



Downing, Joseph.- *French Muslims in Perspective: Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic* (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2019), 284 p.

Since the horrendous attacks of September 11, 2001, referred to as 9/11, the world has witnessed the apparent upsurge of essentialist and racist discourses. Islamophobia, xenophobia, populism and nativism have become rife phenomena that shape the identity politics in the western world, jeopardizing the ‘good multicultural world.’ Many primordialist writers, inspired by Samuel Huntington’s theory of clash of civilizations and frightened

by the so-called Islamization of Europe, attempt to explain identity in narrow and restrictive terms, reflecting primordial values and embodying exclusionist practices. Unsurprisingly, they have failed to present a full and multidimensional analysis of identity, and their primordial and singular view of identity is challenged by an alternative view, known as constructivism. The latter, then, proposes an alternative to essentialist models of people or social groups by claiming that rather than having a single, given, and relatively stable identity, persons and groups have multiple, fluid and situational identities that are produced in inter-subjective understandings. The constructivists think of culture, identities and identifications as always a place of borders and hybridity rather than of fixed stable entities. In his book titled *French Muslims in Perspective: Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic*, Joseph Downing argues against the tendency to essentialize French Muslims into a homogeneous identity. Adopting a more realist view of social constructivism, Downing problematizes the growing influence of Islam in France that has turned into a major subject of debate within a French society particularly after the bloody attack on a French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015. As a social constructivist, he seeks to describe, discuss and analyze the heterogeneity, hybridity and dynamism of French Muslims in both social functions and discursive entities.

Having the largest Muslim population, France has been criticized for attempting to assimilate Muslims into an ostensibly secular state and society. French Muslims themselves have also been blamed for not having the capacity to comply with and conform to the French secular public life. In fact, Joseph Downing’s book goes beyond neo-orientalist and essentialist narratives and

analyses that highlight the conflict and incompatibility between Muslims and the French state and society. To undermine these narratives, Downing sheds light on the intersection of Muslim faith with other identities, the central roles of Muslims in French civil society, politics and the media. In this thought-provoking book, we are invited to view the experiences of French Muslims from a new angle. Using the term 'French Muslim' in a deliberately diverse and dynamic sociological context, Downing seeks to subvert the Islamophobic discourse of far-right academicians and politicians such as Marine Le Pen and her far-right Front National Party by offering a more nuanced account based on Muslims' actual lived experiences. He claims that in French mainstream discourse the terms French and Muslim will never be reconciled and compatible. This French Eurocentric view of Muslims is age-old, harking back to the 19th century when European powers were on the verge of colonizing Asia and Africa. Interestingly, the main interest of the book is to dismantle the Logocentric and Eurocentric narrative that views Islam and France as an oxymoron. Phrased differently, through his book, Downing demonstrates that the terms French and Muslim are already compatible partners "living happily alongside, and within, each other" (8). In this sense, Downing confirms that Islam and France are mutually inclusive by highlighting the paradoxes, nuances and diversity of the French Muslims' experience. In other words, Downing's book attempts to explore the complexity, diversity and hybridity that characterize the presence of Muslims in France. "French Muslims and their historical, cultural and social realities are extremely diverse and require a nuanced treatment" (4). Countering the French official rhetoric, which has been dominated by questions of security and terrorism, against the French Muslims, the writer celebrates and demonstrates the multiple social, cultural and political roles French Muslims play in France.

Before confronting and deconstructing Franco-centric orientalist narratives about French Muslims, Joseph Downing presents an overview of the misrepresentation and demonization of Islam and Muslims in French literature, media and politics. The author claims that the attacks in Paris and Nice committed in the name of Islam have contributed to the rise of Islamophobia and strengthened an already visible anti-Muslim sentiment in the country. Deploying essentialist notions in the construction of French Muslims, French public intellectuals make sweeping and totalizing statements about Islam and Muslims. They allege that Islam does not fit with neither the concept of *laïcité* nor the Christian values embedded in the state's ideology. Moreover, the media coverage of French Muslims focuses only on those engaged in extremist behavior. So, French Muslims are constructed as

“communities of fear” that threaten the liberal values of the French Republic. Along similar lines, Downing maintains that in the mainstream French discourse French Muslims are depicted as “the threatening internal other par excellence” (2), threatening the physical security through terrorist attacks as well as the European liberal, secular and democratic values. Demonized and Othered by the Eurocentric French discourse, French Muslims “sit in a grey area between an assimilationist state and a multicultural society” (54). Downing refutes the aforementioned generalizing statements about French Muslims and blames France for marginalizing and ignoring the needs of French Muslims. He affirms that France’s social, economic and political failures have created a French Muslim, black and Arab underclass, poorly educated and ripe for the picking by crafty jihadist ideologues. Viewed in this light, French media and far-right politicians use this dark side of the French Muslims’ diverse experiences to tarnish and vilify Muslims as a threatening Other. For Downing, when we deal with questions of French Muslims and France, we must avoid falling prey to an essentialist discourse. Essentializing French Muslims will only eclipse their hybrid, fluid and diverse identities and experiences. So, Downing’s major argument is that the French Muslim population is actually extremely diverse socially, culturally and doctrinally, and French republic “in reality is not a singular republic, but a set of multiple republics” (46).

