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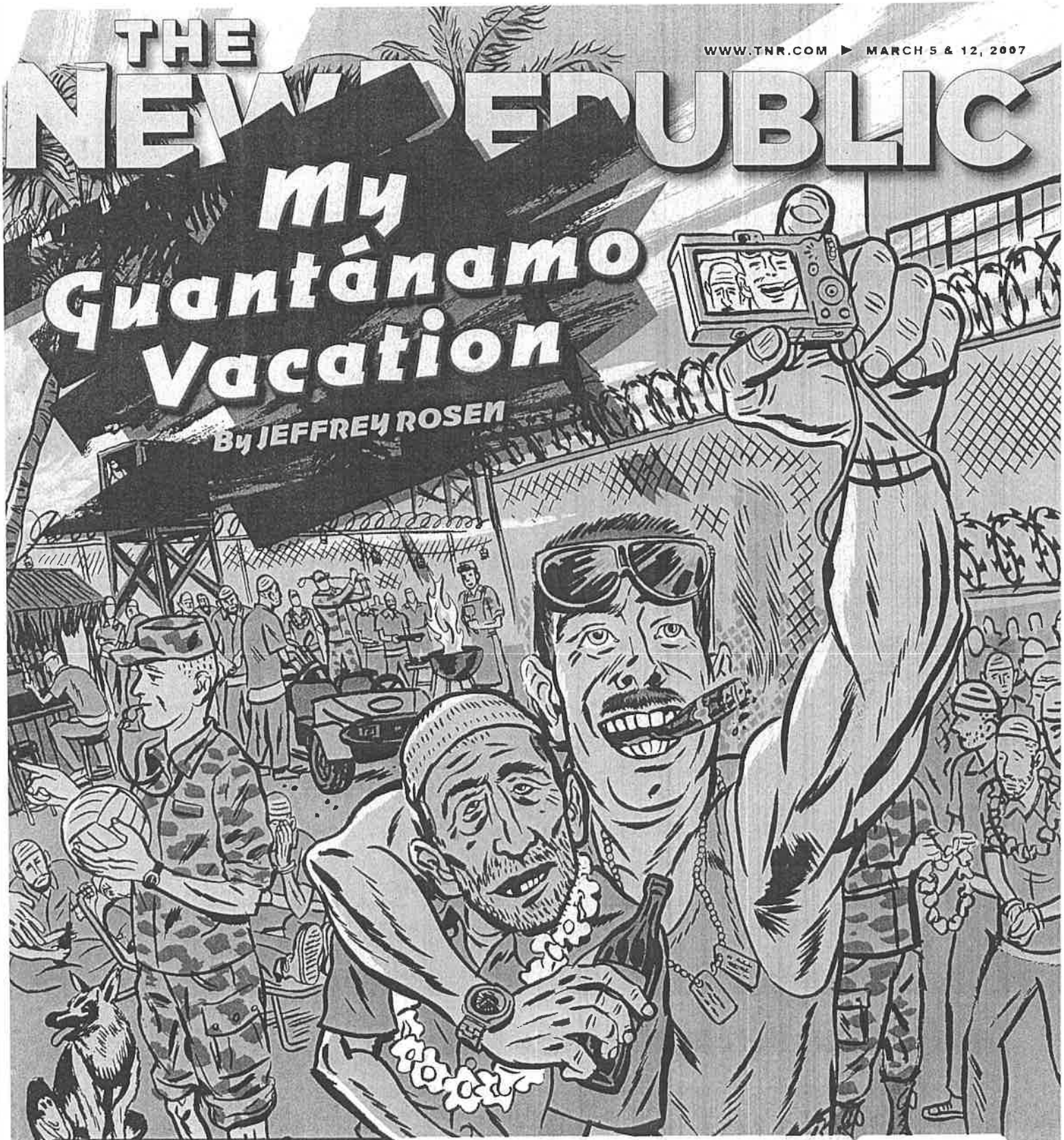
My Guantánamo Vacation

By JEFFREY ROSEN



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dean position, and that is its anarchism of method: not *Against the Day* so much as *Against Method*. But 1,100 pages of antic surface is an awfully expensive way to pay for these pretty obvious splashings in skepticism.

