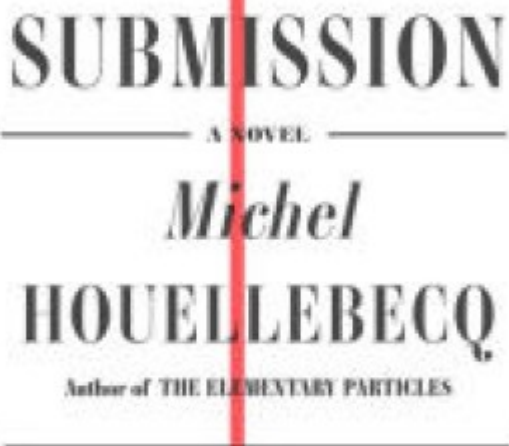


Saved by Islam?

by [S. Mark Heim](#) in the [October 28, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Submission

By Michel Houellebecq
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Last January 7, newstand issues of the Paris satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* carried a cover cartoon lampooning Michel Houellebecq and his novel *Soumission* (*Submission*), released for sale that day. The novel imagines France in 2022 under

the rule of an Islamic party. Houellebecq's scenario was pilloried as alarmist bigotry in some quarters, praised as prophetic in others.

That same morning, two men broke into the *Charlie Hebdo* offices and killed 12 people, intending to avenge the magazine's irreverent treatment of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. One of Houellebecq's good friends was among the murdered. His publisher's office was evacuated and he himself briefly went into hiding outside Paris. The next day, the French prime minister weighed in: "France is not Michel Houellebecq." It is not "intolerance, hate, and fear."

These events, in which the writer seemed to have become a character in his own novel, cemented the country's obsession with a book in which fictional figures rub shoulders with contemporary political personalities. Billed as a cautionary tale about Islam's threat to subjugate Europe, *Submission* is more an introspective tract on the West's ambivalence about survival.

The protagonist is François, a professor at the Sorbonne. He is an expert on the 19th-century writer J. K. Huysmans, noted for his cultural pessimism and satirical wit. The early chapters revolve around François's reflections on Huysmans and his conversations with his latest student girlfriend, Myriam.

Die Hard this is not. The changes disrupting French society loom offstage, casting their shadows on a foreground occupied with jaded observations on literature, academic politics, food, and sex. Suspecting that the high points of both his intellectual and erotic lives have already been attained in his doctoral thesis and the episodes (clinically described) with Myriam, François musters interest in his own life primarily as a source of ironic aphorisms.

From time to time, François tonelessly reports what he hears on the television about the weather: a cold front is working its way from Scotland across the channel and the next few days will be unseasonably dry. Political events show up as just so much more implacable weather. Clashes between Muslim and right-wing militants escalate in frequency and violence, but reports of them show up more on the Internet than on the news.

Though he has an uncomfortable encounter with some Muslim students outside his classroom, François does not fully credit the widespread rumors of teachers actually being assaulted. Nor does he buy the idea that the academic authorities have essentially purchased protection by a secret agreement with the Muslim student

association, though he notes that since the last term the union of Jewish students is no longer represented on any campus in the Paris region.

Mainstream media like *Le Monde* regularly condemn “Cassandras” that predict a coming civil war in Europe. François reflects that this is an odd term of abuse, given that the Greek Cassandra’s fate was to tell the truth and not to be believed. Early on, he likens the situation to the 1930s, marked by the blindness of intellectuals and journalists who were convinced that Hitler would “end by seeing reason.” This is as far as the book goes to draw that inflammatory parallel. It remains with the reader to decide if what follows in the rest of the book bears out this analogy or not.

Most recently, François says, the entire multicultural problem has been passed over in silence in polite company. “No one talks about it at all.” As he circulates at a literary cocktail party, an explosion and sirens are heard not far away. Police block off a street, complicating his walk home. This merits little more than a Gallic shrug. The weather is changing. Reading the signs more attentively, his girlfriend Myriam departs for Israel with her parents, leaving François to note, “There is no Israel for me.”

A political storm is brewing that even he cannot ignore. In French presidential elections only the top two vote getters advance to a run-off. In *Submission*, a Muslim party has arisen (in fact one was founded in 2012), and in the first round presidential election of 2022, the right-wing National Front—with an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim stance—comes in first with a third of the vote. The Muslim party edges out the socialists for second place. This leaves France’s two traditional major parties out in the cold, with voters having to pick one of the remaining two sides in the final election.

While the choice between the National Front and the Muslim party hangs unresolved, it seems as if everything may be falling apart. A strange silence falls over the media. François packs a bag and drives to the southwest of France, thinking that whatever disaster is coming will arrive later in the provinces. Along the way he stops at a deserted gas station, finding a murdered attendant lying among the snack foods, and two young North Africans dead in the parking lot. Houellebecq conveys this eerie scene in the flat voice of his narrator, who, after some hesitation, appropriates a tuna sandwich, a nonalcoholic beer, and a Michelin guide in which to search for nearby lodgings.

