Sacred Rivals

Peterson, Joseph W

Published by Oxford University Press

Peterson, Joseph W.
Sacred Rivals: Catholic Missions and the Making of Islam in Nineteenth-Century France and Algeria.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/103173.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/103173

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3245335
It was June of 1872 when Henri Ducat—a Jesuit missionary in French Algeria—put pen to paper to write to one of his former disciples, an Arab youth from the city of Constantine named Louis Khoudja. It was the feast day of St. Louis Gonzaga, patron saint of Catholic youth, so naturally Ducat’s thoughts turned to his former convert, who had been baptized years before and named “Louis” in honor of this saint. Ducat had spent some fifteen years in Algeria, concentrating his efforts especially on Muslim youth, teaching them French, putting on magic lantern shows, distributing sugared almonds, and catechizing these children in the doctrines of the Catholic church. He had also been one of the most vocal advocates of the idea that Algeria’s Muslims were not unconvertible fanatics but in fact potential Christians. Louis and his brother (whom the Jesuits christened “Stanislas,” after another famous saintly youth) had been Ducat’s star converts. The brothers had even traveled to France in the 1860s to train for the priesthood.

On this day, though, Ducat was writing to reproach Louis and to express his sense of betrayal. Ducat had heard through the grapevine that Louis had “taken up Arab dress again,” and the missionary was worried: Did this sartorial choice indicate a rejection of Catholicism or, even worse, “a Muslim marriage”? Ducat reminded Louis that he loved him and his brother as if they were his own children and that they had once thought of him as a father, too. Ducat saved the real twist of the knife for the letter’s postscript, where he wrote: “Attached is a picture [of Our Lord] in the garden—with the caption ‘then all his disciples abandoned him and fled.’” Yet God was still merciful: Ducat also enclosed a picture of the prodigal son returning home. The story of the Jesuits’ failure to retain these two brothers—converts in whom they had invested so much—is a fitting illustration of the larger rise and fall of missionary hopes for Algeria’s Muslims in the nineteenth century.
Like other Jesuits interested in proselytizing among Algeria’s Muslims, Ducat was a believer in the missiology of cultural accommodation; he also exemplified the Catholic philo-Islamism of conservative culture warriors like Veuillot. He hoped that Muslims’ inherent religiosity would survive their conversion to Christianity, reinvigorating Christendom with their premodern piety and leading them to serve as indigenous missionaries throughout North Africa. Ducat took this cultural respect and philo-Islamic optimism further than most. In one report to his superiors, Ducat sketched out a plan whereby the Jesuits would establish a special congregation specializing in Muslim missions. The Jesuits would also offer schools and catechumenates, orphanages, medical care, “excursions . . . among the tribes,” and even create parishes wholly populated by indigenous Christians (supplemented, if need be, by Arabic-speaking Maronite Christians imported from Lebanon). The plan was animated by the kind of inculturation recommended by previous Jesuit missionaries. For example, Ducat advocated intermarriage between Europeans and (Christianized) Arabs, and—remarkably—even insisted that the Jesuits should “warn” the European partner-in-marriage “that [this mingling] not be to the detriment of [those customs] of the Arabs, even Muslims, which are much preferable.” On a later occasion, Ducat composed a song in Arabic in which the verses consisted of the Lord’s Prayer, but the chorus was the shahada, the Islamic profession of faith—“there is no God but God”—repeated over and over. Of course, Ducat left out the second half of the profession: “and Muhammad is his prophet.” Ducat’s students would sing this song to the tune of the well-known French carol “Les anges dans nos campagnes” (Angels we have heard on high).

Throughout the 1850s, the Jesuits’ Arab Mission had become pervaded by a sense of discouragement, not only because of the government’s refusal of their bid in 1850 for a mission to the tribal territories but also because a series of individual attempts in and around Constantine had met with failures, false starts, and governmental obstruction. The Père Jordan, the Jesuit superior in Algeria, initially hoped, along with Jean-Baptiste Creuzat, that the failing Arab seminary of 1849–50 could be relocated from Algiers to Constantine, and that some Jesuits might, “in the manner of the P.[ère] de Nobili [in India],” live and dress like the Arabs of Constantine and earn the reputation of “scholar-marabouts” specializing in “languages, poetry, astronomy, [and] medicine.” These Christian marabouts would only broach the topic of religious conversion much later, after winning the Muslims’ respect. Such grandiose projects, though still in keeping with the ideal of cultural accommodation, always seem to have run into obstacles such as shortage of funds and personnel. Lacking the hoped-for wider mission
among the Arab tribes, the pères at Constantine restricted their missionary efforts to smaller-scale educational and orphanage work in and around the city.\(^5\)

In 1856, the Jesuits were relieved of their parish duties at Constantine by Bishop Pavy. Pavy had finally recruited sufficient personnel to do without these “auxiliaries” and had grown tired of tolerating independent priests within his hierarchy.\(^6\) Thus the Jesuits had more reason than ever to concentrate their efforts on the non-European population of Constantine. Not only did they now have fewer responsibilities toward the European colonists and the secular Church hierarchy, but their new house in Constantine was more conducive to contact with the Muslims. Following their ouster from the cure of Constantine, they had been obliged to move into a maison in a less Europeanized neighborhood, “in the middle of [the Infidels].”\(^7\) They hoped to continue their educational outreach, focusing especially on the children while not neglecting any adult Muslims whose “natures” had not been too “tainted.”\(^8\) Still, in 1857, one Jesuit superior in Algeria bemoaned the “sad truth” that even those missionaries who had believed in the mission arabe the most, like Creuzat and Père Baulard, were “discouraged” and in need of more youthful replacements.\(^9\) The superior also wondered if they had erred in thinking that Constantine, “the center of infidelity,” was indeed the best location for their missionary attempts, since it was becoming clear how difficult it was for potential converts and catechists to resist the constant influence of their families and other Muslim coreligionists.\(^10\)

