

Conference Report

‘Disaffiliation, Dis-identification, Disavowal: (Ex-)Muslims and Public Apostasy from Islam in Francophone Culture and Politics’

IMLR, 5 & 6 April 2019

‘Disaffiliation, Dis-identification, Disavowal: (Ex-)Muslims and Public Apostasy from Islam in Francophone Culture and Politics’ brought together a mix of early career and more senior researchers from the UK, US, France, and Sweden to discuss the broad topic of apostasy from Islam in the French-speaking world and beyond. The conference marked the first academic exploration of the question of apostasy from Islam in the field of French and Francophone Studies and comprised five panels, a keynote lecture by Dr Daniel Enstedt (University of Gothenburg), and a roundtable discussion with critically acclaimed Algerian novelist Salim Bachi. These formal presentations and discussions were interspersed between the no-less productive informal conversations during the conference lunch, reception, and dinner.

The panels were organized thematically and sought to examine the question of apostasy from Islam from a variety of approaches. The first panel, chaired by Adi Bharat (Manchester), focused on the diverse ways in which apostasy has been represented in literature and film. Natalie Khaazal (Texas A&M) examined the poetics of apostasy in the work of Mohamed Choukri, Rebekah Vince (Durham) analysed Slimane Benaïssa’s work in terms of interfaith dialogue and interfaith doubt, and Fraser McQueen (Stirling) explored why the figure of the “ex-Muslim” is less common than that of the “secular Muslim” in contemporary French literary and filmic representations.

The ASMCF panel, chaired by Joseph Ford (IMLR), adopted an anthropological and sociological approach to address the conference theme. Houssame Bentabet (EHESS) examined the question of apostasy from Islam from a theologico-political perspective, drawing on individual cases from his fieldwork with the Council of Ex-Muslims in France, while Nedjib Sidi Moussa (CESSP, CNRS) presented on the various approaches to apostasy taken by actors across the political spectrum.

Dr Daniel Enstedt’s keynote on apostasy from Islam in Sweden brought the first day of the conference to a close. Drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted in Sweden, Dr Enstedt’s talk provided delegates with a rich understanding of the individual process and experience of leaving Islam.

The second day began with a panel, chaired by Nicholas Harrison (KCL), on socio-political and legal perspectives on apostasy, Islam, and race in France and beyond. Fabrice Roger (Bristol) discussed French-Algerian journalist Mohammed Sifaoui’s representation of Islam in *Mes “frères” assassins* (2003). Historian and Lawyer Alice Bullard’s presentation shed light on how some governments use the charge of apostasy to target political critics. She discussed the case of her former client Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mkhaitir who was charged with apostasy and sentenced to death in 2014 following an article he had written that was critical of religion and the caste system in Mauritania. Chris Jardine (Edinburgh) examined apostasy from Islam within the framework of *laïcité* in France.

The next panel, chaired by Jane Hiddleston (Oxford), focused on the politics and aesthetics of apostasy in literature. Sura Qadiri (Cambridge) examined the work of Abdelwahab Meddeb in terms of a ‘post-Islamic’ atheism, while Max Silverman (Leeds) argued for a reading of Boualem Sansal’s *Le village de l’allemand ou Le journal des frères Schiller* (2007) that would set the often-reductive politics of apostasy against that of a collective transnational memory, whereby literature functions almost always as a form of transgression of the political status quo. Nicholas Harrison examined how religious language, including that of apostasy, inflected the assumed ‘secular’ sphere of anti- and post-colonial politics and literature in Algeria.

Because of the relative novelty of apostasy studies in French and Francophone contexts, the final panel, chaired by Max Silverman, sought to broaden the field of analysis by offering a set of transnational and comparative case studies beyond France. Adi Bharat examined the individual and collective experiences of members of the Council of Ex-Muslims in Singapore within the rigid socio-cultural and political framework of race and religion in Singapore and Malaysia. Laura Thompson (Harvard) presented on blasphemy cases against Tunisian Muslims in the pre-Independence and post-Arab-Spring periods. Zainab Salloo (Manchester) presented a thematic analysis of “coming-out” YouTube videos by British ex-Muslims.

In the roundtable discussion at the end, Salim Bachi reflected on the question of apostasy from Islam in relation to his personal life and his public life as a writer. The ensuing discussion, which was later opened to the public, focused on themes of Islam, religious fundamentalism, apostasy, and self-identification in his various literary and (auto-)biographical works, including *Le silence de Mahomet* (2008), *Dieu, Allah, moi et les autres* (2016) and *Un jeune homme en colère* (2018). Bachi also responded to scholarship on his work that sometimes implicitly or explicitly identifies him as a “Muslim author”, thereby unpacking the assumptions that lie behind concepts of minority writing.

The organisers concluded the conference by highlighting the various productive and thought-provoking discussions over the two days, suggesting that the study of apostasy from Islam is a fertile avenue for further research in the broad field of French and Francophone Studies.

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