

MARIANNE IN PURDAH

Review by Susannah Black

SUBMISSION

by Michel Houellebecq — trans. by Loren Stein

Paris: Flammarion, 300 pp — New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 246 pp

The shocking thing about Michel Houellebecq's *Submission* is not that it isn't anti-Muslim. The shocking thing is that it's not—primarily—anti-Islam.

You might expect it to be, based on a quick glance at the premise: Paris, 2022: a Muslim Brotherhood party wins the election, and Sharia is established throughout France; the Sorbonne is briskly refashioned into a confessionally Muslim university; women retreat behind ...if not burqas, then at least extraordinarily shapeless clothes. It can, it seems, happen here. So is *Submission* essentially Tom Kratman's Islamo-dystopian pulp novel *Caliphate* for the Gauloise-smoking set?

That's the book it could have been: a fictionalized version of Mark Steyn's or Bruce Bower's anti-Islamic screeds: a passionate plea from a member of the secularist French intelligentsia on behalf of *laïcité* and the values of the Revolution, a Voltairean call to crush the Infamy, with the role of the Catholic church being admirably reprised by an Islamic state.

But that is not Houellebecq's book. There is no possible way to read it as being in favor of traditional French Republicanism, or its naughty little sister Decadence, and as having Islam as its *primary* target. It is an excoriating denunciation—but

a denunciation first of liberalish French society of the 21st century, a denunciation of the welfare state and the sexual revolution.

The protagonist, François, is a middle-aged academic who'd done his graduate work on the nineteenth century Decadent writer Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans—a *flâneur* who embraced Catholicism—is François' parallel. But François is no decadent: he is instead post-decadent. His sin is *acedia*: sloth, a failure to love what is loveable, to hate what is worth hating.

He is a miniature of French society, whose denizens are so pampered that they can't be bothered to have children and have no connection to their parents. He's the Last Man. And Islam offers itself to him as a rescue; and a very good rescue it seems to be: tempting precisely because its diagnosis is so accurate, and its solutions so nearly spot on.

But it's a rescue that can only appeal because François—and by implication France—has chosen against Catholicism. It's only by that choice that he is empty enough to make Islam a fairly easy yes. The culture of the *fin-de-siècle* isn't strong enough to stand against it; neither is the old bourgeois order which the Decadents had rejected; neither is the eighteenth century radical atheistic Republicanism which the nineteenth century had at-

tempted to assimilate into its Third Republic cozy life; neither is the modern EU-inflected *laïcité*, with its perpetual peace hovering just around the corner as soon as we can convince the religious crazies to get with the program. Islam, with its acknowledgement of the transcendent, and its social cohesion, is a far stronger thing than these others.

How this strength plays out—in the civic life of France and in the personal life of François—is what fascinates about the book. Islam comes across as a heady blend of cozy Chestertonian distributism, New Right perennialist philosophy, opportunity for career advancement, and sex with teenage girls to whom one is married: an irresistible *cas-soulet* of temptation.

The figure who embodies the link with the New Right is by far the most compelling and disturbing one in the novel: Robert Rediger, the French convert who is François' proselytizer, catechist, and seducer. He'd started out, before his own conversion to Islam, as a Front National type, a Catholic nativist—once he'd rejected the EU-vagueness of extended summer vacations and nothing to die for in which he'd been raised.

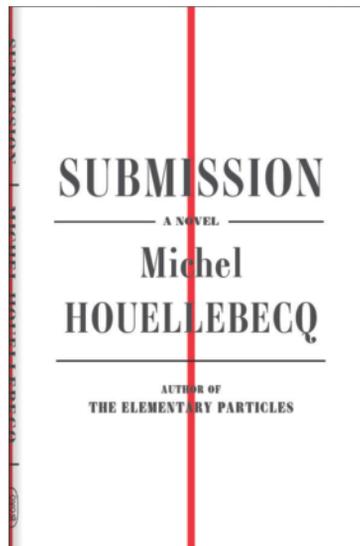
At one point François tracks down an article that Rediger has written

...as an appeal to his old comrades, the traditional nativists. It was a passionate plea. He called it tragic that their irrational hostility to Islam should blind them to the obvious: on every question that really mattered, the nativists and the Muslims were in perfect agreement. When it came to rejecting atheism and humanism, or the necessary submission of women, or the return of patriarchy, they were fighting exactly the same fight. (225)

This is Islam as alt-alt-right, Islam as archaeo-futurism on steroids. It's real Islamofascism, in the precise way that ISIS is not. And it rings extraordinarily true. Rediger is intellectually cheap and ultimately a panderer, but there's something very possible about him, ideologically: there must be those who have followed this path.

