

Title—Why the French Don't Like Headscarves: Islam, the State, & Public Space
Author—John R. Bowen
Year—2007

Categories: Islam, Politics, Colonialism, Space

Place: France (& French Empire)

Time: 1950-2006

Argument Synopsis:

Bowen's book aims to provide an understanding of the French reasoning about Islam that resulted in the passage of the 2004 law banning headscarves (and other ostentatious religious symbols) from public schools. In particular, Bowen strives to demonstrate how anxieties over domestic and international threats combined to produce a set of opportunities for politicians. The headscarf in France came to represent the symbol of many of France's social problems, including Anti-Semitism, Islamic fundamentalism, growing ghettoization in the poor suburbs, and the breakdown of order in the classroom. According to Bowen, in order to understand this law, it is necessary to understand France's particular history of religion and the state, the continued weight of the colonial past, and the French tendency to think passing a law will resolve a social problem.

He also explores the tendency of French public figures to frame discussions of social issues in terms of long-term history. Thus, by framing the issue of headscarves in terms of the history of *laïcité*, French public figures argue for long-term structures which newcomers must adapt. While Bowen acknowledges that the book is about the lives of the women and girls who wear headscarves, he acknowledges the book itself is not truly about Islam, but rather about French reasoning about Islam. The methodological approach used by Bowen is that of a social anthropologist, relying on both written sources and interviews for research. He discusses the research issues that came following the events of 9/11, with some Muslim subjects more wary of being interviewed by an American than in early 2001 when he began his research.

Bowen begins with an examination of the institutional arrangements that govern relations among the state, religion, and the individual in France, drawing on French works of philosophy and sociology as guides to these ways of thinking. However, he notes that these philosophies, laws, histories, and attitudes about the role of the state in religious life do not alone explain why the headscarf became such a recurrently divisive issue. The first section is focused on these philosophies and arrangements. The second section turns to trace the gradually developing public presence of Islam in France, beginning with colonial rule in North Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. The final section of the book is focused on three major anxieties in France that were linked to headscarves. These issues were: the growth of communalism at the expense of social mixing, the increasing influence of international 'Islamism' in France, and the denigration of women in poor suburbs. He also illuminates the very short time allotted for the passage of this law, in part due to fears of more electoral success for the vehemently anti-immigrant National Front party.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Pressure to “do something” about the “Muslim problem” reached a tipping point in 2003, resulting in the passage of the 2004 law
- Role of the media in characterizing Muslim men and women in constrained forms, with only the secularists being deemed worthy of an opinion
- Tendency of French public figures to frame discussions of social issues in terms of France's long-term history