Juliette Galonnier, White Muslims, Black Muslims

Please note:
This is an already published essay that gives an overview of the empirical material that will be discussed in the paper.

Juliette Galonnier (https://www.criticalmuslim.io/author/juliette-galonnier/)

White Muslims, Black Muslims

In every religious tradition, issues of religious authority and leadership are eminently complex and contentious. The religion of Islam on the two sides of the Atlantic is no exception to this rule, especially since it is increasingly diversified in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, migration status and class. Yet, another layer of difficulties comes from the fact that Islam as a religion is racialised in Western societies, which means that it is associated with a number of cultural and moral characteristics deemed inborn and immutable. Muslims are also scrutinised and the politics of Muslim religious leadership involve high stakes: Western states frequently organise the institutionalisation of Islam by selecting or co-opting what they see as acceptable religious spokespersons. This makes the question 'who represents Islam?' a tricky one, since the assertion of religious legitimacy within the Muslim community is complicated by processes of racialisation, stigmatisation and politicisation (state involvement). Taking into account this particular context, we can examine the racialised fault lines that affect the construction of religious authority within the French and American Muslim minorities.

The Muslim minority in France, according to the Pew Research Centre, is currently estimated at 4.7 million, which represents 7.5% of the total French population. According to estimates, over 70% of French Muslims are of North African descent, with large numbers from Algeria. Some 10% hail from Turkey, 9% from Africa and the Indian Ocean, and 2% from Asia, the remaining 9% being constituted of untraceable immigrants and people of various origins, including converts hailing from white or West Indian families. Converts are believed to represent 2 to 3%

of the total Muslim population. Because of demographics and past historical trajectories, Islam is often conflated with mastery of the Arabic language and North African culture in French representations. In the process of institutionalising French Islam, Muslim immigrants' countries of origin have also played a key role, as evidenced in the management and funding of mosques, imam training and participation in institutional structures. Such transnational influence has tended to favour the public visibility and institutional legitimacy of Islamic expressions that are strongly backed by powerful States such as Morocco, Algeria, Turkey, at the expense of African Muslims, second-generation Muslims and converts.

The American Muslim minority is smaller than the French one, both in absolute and relative terms. Recent estimates by the Pew Research Centre established that there are 3.3 million Muslims living on American territory, who make up only 0.9% of the total American population. In spite of their small size, Muslims are considered, according to Gallup Coexist Foundation in 2009, 'the most racially diverse religious group in the US'. A 2012 survey of American mosques by Ihsan Bagby found that 33% of American mosque goers are South Asian, 27% Arab, 24% African-American, 9% African, the remaining 7% being a mix of European, Turkish, Southeast Asian, Latino, and Iranian. The American Muslim minority is therefore more heterogeneous than the French one. Within American Islam, the most striking and enduring cleavage is that opposing African-American Muslims on the one hand and immigrant Muslims from the Middle East or South Asia on the other. To be sure, both groups display great internal diversity. In 2005 Sherman Jackson explained in his book *Islam and the Blackamerican,*that 'African-American Islam' and 'Immigrant Islam' do not refer to reified groups, but rather to distinct sets of experiences, memories and practices that have a structural impact on the direction American Islam is taking as a whole. This cleavage also overlaps with class inequalities, contrasted migration histories and urban/suburban disparities.

Relying on my own ethnographic observations and in-depth interviewing with 82 white and black converts to Islam in France and the United States as well as on a collective study on French Muslims of Sub-Saharan and Comorian descent, I conducted with my colleagues Mahamet Timéra, Mahamadou Cissoko, Seydi Diamil Niane, Hassan Oili and Cheikhna Wagué, I propose, to investigate how white and black Muslims relate to religious authority on the two sides of the Atlantic in contexts where Islam is racialised. As minorities within the Muslim minority, white and black Muslims experience race, religion and the racialisation of religion in peculiar ways. While their accounts and experiences sometimes coincide, they also markedly diverge, as whiteness tends to be valued and blackness devalued in both national contexts.