IN AN OTHERWISE INTELLIGENT review of *Against the Day* in the *Los Angeles Times*, Christopher Sorrentino argues that those who dislike this novel are people whose ideal novel is "lean, well-plotted, linear and related from a single point of view." There may well be such mythical beasts around, grunting for their daily grub of realism. But what if you wanted a novel that had little plot but much internal story, that was morally and aesthetically complex, stylistically difficult and demanding, determined to put language to some kind of challenge, formally lovely and alluring, humanly serious but also humanly comic (I mean a book that comically investigated deep human motive)? A novel that was narrated in the internal voices of several different characters, but characters who really have their own voices, not just vaudeville ventriloquism? Well, then, you might read the great novels that are set in the same era as *Against the Day*: these include *The Man Without Qualities*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, *The Radetzky March*, *The Secret Agent*, *Confessions of Zeno* (which ends with a prophesy of something very like atomic destruction), *The Magic Mountain* (which ends with the Great War), *The Good Soldier Svejk*. Many of these are quite funny—but not farcical—novels, above all profoundly involved with the exploding of truths, then finally devoted to the search for truth.

Naturally, a search for truth implies a wariness about the definition of truth. But it is hard not to feel that Pynchon is postmodernistically consumed by the latter, while he merely snacks at the former. Another reviewer, this time in London, gives a generally positive—again, joyless!—review of the book before complaining that, after all, the whole thing is too much: "*Against the Day* resembles *Moby-Dick* in its vast scale, its displays of learning, its engaging larkiness. But it's a *Moby-Dick* with no Ahab, and no whale." But wouldn't *Moby-Dick* without Ahab and the whale be a *Moby-Dick* without anything at stake? Wouldn't that be a book for children? ■

David A. Bell

Veil of Tears

WHY THE FRENCH DON'T LIKE HEADSCARVES: ISLAM, THE STATE, AND PUBLIC SPACE
By John R. Bowen
(Princeton University Press, 290 pp., $27.95)

WHAT DO WE CALL the following French person? She is born in France, and a citizen, but many of her compatriots treat her as an alien, threatening presence. She is easily recognizable, above all by her distinctive head covering, which proclaims her religious allegiance. No one questions her right to wear this garment at home or in her neighborhood's streets, but many of the French have a different opinion when it comes to official "public spaces"—above all, public schools. For many fervent defenders of the secular Republic, letting her into the schools would pose a threat to the Republic's very existence.

So what do we call this person? Until quite recently, we would have called her a nun. After all, hostility between the Catholic Church and the secular Republic marks broad swaths of French history. But of course it is not nuns who have been targeted by the recent law banning "ostentatious signs of religion" from French public schools, which John R. Bowen has put at the center of his lucid and thought-provoking book. The controversial French women at issue are headscarf-wearing Muslim schoolgirls.

The controversy around them continues to simmer in France, while also spilling across European borders. The Netherlands is considering an even broader ban, while Jack Straw, the leader of Britain's House of Commons, recently attacked the wearing of veils as a "visible statement of separation and of difference," and requested that women remove them when visiting him. This is one of the strangest, and most philosophically rattling, controversies in recent European memory, and in order to comprehend it we have to start with France, and consider the things that the odd shift from nuns to schoolgirls tells us about the relationship between religion and society there. I have in mind three things in particular.

THE FIRST IS THE UTTER CENTRALITY of conflicts with organized religion to the identity of the French Republic, dating back to the French Revolution. During the critical years of the Third Republic (1871–1940), Republican officials fought their greatest battles to establish an entirely secular public sphere, while Catholic opponents disputed the regime's very legitimacy. The Republicans won, banning Catholicism from the public schools and ending the church's official relationship to the French state. Today the legacy of this struggle literally soars above the Paris skyline. On the heights of Montmartre looms the great white bulk of the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur, which the church built to expiate the sins of the anti-clerical Paris Commune of 1870, while across the Seine stands the structure that the Republic built in part as a response, the Eiffel Tower. Today, of course, the advocates of assertive public secularism, or *laïcité*, do not trouble themselves much with Rome. They have found plenty to worry about in the direction of Mecca.