He retreats to a hotel in Martel, a small village named after Charles Martel, who turned back Muslim invaders at Tours in 732. In a café he bumps into the husband of an academic colleague in Paris. This man works for the French antiterrorism police. Over a meal, he shares an analysis born from the long years it has been his professional task to study the leader of the Muslim party, Mohammed Ben Abbas.

From this unlikely source, François hears an enthusiastic endorsement of Ben Abbas and his movement. Ben Abbas is a true moderate who has stood up to the jihadists in his own community and offers France a new beginning, a way to break through the impasse of its traditional right-left politics.

Ben Abbas offers support for the values of a Catholic France that can no longer maintain those values itself. As the nonfictional French Muslim party puts it on its website, “We are proud today to represent renewal and dynamism for a France that has lost all hope in the future and in its traditional politics.”

For Jews, François’s dinner companion allows, the situation may be somewhat more delicate. But Ben Abbas has cultivated good relations with the Jewish community: most likely the problem will resolve itself with Jews choosing simply to remove themselves from France.

This conversation is capped with the news reports that the socialist party and the much feebler center-right party have worked out a deal to throw their support to the Muslim candidate. Antipathy to the National Front trumps all other causes. For the socialists, as François’s informant says, antiracism has trumped secularism. This deal assures the triumph of the Muslim party. Shaken by its swerve to the edge of violent chaos, the country breathes a grateful sigh and welcomes this compromise.

The agreement between the socialists and the Muslims honors each group’s priorities. For the socialists, it is economics that is most important, and this department is left entirely in their hands. For the Muslim brotherhood, what matters is demography and education: “Who controls the children controls the future, period.” Immigration and differential birth rates assure the Muslims ascendancy on the demographic front.

As senior partner in the government, the Muslim party asks to control only the education portfolio. The state’s secular elementary and secondary schools will remain, but their financial support will be drastically cut—a fiscal boon to a government struggling to maintain the social services its citizens expect. Alongside

the shell of a state system, a network of privately funded Islamic schools will be established whose diplomas are equivalent in value, making it possible to receive a completely Islamic education from infancy on.

In short order, it will be clear that parents who care for their children's future will prefer the Islamic schools to the threadbare state ones. The Sorbonne will become an Islamic institution on the basis of an unprecedented Saudi endowment, just the way a declining American university might bend to the wishes of a particularly importunate and improbably wealthy donor.

François takes a short detour to visit the shrine of the black Madonna at Rocamadour. It is a site crucial in the life of his alter ego Huysmans. In despair about the modernist trends in society, Huysmans made a late-life conversion to Catholicism, an attempt to connect with a more primal vitality in European culture.

François sits before the Madonna over a number of days and feels an undeniable power radiating from the image, an invitation to commit. On the final day he remarks, "The Virgin possessed sovereignty, she possessed power, but little by little I felt I was losing contact, that she was distancing herself in space and centuries, while I settled in my pew, shriveled, restrained." He checks out and heads home.

When François returns to Paris, the tides of political events wash up in his corner of the Sorbonne literature department. The newly Islamicized university terminates his services. A pool of Gulf state cash underwrites his generous early retirement package. That same largesse provides rock-star status for those who convert to Islam and obtain prominent teaching posts. This option applies only to men, since education is now strictly sex-segregated ("as had long been done in Catholic schools"). These appointments often carry the additional perks of young Middle Eastern wives, provided for single instructors (or additional wives for the married). By the end of the book, François has himself converted, enticed less by the arranged marriages than an invitation to edit a lavish, definitive edition of Huysmans's works.

This is no "barbarians at the gates" tale. Islam comes to power entirely by means of democratic horse-trading. A Muslim minority rules a non-Muslim majority in the same way that any parliamentary party and its allies may do. If there is an insult to Islam in the book, it is that Islam is addressed less in its own right than as an excuse to air old Western intellectual feuds. The novel shows nothing of the mix of nationalities and ethnicities that exist within European Muslim communities, nor the

varied proportions of explicit appreciation for their host cultures and the even more varied degrees of assimilation.

François's beloved Huysmans, the Islamic radicals Ben Abbas has suppressed, the moderate Muslim party, and François himself all share a conviction: Western culture is played out. Its Jewish and Christian roots have little life left in them. The Enlightenment modernism that did so much to sap that strength increasingly fails to provide meaning to the lives it otherwise nourishes with wealth and technology.

François's Sorbonne rector is a man named Rediger. Both boss and religious instructor, he confides that he himself started out as an adherent of the far right, seeking to address cultural decadence by a retrieval of the past. He can date his own conversion exactly to the day that he found that the bar of the Hotel Metropole in Brussels was about to go out of business. Realizing that it would no longer be possible to "order sandwiches and beers, Viennese chocolates and cream cakes, in this absolute masterpiece of decorative art in the capital of Europe" was the moment that he recognized that Europe had committed suicide.

The self-destruction of Europe that began with two world wars ended with an inability to appreciate its own art or even the pleasures of good pastry. After sitting in the bar until it closed for the last time, Rediger presented himself the next morning at a mosque.

