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Minority identification between affiliation and ascription

By Margot Dazey

Contemporary uses of the word "Muslim" in France illustrate the variety of ways in which minorities identify themselves. In a book that straddles semantics and ethnography, Marie-Claire Willems sheds light on the diversity of forms of belonging available to populations exposed to exclusion.

Reviewed: Marie-Claire Willems, *Musulman. Une assignation?* ("Muslim": An Ascription?) Bordeaux, Éditions du Détour, 2023, 200 p., 18 €.

In her new book, Marie-Claire Willems takes up the question of minority self-identification: what ability do people have to say who they are and tell their own stories in contexts marked by racism and stigmatization? Or, to put it differently, what reflective faculties can one deploy in the face of othering? Using interviews with self-identified Muslim as well as socio-semantic research, Willems explains the different uses and meanings of the word "Muslim" in contemporary France. Her attention to subjectification processes--that is, efforts through which individuals constitute themselves as subjects, in this instance, as "Muslims"--allows her to shed light on how exclusion mechanisms impact forms of belonging and group formation. In short, Willems considers the possible connections between ascription (*assignation* in French), which is conceived as the categories that are imposed upon a social group) and affiliation (defined as a voluntary choice to associate with a social group) by delving into the actors' reflectiveness.

Semantic methods, ethnographic investigation

The book's starting point is semantic: what is the meaning of the word "Muslim"? What is its history? How is it used? In her socio-semantic historical investigation, Willems goes back to the Middle Ages, when the term used to refer to Muslims was "Saracen," which meant "pagan" or "non-Christian," disregarding the Quran, which refers to "Muslims" (those who submit to God). In the eighteenth century, another exonym emerged in French: "Mahometan." Once again, the reference was Eurocentric, as this term conceived Islam on the model of Christianity, comparing the figure of Christ to that of Mohammed, in ways that recall Talal Asad's analysis of the Christo-centric underpinnings of the concept of religion.[1] The colonial period brought about the category "of Muslim origin." It was in colonial Algeria that the law came to differentiate "natives of Muslim origin" from "French of European origin," each class being mutually exclusive and referring to distinct legal codes. In Thanks to colonial law, the category of "Muslim" became racialized: individuals were ascribed it at birth, and religious conversion did not change an individual's legal status. This is evident in the term "Christian Muslim," used in colonial settings to refer to people "of Muslim origin" who had converted to Christianity but remained subject to colonial rather than civil law.[2]

The genealogy of the term "Muslim" also illuminates the long history of deformation, stigmatization, and othering that made being Muslim a dominated identity. To her semantic approach, Willems adds an ethnographic dimension (which, unlike the semantic work, is synchronic), through which she seeks to reconstruct the uses of the category "Muslim" by considering those it designates. This wide-ranging study includes interviews, observations, and questionnaires. Some thirty biographical interviews are used throughout the book, including figures in various leadership roles (from Tareq Oubrou, the rector of the Bordeaux mosque, to Houria Bouteldja, the spokesperson of Indigènes de la République [the Indigenous of the Republic], by way of Nagib Azergui, one of the founders of the Union des démocrates musulmans de France [the Union of Democratic Muslims]) and anonymous individuals who understand their connection to Islam in contrasting ways (a student who describes himself as an "atheist of Muslim culture," individuals who converted to Islam and

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[1] Talal Asad (1993) *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press.

[2] Mohammed Amer Meziane (2019) "Racialiser 'la religion,' séculariser l'empire. Sécularisme, conversion et citoyenneté en Algérie coloniale," in Simona Tersigni, Claire Vincent Mory, Marie-Claire Willems, eds., *Le religieux au prisme de l'ethnicisation et de la racisation*, Paris, Éditions Pétra.

practice it to varying degrees, a professor who describes himself as "of Muslim origin," and a mosque's faithful). To this sequence of portraits, she adds observations made at a training session on Islamic ethics in the Paris suburbs and at meetings in Paris with women who converted to Islam. Finally, she includes two questionnaires administered at an Islamic education center in Saint-Denis and a mosque in Bordeaux. This methodological framework, laid out as the book unfolds, provides a glimpse into the difficulties of studying a stigmatized population, as evidenced by people who refused to be interviewed or concerns relating to anonymization on the part of people seeking to protect themselves at a time when their religion is highly stigmatized. The method also shows how Willems positions herself reflexively: the book begins and ends with personal anecdotes from her experience as an educator who observed the ascriptive power of institutions vis-à-vis populations perceived as Muslim and as a witness to the terrorist attacks of November 13, 2015.

Three uses of the word "Muslim"

The heart of Willems' argument concerns how people who identify as Muslims "say who they are" (p. 5). Rejecting rigid conceptions of religious affiliation and in keeping with more comprehensive approaches,[3] she examines how the word "Muslim" is associated with different subjectivation trajectories associated with experiences of othering, reflective acts, and biographical bifurcations. This work has led her to propose a three-part typology of the uses of the term "Muslim": Muslim affiliation as an ethnic-cultural category, a social condition, and a religious identity.