Second, there is the fact that in the French Republican imagination, when it comes to religion, women hold a critical and distinct place. As early as 1845, the great Republican historian Jules Michelet famously wrote that "our wives, our daughters, are raised and ruled *by our enemies*"—that is, by priests. He and many Republicans fretted that women—those superstitious and ignorant creatures—would be lured into fanaticism by the black arts of the priesthood, and then draw their menfolk in after them. Today, advocates of *laïcité* again focus on females, ostensibly because they consider Islamic women and girls particularly vulnerable to forced religious conformity (not an unfounded view). At the same time, though, just as nuns featured with remarkable frequency in early French

pornography, so the current controversy also has an undeniable sexual undertone. A garment designed to desexualize the wearer instead turns her into a forbidden, exotic object of desire. (The role of veils in Western fantasies about "the Orient" scarcely needs mentioning.)

And third, we need to remember just how sudden and jarring the shift from nuns to Muslim schoolgirls has been. As recently as the 1950s, despite the victories of the Republic, France remained in many ways a conventionally observant Catholic country. Then the 1960s and 1970s brought a vertiginous decline in observance. Today, according to an amazing recent survey, only 51 percent of the French population identify themselves as Catholic, and only half of those Catholics believe in God. The implications for French society have been significant. Consider that the current Socialist candidate for president, Ségolène Royal, has had four children out of wedlock, and this fact seems to matter not at all to the non-observant electorate.

THOSE SAME DECADES, THE 1960s and 1970s, also saw massive Muslim immigration into France, principally from former French colonies in North Africa. Yet for a long time French observers paid little attention to the religious consequences of this new wave of immigration. (Earlier immigrants were predominantly Catholic.) They considered the newcomers "guest workers," and assumed that they would eventually return to their countries of origin, even as the supposed "guests" were bringing over families and raising French-born children. Decolonization, and particularly the brutal shock of Algerian independence, had left the widespread impression that France's engagement with Islam belonged to its lost imperial past; it took time to register that France might also have an Islamic future. Only toward the end of the 1980s, Bowen notes, did the presence of the large, growing Islamic population on French soil become a matter of widespread concern—and quickly enough, of panic.

How many Muslims live in France today? We cannot say with precision, because the French state, true to its secularist principles, refuses to gather such statistics. Bowen, drawing on the best recent estimates, suggests four to five million, or around 7 to 8 percent of the population. But owing to differential birth rates, the percentage of those under age twenty is much higher: as much as 20 to 25 percent. The predictions of a France that is one-quarter Muslim by 2050 are not unreasonable.

By the late 1980s, this demographic shift was becoming impossible to overlook, and at the same time the radical potential of Islamism was exploding into French public view. This period brought the infamous *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, when, to the horror of liberal Europeans, many of their Muslim fellow citizens hailed Ayatollah Khomeini and publicly burned copies of *The Satanic Verses* rather than defending its author's freedom of speech. Meanwhile, in Algeria—which before 1962 had formed an integral part of France—a radical Islamist movement took shape and tried to overthrow the secular government, horrifying French observers. Not coincidentally, it was in 1989 that the first headscarf controversy erupted, with three Muslim girls threatened with expulsion from their school in the Paris suburbs if they did not uncover their heads. Over the next fourteen years, it bubbled up at regular intervals, until finally President Chirac appointed the so-called "Stasi Commission" (after its chairman, Bernard Stasi) to study the issue. After it and another committee recommended the headscarf ban, parliament passed it in March 2004.