My interviewees perceived the religion of Islam as a powerful tool to fight racism, and universal Islamic brotherhood was frequently evoked as a means to eradicate or smoothen racial inequalities. Khabir, a twenty-three-year-old African American barber from Detroit, stated for instance that 'being a Muslim is not being a certain race; it is about your soul'. The Muslims I spoke to often articulate their commitment for racial equality in religious terms. At the convert associations I followed, such commitment was clearly stated. Prominent black figures from the classical period of Muslim history were frequently mentioned, such as Hajar and Bilal. In the US specifically, the anti-racist Islamic rhetoric is prominent. Constantly revived through new films and documentaries, the legacy of Malcolm X in particular continues to shape the experience of converts and born Muslims alike. The letter he wrote after his 1964 pilgrimage to Mecca is for instance frequently cited as evidence of the great transformative power of Islam:

America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to and even eaten with people who, in America, would have been considered 'white' but the 'white' attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. (…) And in the words and in the actions and in the deeds of the 'white' Muslims, I felt the same sincerity that I felt among the black African Muslims of Nigeria, Sudan and Ghana.

Many Muslims in both France and the United States strive to place religious sincerity over racial considerations and consider the Islamic tradition as well-armed to foster racial equality. Yet, several interviewees complained about the discrepancy between Islamic teachings and the reality of Muslim communities. Kathleen, aged thirty and a flight attendant from Detroit, who identifies as black, was sceptical about the prospects of Islamic anti-racism: 'Islam could solve racism in every country of the world. But will the practitioners of the religion be able to do so? That's a different story.' In my samples, white and black Muslims tended to share pessimistic views about the existence of internal racial boundaries among Muslims. The segregation of mosques along ethno-racial lines, in particular, is a matter of concern for those, particularly converts, who had fantasised the *ummah* as an indivisible whole. Complaining about the monochromatic character of some mosques in Marseille, forty-seven-year-old Gérard, who works as an accountant, explained: 'they don't understand that there is only one Islam. There is not one Islam for the Moroccans, one Islam for the Algerians, one Islam for the Comorians. No!' In Chicago, student Pablo, twenty-two, also noticed: 'we are supposed to be all one, you know. And then we get this separation thing going on: "oh that's the Desi mosque, that's the Nigerian mosque, that's the Palestinian mosque, that's the Syrian mosque." It shouldn't be like that.' For

many interviewees, the ethno-racial homogamy of Muslim worship spaces prevented the emergence of an overarching Muslim religious identity that could supersede differences.

With Islam as a religion so heavily racialised as 'Arab' or 'Middle Eastern', white and black Muslims often share the experience of not being identified as Muslims by their fellow coreligionists or by society. Sophie, a twenty-seven-year-old social worker from Marseille, who is blond and blue-eyed and a convert of several years, confessed that many of her coreligionists do not see her as a Muslim. She recounted how the imam at her mosque kept calling her a Christian, even though he sees her pray there on a regular basis. Once he gave a sermon on interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians and said he had done it just for her, as a Christian. She was really disconcerted: 'I know he means well but these are the stereotypes that you see over and over and over again. Even in a religious context, he leaps to the conclusion that French = Christian.'

White converts often stand out in mosques. In Marseille, Sophie explains that she is constantly being stared at: 'I don't have the typical face of a Muslim, so, with my blue eyes, I really get noticed!' African-Americans and Muslims of Sub-Saharan and Comorian descent also experience their invisibility as Muslims. French journalist Rokhaya Diallo, who is of Senegalese and Gambian descent, declared: 'being Black cancels my Muslimness in this society. There is a complete invisibility of non-Arab Muslims in France.' Black Muslims do not conform to the stereotyped image of the 'Muslim' in the French imagination and are more closely associated with Christianity. This feeling of being denied Islamic belonging is clearly stated by Banta, a forty-two-year-old Muslim of Malian descent who works as a Muslim chaplain in prison. In an interview conducted by my colleague Cheikhna Wagué, he describes the surprise that his Islamic identity generates among the people he encounters on a daily basis:

At work, it happens that we meet people who think we are only Blacks. Sometimes, when they ask for the chaplain and I come forth, they don't understand. Some even ask: 'are you a Catholic chaplain?' When I reply that no, I am a Muslim chaplain, they do not understand. They say 'oh really?' Because for them this job is for the *sourakhou* [the Arabs in soninke language].