For Henri Ducat, an enterprising young Jesuit who first arrived at Constantine in the mid-1850s and who felt a particular vocation for Muslim evangelization, the Jesuits would only begin to have success when more Catholics around the world were praying for Muslim conversion: “We prayed . . . but these prayers seem not to have been universal enough, not insistent enough, not relentless enough. The Muslims are generally viewed as a cursed race, and discouragement and indifference make Christians insensitive to the eternal loss of so many souls.”\(^11\) While on leave back in France in 1857, Ducat had the idea of organizing an “Association of Prayers to Our Lady of Africa for the Conversion of the Muslims” to pray for the spiritual awakening of Islamic Africa. Members committed to saying an Ave Maria every day, with the invocation “O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us and for the Muslims.” Confessing and partaking of the Eucharist at Easter was also a prerequisite for membership.\(^12\)

Ducat had particular success publicizing his new Association of Prayers in and around Besançon, where he had family connections, and around Lyon and the Rhône valley, within his own Jesuit province. France was divided by the Jesuits into four “provinces,” and Lyon was the province charged with missions in
North Africa and elsewhere in the Mediterranean. Lyon was also known as the most ultramontane or “intransigent” Jesuit province. Moreover, in the 1860s, the idea of an “Apostolate of Prayer” that would knit Catholics around the world together into a wider mystic community—addressing its prayers to the “Sacred Hearts” of Mary and Jesus—was a trend associated with the sentimental devotional practices of ultramontane Catholicism. These intransigent and emotive sensibilities may have made Ducat’s new prayer association especially attractive to congregations throughout the Lyon province.

Nevertheless, tensions with Bishop Pavy in Algiers continued. Bishop Pavy approved the Association of Prayers, but with the caveats that the Association help raise funds for the new cathedral he was constructing at Algiers and that the Jesuits refrain from publicizing the Association until after he had completed his own fundraising campaign, because “the idea of proselytization” might alienate moderate Catholics. Pavy decreed that any moneys given to Ducat’s fledgling prayer Association would go toward the completion of his cathedral and not toward the actual work of catechizing the Muslims of Constantine. Pavy also revised the Association’s prayer to read “Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us and for the poor Infidels,” instead of “for the poor Muslims.” The Jesuits protested this rewording and were reassured that this had only been “by mistake.” Perhaps the Jesuits were concerned about the sensibilities of the Muslim population of Constantine who might hear the prayers: one Jesuit insisted they would need to change “Infidel” back to “Muslim” before they could “read [the prayers] in public.”

These early misunderstandings with Bishop Pavy suggest that Pavy’s commitment to Muslim missions was halfhearted and pragmatic at best and that tensions continued to fester between the Jesuits and secular clergy in the colony. Pavy seems only to have spoken of his support for Muslim missions when he needed to justify receiving funds earmarked for missions, funds disbursed by the Lyon-based Œuvre de la Propagation de la Foi (Association for the Propagation of the Faith). Bishop Pavy’s approach to the Muslims of Algeria was not at all in the philo-Islamic mode of Louis Veuillot and the Jesuit missionaries who tried to portray the Muslims as noble, devout, and susceptible to conversion and civilization. On the contrary, as Catholic observers of Islam would increasingly do in the second half of the nineteenth century, Pavy preferred to drum up support and financial contributions by denigrating Islam to his European audiences.

For example, on the occasion of Lent in 1853, Pavy preached a fiercely polemical sermon “On Mohammedanism” to his European parishioners of Algiers. According to the bishop, only the Arabs could have been so stupid and credulous
as to believe that someone like Muhammad, without performing any miracles or fulfilling any prophesies, was a prophet of God. Unlike Eugène Boré, Pavy found nothing of literary value in the Qur’an. And he repeated the old slur that Muhammad and his followers were consumed by fleshly pleasures, and that unlike Christianity, Islam made no moral demands on its followers and allowed all manner of sexual vices.¹⁸ In 1858, Pavy’s fundraising appeal on behalf of his cathedral construction project emphasized opposition and enmity between Christianity and Islam. For Pavy, this new Chapel of Notre Dame d’Afrique would serve primarily as a commemoration of France’s victory over the “Barbary” pirates of Algiers and of the Virgin Mary’s role in that victory. Pavy’s rhetorical strategy in his fundraising efforts was to emphasize just how evil these Muslim pirates had been to show that their defeat was great cause for celebration (and financial contribution).¹⁹ Pavy’s vision of the chapel as a pilgrimage destination for French Catholics thus grew out of a stance of total opposition to Islam that left no room for the rhetoric of Muslim religiosity or of future conversion and reconciliation.

Despite Pavy’s tepid support for the prayer association, Ducat was back in Algeria by October 1858, announcing that the association had already grown to some 10,000 members. The missionary quickly received some encouraging results. For one thing, the missionaries back at Constantine reported having been able to baptize more dying Arab children than usual—without the knowledge of their parents, of course.²⁰ But the real “first fruits” of the Association’s prayers were two young Muslim converts to Christianity, the Khoudja brothers, Garmi and Mouloud.²¹ As many as thirty other children “from the best families of the city” quickly followed these brothers, perhaps attracted by the opportunity to learn French by way of Catholic liturgical texts and prayers. These children fit neatly into the sympathetic Catholic discourse about Muslim religiosity and receptivity to the Gospel: the Jesuits claimed they were initially cautious about broaching religious topics, but their students wanted to discuss religion and “already [seemed] to believe firmly in several important points of the Catholic religion.”²² From reports Ducat and others sent back to France, which were hand-copied by Jesuit scholars in Lyon and distributed to Jesuit houses across France, it is clear that the Jesuits hoped some of their catechists might themselves become priests and return as missionaries to their own people: the beginnings of an indigenous clergy.²³ One promising student had even expressed a desire to become a missionary to the Kabyles, but was withdrawn by his family after a prominent Muslim theology teacher in Constantine protested that the Jesuits “wanted to make him a Christian.”²⁴
In 1861, the Khoudja brothers were baptized and renamed “Louis” and “Stanislas” in the chapel of the Jesuits. The Jesuits were careful to record in French and in Arabic the “formal consent” of the boys’ father, with the father’s signature not only authorizing the boys’ baptism but promising to leave them “perfectly free to practice the Catholic religion.” The Jesuits and Ducat in particular made much of this consent—whenever Ducat recounted the story of the boys’ baptism, he would often add some variation of the phrase “with the formal consent of their father.” The Jesuits at Constantine would baptize a number of other Muslims in these early, heady years of the catechumenate; and in each case, Ducat kept careful records of parents’ permissions and of baptismal certificates signed by witnesses.

