

JENNIFER FREDETTE, *Constructing Muslims in France: Discourse, Public Identity, and the Politics of Citizenship* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014). Pp. 228. \$89.50 cloth, \$29.95 paper. ISBN 9781439910290.

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In this compact, hard-hitting critique of France's policies toward its Muslim citizens, Ohio University political scientist Jennifer Fredette examines how the French intellectual, political, and media elite (close to the same people) have socially constructed Muslims living in the country as "unfit citizens" and "poorly integrated." Her case against the French establishment should resonate well among civil libertarians and religious believers raised in the Anglo-Saxon legal tradition, but most "Français de souche" and Francophile scholars will likely object strenuously, especially since she exposes the government's hypocritical, inconsistent application of French *laïcité* (secularism or separationism).

To back up its contentions, the book adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach reminiscent of Clifford Geertz. Fredette immersed herself in the French Muslim community over several years to obtain about fifty semi-structured interviews with Muslim activists and with a few members of the economic and political elite in Bordeaux, Paris, and Lyon. She follows up these encounters with insights gleaned from participant observation and from content analysis of relevant media sources.

One of Fredette's principal theoretical goals is to separate her work from the previous literature, which focused on French Muslims as religious believers. Instead, she seems to want to see Muslims as more of an ethnic or social group than as devotees of a particular faith. According to Fredette, French Muslims are not primarily or simply concerned about religious restrictions but rather are more dissatisfied

with de facto educational tracking into lower-tier career paths, racial discrimination in hiring, and apartheid-style segregation in suburban ghettos. She thus emphasizes the “intersectionality” of France’s social exclusion of its Muslims: “As long as we focus on Muslims as religious believers alone, we will not be able to fully understand certain aspects of social injustice that they face, as these issues often intersect with other structural inequalities” (9).

Fredette does take on the “imperialistic” arrogance of many French feminists (155–56), the impermeability and close-mindedness of the French elite (30–35), and the racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic assumptions of a supposedly “universal” and “colorblind” Republican citizenship (42–43). One of her most prominent targets, however, is the hypocritical double-standard elites employ when implementing *laïcité*. In general, she suggests, French politicians adopt a kind of established-church model for nominal Catholics but a strict, almost repressive, separationist regime for practicing Muslims and Jews. In France, Christmas, Easter Monday, and even the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary are national holidays, yet Eid al-Fitr and Rosh Hashanah are not. Catholic cathedrals likewise receive substantial public funding (54) that is generally not available for the more recently built mosques. French Muslims would thus view a truly even-handed, consistent *laïcité* as a major step forward.

Not only are French elites hostile to public expressions of Islam, the author maintains, they also are wary or dismissive of most forms of traditional religion in general. This critique of French anticlericalism seems surprising coming from an apparently liberal, American academic who does not show obvious signs of being religious herself. She nonetheless notes, “[i]t is not just that few people attend religious services in France. Public denunciations of religion, articulated with a tone of disgust, are not rare there” (15). Even though the official articulation of *laïcité* supposedly allows one at least to practice one’s faith in private, “mainstream” French individuals heap scorn on Muslim believers who choose to have intercourse only with their spouse instead of being sexually promiscuous (43–44). Muslims thus feel rejected as religious believers, Fredette contends, but “practicing Christians” such as the law professor she discusses “are even more likely to be ridiculed by coworkers” (118). The author’s photograph of a poster reading “down with all religions” and featuring a man vomiting out the symbols of most major faiths (119) similarly illustrates her larger point.

Though Fredette does not make the argument herself, one might further advance this critique by asking why for even moderate French Muslims, “*laïcité* means the freedom to practice one’s religion so long as one does not actively proselytize” (18). For many traditions, including Christianity and Islam, proselytizing is arguably a religious duty (cf. Mark 16:15; Qur’ān 41:33); if one sincerely believes that God is Muslim and that s/he bestows blessings on the faithful, for example, one should logically want to share this gift with others who are not yet so fortunate as to have found a spiritual home. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights assures us that “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion . . . includes freedom to change [one’s] religion or belief, and freedom . . . in public or private, to manifest [one’s] religion or belief in teaching.”

Conversely, the “freedom of antireligious propaganda” (but not that of pro-religious speech) was guaranteed in article 124 of the Stalin-era Constitution of the Soviet Union, hardly an exemplar of human rights. Of course, preaching a sermon would not be appropriate during class time, but the French model seems to impinge on what Americans would define as freedom of expression and religious practice.

At a few spots in the book, even a sympathetic reader might not be completely persuaded by some interpretive or factual claims. During Fredette’s opening discussion of the booing of the French national anthem at the 2008 French-Tunisian soccer match, for example, she asserts that the spectators’ actions were “not unambiguously anti-French” (3). Yet if the audience really had wanted to express absolute hatred of the French nation or government, how could they have behaved differently other than by publicly burning the *Tricolore*? The author may well be correct that the young French Muslims who booed the flag were mainly upset about being rejected by the nation as a whole, but this conclusion may rely a little too much on her particular interpretation of events and on that of third parties instead of being based on the explanation of the actual “booers” themselves. Elsewhere Fredette writes that “It is far too easy to say the French are just racist or just Islamophobic – easy and inaccurate” (15). But some of the evidence she provides later in the book undermines this claim. Most damning is Charles de Gaulle’s quote on p. 152 contending that “yellow French people, black French people, brown French people [should] remain a small minority. Otherwise, France would no longer be France.” And de Gaulle is hardly less offensive when discussing Islam: “The Muslims, have you gone to see them with their turbans and their djellabas? You see well that they are not

French people.” Finally, the text sometimes takes on an overly optimistic tone, at least from our post-*Charlie Hebdo* perspective (e.g., when she implies on p. 17 that the problems of the banlieues are not getting worse).

One high point of the work is its daring distribution model and impeccable copyediting. As part of the innovative, open-access Knowledge Unlatched Pilot Collection, the book is freely available on the Internet in .pdf form. A coalition of hundreds of primarily research libraries covers the publisher’s costs. Production and editing of the text are likewise outstanding; Alex Holzman apparently transferred the skills he mastered at Cambridge University Press over to his later work as Director of Temple University Press. The only mistakes I could find were the potentially erroneous italicization of the full names for the French terms “Greta” and “HLM” in the glossary on p. xiv and the listing of “Richard” instead of Clifford for Geertz’s first name in the bibliography (197). Many an academic copyeditor can only aspire to such typographical near-perfection.

In short, this volume arrives highly recommended for its easy readability and its critical insight into the day- to-day discrimination faced by French Muslims. It serves as an excellent entrée into the field and is particularly well suited for undergraduate classes on immigration or European politics.