Those who conceive their Muslim affiliation in ethnic-cultural terms situate this identity in a collective history: that of the postcolonial immigration of North African parents and their families' resulting socialization to Islam. In such situations, relationships to oneself are rooted in collective memory and forms of minority-group solidarity, intersecting migratory trajectories, religious practices, and institutional ascriptions. This is the case, for instance, of Ramzi, a man of Algerian background who describes himself as both Muslim and an atheist, who gave a Muslim "second first name" to his children, and who refers to his primary socialization to explain the fact that he does not eat pork ("It is something that is very, very anchored. I can't explain

[3] Gotman, Anne, *Ce que la religion fait aux gens : Sociologie des croyances intimes*, Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2017.

it. It takes shape when you're a kid, it's an almost physical connection," p. 58). Such remarks testify to the resilience of particular ways of acting, thinking, and feeling in relation to the Islamic tradition--in short, the force of certain religious dispositions, which an approach focusing on socialization could enrich by clarifying the sociological basis (in age, gender, class, and so on) of these practices of affiliation.[4]

Considering this collective memory from the standpoint of belittling (whereby people belonging to minority groups are essentialized and made to feel inferior), others conceive of Muslim identity as a social condition. In this instance, it is the experience of stigmatization that founds one's identification as Muslim: people call themselves Muslim when the majority gaze designates them as such. Yet the majority's gaze changes with time and context. Specifically, the racial boundaries surrounding Islam have acquired, in recent decades, ever greater political salience.[5] We learn this from Tareq, who was late to embrace the "Muslim" label. "Never in my life did I think that the time would come when I would identify with that imaginary fantasy …. I could say 'I'm a student,' 'I'm a sociologist,' 'I'm an activist, a union member, an Algerian, an Arab,' but never before had I described myself as 'a Muslim'. But things change. Now, it has become defining, politically" (p. 96). Such boundaries draw on different othering mechanisms (Arab-sounding names, diet, circumcision, and so on) that inscribe the Muslim condition in an asymmetrical racial relationship, leading some to "self-racialize" to reverse the stigmatization.

In contrast to this "self-racializing" conception, others conceive their Muslim identity in strictly religious terms. For these people, the point is "de-ethnicize" Islam by considering "Muslim" as a category that could in principle apply to all humanity, without national or cultural limits. This decoupling gesture leads some to weave their religious practices into a cultural fabric that is coded "European": fasting interrupted with a halal quiche or praying on a rug with a tartan design. In short, this conception of Muslim affiliation makes possible, according to Willems, an acculturation of Islam to French contexts in the form of a life ethos. At this point, the analysis reaches the epistemological limits of a sociology of Islam seeking to prove that Islamic practices and ideas are consistent with dominant models of citizenship, at the risk of neglecting

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[4] L'ANR ISLAMSOC [2023-2027] on Islamic socializations considers the transmission and incorporation processes of practical and theoretical knowledge relating to the Islamic tradition.

[5] Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed, *Islamophobie: comment les élites françaises fabriquent le « problème musulman »*, Paris: la Découverte poche, 2022.

the decisive role of the Islamic tradition and confining itself exclusively to its most "liberal" forms.[6]

The articulation of race and religion

This typology of the usages of the word "Muslim" makes it possible to unravel the articulations of affiliation and ascription, self-categorization and categorization by others, and the level of the individual and that of the system. Through the study of these processes of constrained subjectification, Willems also shifts the focus to possible intersections between race and religion. These intersections are approached from their margins: by comparing the Muslim condition to the Jewish condition and examining the consequences of conversion trajectories for minority identities.

The Jewish condition is discussed on several occasions throughout the book as a way of reflecting on the entwinement of collective memory, cultural practices, religious affiliation, and experiences of stigmatization that shape Jewish identification. These forms of self-categorization are closely intertwined with forms of categorization by others, the Jewish and Muslim conditions being marked by biologization and ethnicization processes that make it difficult to remove these categories from the majority gaze. Through these mirroring analyses, the author seeks to unravel the knots of racial and religious subjectification, being attentive to the latitude for self-identification available to individuals in minority situations. The book's central if underlying implicit question is: "to what extent can I claim to be my own subject?" (p. 176).

The constrained choice to belong is also a function of conversion trajectories. Willems presents fascinating interviews with converts to Islam and former Muslims who have converted to Christianity, exploring the experiences of alienation and agency that underpin the racial and religious restructuring that follows a conversion. Thus Sarah, a Christian convert who was socialized as a Muslim, regrets that she continues to be ascribed a Muslim identity (people express surprise, for instance, that she eats during Ramadan). She would like to create a Christan center with a hammam and Moorish café to celebrate her "Arab origins."

[6] Nadia Fadil (2019) "The Anthropology of Islam in Europe: A Double Epistemological Impasse", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 48, no. 1, p. 117–32.

These rich reflections on socio-discursive practices surrounding the category of "Muslim" remind us of the powerful interconnections between context and subjectivity and shed light on the--asymmetrically situated--doubts and fumbling that accompany the way people speak and think about themselves.

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