Absent Christianity, Islam as it is presented to François fills the gap: it is a metaphysical religion that is also appealing as a way of life on both the wholesome and the ...less wholesome levels of experience. There is almost nothing that could be so good as this. Islam works better than Christianity as a vehicle for Guénonian perennialism; it seems to work better as a weapon against the wretched fruitlessness of technocracy.

It's always tempting to recruit the author of a book one has enjoyed to one's own camp. I'm trying hard not to do this, with Houellebecq; he's no Christian; word is that he had originally intended the book to be about the protagonist's conversion to Catholicism, and couldn't manage that; this is not a Catholic apologetic; and I am not a Catholic.



And yet, it's difficult to read it without getting the impression that within the world Houellebecq has created, if there is a "solution" to the problem of modern Frenchness, modern Europeanness, that solution is Catholicism. But a Catholicism of a particular kind: not the aestheticized Catholicism of Huysmans, nor the identitarian, nationalist Catholicism of Huysmans's fellow-convert, the poet Charles Péguy, but a Catholicism that is metaphysically true. And a Catholicism which has at its center the Virgin.

Before his encounter with Rediger, François had visited the citadel-town of Rocamadour, the Marian shrine there. And what he sees is precisely this Catholicism:

What this severe statue expressed was not attachment to a homeland, to a country; not some celebration of the soldier's manly courage; not even a child's desire for his mother. It was something mysterious, priestly, and royal that surpassed Péguy's understanding, to say nothing of Huysmans's.

The world Houellebecq has written is a Catholic world, in which Jesus is the Lord of History, and Mary is the queen mother.

And it is this that François declines. He loses her Son, and he loses Mary.

And indeed the whole of the book resonates with the loss of women, their absence: before he goes to Rocamadour, François loses the other Jewish woman in his life: his lover Myriam goes with her family to Jerusalem; it's no longer safe for them in France. His bachelordom is deeply lonely; Rediger's Islam promises to correct this, but its erasure of women from the public sphere is grotesque. The book parties he goes to after the Brotherhood win are just like those before, but the Parisiennes—clever or elegant, lovers or collaborators, conversation partners and conversation instigators—are gone from them. (And in my judgement it is in describing these salons with no *salonnières* that Houellebecq is at his most savagely satirical against Islam.)

And behind this all must be the attempted erasure of the Church: of the woman who "looks down like the dawn, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, terrible as an army with banners." It is a world without this woman in which François has, for the most part, lived; it is another kind of world without her that he is, in Islam, being offered.

Still, as long as one is willing to do without the public companionship of—rather than the simple sexual and culinary services of—women, and as long as one doesn't mind the absence of Jews, or grace, it's a pretty good deal. Infinitely better than atheist humanism, with plenty of spiritual interest, up to date with the most advanced cosmology,

and no complicated and objectionable incarnation; plenty of babies; also good hors d'oeuvres. A fine bargain, in fact.

Unless, of course, what Huysmans's monks chanted was true. Unless the Word, in flagrant defiance of both materialist possibility and perennialist propriety, was made flesh. **P**

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INTELLIGENCE IN AN OPEN SOCIETY

Review by David R. Shedd

JUST WAR AND THE ETHICS OF ESPIONAGE

by DARRELL COLE — Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015, 155 pages

Espionage dates back at least to the start of recorded history of the human race. As the title of Darrell Cole's book suggests, boundaries on what constitutes acceptable and non-acceptable behavior in the use of espionage techniques is something that merits the kind of in-depth, serious, and Christian analysis that Mr. Cole provides. In his exceptionally well-written and argued case, the author links a nation's proper use of espionage as state craft to the long established just war theory framework which traces its origins back to St. Augustine (354-430 AD).

In essence, just war theory recognizes and makes the case on moral grounds that peace, order, and justice will at times only be preserved by engaging in armed conflict. Mr. Cole makes a strong and convincing case that espionage is a justified practice by a nation using the same just war theory applicable to the use of a country's military.

Whether you are a current or former intelligence professional or, for that matter, an ordinary citizen concerned with how the state uses intelligence as an element of national defense,

this book will be difficult to put down once you open it. *Just War and the Ethics of Espionage* takes you deep into the labyrinth of ethical challenges in what the author argues is a necessary activity that prevents escalatory conflicts and protects the citizenry of a nation. Mr. Cole would be the first to warn, however, that as statecraft is in the hands of fallible human beings, the bar is justifiably high in establishing the rules of engagement for the personnel that undertake espionage in defense of the nation.

Mr. Cole's book should be mandatory reading for all those in pursuit of a career in intelligence work. He not only makes a strong justification for spying as a contributor to maintaining justice and peace but also warns that in the absence of checks and balances in a free society, espionage leads to abuses. His book is replete with historical examples of espionage ranging from the intricate, brave, and honorable work done by American intelligence professionals in the lead up to and the conduct of the operation against Osama bin Laden to the application of covert action recorded throughout annals of U.S. history. But this