These baptismal contracts were probably meant as insurance against the accusation—sometimes made by anticlerical enemies of the Jesuits or other missionaries—that the missionaries were kidnapping Muslim children. At a moment when the Pope himself had just ignited the anticlerical scandal of the century by seizing a Jewish child—Edgardo Mortara, who had been baptized without his parents’ knowledge—the Jesuits of all congregations, and above all in colonial Algeria, could not afford the accusation that they had kidnapped Muslim children. After all, the Lazarists at Algiers had been accused of the “corruption of minors” only a decade earlier, for their attempt to gather Muslim children into a catechumenate. And some years later, in 1877, the Jesuits would find themselves attacked in the anticlerical press for having allegedly kidnapped “two new Mortaras”—two Kabyle youth sent to join the Trappist monks at Staoueli without their parents’ permission. But more than a defensive caution against European critics, Ducat’s obsession with these “formal consents” could also be seen as a mark of his anxieties about Muslim conversion—anxieties about the Muslim influence the boys’ family might still exert on these young Christians, that the boys would lapse and that their conversions and callings to the priesthood might fail.

The choice of saints for whom the brothers were named seems likewise significant: the saints Louis of Gonzaga and Stanislas Kostka had both from a young age received divine calls to the priesthood. More significantly for the anxieties and hopes of the mission arabe, both had met with some parental resistance, yet both had gone on to become Jesuit novices—Stanislas even fled his Vienna home to join the Jesuits in Rome. Ducat seems to have made the stories of these two saints a recurring part of his teaching to Muslim youth; perhaps he even saw them as patrons of the Constantine catechumenate. Years later, writing about Constantine in the pages of the French weekly Les missions catholiques,
Ducat would recall a scene from the hopeful days “when we would give French lessons to some young Arabs”: “the room which served both as our parlor and school” was decorated with engravings of “Our Lord, the holy Virgin,” and of “the two young marabouts (saint Stanislas and saint Louis of Gonzaga).” In taking these two Jesuit novices as the boys’ saints, Ducat no doubt hoped the Arab brothers would display the same perseverance the young Jesuits had, forsaking even their own families for the sake of the gospel.

The social position of the Khoudja family in Constantine suggests they stood to gain from a relationship with the Jesuits. The boys’ father, Mohamed ben Amin Khodja, was a spahi, or indigenous cavalryman, in the French colonial troops—an indication that he had already in some sense opted to better his social or financial position by “collaborating” with the French. Mohamed was away from Constantine on military exercises the day his sons were baptized, but the boys’ uncle and head of the family, El Hadj Othman, represented the family and signed the baptismal certificate as a witness (perhaps their father signed a separate permission, before or after the day of the baptism). In fact, this “El Hadj,” as the Jesuits called him, was an important indigenous functionary and the Jesuits’ primary “native informant” in Constantine. Much of the Jesuits’ contact with the Khoudja family and other Constantine Arabs was filtered through him, and he may even have smoothed over some initial objections from the boys’ father.

Until the mid-1860s, “indigènes” who lived in French Algeria’s major cities were governed and policed by their own community or “corporation.” These corporations were linked to ethnic or regional origin and were also associated with a given profession. El Hadj was the amin, or chief, of the corporation of the Biskris, residents of Constantine who hailed from the southern town of Biskra and had the monopoly on porterage in the city. Although Ducat and the Jesuits referred to their disciples as “Arabs,” at least some laborers from Biskra may also have been perceived as ethnically “other” in Algeria’s cities. Some of the earliest travel writers and ethnographers in Algeria believed that migrant laborers from Biskra were darker skinned than other Algerians—Berbers, one rung above Black African laborers, if not Black themselves.

Biskra, an oasis town perched at the southern end of Algeria’s Aurès Mountains and a “gateway” to the Sahara and the caravan trade, was the center of the date-producing oases of the Ziban region and a source of seasonal labor migration that flowed along the trade route to and from Constantine to the north. Back in the mid-1840s, as the French managed to subdue Abd-el-Kader’s resistance to the west, Biskra and its surrounding oases in the southeast had become the center of a new kind of popular resistance led by a messianic Mahdi
figure, a divinely-appointed leader destined to appear at the end of days. A revolt near Constantine in 1845 was led by Djamina, an apocalyptic liberator who had spent time around Biskra. Algeria’s most successful and widely followed claimant to the *Mahdi* title, Bu Ziyan, also hailed from the Biskra region and made his legendary last stand in 1849 in the nearby oasis of Zaatcha. The French subjected Zaatcha to vengeful annihilation—men, women, and children “put to the sword,” its walls and date palms razed—a punishment exacerbated by the cholera French columns carried with them into the region. Perhaps the violence of 1849 drove even more Biskris to emigrate to Algeria’s northern cities. But French authorities continued to worry that the mobility of Biskri laborers helped spread anti-French “rumors” and agitation. In short, Biskris in Constantine were likely confined to manual labor and were social and ethnic outsiders.
Perhaps even religiously, they may not have been as integrated into the Islamic institutions of Constantine, but rather more attuned to the populist spirituality of rural saints and brotherhoods. Biskris were also not necessarily permanent residents of the city.

The Khoudja family head, El Hadj Othman, was himself a former student of the Jesuit Père Creuzat during the latter’s time in Constantine, and his second wife was a former student of the Soeurs de la doctrine chrétienne at Bône. Though El Hadj was not a convert to Christianity—according to Ducat, because he had profited from the provisions of Islamic law in order to divorce his first wife—he “[felt] the benefits of an almost entirely French education.” Indeed, it is possible he owed his administrative position as spokesman of the Biskris to his knowledge of French. El Hadj’s positive experience with Catholic educators had disposed him to send his own son Moustafa to “the frères” rather than to one of the colonial administration’s recently instituted écoles arabes-françaises. This son had already “expressed several times the desire . . . to go to France and be baptized.” In a feat “almost miraculous for an Arab,” according to Ducat, Moustafa had won prizes for his “diligence” and “daily exercises” and was even using his vacation to come to the daily French lessons at the Jesuits’ house. But conflict with the family of Moustafa’s mother (El Hadj’s ex-wife) erupted when El Hadj accepted a scholarship for the boy to study at Bishop Pavy’s Petit séminaire in Algiers. El Hadj asserted his paternal right to educate his son however he wished, even after his wife appealed to the highest Muslim court of law in Constantine. He won this case, but at the expense—according to Ducat—of being considered by his fellow Muslims as someone who wanted to become “completely French (in other words Christian).” Moustafa would follow one of the few career paths open to French-educated Algerians, studying at the military school at St. Cyr in France before being commissioned an officer in the Tirailleurs indigènes.

