

Book Review: French Muslims in Perspective: Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic by Joseph Downing

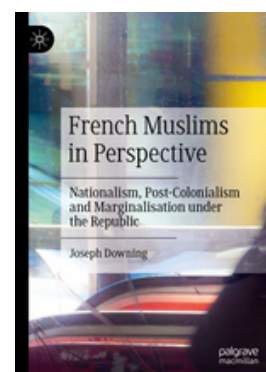
In French Muslims in Perspective: Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic, Joseph Downing offers a new examination of the lives and experiences of French Muslims in the face of persecution, intimidation and marginalisation. Challenging and deconstructing widespread stereotypes and misconceptions, this well-researched book makes an excellent contribution and will be a good reference for scholars interested in exploring this area, writes [Isa Ishaq Ojibara](#).

If you are interested in this book, you can listen to [a podcast of the book launch](#), recorded at LSE on 27 November 2019.

French Muslims in Perspective: Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic. Joseph Downing. Palgrave. 2019.

'...Thus, Muslims have become the threatening internal other par excellence, who present not only an existential threat to physical security through terror attacks, but also a far wider and diffuse threat to the liberal democratic order of things in a Europe that still struggles with home-grown nativist fascism' (2).

The above paragraph sums up the stereotypical construction of Muslims in the west, particularly after the 9/11 terror attacks on the US. The actions of Islamic extremists have contributed to the notion that Islam is against other civilisations of the world, particularly 'western' values of liberalism, democracy and the upholding of fundamental human rights; as a result of this perception, Muslims in the west have been victims of Islamophobia and discrimination. These stereotypes of European Muslims as criminally minded individuals who want to destabilise the centuries-long established cultural and civil fabric of western civilisation need to be constantly deconstructed and disproved, and Joseph Downing's book has done just that.



[French Muslims in Perspective: Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic](#) examines the lives of French Muslims in the face of persecution, intimidation and marginalisation and their struggle to provide evidence of allegiance to the state. As Downing rightly observes, the terror attack on *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 'placed France's Muslim population even more firmly in the spotlight that it had been subjected to repeatedly over recent decades':

'The national burka ban, the regional burkini bans, halal food provision in schools. It seems that barely a year goes by when French Muslims are not the subject of either a new raft of regulatory law or huge, normative, media polemic about how aspects of their daily lives *should* be structured under the secular republic'. (35)

Downing specifically outlines how different aspects of French Muslims' lives are being regulated by various institutions of the state, despite 'the commitment of article 1 of the French constitution of 4 October 1958, which states that the republic will "ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs"' (36). Despite this provision and *laïcité*-secularism, on which the French republic, like most western democracies, was built, these have not in any way solved the problem of religion and ethnicity as they relate to the experiences of French ethnic minorities.

Downing analyses the assimilation policy of France in contrast to multiculturalism, which is often associated with western democracies. He posits that the notion of being 'culture blind', which assimilation policy sets out to achieve, 'excludes' minorities, especially migrants from North Africa, who are largely Muslims, and black migrants from West Africa. The diverse interpretation of *laïcité* and assimilation policy by different levels of government and institutions in France, which can vary 'depending on their positionality and particular political interests' (50), has created what Downing refers to as 'many republics, many solitudes'. While many local and municipal authorities have named important monuments and streets after some Muslim figures as a way of redefining republicanism away from the national government, the creation of associations by the national government to address ethnic minorities, particularly black people and Muslims, 'will provide an interesting insight into how the state seeks to deal with Muslims, but it does not represent a massive policy shift' (49).

Downing outlines the contributions of French Muslims to the stability, progress and development of the republic, especially in the army and police. Downing extensively highlights the vital roles of French Muslim soldiers, 'drawn from across North Africa [but...] rarely described as Muslim soldiers', in the liberation of Marseille from Nazi occupation in 1944 and the independence wars in ex-colonies of France, like Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Despite many fighting as part of the colonial army in annexing and defeating the anti-French army in Algeria, French Muslims' allegiance to the republic has been questioned, especially by far-right politicians who, at any given opportunity, doubt their loyalty to the flag.

Having given examples of how France treated Muslim soldiers who fought on its side, Downing examines the experience of the Harkis who sided with France during the Algerian war of independence. The war pitted the Harkis against their fellow Algerians, who later found themselves *persona non grata* in Algeria and were also denied entry into France and left to face persecution. It was only in 2003 that the Harkis were given national recognition. 'At times, monuments have been extremely late to be constructed for Muslim troops, monuments have been repatriated from North Africa where the Muslim Harkis were left to be persecuted, or given centre stage in cities' (90).

Downing observes that French Muslim service members, both in the police and army, were also victims of terror attacks in France. Their roles as defender of the republic and its values negate the far-right rhetoric that positions Islam as being in contrast with liberal values of the west: 'Thus, the death of a Muslim in the service of the state is an important reminder that compatibility between Islam and European political systems is the overwhelming norm and not the exception or indeed even an impossibility' (106).

Another area in which French Muslims have been stereotyped and wrongly constructed is the 'Islamisation' of the 2005 riots, in which the rioters were controversially referred to by former French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, as '*racaille*' (outcast/rabble), even though the rioters were diverse. However, Downing observes that it is paradoxical to the French political system to racialise protest in France. He posits that:

other events of anti-systemic direct political action, from the revolution of 1789 to the riots of May 1968 and most recently the action by the yellow vest "gilets jaunes" have been incorporated into a history that defines such direct action as a key part of Frenchness.

The belief that jihadism and insecurity in France is to revenge French atrocities in its ex-colonies is not entirely true; instead, it is as a result of France security policies as well as economic and political failure. These have created a group of French Muslims, black and Arab, who are economically deprived, poorly educated and vulnerable to jihadism. The eroticised portrayal of Muslim women (particularly in pornography, as Downing discusses) or as a group needing emancipation from men are additional stereotypes. Muslim men are often portrayed as violent towards women. Despite the high acceptance of rap culture in France, Muslim rappers have been constructed as 'gangster' and are alleged to promote violence through their lyrics. While France has celebrated the success of other controversial music artists like Serge Gainsbourg, it is not as welcoming to Muslim rappers who are often seen as promoting jihadism.

Furthermore, Downing points to the criticism and verbal attacks on French Muslims and black players as another form of politicisation of the French national football team. Any loss by the team in a major tournament has been linked to disloyalty on the part of the minority ethnic players. The national team has been criticised particularly by far-right politicians as losing its 'Frenchness' in being predominantly made up of black and Muslim players, and in 2011 the technical head of the French team was accused of calling for restrictions on the number of black and Muslim players to be called into the national team. However, the recent success of the team at major international tournaments, including the lifting of two FIFA World Cup trophies within two decades, has been seen as good for national integration. As Downing rightly states:

This gives insight into the public performance of Frenchness in football, where in this case triumph on the football field demonstrated that integration had been successful in France and anyone could reach the top of French society.

Downing's long years of [living, working and holidaying in France](#) are evidenced in this excellent book, and his social scientific background helps in framing the methodologies and identifying the problems that need investigating. His method of applying multiple approaches to each area covered in the book makes this a great reference for anyone researching French Muslims. Even though Downing states his frustration at studying French Muslims as a homogeneous group, the book is more focused on those of North African origin, with black Muslims from West Africa largely excluded from the analysis. Nevertheless, this well-researched book makes an excellent contribution and will be a good reference for early scholars interested in exploring this area.

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