In his attempt to understand the diverse experiences, compositions and lived experiences of French Muslims, Joseph Downing adopts a multidimensional and interdisciplinary approach. He avers that France as a unified cultural, linguistic or religious entity has never actually existed. In addition, French Muslims are not monolithic and should not be simply defined in religious terms; some French Muslims are making rap music, some are selling drugs and others are engaged in civic and military services. This displays that French Muslimness is a far more diverse and complicated reality than is often given credence in contemporary discussions: “Empirically, homogeneity is far from the reality of French Muslims” (19). Downing convincingly argues that globalization and migration involve cultural syncretism and hybridization, and accordingly the conventional view of Islam and France as distinct autonomous entities is no longer tenable in this changing globalized world. In his book, we are confronted with many Islams, secularisms, republics and Frenchnesses in France. French Muslims are not living outside of, and in opposition to, society but they are actually very well integrated and play a wide range of important roles in French society. They are citizens of France, football supporters, music fans and public servants. To

demonstrate that French Muslims are a very settled French population who are extremely racially, ethnically and socially diverse, Downing provides us with numerous names of French rappers of French Muslim origin and opines that the presence of Muslim players in multicultural French national team has redefined French national identity.

Joseph Downing also throws some light on the Muslims' sacrifices for a free France by bringing together both historical and contemporary instances, debates and social manifestations of the Muslim presence in the French army. The contribution of Muslims to the security and defense of France is not recent but it dates back to the First World War. In today's France, there is a larger number of French Muslims who serve in the security services than those who serve jihadist groups. To consolidate his argument, Downing presents several names of French Muslim victims of jihadi terror attacks who worked for the security services. He also says that Islamist terrorism has very little support among French Muslims and many French Muslims died during acts of terrorism committed in the name of their own religion. He therefore suggests that the publicization of the biographies of the Muslim victims of terror could be an important bulwark against the rise of Islamophobia. Furthermore, in his book Downing maintains that France has to reconcile with its colonial past and critiques government measures that aim to increase French Muslims' assimilation as well as France's ongoing intervention in the Muslim world. French Muslims and France, Downing argues, are mutually inclusive, living in a constant state of dialogue and interaction. That is why, jihadism in France will certainly vanish if the French government is serious about fighting social discrimination against French Muslims.

Joseph Downing's *French Muslims in Perspective: Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic* is a very interesting and invaluable in-depth study of the nuanced and multifaceted nature of French Muslims' experiences. It must be kept in mind that this full-length study is dedicated to a topic that is fraught with tensions and controversies, but Downing has managed to provide us with a comprehensive interdisciplinary academic study about how Islam and Muslims are constructed in France. One strength of this study lies in the stunning array of material the writer has amassed to describe and examine French Muslim experiences. Downing's book is, undoubtedly, a useful reference for students and scholars of cultural studies, postcolonial studies, postsecular studies, and European studies. A postcolonial researcher will certainly find it very helpful because it displays that postcolonialism can be deployed as an effective critical tool to account for the complexities and experiences of postcolonial minority groups such as

Muslims in Europe. Intriguingly, the book will quench the thirst of students and scholars of religion, secularism and postsecularism. Downing contends that the French republic has been a highly dynamic and unstable political system that is already on its fifth incarnation and the idea of French deeply secular French system as oppressive and intolerant with regards to Islam is no longer valid today. It is crystal-clear that religion has become a crucial feature within European national cultures and this return of religion to the European public sphere is called postsecularism. Postsecularism preserves the best aspects of both religion and secularism, while siding with neither. The postsecular critique therefore argues for the need for a turn beyond secularism, moving beyond the secular/religious binary opposition. Because he is keeping abreast of what is going on in Europe in general and aware of the fact that religion is gaining momentum in France in particular, Downing advances the intertwining and rapprochement between postsecular France and French Islam and calls for France to reconsider its established secular narratives. As a matter of fact, Joseph Downing neither proselytizes French secularism nor sentimentalizes Islam. It is therefore highly important that the author seems to suggest the postsecular as an alternative perspective and a great model for both France and French Muslims because France and Muslims are mutually enriching and, in the process of constant interaction and dialectical convergence, are mutually transformed. In a word, Joseph Downing's *French Muslims in Perspective* is a wake-up call for a democratic and religious pluralism. It is truly an enjoyable reading journey.

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