There are a number of possible reasons why El Hadj, the Khoudja family, and others in this orbit might have opted for a Catholic education for their children. In the late 1850s, when Louis, Stanislas, and the other children first began attending the Jesuits’ catechism class, French education for indigenous Algerians was at its most embattled and embryonic. In 1850, as an experiment in winning hearts and minds, the military administration had opened several écoles arabes-françaises, where Algerians students could learn French, alongside traditional Arabic and Qur’anic studies from approved indigenous instructors. One of these schools was at Constantine, but it never attracted more than a handful of students. Perhaps this failure was due to the school’s symbolic association with the still-recent military violence or to the fact that in the 1850s and 1860s,
zaouias and other independent Qur’anic schools were still widespread and popular enough to create very real competition with the colonial state. At the same time, though, it was clear that a French education would soon be the only path to secure employment. In 1854, for example, the colonial administration began cracking down on its indigenous interpreters, in principle requiring them to pass a literacy test, rather than merely be able to speak French and Arabic. To cut down on competition with its own schools, the colonial administration in 1857 shuttered “half of the 24 religious schools” in Constantine. The same year, perhaps to save money, the administration also halted its policy of “[paying] students 2 francs a day to attend” its own Arab-French school. Perhaps these factors combined with El Hadj’s own friendship with the Jesuits and made the catechism class an attractive option for these children. In some Algerians’ minds, the Jesuits’ house might not have been as tainted with the violence of colonialism as the military administration’s school was. The catechism class seems to have met for only an hour a day, so these children also could have continued working and contributing to their households. They might even have continued attending a Muslim school while they used the Christian catechism to learn French.

The fact that the most promising catechists were boys is unsurprising, given that the Jesuits were a male congregation hoping to train indigenous missionaries and that alternatives for female Catholic education existed. But the focus on male rather than female children was also in keeping with the broader “tone” of educational initiatives in Algeria by the end of the 1850s. The colonial administration briefly experimented with including girls in its Arab-French schools, but in Algiers, “book learning” was soon deemed inappropriate for Muslim girls as future wives. Muslim women were thus denied the “assimilation” promised by the civilizing mission, confined to their religion and race in the name of tolerance for Muslim family life.

The Jesuits depended on El Hadj as their primary mediator with Constantine’s Arabs. Not only did he witness Louis’s and Stanislas’s baptisms, but he represented the families of a number of other catechumens baptized around the same time. These other children likely came from Biskri families as well, and one wonders how El Hadj exercised his authority over his corporation in these instances. How did he explain the significance of the baptismal ceremony to his compatriots? Were his motives insincere all along, only a strategy to acquire lodging and education for these children?

In the early 1860s, however, the Jesuits were optimistic that these conversions were sincere. Louis and Stanislas were only the most encouraging signs of a much larger movement among the children of Constantine: the Jesuits’ students were
inviting friends to join them at their daily lessons, memorizing Christian prayers and repeating them at home in the evenings, wearing religious medals and crucifixes, even playing at “baptizing each other.”\(^7\) According to a suggestive entry in the Jesuits’ diary, some European *dames* who came in their finery to worship in the Jesuits’ chapel “complained that our chapel is filled with Arabs” taking up all the space.\(^8\) The children even slept over one Christmas eve, to participate in the Vigil, midnight mass, and *reveillon* feast. During this period, El Hadj was visiting his Jesuit friends regularly, either to participate in the Jesuits’ religious services or to dine or drink coffee with them. He would bring a pastry or some other local delicacy or give tours of the city’s mosques and religious figures to a visiting Jesuit. He even invited the *pères* to his house for coffee on the Epiphany, “because that [was] the day,” he said, “when the King of the Arabs went to worship Our Lord Jesus Christ.”\(^9\)

One little boy—probably Louis Khoudja himself—was asked to serve as a kind of junior missionary to help the Jesuits convert an Arab man who was dying at the hospital and who had successfully resisted the efforts of French priests and nuns. Louis, with his “childlike candor,” debated religion as skillfully as any missionary, using the Qur’an’s own teachings on Jesus Christ to trap this poor man in his words and lead him to admit the superiority of Christianity over Islam and be baptized.\(^10\) Louis’s success must have been a tantalizing demonstration of the potential for an indigenous clergy to communicate in ways the Jesuits could not. Soon after, the Jesuits marked Louis and Stanislas for the priesthood by beginning their instruction in Latin.\(^11\) When, at the beginning of 1863, the boys’ family—perhaps in financial difficulties—left them entirely to the Jesuits’ care, Ducat took the boys to France, to a *maîtrise* (a Cathedral school) in the Jura, France’s alpine foothills.\(^12\)

Before entrusting his young charges to the school, Ducat took them on a tour of religious congregations and parishes in France, raising money to support the mission and the boys’ education. These visits by Ducat and the Khoudja brothers were such a success that they led to “enrollments en masse” in Ducat’s Association of Prayers for the Conversion of the Muslims, to the extent that “the peaceful Crusade now counted around 80 thousand soldiers.”\(^13\) What Ducat and others still found most striking about the young Arabs was their natural propensity for religion. “Their simplicity—pious and full of affection—their naïve and precocious intelligence, everywhere aroused a benevolent sympathy,” Ducat wrote.\(^14\) The missionary was pleased to hear from the brothers’ teachers the following year that, “even in an entirely religious establishment,” the boys continued to distinguish themselves by their “piety . . . and their spirit of faith,”
and by “that naïveté, that simplicity [which is] so rare now.”55 Here is a reminder that, back in France, Catholic admiration for Muslim religiosity was not just a reflection of missionary optimism; it also always functioned as a veiled critique of France’s own alleged decadence. As it had for Veuillot, the trope of the Muslim as a kind of religious noble savage could still serve as a stick for beating Catholicism’s godless enemies at home. In Ducat’s extensive notes and sketches, there is a drawing not of Louis or Stanislas, unfortunately, but of an Arab student he encountered some years later. The sketch is almost loving in its detail, and it is tempting to wonder whether Ducat still had his two dearest and most promising converts in mind (see figure 3.2).