THE ONGOING CONTROVERSY has had more than a touch of the absurd to it. As left-wing critics of the ban have pointed out, it is curious indeed to expel girls from public schools in the name of "integrating" them more fully into French society. The wording of the ban also left comically unclear just what constitutes an "ostentatious" sign of religion. Does a small cross or star of David on a necklace count? What about a small crucifix? After the law passed, some Muslim girls substituted colorful bandannas for the traditional black scarves, while journalists asked mischievously if schools would ban elegant silk *carrés* from Hermès. School officials found to their consternation that the most blatant infringement of the law came not from Muslim girls but from turban-wearing Sikh boys, although no one had ever previously detected a threat to *laïcité* from France's small Sikh minority. In a ham-handed attempt to cover up this particular embarrassment, Education Ministry officials allegedly offered to pay full tuition for the Sikhs at Catholic private schools! In the oddest twist of all, two of the Muslim girls who became famous for defying the ban—after their expulsion they wrote a book about it and appeared frequently on television—had a Jewish father and were named Lévy.

This last absurdity reveals something important. Casual observers have usually assumed that the controversy pits "modern" secular Republicans against "traditional" pious Muslims wrenched out of their North African villages into metropolitan France. Yet as Bowen demonstrates, the girls who took part most actively in the controversy do not fit this mold. Most were French-born, and many came from relatively non-observant Muslim families. Far from succumbing to family pressure to cover their heads, they made their own independent decisions to do so, often as part of individual quests to find a more meaningful form of religion than they knew at home. Bowen cites the case of a girl in Grenoble named Schérazade, who read the Koran in her final year of high school—in French, since she did not speak Arabic—and only then decided to risk expulsion by donning the headscarf. Once expelled, she staged a twenty-two-day hunger strike in an RV parked in front of the school, and gave numerous interviews to the French and foreign press. Those are not exactly the actions of a "traditional" Muslim schoolgirl.

In other words, many of these girls are classic figures of what used to be called alienation. They are torn between cramped and unsatisfying lives at home and a larger French world that speaks loudly of "integration" but in practice also doles out large measures of racism, condescension, and neglect. For the time when French public schools and local authorities made serious efforts to assimilate immigrant populations is long past. The schoolteachers who once saw them-

selves as the Republic's missionaries to supposedly benighted populations now usually treat their stints in majority-Muslim schools as sentences in purgatory to be served and forgotten. The police view large swaths of the poor Muslim suburbs as no-go areas. Opportunities for young Muslims remain restricted, and the Muslim presence in France's elite educational institutions and governing cadres languishes far below the Muslim proportion of the population. And yet defenders of the "Republican model" decry any moves toward affirmative action as a betrayal of egalitarian Republican ideals.

THERE IS AN EXTRAORDINARY irony in all of this. What these girls sometimes call a search for "true Islam" is in some obvious ways a deeply Western phenomenon, owing as much to Romantic notions of authenticity as to North African Muslim tradition. In this sense, the girls have already "integrated" to a greater extent than either they or their critics realize. While the Republic waves the banner of anti-clericalism in the manner of Voltaire, they respond by praising Mohammed in the accents of Rousseau. And this fact suggests that they are not rejecting secular French society entirely so much as trying to negotiate some sort of *modus vivendi* with it.

Unfortunately, French Republicans and much of the French media miss this point, and all too often seem to regard headscarves as just a step removed from suicide bombs. As early as October 1989, at the start of the controversy, the aggressively *laïc* weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* published a cover story showing a woman wearing a black chador under the headline "Fanaticism: The Religious Menace." Many more sensational headlines about "*la France islamique*" have followed, especially after September 11 and the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London. The threat of violent Islamism certainly exists in France, but it is hard to see how the headscarf ban will do anything to reduce the danger.

In fact, even the proponents of the ban have generally recognized the absurdities of targeting teenage girls, and few of them thought that the 2004 law would have anything but a symbolic effect. Bowen suggests that they often believed their own inflated rhetoric, and hoped that the law would eliminate significant causes of Muslim disaffection, but this is doubtful. The members of the Stasi Commission, to judge from later interviews, at best saw the law as sending two messages to the Muslim French community: first, to respect the norms of *laïcité*, and second, to desist from pressuring young women into religious conformism. Criticized for singling out girls, they fell back on the justification that the law would protect those Muslim girls who themselves wanted to go bareheaded. They also argued that once the controversy had arisen, they had no choice but to follow it through to its logical conclusion.