The racialisation of Islam and well-entrenched stereotypes about who 'looks Muslim' and who does not, affect white and black Muslims' claims for religious legitimacy on a daily basis. These issues are often magnified when it comes to religious leadership and authority. In France, a number of interviewees complained about what they saw as the excessive influence exerted by

'Arabs' over Islam. What is merely the reflection of the demographic composition of French Muslims is experienced by some converts as undue monopoly. Some, like thirty-five-year-old Adam, a convert of Caribbean descent living in Paris, mentioned the arrogant attitude of some of his North African coreligionists: 'most of the time, when I talk about Islam with Arabs, we quarrel… They are like: "how come, you are Caribbean, you are a convert and you want to teach me lessons about my religion?" They are real nuts! They think it is theirreligion. These guys are convinced that Islam comes from them, that it is them, that it is their stuff.' A convert, Adam denounces what he sees as North Africans hijacking Islamic religious authority, thereby preventing his full participation in religious discussions.

These discourses were also found among first and second-generation Muslims of African descent in France who lament their marginalisation in the Islamic landscape. Aissatou, a twenty-five-year-old student of Mauritanian descent, explained:

There is this very strong feeling of superiority sometimes, coming from Arabs, over the rest of the Muslim community. It is a pity. Really, I feel it very strongly. North Africans consider that they know religion better than Africans, because Arabic is their main language. Supposedly Islam came to their countries first. But this isn't true! When you look at the history of the expansion of Islam, you see that this isn't true… As a black African, you always have to endure remarks like 'how come you speak Arabic?', 'you know how to do that?', 'but how do you pray?' I always have to explain how I practise my religion.

On a daily basis, ordinary interactions in mosques or learning institutions shape the boundaries of a legitimate and orthodox Islam, from which African Muslims are implicitly excluded. Their Islam is denigrated as secondary, subaltern and different from 'true Islam'.

In the US, many African-American Muslims also claim that the legacy of African Muslim slaves as well as that of the various black movements that appropriated Islam to turn it into an American religion have been silenced and forgotten. The Moorish Science Temple, Nation of Islam, Five Percenters, among others, are insufficiently recognised by post-1965 immigrant Muslims, who, upon arriving in America, launched their own Islamic institutions while overlooking the fact that Islam had already a well-established history in the US at least since the 1910s. The oblivion of generations of African-American Muslims was particularly disturbing for John, a white convert married to an African-American born Muslim woman: 'I remember a well-educated Pakistani brother said to me a few years back: "my generation

(1970-80) was the first to wear *hijab* in America and it was tough to be the people to introduce Islam to America." My wife's eyes open wide in shock and disbelief that this man said this with conviction.' Several converts felt that South Asian and Middle Eastern Muslims hold themselves as the sole repositories of authentic Islamic knowledge and the only ones having the legitimacy to define the boundaries of proper Islamic behaviour. Khabir noted that Islamic legitimacy was often conditioned by obtaining degrees or traveling to the Middle East or South Asia to study: 'it is like if you don't go to the South Asian and the Arab door, you are not a valid Muslim. You are not. That's the impression I get a lot.' He criticises the conflation of Islamic authenticity with Arab/Desi culture and its potential negative impact on black converts' sense of self.

When an African-American Muslim looks in the mirror, they don't want to see an African. Because they think that a Muslim is Arab, Persian, South Asian. You are not Muslim unless you are of these backgrounds. I really get frustrated with that reality. I really do! Before your slave master was a European God figure. Now you think God is an Arab. Now you think God is a South Asian.

White and black Muslims also denounce their tokenistic use as representatives of the diversity of Islam in institutional settings: when applying for mosque funding, when meeting authorities, and so forth. They critique the way they are sometimes harnessed as 'diverse faces' of the Muslim community, while not being given an actual voice in religious matters. In Chicago, strikingly tall and blue-eyed thirty-six-year-old technician Jonathan, who has been part of a mostly-immigrant mosque for decades, noticed this phenomenon: 'If somebody becomes Muslim, and he is Caucasian, they [Muslims] will have him give a lecture about Islam tomorrow.' Imam Suhaib Webb, who is white and converted in 1992, said during a 2013 public talk that he resented the way he was sometimes strategically used. Put on the front stage for advertisement purposes, he regretted not being listened to regarding internal mosque matters: 'they would not consult me over any decision. They never asked me one question. But when it came to a fundraiser, when it came to get a guy on a poster, you know what I mean.'

