

## **Can Islam Be French?**

*John R. Bowen*

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2010. 230 pages.*

John R. Bowen's *Can Islam Be French?* is divided into three parts. The first part, which includes chapters 1 and 2, provides a brief overview of Islam in France and addresses issues of migration, the rise of religion, the response of the state, and the distinctive features of the French Islamic landscape.

The second part consists of four chapters. Chapter 3 explores Islam in the suburbs, Islamic networks, and the work of an everyday imam, as well as mosques and social divisions. Chapter 4 examines the forces that shape Islamic knowledge in the countries; the various rules, schools, and principles used to interpret Islam; Hichem ElArafa's Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Sur l'Islam, the science of prophetic traditions, and the objectives of Scripture. Chapter 5 differentiates among the various schools of jurisprudence in Islam, the differing pedagogical approaches employed in teaching the Muslim faith, the major influence of the Maliki *madhhab* in France, and the practical training of preachers and scholars. Chapter 6, which wonders whether Islamic schools can really be republican, examines the case of Dhaou Meskine's Success School, how Muslim schools manage to teach a secular curriculum, Muslim family camp, and closes with coverage of Meskine's arrest.

Part 3 includes three chapters. Chapter 7 asks whether there should be an Islam for Europe and whether there should be different rules for different lands, ideological confrontations in mosques, and the transnational Islamic sphere. Chapter 8 deals with issues such as secular and religious marriages,

*halal* and *haram* food rules, as well as the attitude of French civil law toward Islamic practices. Finally, chapter 9 tackles Islamic spheres in republican space, whether religion-based associations impede integration, priorities and values, as well as pragmatics of convergence.

Bowen's relatively well-written work provides an overview of the Islamic landscape in France and the problems confronting its Muslim population. Almost exclusively descriptive, the book is virtually devoid of an authorial voice. While the author can be praised for his apparent objectivity, in which he primarily presents the French and Muslim perspectives on various issues, he can also be criticized for providing little to nothing in the way of analysis and commentary. By focusing on presenting the facts without advancing an overt argument in defense of either the secular French or the French Muslim community, Bowen essentially says: "Come to your own conclusions." Rather than bridge the divide or express sympathy or support for a community under attack by racist secularists, the author elects to be silent on many subjects, a passive position that many readers will find frankly infuriating.

The field work completed by the author is certainly of value, but almost exclusively for those who are unfamiliar with the issues at hand. Written primarily for an uninformed American audience, the book provides information that is already well-known to specialists, the French – both secularists and Muslims – informed individuals in the Maghreb, as well as politically sensitive media watchers from around the world.

Despite providing a good overview of the interpretive chaos reigning within the French Sunni community – in which opinions range from the extreme fundamentalism of the Salafis to some type of deformed, state-supported, secularized, liberal Islam – the author has ignored the Shi'ite community, which has a strong, structured leadership and an uninterrupted tradition of *ijtihad* (interpretation of Islamic law to new and changing realities). If Bowen presented the secularist voice in *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves* and wanted to present the Muslim voice in *Can Islam Be French?*, he should have provided a more complete profile of the Islamic community without ignoring the smaller, but equally significant, Shi'ite perspective.

Although subtle in argument, Bowen suggests that Islamic values and French secularism could be compatible on the condition that both sides make concessions. While it is true that some Muslims hold the most backward cultural customs that deserve to be denounced, it is clear that it is Islam as a whole that is under attack in France. If anything, sensitive readers feel

a sense of siege when they read Bowen's book. As the facts presented make explicitly clear, it is not only "religious symbols" like the headscarf that the secular French do not like – now they are actively attacking the Islamic institution of marriage and divorce (pp. 158-64), *halal* food rules (pp. 165-72), and the prohibition against interest (p. 137). They also aggressively oppose the presence of mosques and minarets (p. 193), which are "incompatible" with the architectural landscape (p. 22). Some legal scholars believe that Islamic marriages and divorces conducted abroad should not be considered valid when one or both parties come to France (p. 173). As the author reveals, the government is even pursuing Muslims into the personal realm, accusing them of "assimilation defects" for failing to replace their old Islamic values with new French ones (p. 191). Valuing virginity is viewed as a "retrograde value" (p. 192), requests by Jewish and Muslim women for private swimming sessions are met with anger (p. 195), and wearing a face-veil and opting to be a housewife is cause for having one's citizenship denied (p. 192).

Rather than rationalizing the reasons for this anti-Muslimism and addressing issues of Islamic apologetics, scholars should focus more on the historical, sociological, and psychological roots of French anti-Islamism, paralleling the plight of the Muslims in France with the condition of the Jews in Nazi Germany. Much like the Nuremberg Laws, which sought to exclude Jewish people from civic life, laws aimed against expressions of Islam seek to exclude Muslims from active participation in the country's social, economic, and educational life – something the Québécois nationalists, American Republicans, and Tea-Baggers seek to replicate in North America. Following in the footsteps of the French, many French Canadians in Québec have brought the battle over "reasonable accommodations" to the province in an attempt to antagonize its Muslim minority. Inspired by the increased tolerance for intolerance seen in Europe and elsewhere, extreme right-wing rhetoric has greatly increased in the United States, reminding many historically informed individuals of the anti-Jewish hate propaganda spread by the Nazis. Although valuable sources of information, works like those of Bowen miss the critically important issues by a mile.

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