BUT WHY DOES THIS CONCLUsion have to be a rigid piece of national legislation? Bowen remarks in passing that the French place inordinate faith in legislation as a remedy for social ills, and this is certainly true. Indeed, such faith is central to French Republicanism, which differs from the American variety not only in its emphasis on civil equality and secularism, but also (in keeping with its French Revolutionary origins) in the importance it attaches to the expression of the popular will in law. The many constitutions of France's five republics have tended to evince a distrust for American-style checks and balances as impediments to the popular will, while elevating the legislative branch above the others. Even in the quasi-monarchical Fifth Republic, the powers of the executive branch shrink dramatically if the president's party loses its parliamentary majority.

A more important reason, which Bowen also discusses, involves the complex and even deceptive nature of *laïcité* itself. Advocates of the concept tend to define it in terms of the separation of church and state, but in practice it has as much to do with control as with strict severance. The state may insist on keeping religion out of the public sector, but it also supports religion to an extent that Americans would find unimaginable, under the justification that religious belief in general contributes to the health of civil society. The state or municipal governments subsidize and maintain most churches and cathedrals. The state pays the salaries of teachers in religious schools, so long as they teach the national curriculum. It encourages the formation of voluntary organizations such as the Jewish Consistory and the Protestant Federation of France, which act as quasi-official representatives for particular religions. It also tolerates a glaring exception to the principles of *laïcité* in the eastern province of Alsace, which enjoys an exemption from the secularist legislation of the early twentieth century (it belonged to the German empire at the time). There, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism all enjoy official status, with priests, ministers, and rabbis receiving salaries out of the public purse.

French authorities have long tried to pursue the same pattern of accommodation and control with Islam. They have helped to build mosques, and set aside sections of public cemeteries for Muslim burial. Dominique de Villepin, now the prime minister, even proposed in 2005 that the state pay for imams to receive instruction in secular history, law, and the French language. During the same years that the headscarf controversy was bubbling away, leading French politicians—especially Nicolas Sarkozy, the neo-Gaullist candidate in this year's presidential election—strove to establish

Inchworm

Inchworm finding a path
To heaven, climbing a cable
That from a leaf dangles,

Only you, fizz of a green star,
Wander from where to where
Without fear. Because the line

Was too low we could not
See it, because it was too fine
We did not feel it, so we fell,

Without knowing why. The tree
Of knowledge & the tree of life
Are intertwined, struggling

Together to ascend: they will
Strangle each other or bend,
And their ascent may end

In their undoing. Inchworm
Hugging a slender trail,
Scaling a sliver of time

From which we dangle,
Are you the true measure
Stretching across the divide?

PHILLIS LEVIN

a Muslim representative body that could help to shape a moderate "French" Islam. These efforts finally resulted in the creation, in 2003, of the French Council for the Muslim Religion, which has yet to acquire full legitimacy in the eyes of most French Muslims. It often seems that what matters most to these officials is not an Islam separate from the Republic, but an Islam subordinate to it.

This context suggests an alternate explanation for what drove the headscarf controversy forward. The crucial factor may not be that Muslim schoolgirls were "bringing religion" into the schools, but that they were actively defying school officials. The secular state can accommodate certain "public" forms of religion, but it will not tolerate blatant religious opposition to state authority, however minor the gesture, however young the opponent. How else to understand Chirac's extraordinary statement, on December 5, 2003, that the headscarf is "a kind of aggression difficult for [the French] to accept," or the demand by a neo-Gaullist deputy that a veiled woman be expelled from the visitor's gallery in the National Assembly? (Chirac's comment also implies, insultingly, that headscarf-wearers are not really French). In his interviews, Bowen found that French people frequently used the word "aggression" to describe the wearing of headscarves. They perceive it as defiance.

