in order to show the roots of France's current troubles with Muslim assimilationism. She argues that this inassimilability was, in fact, produced by a particularly French branding of Islam. *Islam français* "was a system that blended French secular republicanism with distinct embodied practices and aesthetics drawn from the French imaginary" (1). This French creation attempted to make Islam assimilable *and* posited the inassimilability of Muslims because of the uniquely embodied practices of their religion.

Davidson examines this paradox in subsequent chapters. She highlights how the *Mosquée de Paris*, which has been portrayed as a center of Muslim culture and religiosity in France, was imbued with a particular conception of the totalizing *Islam français*. Though France became officially secular in 1905, Davidson deconstructs the way the French state negotiated this supposed "*laïcité*"—separation of church and state—in order to create and assimilate a specifically French form of Islam. In other words, French Islam picked the kinds of Islamic practices and customs it wanted to assimilate, while stigmatizing others. This is especially the case with the *Mosquée de Paris*, which received public funds despite official state secularism. The Orientalist French architecture mirrored Moroccan "hispano-mauresque" construction, and attempted to prove France's commitment to Islamic culture (52). Moroccan Islam was understood to be a pure form, unlike Algerian Islam, which was portrayed as a kind of paganism. Therefore, the specific form and function that French Islam took was also exclusionary and racialized.

Over the course of roughly sixty-five years (1914-1981), Davidson skillfully shows how *Islam français* evolved during the Vichy years and in the period during and following decolonization. Her expertise is in

showing the ways in which religion and race intersected and created the basis for race-based exclusion justified through inassimilable religious practices. Over time, Davidson argues, the conflation of “Muslimness” with “Algerian-ness” resulted in reducing Algerian immigrants into “only Muslims,” and thus denied them the possibility of a French identity. As such, for Davidson, “Muslim” is “a category of racial difference” rather than religious difference (11).

This elision becomes particularly clear in her discussion of the Algerian War. The war (1954-1962) polarized French and Algerian conceptions of Islam, as both sides fought to define Algerian-ness. As Neil MacMaster has argued elsewhere, Algerian Muslim women were targeted by both the French government and the National Liberation Front (FLN) as the crucial demographic to persuade throughout the war. Likewise, Davidson examines how *Islam français* and *Islam algérien* (of the Algerian National Liberation Front) “were both used to define and maintain [the Algerian Muslim] population” (134). Religion became a tool for French national consolidation and Algerian national liberation much as women’s roles became contentious in the struggle to define Algeria.^[1] Indeed, both sides were so successful in their argumentation that the Algerian War solidified the conflation between Muslimness and Algerian-ness. The result, however, was that Algerians “could not and should not be French” (167). This conclusion led to the postcolonial paradox: being Muslim foreclosed the possibility that North African immigrants to France could adopt any other identity during a period when religious affiliation was said to be otherwise waning.

Davidson’s focus on bureaucratic archives and government sources provides important grounding for her contention that the French government and elites helped shape a particular, yet systemic *Islam français*. The unintended consequences of these discourses and practices interest Davidson, especially as decisions were usually made in the name of “cultural sensitivity.” This supposed sensitivity created the logic of exclusion based on inassimilability. Thus, the Paris Mosque and the French government provided uniquely “Muslim” social services for North African immigrants, even in the postcolonial period as a way to justify their difference. By this time, however, more autonomous religious sites had begun to spring up, and the space of the Paris Mosque was demoted in French Muslim life. Nonetheless, the ethno-religious

definition of Algerians as “only Muslim” created a singular cultural identity that has shaped the history of France’s present.

Given the central role of the state in conceiving of Islam as “other,” this reviewer wondered about the role citizens played in deploying these assumptions. Indeed, the reception of discourses about difference and inassimilability could have explained the extent to which *Islam français* shaped everyday life for immigrants and citizens. Moreover, did citizens push back against these discourses as they were created, especially in the postcolonial period? How were these ideas taken up? These questions, although peripheral in a study of the state, could have enriched Davidson’s claims about the significance of her study today.

In short, Davidson’s history is necessary reading for historians interested in French republicanism and its limitations, empire, and immigration. Moreover, it is a postcolonial history that accounts for the continued essentialized understanding of religious difference. Davidson’s work contributes to and complicates our understanding of the centrality of *laïcité* to the French Republic and its continual existence as a “stumbling block” for Muslim immigrants in France (218).

Elise Franklin

Boston College

[1] Neil MacMaster, *Burning the Veil: The Algerian War and the ‘Emancipation’ of Muslim Women, 1954-1962* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 12, 395.



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