In 1864, the brothers’ cousin—El Hadj’s daughter “Louise,” who had studied with the Soeurs de la doctrine chrétienne and been baptized in 1861—was sent

---

**FIGURE 3.2.** Arab student of the Petit séminaire (?). Henri Ducat, “Diaire: Mission Arabe Consantine, 1871–72,” RAl 81, ACJF.
to a girls’ school in Besançon, Ducat’s hometown. For Ducat, the real danger was
that contact with France would destroy these children’s native innocence and
credulity. Despite the dangers of subjecting the young converts to French civiliza-
tion, such a method would remain necessary, as long as there was so little social
support for indigenous converts in Algeria. Ducat’s repeated fears that the boys
would lose their “innocence” and piety while in France speak to his recognition,
however dim, that traveling to France for an education might serve to increase
the cultural alienation experienced by converts or destroy the very links with
their indigenous compatriots that were supposed to make them such effective
missionaries. In short, isolating the brothers from their indigenous milieu for
an education in France seems at odds with some of the more culturally adaptive
impulses of the missionaries, at odds with the Jesuits’ desire for Arab Christian
settlements untouched by European decadence. Similarly, Eugène Boré and the
Lazarists sought to relocate potential converts from the Ottoman Empire to
Malta or to Algeria; he saw France as too culturally or morally compromising or
alienating for indigenous seminarists.

Yet, in the absence of fellow Arab Christians—to say nothing of fully formed
Arab Christian parishes—to shelter and support indigenous converts in Alge-
ria, the cathedral school in Jura may have seemed the next-best thing from the
missionaries’ perspective. At the maîtrise, students lived essentially as if already
in a religious community, complete with cassock, daily liturgical chants, and
annual spiritual retreats. The school counted at least two other Arab Chris-
tians, young Maronites “who had escaped the massacres of Lebanon” in 1860,
one of whom would end up a vicar general for the Maronite archbishop of Bei-
rut. Dom Gréa, the director of the school, planned to found a congregation of
“Canons Regular”—priests who ministered publicly in parishes yet who lived
in cloistered community like monks—and he and his followers believed this
monastic model could also contribute to the formation of indigenous clergy in
missionary contexts, since the regular, communal life would protect native con-
verts from “the inconstancy of the infidel countries.”

Despite the promising beginnings of Louis’s and Stanislas’s education, in
1865 the fortunes of the “Arab mission” began to fade. Ducat was recalled
from Constantine to take up a new position at Algiers, and his main assistant
at Constantine passed away. Ducat had naively hoped that, once he was nearer
to the Cathedral of Notre Dame d’Afrique—theoretically the spiritual center
of his Association of Prayers and of Bishop Pavy’s pilgrimage—he would be able
to exercise his influence more effectively. On the contrary, at the center of co-
lonial Algeria’s ecclesiastical and governmental hierarchy, he felt pressure not to
proselytize. An even worse blow fell in the fall of 1866: in a symbolic setback for the Association of Prayers and a personal heartbreak for Ducat, Louis and Stanislas’s family demanded the boys’ return from France and their circumcision, which to the missionaries signified their abandonment of Christianity and embrace of Islam. “Charmed by maternal caresses . . . intimidated by the threats of their father, our two poor children, Louis and Stanislas, were circumcised at the age of 14 and 15,” Ducat wrote. “[T]he younger, Stanislas, protests against the violence which was done him, and still claims to be a Christian. But his brother [Louis] seems to have formally apostatized.” For Ducat, the family was guilty of long-term deceit after their father’s promises to leave them free to practice Christianity. Even more disheartening, El Hadj had himself served as witness to the circumcision ritual and had “held them down during the operation.” Ducat accused El Hadj of having conspired against the Jesuits with what he called “Arab dexterity.”

One possibility was that the boys’ family had always had a different understanding of their arrangement with the Jesuits and of the baptismal “contract” in which Ducat had put so much faith. El Hadj and the Khoudjas may have been more syncretistic in their understanding of the relationship between Muslim and Christian practices, seeing no inherent conflict between the rite of baptism, for example, and that of circumcision. Practices of Maghrebi Islam that later Muslim reformers would condemn as unorthodox or superstitious—veneration of saints or marabouts, praying for miracles at maraboutic shrines (perhaps even non-Muslim shrines), the use of amulets to heal and protect—may have predisposed some Algerian Muslims to believe they could adopt Christian veneration or practices. The popularity of medals of the Virgin Mary among Algerian Muslims, for example, was one oft-cited reason for missionary optimism. Perhaps a certain measure of this syncretism was also encouraged by the missionaries’ own strategy of adapting the Gospel in ways that emphasized its commonalities with Islam and of encouraging the Muslims to think of them as marabouts.

Even those Algerians who converted later on and who openly identified as Christian often “[played] with the rituals of either religion,” according to Karima Dirèche-Slimani, combining religious practices that might seem “logically incompatible.” The vast majority continued to practice circumcision; some even practiced Christianity their entire lives yet still refused to receive last rites, effectively dying as Muslims. In short, it is possible that even if the Khoudjas never intended to “convert” in the full sense the Jesuits would have wanted, they may not have been conscious of perpetrating any deception. Another possible explanation for the family’s decision to recall and circumcise the brothers could be
that French Algeria’s municipal governments may have begun eliminating official positions for “corporation” spokesmen like El Hadj, and perhaps he ceased to see the benefit of a French education for his nephews. Finally, it is also possible that Ducat’s accusations were correct: that the Khoudja family, driven by poverty and skillfully advised by El Hadj, had looked for some material advantage; that their actions had always been a ploy to acquire lodging and education. In any case, as Dirèche astutely observes, missionaries could not allow a situation of “double religious-belonging.” For them, such behavior would always have to be evaluated according to the narrow calculus of “sincerity” versus “bad faith” of the Muslims.