THIS ALTERNATE EXPLANATION is not one that Bowen himself provides. An anthropologist who has previously written mostly about Indonesia, he tends to take French statements about headscarves at face value, as in his assumption that the proponents of the ban really thought of it as a cure-all. He relies heavily on interviews for his evidence, and the approach serves him very well when elucidating the attitudes of Muslims and of local officials. But it is much less effective in dealing with French academics and high-level politicians, who usually have sophisticated rhetorical skills of the sort that their American counterparts can only dream of, and who consciously formulate even apparently off-the-cuff comments with enormous care, in order to produce particular effects. These men and women can speak with great eloquence and enormous conviction about the abstract principle and historical antecedents of *laïcité*. But they are also deliberately casting as a question of principle something that is, in critical ways, a question of power.

Since he misses this element of the story, Bowen concludes his otherwise instructive and useful book on an exasperatingly irenic note, by suggesting that the French Republic could resolve the current controversy and ease the integration of Muslims if it adopted a looser, more inclusive form of Republicanism. Perhaps, he implies, the French should "broaden their notions of what is acceptably French." The Republic, he preaches, "is based not on a shared faith, but on a faith in the possibilities of sharing a life together, despite vast differences in appearance, history, and religious ideas." Well, yes, in one sense; but the Republic is not just a gentle ideal. It is also a power structure in which certain elite groups wield a tremendous degree of cultural, political, and economic authority. And this authority derives in part precisely from defining what is "acceptably French," and from prescribing cultural and political norms for the rest of the population.

Meanwhile, on the other side, Bowen does not pay sufficient attention to the fact that French Muslim hostility to the Republic often goes far beyond defending the right to wear headscarves. The same sort of alienation that drove some Muslim girls to search for a "true Islam" is also driving more dangerous and destructive forms of behavior, as became clear in the massive riots in the fall of 2005, and the continuing high levels of nihilistic violence in the miserable suburbs that surround major French cities. It is a particularly virulent form of alienation that elsewhere in Europe—notably the Hamburg of Mohammed Atta and the Leeds of the British bombers—has bred terrorism. In these circumstances, it is doubtful that a well-meaning embrace of multiculturalism by the Republican elites would do much to help. Extraordinarily generous multicultural policies were long pursued in the Netherlands, but the degree of mutual hostility and incomprehension there is today, if anything, even greater than in France, as demonstrated by the murder of Theo van Gogh and its aftermath.

So while it is easy enough, especially from an American perspective, to ridicule the proponents of the headscarf ban, it is much harder to say what they should be doing differently. Yes, it is absurd to expel girls from school over this marginal issue, and yes, the controversy has probably harmed the cause of Muslim integration far more than it has helped. Headscarf-wearing Muslim girls are not signs of a "Muslim plot," as some of the more hysterical French headlines have alleged. But they certainly are signs of a great social transformation whose outcome is unclear but whose dangerous potential is all too visible. And frighteningly, despite the desire of many reasonable people in France to find a peaceful and reasonable accommodation, no one seems to know how to stop the worst case from developing. No wonder so many people in France are nostalgic for the days when Republicans saw nuns as their enemies. ■

CORRESPONDENCE

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integrated Belgian-Muslim community, and he expresses utter disbelief that Muslim immigrants can be equal members of Belgian society. He would like to suspend all immigration to Flanders. But, even if that xenophobic positioning would not give Jews pause, perhaps his bedfellows might. Vlaams Belang and Filip Dewinter long have been eager champions of unabashedly anti-Semitic right-wing parties across Europe, from Poland to Romania to Bulgaria to Austria to France. In 2002, Dewinter even advanced the idea of Jörg Haider, an unapologetic Nazi sympathizer, running a pan-European far-right movement. This year, Vlaams Belang is forming a coalition in the European parliament with two anti-Semitic groups: the Greater Romanian Party and Bulgaria's Ataka. Does this mean they are anti-Semitic? Not necessarily. It means their philo-Semitism should be seen for what it is: politically expedient. As Cas Mudde, a University of Antwerp political scientist told me, "Dewinter is willing to work with very anti-Semitic politicians. ... What that most notably shows is that his [outreach to Jews] is secondary; it is all strategy for him. He is not truly philo-Semitic. He cares about the Flemish." Vlaams Belang is, first and foremost, a Flemish nationalist organization, and, "if an alliance with Jews is good for the Flemish, he will do it. And, if it is good for the Flemish to work with anti-Semites, then he will do that." ■