

Review of *Submission* by Michel Houellebecq

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Submission: A Novel. By Michel Houellebecq. Translated by Lorin Stein. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. 256 pages.

On January 7, 2015, two Muslim extremists broke into the Parisian offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and opened fire with automatic weapons. Twelve people were killed and eleven wounded, and the words *Je suis Charlie* soon became a catchphrase among the supporters of free expression in France. On the day of this attack, the cover of *Charlie Hebdo* featured a caricature of the French writer Michel Houellebecq (pronounced *well-bek*) as a prophet of doom wearing a wizard's conical cap. Houellebecq's prophetic imagination was also on display that day in the form of his sixth novel, *Soumission*, a dystopian fiction that envisions a Muslim France in the near future. The English translation of the book appeared in October 2015.

Houellebecq is, needless to say, a controversial writer. His 1998 novel, *Atomised*, won the Dublin Literary Award but was seen by many as a disturbing nihilistic read. His 2001 novel, *Platform*, was not as critically well received but earned him a wider reputation. It is a romance filled with sex scenes and, in the name of free-market economics, seems to approve of prostitution and sex tourism. The book is also explicitly critical of Islam. This criticism, followed by anti-Islamic comments he made in an interview for the magazine *Lire* in which he characterized Islam as a "stupid religion," led to his prosecution in 2002 for inspiring racial hatred. He was acquitted by a three-judge panel that found the expression of his opinions to be within the bounds of legitimate free speech.

In *Submission* Houellebecq imagines the France of 2022 when in a multiparty election the three political party finalists are the Front National (extreme right nativists), the Socialists, and the French Muslim Brotherhood. In the run-off election the Front National and the Brotherhood are essentially tied, and the Socialists decide to form a collation with the Brotherhood, preferring Muslims to their traditional nemeses. Hence France gains a Muslim president and prime minister, and overnight France becomes a Muslim country. Although there are initial protests, rioting, and talk of a drift toward civil war, France quickly and fairly smoothly accepts Islam.

Except for the fate of women, the form of Islam adopted by the country is arguably benign. Unemployment is halved by eliminating women from the workplace. The budget of the national government is balanced by cutting educational costs. Jews immigrate to Israel. The European Union is reformulated as a modern Roman Empire, shifting southward to be centered around the Mediterranean as was the original Roman Empire. The new states to be included are Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Turkey. France, having the strongest military and economy in this new formulation, is propelled to a position of global power that reviv-als that of the United States.

Although the novel is written as political satire in the tradition of Jonathan Swift and George Orwell, it has a strong undercurrent of irony. Once Islam is in place, the nativist political right does not find it unpalatable. A Muslim intellectual in the book opines, “When it came to rejecting atheism and humanism, or the necessary submission of women, or the return to patriarchy, they were fighting exactly the same fight.” Nativists could also be expected to embrace the return to “family values” and the renewed *gloire* of France in the reformed European Union. Liberals, who are largely in denial about the threat of Islam, are paralyzed and silenced by their own oppressive multiculturalism, and the few who warn of the calamity to come are dismissed as Cassandras – the ancient Greek prophet who was cursed to predict accurately a dire future but not to be believed. The greatest irony of the book, however, is that that Islam is not the target of Houellebecq’s satir-

ical bolts. Although Houellebecq is known to detest Islam and has been stigmatized as an Islamophobe, he presents Islam in his novel in its most moderate and reasonable form. Hence, the object at the center of this novel's cross hairs is not Islam but a feckless French elite.

The protagonist, François, is a forty-four-year-old literature professor at the Sorbonne who admits that he “never felt the slightest vocation for teaching” and begins every academic year by searching for a new girlfriend from among his students. His interior dialogue is largely about his physical ailments and his sex life – he indulges in smutty sex that will certainly be unsettling to many readers. François represents an intellectual elite that is morally and spiritually adrift. When the Sorbonne is transformed into the Islamic University of Paris, he and others like him are easily bought off with pensions. Upon losing his job, François's most acute worry is that he will no longer have access to female students. Towards the end of the story, he is close to suicide because he has nothing left for which to live – not himself, humanity, or even a wife and family. He is a painfully isolated and pathetic figure.

François specializes in the study of J. K. Huysmans, a fin-de-siècle French novelist who made the transition from the Decadent Movement to Roman Catholicism. Huysmans had rejected Catholicism in his youth but was profoundly pessimistic about modern life. His novels are autobiographical, tracking his spiritual progress until he reconverts to Catholicism. Houellebecq uses Huysmans as a foil for his protagonist who, like his nineteenth-century precursor, comes to reject the humanism of the Enlightenment as the basis for modern life yet cannot easily accept a return to religion.

In his desire to find meaning in life, François journeys to the pilgrimage church of Notre Dame in Rocamadour to view the Black Madonna. He is genuinely moved but still cannot embrace Catholicism. Eventually, he acquiesces to the new religious reality in France, becoming a Muslim. This allows him to regain his position as a professor at the Sorbonne and, he is promised, to have as many as three wives. The novel ends with François's re-

alization that his “intellectual life was finished” but that life still had more to offer him.

Where is Christianity in this satire? Houellebecq is entirely dismissive of the Church. He has a Muslim intellectual explain, “Without Christianity, the European nations had become bodies without souls – zombies.” Yet “atheist humanism,” he believes, is incapable of being the foundation of a society. The Church, however, has long since relinquished its place as an authentic and credible alternative to secularism. “Thanks to the simpering seductions and the lewd enticement of the progressives, the Church had lost its ability to oppose moral decadence, to renounce homosexual marriage, abortion rights, and women in the workplace.”

Houellebecq’s satire, it might be argued, is dissatisfying for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is plainly overwrought: France’s intellectual elite would not go down with the spiritless whimper that the author imagines. Intellectuals, like any other group, can at times be craven crowds, but surely some at least could be expected to render a noble defiance. Also, the novel is undoubtedly poor political prophesy as the French public has already shown itself to be capable, at least in some instances, of resisting the inroads of Islam. Finally, the novel has a certain cringe-factor in its protagonist’s endless, low-minded, sexual prattle and desultory personal life. *Submission*, however, would be unfairly impugned on these grounds.

Satire, after all, tends to be overwrought by its very nature: it extrapolates from certain current trends, while ignoring others, in order to predict a scary future. Hence, it is not prophesy but political commentary. Intellectuals, it is true, are treated unfairly and shown no quarter in this novel, but the author seems to feel, rightly I think, that they need to be reminded from time to time – and in no uncertain terms – that their vocation calls for more than pedantic curiosity and erudite glosses. In effect, they need to take threats to cherished values seriously – to take ideas seriously. François recognizes this in the end: “I was more or less resigned and apathetic myself. I’d been wrong.” And as for the protagonist’s lasciviousness, one is tempted to see here a projection of the author’s own predilections rather than social commentary.

Houellebecq has given his readers a withering critique of the modern French intellectual elite and one possible – if not probable – direction that French society and perhaps European society, too, may take in the not-too-distant future. If his novel at times makes the reader uncomfortable, resentful, and even angry, then perhaps this contentious author has simply succeeded in earning the doleful responses that naturally accrue to any effective satirist.