In the end, the Jesuits were able to convince the boys’ family to let them return to France, where they spent another two years. The Jesuits agreed once again to fund the brothers’ education and stay in France, but the family would have to pay for any return trip if they wanted the boys back. Under the circumstances, one père worried that the parents had once again only consented out of “interested motives,” because they were in “extreme poverty” and unable to support the brothers. Still, Ducat was heartened to hear reports from France that “these dear children are still the same. . . . If they may have weakened for a moment, they did not cease to be what Baptism and Communion had made them.”

But in 1869, they returned to Algeria, this time for good. Ducat was no longer stationed at Constantine, but one colleague there wrote to him that “Louis is dressing in the Arab style. . . . He does not even greet us, if we by chance run into him—he works . . . as a [Lawyer’s] clerk and interpreter. . . . Stanislas still has his European clothes, but in an almost destitute style. . . . He still half-greets us if he is alone; but not if he is with some friends.” One Jesuit in Constantine wrote that “both of them live a life worthy of a Muslim and worse.” Ducat’s bitter remarks in 1866 about El Hadj’s “Arab dexterity” in conspiring against the missionaries, as well as the snide implication of these later comments—that living a life “worthy of a Muslim” was somehow a reprehensible thing—seem a swift and bitter reversal of the missionaries’ earlier belief that Muslims, inasmuch as they had a natural respect for all religion, were to be commended.

It was in the wake of this second apostasy that Ducat wrote the letter to Louis imploring him not to abandon the missionaries, not to abandon Christ. Ducat would continue to write, receiving no response from the brothers until, in June of 1876, he “hazarded” another letter. Hoping to appeal to Louis’s self-interest and to “cause him to break [his] silence,” Ducat suggested that he might be able to find Louis a job. Louis responded immediately. He was still working as a clerk-interpreter at Constantine and claimed to be married; he urged Ducat “in the name of the Sacred Heart” to help him find a post in the government,
preferably in Algiers. A second response from Louis was even more insistent about the job and “even more Christian” in its language. After inquiring into Louis’s conduct—he was in fact not married but living with a French woman, and still wearing “Arab clothing”—Ducat and his superiors decided that they should try to help. Even if Louis’s motives were insincere, God might still use the circumstance to draw him back to the Jesuits. Ducat advised Louis to go back to wearing French clothing and to “regularize his [marital] position.” Ducat then arranged for the colonial administration to offer Louis a low-level, rural post as an interpreter. It was not much, Ducat admitted, but perhaps it would come with opportunities for advancement and even relocation to Algiers. Louis accepted, and then seems to have once again stopped responding to Ducat’s letters. It is interesting to observe, on the one hand, how adroitly Louis mimicked the particularly emotive devotional vocabulary of ultramontane Catholics (“in the name of the Sacred Heart”) and, on the other hand, how Ducat and other Jesuits were well aware of this potential for insincerity yet still tried to use their resources and influence to regulate Louis’s moral behavior. The Jesuits’ fixation on the brothers’ European clothing and relationships also illustrates the period’s ambivalence between cultural and racial thinking about difference. No matter how culturally adaptive the missionaries claimed to be—because religious affections are not “observable”—the missionaries seem to have insisted on a visible display of the young men’s conversion and civilization.

Although there are a number of explanations for the Khoudja family’s behavior—poverty, desire for education and advancement, the shifting politics of Constantine’s municipal administration, and even a sincere but syncretistic admiration for Christianity—Ducat and his colleagues immediately leaped to racialized, collective explanations. “Commitments and even promises, what are they for the Arabs? Nothing at all. Whoever believes them is quite a dupe!!!” one père moaned. In the years to come, Ducat would become even more inclined to see all Arabs through the lens of his personal disappointment with Louis and Stanislas. Throughout the 1870s, even as he still attempted to renew contact with the brothers, Ducat complained frequently, and with increasing dejection, about the “inconstancy” of the Arabs and other Algerians—former students or orphans—who returned to the missionaries only when they needed something and who could never stay in one place long enough to keep a job once it was offered. “These poor people,” Ducat commiserated with his colleagues, had an “inconceivable . . . inconstancy”; they were “limited in their intelligence beyond a certain point and a certain age”; and they were “almost without gratitude...only thanking when they hope for something more.”
Later on, when another convert seemed hesitant to announce his conversion to his family, Ducat suggested that "these Arabs... have a weak understanding for the things of religion." What a reversal this was: at the beginning of the Arab mission, the missionaries had imagined that Muslims’ respect for Christian priests, rites, and practices was an indication of their admirable capacity for belief in general and even of their imminent conversion. In a newly racialized discourse poisoned by personal disillusionment, that exact same syncretism proved that Arabs were not smart enough to understand that the two religions should be mutually exclusive.

Ducat did not keep these judgments private. He went on to publicize them and to elevate them to the level of ethnographic knowledge in a series of articles he coauthored for the metropolitan weekly *Les missions catholiques* in 1877. Ducat self-consciously inscribed this work in the discipline of colonial ethnography, claiming that at the beginning of the Algerian conquest, the French had known very little about the indigenous populations, but that his articles—concentrating especially on the Arabs—would contribute to the project of distinguishing the “diverse races” that inhabited Algeria. In this series of articles, Ducat described the “physical constitution of the Arab” as consisting of “black hair, beard, and eyes... oval face, and long neck,” an “ovoid” head, and an “aquiline” nose. According to Ducat, when it came to the humors the Arab temperament was especially heavy on the bile, though more “bilious-lymphatic... in the plains of the Tell” and more “bilious-nervous in the Sahara.” Finally, among other dehumanizing observations, Ducat noted that Arabs had especially keen senses of sight, smell, and hearing; were hopelessly dirty and smelly; and, although able to survive for months on a handful of dates alone, could also engage in gluttonous acts that would “frighten a European stomach.”