Houellebecq's deadpan comedic edge here defies the reader to find the line between parody and philosophy. Grandiose talk of cultural suicide is paralleled by the existential emptiness seen up close in François. He commands the rich vocabulary of generations of intellectual history and employs it only to utter eloquent variations on "Whatever . . ."

François's exploration of the Christian path at the Madonna's shrine finds that path wistfully appealing but blocked. As he reads Rediger's best-selling apology for Islam, which draws heavily on Nietzsche's indictment of Christianity, his attitude takes on a darker quality. He is not impressed by Jesus' argument about the woman taken in adultery. The problem was much simpler than Jesus made it, François muses. All that was needed was to find an ordinary seven-year-old, who would have been quite happy to throw the first stone, "the little f—r."

The rector tells François his conversion story while his youngest wife serves them exquisite pastries and coffee in the fashionable Paris home made possible by new

academic riches. When François remarks upon the beauty of the house, the rector reveals the fascination that led him to choose it. "It is a happiness each instant to live in the house where Dominique Aury wrote *The Story of O* . . ." He confides to François that he hesitates to share the idea with his coreligionists for fear they would find it blasphemous, but he sees a rapport between the absolute submission of a woman to a man and the submission of the human to God, as Islam envisions it.

Houellebecq views the relation of Islam and culture primarily through the lens of the status and roles of women. In a conversation with Myriam, François observes that patriarchy has a modest merit in that it actually exists. Its social systems, including Muslim ones, have families in them, with large numbers of children who grow up to reproduce the same. "In short, it works."

François looks out from his apartment at night upon the windows of several thousand other "households," which in (non-Muslim) Paris generally include a couple of people, more and more often simply one. His musings offer less comfort to patriarchy, he implies, than the actions of feminists who do not care to bear the children that might make their cause sustainable. Houellebecq's quite purposeful mischief is to frame François's gender impieties as part of his evolving open-mindedness toward Islam and its cultural differences.

Submission is one possible translation of the word *Islam* itself, the description of an ideal, shaping one's will to the purposes of God. Another connotation is more along the lines of defeat by a stronger adversary, a bitter surrender. There is also a *Fifty Shades of Grey* aura to the word as well, suggesting a transgressive erotic or spiritual thrill in both the exercise of power and abnegation before it. The rector's account of his path to Islam veers strongly toward this third choice, one that would probably play best in a postmodern faculty lounge.

The word is also the title of the film on women and Islam for which Theo van Gogh was stabbed to death on an Amsterdam street. The novel manages to maintain all the allusions tangled in this one word.

In all this, does Houellebecq express animus toward Islam? He was taken before a French court in 2002 for stating in an interview that monotheism was for cretins and that Islam was "the most idiotic religion of all." He was accused of inciting racial hatred with these comments, though not convicted.

More recently he said that a reading of the Qur'an had convinced him of its beauty and its superiority to the Bible. He volunteered that violent jihadism must be seen as a misappropriation of the text. He added that his atheism has weakened and he regards naturalism as a civilizational dead end. In these respects, he could be channeling the voice of the university rector in the book.

At the end of the day, as Adam Gopnik put it in the *New Yorker*, Houellebecq is not Islamophobic. He is Francophobic. It is unclear to him that there is anything left in French culture worth defending against an Islamic "threat," and perfectly clear that few enough would care to defend it if there were. Most of the characters in his novel either embrace Islam as a savior for Europe or accommodate its rise with sanguine self-interest. It is Houellebecq's keen eye for the soulless pliability of those who go with this flow that leaves the sour taste. There is no rant against Islam here. But to be accepted by such people, for such reasons, hardly registers as a ringing recommendation.

What Houellebecq has done in *Submission* is hold up a mirror to his readers. The charge is that he inflames animosity by depicting a Muslim-influenced France as something of which Europeans should be frightened. But he puts readers and critics in the position of having to specify what exactly is frightening about this France. Ought one to be outraged by a Muslim political party winning a democratic election in a European country? By a Muslim president who acts and talks in every way as the *bien pensants* say a moderate Muslim ought to? By full acceptance of Islamic education? By legal accommodation of polygamy? By the ratcheting exclusion of Jews from society? By the limitation of women's access to higher education? Where on this list does matter-of-fact description of a cultural transition become incitement to bigotry? If Houellebecq outrages by depicting an outrageous Islam, it is the reader who must calibrate where the outrage begins.

The regime coming into place around François is offensive precisely (and only) to the extent that one values as universal the particular principles of free inquiry, sex equality, or secular law that it sets aside. If Islam does not necessarily compromise any of these things, it is not necessarily being attacked. On the other hand, if we are only circumstantially attached to these values (as *Submission* so strongly suggests), then we have no reason to reproach Islam for changing them. We are the barbarians at our own gates, vandals of our own tradition.

If Houellebecq's intuitions are correct, the last thing he is predicting is violence. Islam will come to a hollow city as a welcome undertaker or inheritor, the last living

relative with the money, the workers, and the will to put the old homestead in trim. *Submission* reports this not as tragedy or incitement, but simply the prevailing historical weather. Whatever.