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'Why Muslim Integration Fails in Christian-Heritage Societies', by Claire L Adida, David D Laitin and Marie-Anne Valfort

Review by Malise Ruthven

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Students play basketball at a Muslim school outside Paris

No reasonable person would claim that the integration of Muslims into western societies is without problems. As the team of social scientists behind *Why Muslim Integration Fails in Christian-Heritage Societies* reports, 43 per cent of people interviewed in a poll for the newspaper *Le Figaro* in 2012 considered that the country's Muslim community constituted a "menace to the identity of France", while in a German survey conducted in 2013 51 per cent thought Islam posed a threat to their way of life. That year, of a thousand 18- to 24-year-olds in Britain interviewed by Radio 1, 27 per cent said they did not trust Muslims (compared

with 16 per cent concerning Hindus or Sikhs, 15 per cent for Jews, 13 per cent for Buddhists and 12 per cent for Christians).

Disentangling the complex of attitudes behind such findings is the project of Claire Adida, David Laitin and Marie-Anne Valfort in this book — no easy task in the case of the French, among whom most of the research was undertaken. France's culture of *laïcité*, a type of radical public secularism with roots in the absolutism of the *ancien régime* and the anticlerical campaigns that followed the revolution, means that the investigation of faith and religious practice poses methodological challenges far greater than would be met in a more explicitly pluralist society such as the US or even Britain, where ethnic backgrounds and public religiosity are better understood and celebrated. As the authors explain, French republican ideology has no interest in “knowing the ethnic past of any of its citizens”, an attitude that applies — *a fortiori* — to their religious beliefs or backgrounds.

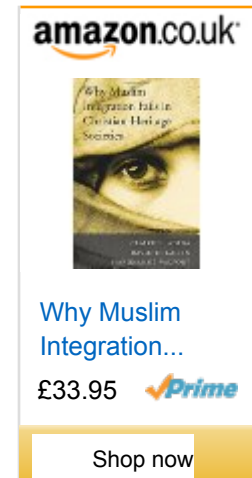
The idea of “equality through invisibility” is partly a consequence of the shame at the treatment of Jews under the Vichy régime that “republicans do not let their nation forget”. A 1978 law that remains in force, with some amendments, prohibits the collection or processing of data that reveal a person's racial or ethnic origins, while class actions, common in the US, are not recognised under the French law of torts. Halde (*La Haute Autorité de lutte contre les discriminations et pour l'égalité*), the state-funded anti-discrimination body that existed from 2005 to 2011, was unable to establish general trends regarding discrimination based on ethnicity due to lack of data, leaving its lawyers to deal with individual cases without supplying material pointing to general trends.

These caveats, dealt with somewhat oddly in an extended appendix, help to explain the scrupulous way the researchers approached their task of isolating attitudes concerning religion, while discounting issues such as racial stereotyping or prejudices arising from France's colonial history. For example, the researchers measured differences of response between two groups of Senegalese participants, one Christian and one Muslim, vis-à-vis a sample of “rooted” (or third-generation) French people chosen randomly in the affluent 19th arrondissement of Paris. The two Senegalese groups, belonging to communities that became established in France in the 1970s, were alike in every respect save their religion, enabling researchers to tease out attitudes that could be attributed to religion exclusive of race or ethnicity.

The results, while hardly surprising, are disturbing, to say the least. Their research, say the authors, “confirms that Muslims qua Muslims are discriminated against” in France. In responses to job applications, for example, one comparison revealed a 13-percentage-point

difference in callback rates, suggesting that despite official *laïcité*, French employers “rely on signals about the religious heritage of applicants and systematically discriminate against those — in this case Muslims — who are from a different religious heritage from that of the majority”.

Part of the prejudice, the authors argue, may be “rational” to the degree that the HR personnel perceive a threat to their company’s productivity or esprit de corps in Muslim religious practices. But “non-rational” Islamophobia, based on “grotesquely exaggerated” feelings about Muslims, is just as important, indicating that “even if French recruiters considered Muslim candidates as strictly identical to Christian candidates in terms of productive characteristic, they would still discriminate against Muslims, out of pure distaste”. As a consequence, Muslim families in France are “significantly less endowed with income than matched Christians”. The status quo is thus a “discriminatory equilibrium”, defined by the authors as “a vicious circle in which both [“rooted” French] and Muslims in France are acting negatively toward one another in ways that are mutually reinforcing”.



While some of this book’s description of workplace issues affecting Muslims are clearly relevant beyond France’s borders, the title seriously oversells its thesis. The religious cultures and church-state relations of countries in Europe and North America vary too greatly to be captured by the all-embracing category of “Christian-heritage societies”. For example, while the authors make the case that Arab-Americans who are Muslims may face more prejudice than their Christian counterparts, they make no reference to Muslims of mainly South Asian origin who — along with Sikhs and Hindus — enjoy among the highest household incomes of any immigrant group in the US. Canada, a “Christian-heritage society” where the Muslim South Asian minority expelled from Uganda in the 1970s has been highly successful, does not even rate a mention in this book.

Nevertheless, the authors propose remedies that make obvious sense in France itself, such as improving educational prospects for Muslims through affirmative action programmes. Whether such initiatives can be considered a realistic prospect in the wake of last year’s jihadi atrocities is another question; right now, the political climate is far from auspicious.

Malise Ruthven is author of 'Islam in the World' (OUP) and 'Encounters with Islam' (IB Tauris)

Why Muslim Integration Fails in Christian-Heritage Societies, by Claire L Adida,

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