Such concerns were also voiced by several black Muslims interviewed in France. According to religious speaker Ousmane Timéra, an energetic French man of Senegalese descent, 'they bring Africans but only as stooges. It is just to be able to say "look, we have diversity, there is a Black person with us".' In Marseille, Cheikh Ahmed Ndieguene, a renowned and much appreciated imam of the Bilal Mosque, now systematically refuses to play the role of the token African

Muslim.

Africans don't have their say. They are just being used to say 'see, we represent all Muslims'. The moment I understood this, I said, 'I am done, I won't do it anymore'. For instance, they wanted to go see the prefecture. They brought an Algerian, a Moroccan, a Tunisian, a Senegalese, a Comorian, to say: 'we represent Islam' and all that. It is a way of bringing colour to the picture. I said 'no, I won't do this anymore', because if I agree to come, I contribute to legitimate such discourses.

These feelings of instrumentalisation were strongly expressed during interviews. Yet, while they both denounce racialised hegemony over Islam and tokenism, white and black Muslims' experiences with religious authority differ markedly. While white converts are often presented as valued assets for a community in need of recognition, black Muslims have to endure sustained forms of marginalisation and stigmatisation. Reflecting general trends in the French and American societies, white skin is often valued as a social asset within religious communities. More than other converts, white Muslims are often over-congratulated for their conversion. In addition, a number of white converts have quickly risen to positions of prominence and authority, as board members in mosques, scholars, spokespersons for Muslim organisations, for example. Because a certain amount of prestige is coupled with whiteness, white Muslims are believed to be legitimate faces who can speak in the name of Islam. They can be valued representatives for religious minorities that are stigmatised at the national level and frequently exposed to litmus tests of assimilation.

The valorisation of white converts becomes particularly evident when compared to the marginalisation of non-white converts. This was clearly expressed by forty-five-year-old Souleymane from Detroit. A charismatic African-American convert who teaches Islamic courses in a mosque, he described the intra-Muslim racism he experienced at the beginning of his conversion. During his first years as a Muslim, he was very active in *da'wah* efforts and brought many new converts to the immigrant mosque he attended. Yet, he was under the impression that his coreligionists were only interested in white converts, and dismissive of black converts:

During that year, many African-American women and men took Islam. And within our community, there were five or six Europeans who came in. There was one, Abu Bakr from Connecticut. When he took *shahada*, all of the Pakistanis, all the Syrians, they stayed, all the

Lebanese people were like: '*Mash'Allah* brother, we will get you help and everything.' But he was from the hood, they didn't know! They said: 'Is there anything you want to say?' And he said: 'yeah, there is only one thing I want to say. I have seen other brothers, African-Americans, take *shahada* here and you all didn't care. And me, I will take *shahada* today, all of you all are happy, all of you all are spinning around me. Is it because I am white? Why don't you do that for any of these? This brother here, he took it last week. And that sister, last month.' And he really crushed their whole ego system about the whole thing. His name was Abu Bakr. He became a stronger Muslim after that.

Souleymane was grateful for Abu Bakr to publicly point at the racial and class dynamics within the mosque and unveil the greater appreciation shown to white converts over their black counterparts. Cab driver Umar Lee from St Louis, a forty-year-old working-class white convert, reported the same phenomenon: 'you literally have white converts coming, and I have seen it, within a couple of weeks, or couple of months, they are on the board of directors of the masjid. Now imagine a black Muslim! He has been around for thirty years. He barely gets returned greetings. White guy comes in, and in a month he is on the board.' The undervaluation of African-American Muslims in comparison to white Muslims, especially in scholarship, is a very important issue for Souleymane. His assessment of the popularity of white Islamic scholars such as Dr Umar Faruq-Abdallah or Sheikh Hamza Yusuf is definite: 'even though I have great respect for Sheikh Umar and Hamza Yusuf, it is true that they wouldn't have gained as much exposure if they were African-Americans. Because there are tons of African-Americans who haven't been given exposure.' Ubaydullah, a forty-year-old Islamic teacher from Chicago is an African-American scholar who studied Islam overseas and now teaches in various settings, contrasted the way his scholarship and that of Hamza Yusuf are received:

Personally, Sheikh Hamza is one of my teachers and I think he is really brilliant. That said, I think his being white did and does confer onto him a certain image of privilege in the Muslim community. When the same thing was from my mouth and from Sheikh Hamza's mouth, maybe it wouldn't resonate in the same way, because people are so attuned to this reality of white privilege. When people are looking for social commentary that they are prepared to take as authoritative or at the very least valid, I do think the fact that he is white has something to do with how they receive his commentary.

The racialised cognitive association of whiteness with knowledge and legitimacy can therefore partly explain white converts' rise to positions of Islamic authority within the Muslim

community.

On the contrary, black Muslims have to endure the systematic devaluation of their Islamic traditions and practices. According to scholar Bakary Sambe, black Muslims in France are subjected to paternalism and racism from their coreligionists, society and the French State alike. Their practices are often depreciated as 'folkloric', 'heterodox', if not 'deviant', and they are pushed into the background as 'second-rank' Muslims. The typification of black African Islam (*islam noir*) as a 'peripheral' Islam tainted with local cultures, in contrast to a so-called 'orthodox' and 'authentic' North African Islam, was created and enforced by the French colonial administration. Its persistence in contemporary representations contributes to the invisibility and discredit of Muslims of African descent in French Muslim spaces. As a result, African Muslims in France are perceived as less practicing, less reliable and less authentic Muslims. Maimouna, a French woman of Senegalese descent, who is well-trained in Islamic sciences and has taught Arabic and Qur'an in women study groups in several mosques, mentioned the lack of legitimacy that black people endure when they try to assert their Islamic authority: 'When you teach Qur'an or Arabic, you show up, people look at you and in the back of their minds they think "she is either the cleaning lady or she came to study". They never see you as the professor. They are always astounded that a Black African can speak Arabic and know the Qur'an.'

Some French black imams also described the difficulties they encountered when seeking to establish their religious authority. Cheikh Ahmed Ndieguene, who is now a widely recognised religious figure among Muslims in Marseille, recounted his difficult beginnings as a young imam:

When I lived on the university campus, I used to be imam there as well. And someone had made a comment. He was an Algerian who liked me dearly so I wasn't shocked. But the comment in itself was interesting. He told me, 'I heard that there is a *hadith* that says that a Black man does not have the right to lead white people in prayer. The prayer won't be valid.' I told him 'well, that *hadith* is not valid' and I explained it to him. I knew that, in his case, it was due to ignorance. But this ignorance took root in a place, in a culture. There are people here who grew up with this way of thinking.

These enduring perceptions, coupled with the lack of religious support from African States to their diaspora and the fact that African Muslims are less socio-economically established than their North African counterparts, contribute to the marginalisation of African Muslims within

the institutional field of French Islam. Taken together, these various experiences and testimonies outline the existence of strong logics of stigmatisation and marginalisation of black Muslims, which significantly affect their claims to religious authority and legitimacy.

Building on the various experiences of black and white Muslims, some of the conflicts and contestations that surround the construction of religious authority in the French and American contexts are laid bare. Because of the racialisation of Islam, white and black Muslims encounter difficulties in asserting their Islamic legitimacy in the society and within the Muslim minority itself, where the boundary between orthodoxy and heterodoxy can at times be policed along racialised lines. Both can be used as tokens of diversity in institutional settings while struggling to authenticate their Islamic belonging and authority among their coreligionists. Yet, black and white Muslims encounter contrasted obstacles in authenticating their Islamic legitimacy, the former being often undervalued as Muslims while the latter are often put in the spotlight. It is therefore important to debunk the myth of a homogenous Muslim community and explore the complex dynamics that shape authority and representation among stigmatised minorities. The rich conversations that are taking place on these issues among Muslim communities in both France and the United States and the strong similarities and resonances of these debates across the Atlantic warrant further investigation.

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