Following these pseudo-scientific claims about Arab physiognomy, Ducat shifted seamlessly to an evaluation of the Arab character, implying that Arabs’ moral values were just as static and universal as their physical characteristics. His readers back in France could not have known just how deeply contingent and personal the circumstances were that had produced these generalized judgments: “The Arabs are liars... They are inconstant in their affections and in their relations. An Arab will be seen to frequent a house, to overwhelm the people who live there with consideration and good wishes; then, suddenly, without [a] plausible reason... he will stop going there, and will pretend not to recognize his friends if he meets them... When [the Arab] studies, he reaches a certain level of knowledge more quickly than the European: but there his efforts will stop... More than forty years of French domination have changed
nothing of the beliefs of the Arabs. They are as rigid observers of their rites, as fatalistic and superstitious as the day we disembarked.” As Ducat bitterly described this abstract, universal Arab who supposedly always forsakes and ignores his friends, it is impossible not to think of Louis, Stanislas, and their Uncle El Hadj. In the bitterness of apostolic failure, no longer would Ducat and other missionaries speak the philo-Islamic language of admiration for Muslim morality and devotion. No longer would Ducat describe Muslim customs as being “preferable” to the decadence of European civilization. Ducat’s hopes for Arab conversion had been utterly dashed. Arabs, he thus reported to Catholic readers back in France, were inherently inconstant, spiritually nomadic, dishonest, unstable, fanatical.
Louis Khoudja and the Senatorial Reform Project of 1891–92

The brothers fade from the Jesuit sources in the mid-1870s, but in 1886 Louis reemerges, this time in the documents of the colonial state, through his naturalization as a French citizen and his marriage. Louis’s new wife was Léonie Allegro, the daughter of Louis-Arnold Allegro—a Tunis-born adventurer of Italian descent, who had fought in French indigenous regiments in Algeria before serving as the Tunisian consul at Bône, on the coast of eastern Algeria. The Allegros were part of the class of “crypto-European” intermediaries and influence brokers between Europeans and North Africans in the nineteenth-century Mediterranean world. Khoudja’s marriage into this family likely represented the highest social level to which he might have aspired. At the time of his marriage he was still working as an interpreter for a rural office of the service de la propriété indigène, part of that clerical underclass to which many educated Algerians were consigned. Yet, immediately after his marriage, Khoudja moved to Bône where he began working as a public defender for the indigenous poor in the Muslim court and studying for entrance to the French bar.

In 1892, Louis was still living in Bône when the prominent French politician Jules Ferry and two other French senators came to town to gather testimony in support of a series of colonial reforms that would lessen the abuses endured by the indigenous people of Algeria. Ferry had formed his senatorial “commission of eighteen” in 1891 to study the “indigenous question” and distributed a questionnaire to colonial administrators and Algerian notables. This reform commission was a signal that after two decades of metropolitan neglect and colonialist autonomy metropolitan France was once again taking interest in the management of Algeria and in the fate of its Muslim populations. At Bône, Khoudja gave the senators a deposition that placed him “at the forefront” of “the orators of the indigènes.” In this atmosphere of reform, Louis Khoudja also published his thoughts on the Algerian Question in the form of an address to the eighteen senators of the commission. Khoudja’s publication was an indication of a rising class of Algerian évolués caught between their desire to vindicate Islam, on the one hand, and their readiness to profit from French education and the benefits promised by France’s civilizing rhetoric, on the other. Khoudja, like the later Young Algerians and reformist ‘ulama of the early 1900s, appropriated the “vocabulary” of France’s Republican, civilizing mission in order to turn that rhetoric against colonial abuses. He believed that the resolution of the “question indigène” was to be found in French education and full legal and political assimilation. Like other French-educated Algerian reformers of his time, Khoudja was no anticolonial...
agitator; he accepted, as James McDougall has put it, that “the only possible future lay in emancipation through [not from] colonial modernity.” Yet despite this sincere or tactical belief in French Republicanism and schooling, Khoudja was still deeply sensitive to Algerian, Muslim difference.

While arguing eloquently and forcefully for the rights guaranteed by French republicanism—education, political participation, trial by jury—Khoudja still insisted on respect for Algerian difference, respect for tribal land ownership, and respect for Muslim belief. The Algerians’ problem was not their religion, Khoudja argued; in fact, the Qu’ran encouraged education and friendship with Christians. The problem was that France had not yet fulfilled its civilizing and emancipatory promises. Turning his knowledge of Islam and of French history against the colonist-critics of Algeria’s Muslims, Khoudja made a trenchant historical and social argument: “I have read and re-read the Koran, in its original text; I know what it contains, and I am justified in saying that to make the Koran responsible for the oddities of the indigène mind, would be equivalent to attributing the massacres of the crusades, the horrors of the inquisition, St. Bartholomew’s, and the Wars of Religion to the Gospel. Let us therefore cast such an absurd theory far away, and let us say that today it belongs to France, that enlightened society, to raise the indigène up to [France's] social level.” In short, Muslim traditionalists and anti-Islamic Frenchmen were both wrong: one could be “a good Frenchman and a good Muslim at the same time,” as long as social and political equality were assured.

Nowhere is Khoudja’s balancing act between Republican universalism and indigenous difference—between universal and particular, “assimilation” and “association”—more effective than in his nuanced argument for allowing “indigènes” to serve on juries. Citing several real-life examples of the habitual “injustice” and “severity” of all-European juries toward accused Arabs, Khoudja argued that indigenous Algerians should have “the same guarantee as the Europeans,” the right to be “judged, they too, by their peers.” Even though Khoudja was laying claim to one of the universal norms achieved by the French Revolution—jury trial by peers—and despite the universal, egalitarian character of his claim, the logic of his demand relied on and even enshrined indigenous difference. The reason European colonists could not stand in judgment of Arabs was precisely that they were not the Arabs’ peers: they did not share the same values; they had “opposing interests”; and they could not avoid, even “unconsciously,” treating the “indigènes” as “the vanquished.” Republican equality, in this case, necessitated the acknowledgment of cultural and racial difference, necessitated the intentional inclusion of Algerian jurors in cases involving Algerians. Like
the anticolonial movements studied by Priyamvada Gopal, Khoudja “at once asserted cultural specificities and made insistent claims upon shared humanity.”

