

Jonathan Lawrence and Justin Vaisse, Integrating Islam: political and religious challenges in contemporary France

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The growing Muslim population in Europe has increasingly attracted social scientists' attention. Jonathan Lawrence and Justin Vaisse's *Integrating Islam* is a very successful example of books recently written on this issue. As is clear from its publisher, *Integrating Islam* is primarily a policy study. Although the book does not include an explicit discussion of social science theories, it still has an implicit theoretical background. It mainly refutes essentialism. Essentialism, which takes Islam as a monolithic entity comprised by certain essences that challenge Western values, became popular among certain analysts who have tried to explain terrorism. In his excellent Foreword to *Integrating Islam*, Olivier Roy summarizes the anti-essentialist theoretical stand of the book: 'In Europe, Islamic fundamentalism is usually the product of a process of alienation and deculturation rather than the ultimate expression of Islamic culture....This noteworthy book...refuses to engage in the often fruitless debate on Islam as an abstract concept. The authors rely on solid documentation to study actual Muslims who live in France (p. xiv-xv)'.

Integrating Islam explores both the Muslims' attitudes in France and the French state's response to this relatively new public actor, while revealing the interaction between these two. According to Lawrence and Vaisse, Islam is only one aspect of the multiculturalist challenge that the French Republic has witnessed. Not only Muslims, but also followers of other religions have certain problems in France due to the French Republic's 'sensitivities regarding the presence of religion in the public sphere' and its goal to "'privatize" religious affiliation' (p. 10). Due to the

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sensitivities and overall goal, the French state has promoted dual policies. On the one hand, it has banned wearing headscarves in public schools. On the other hand, it has supported the emergence of the Conseil français du culte musulman (French Council of the Muslim Faith). This book examines both of these two policies in detail with a fairly neutral language.

Although the book focuses on Muslims in France, it still provides very helpful demographic information about the Muslim minority in other parts of Western Europe. The authors successfully keep the balance between commenting on the general characteristics of the Muslims' interaction with France, on the one hand, and the details of Muslim leadership (e.g., imams and intellectuals), on the other. They provide the reader with a well-informed, consistent, and carefully analyzed picture of Muslims in France. The authors avoid overgeneralizations and stereotypes about Muslims, while stressing their diversity, in terms of ethnicity, education, and social classes. They are optimistic about the future of Muslims' integration to France. Yet they do not over-romanticize this issue and are aware of the socio-economic problems in the *banlieues*.

Integrating Islam is a must read for those who study Muslims in France. It contains very rich and updated data about Muslims' demography, organizational capacity, and political influence in France.