One famous historian called this pamphlet the work of a “young-Algerian avant la lettre.” Yet Khoudja’s pamphlet and brief career as an Algerian spokesman are even more interesting for the light they shed on his early years with the Jesuits. Historians of colonial education have written about the sense of alienation and disorientation experienced by indigenous students, as they found themselves stuck between their need for family support and belonging, on the one hand, and their genuine interest in the seemingly superior knowledge of the colonizers, on the other. This gap between indigenous society and French civilization constituted the entire predicament of colonial education: how do you create an indigenous elite assimilated enough to French civilization to be trusted as representatives of the civilizing mission, yet not so assimilated as to have lost all influence over their compatriots? The usual result of this predicament was what one scholar has called “double alienation,” the experience of no longer feeling at home in either milieu.

It is often assumed that this experience of alienation would have been even greater for those who, like the Khoudja brothers, were educated by missionaries and encouraged not only to embrace French language and civilization, but even to abandon their religion. In one moving passage from his political pamphlet, Louis Khoudja sketches out this double alienation. Without letting on that he is likely speaking about his own family, he describes the disappointing experience of Muslim Algerian parents who “sent their children to the collèges, the lycées, and sometimes even the religious institutions of Algeria, others even... to France... unfortunately, these [parents] have come to regret the sacrifices which they forced themselves to make. Their completely assimilated children became the object of the most total neglect on the part of the Algerian Administration. ... they even served as a laughing stock for their compatriots [since... ] there was no need for them to go so far to study and work in order to acquire a position which was refused them.” These lines recall the pathetic image of Louis’s younger brother, Stanislas, back in the early 1870s, in his threadbare European clothes, lukewarmly greeting the Jesuits when he was alone, yet ignoring them when with friends. The passage also seems to confirm the Khoudjas’ hope that a Jesuit education would lead to positions in the colonial administration and to social advancement.

Notwithstanding the cultural disorientation endured by Louis Khoudja and his brother, the Jesuits may have played an important—albeit accidental—role in making him into the nuanced Muslim spokesperson he became. Not only
had the Jesuits helped him acquire the French language, but with their initial sympathy for Muslim religiosity and adaptation to Muslim customs, they had “unwittingly relativized the concept of religion itself.”

It is a paradox of the missionary encounter that it tends to undermine and reduce religion to a relative choice, perhaps even more so when “religion” is divorced from external cultural markers in the name of adaptation. From his Muslim upbringing to his years in a Jesuit catechism class, from his time in France to his career in the offices of the colonial administration, Khoudja had a great deal of practice creatively toggling between the language of French ultramontane Catholicism, Republican universalism, and his Muslim faith. “In the name of the Sacred Heart” he asked Ducat for help in acquiring a job; in the name of the French Revolution he asked France’s senators for universal, compulsory education and for trial by a jury of his peers; and in the name of the Qur’an he argued that Islam should not be seen as an impediment to becoming French.

But the tide was turning against sympathy for Islam and for Algeria’s indigenous peoples, even among the missionary congregations. At the end of the nineteenth century, Jesuit and other Catholic observers of Algerian Islam would begin employing an ever harsher rhetoric of inherent Muslim inferiority and enmity to Christianity. Indeed, in 1892, in response to the very same reform commission that had prompted Khoudja’s pamphlet, Jesuit editor and historian Joseph Burnichon wrote a pair of articles on the history of Catholic missions in Algeria, the Jesuits’ own answer to the “question indigène.” Burnichon emphasized all the ways colonial administrators had obstructed missions to Muslims in the past. But for him, this kind of missionary-administrator conflict was unfortunate not so much because it resulted in the loss of Muslim souls, but because it prevented the success of assimilation and colonialism. The “indigènes” could never hope to assimilate as long they were Muslims: “Mohammedanism . . . digs an abyss between the indigènes and ourselves that neither education, nor a common political and social life, nor clemency and benefits, nor time itself could fill. ‘The disciple of Mohammed, says J.[oseph] de Maistre, does not belong to us in any way: he is foreign, innassociable, immiscible to us.’ This is the lesson which results from the experience of ten centuries . . . Antipathy for the Christians has entered into the marrow of the Muslim; it survives the weakening and even the loss of his faith.”

For Burnichon, placing one’s hopes in education, as Khoudja did, was especially naïve: not only would education never succeed (since Muslims “will always draw their moral education from the Koran, and the Koran will always teach them that they must hate the Christian dogs and kill them whenever they
can”), but education would even serve to provide techniques and skills which these inveterate enemies of France would then turn and use against their benefactors. Burnichon paid lip service to the traditional, conversion-focused goal of mission work: that Algeria might be transformed into a new Christendom. But his virulently anti-Islamic rhetoric made him an enemy of reform and an ally of the anti-Arab settlers who hoped to maintain the racialized indigenous code and prevent any indigenous education that would go beyond agricultural-vocational skills. Signifying how far the Jesuits had departed from their earlier admiration for Muslim religiosity, Burnichon even commended Louis Tirman—the political leader of the settler-colonists—for being one of the few to “[recognize] that, against the Koran, assimilation runs into an insurmountable object.”

In the face of such growing animosity, perhaps it is no surprise that Khoudja never became the indigenous missionary the Jesuits had hoped for and never returned to his Muslim compatriots as an emissary of Catholic France. Yet if any Algerian learned to play the part of a cultural intermediary, it was he. In Bône, he garnered esteem both among Republican colonists and the more activist proto-Young Algerians around the journal *El hack* [La verité]. Indeed, the nature of his pamphlet, with its respectful references to France’s civilizing goodwill and acknowledgments of indigenous ignorance and fanaticism but also its valorization of Islam and careful cataloging of legal abuses of the “indigènes,” meant that sections of it were cited and commented upon favorably in both colonialist and Young Algerian journals. Still, even as skilled a navigator as Khoudja must have found this a difficult course to steer. Both to be nearer his wife’s family, but also in search of professional advancement, he would ultimately emigrate to Tunisia, whose “protectorate” model of colonization—a more indirect and collaborative rule over the Tunisians—had inspired the reforms Ferry had vainly hoped to see implemented in Algeria.