ISLAM'S RISE TO THE TOP OF THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL AGENDA has prompted historians, philosophers, and social scientists to investigate the specific characteristics of ideological Islam—Islamism. How to explain Islamism's success in our largely secularized societies, and how best to contend with it? Recent books by two prominent French philosophers address these questions. In Islamism and Us, Pierre-André Taguieff, an influential historian of ideas whose previous books have focused on racism, anti-Semitism, and nationalism, emphasizes the formidable intellectual challenge Islamism represents for Western cultures, which persistently resist seeing it as a totalitarian politico-religious ideology whose goal is an Islamist state. And in An Imaginary Racism, prominent public intellectual Pascal Bruckner sheds critical light on Islamophobia, which he sees as the fabricated “WMD” (weapon of mass destruction) of any debate about Islam, Islamism, and Muslims.

Taguieff thinks the West suffers from a clear intellectual disadvantage in responding to Islamism. Following the traumas of Nazism and Communism many Westerners embraced a progressive worldview, promising that the reconciliation of all cultures will secure eternal peace. The main risk we face, they believe, is not the eruption of an internal or external enemy, but our own irrational fear of others. Despite events such as the Iranian Revolution, the failed Arab Spring, 9/11, and the recent wave of terrorism, such progressives cannot fathom alternatives to our belief in the universalism of individualism, freedom of expression, diversity, secularism, rational thinking, and gender equality.

Taguieff underscores our resistance to accepting religion as Islamists’ main motivation, even though they make no mystery of it. Unlike many Americans, West Europeans tend to consider religion a thing of the past. After a long quest to secure freedom of and from religion, the French, for example, fear a 21st-century return of the kind of religious wars they fought in the 16th century. Western Europe also remains influenced by the Marxist idea of religion as the opiate of the masses—a “fog” hiding class struggle, the real engine of history. Islamism challenges our view of the relationship between religion and revolution: the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions fought religion as a reactionary political and cultural force; the Iranian Revolution turned it into a revolutionary one.

Many Westerners consider Islam a “religion like any other.” But unlike the Bible, the Koran,
Taguieff questions the moderate versus radical dichotomy that emerges from this way of looking, or not looking, at Islam. For him, “quietists” and “Jihadists” share ends, but not means. Quietists prefer a “cultural” route leading to the whole society’s “submission” to Islam; Jihadists seek to provoke—and win—a civil war through violent acts of terror. Indeed, police investigations often uncover the role of quietists in the intellectual nurturing of terrorists. Likewise, Taguieff underscores the similarities between the presumably “moderate” Muslim Brothers and the more radical Salafists. As Tariq Ramadan, who until his recent arrest for alleged rapes was the leading Islamist intellectual in Europe and is the grandson of the Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, said, “Jihad is to man’s humanity what instinct is to an animal’s behavior.”

Islamophobia, a theme in Taguieff’s book, is the focus of Bruckner’s An Imaginary Racism. Both authors describe Islamophobia as the key weapon in the Islamists’ ideological arsenal, a Trojan horse the West eagerly admitted behind its walls. The term evokes an irrational fear of Islam and Muslims rooted in an allegedly racist and colonial Western, and especially, French culture. The indictment seeks to delegitimize critical discussion: only Islamophobes could possibly have a problem with Islam and Muslims. Recognizing the superior legitimacy in the West of the struggle against racism, Islamists have cast Islamophobia as the anti-racist cause par excellence—though one “without race or victims,” according to Bruckner. Two odd allies have joined forces with the Islamists: radicalized activists for the equal rights of minorities—including feminists—and the old Marxist far Left. The former have shed their universalist fight against discrimination and for equal rights to embrace an identity-based ideology in which each ethnic, racial, and religious group seeks to break away from the others and from the majority. This model, popular in post-colonial studies programs, resurrects the Black Panthers’ and Nation of Islam’s visions from the 1960s. Bruckner calls it “legal apartheid,” noting that, over the years, the concept of apartheid has shifted from the policy of a racist regime to a way to fight racism. Not all identities are worth celebrating, however, least of all national identity. Houria Bouteldja, a leading Islamist activist in France who titled her latest book Whites, Jews and Us (2017), calls for “shattering French identity.”

The Islamists’ other ally in this radicalized anti-racist ideology is the traditional Marxists who’ve been adrift since Communism’s collapse and the continued shrinking of the West’s working class (one increasingly tempted by populism). As the “dammed of the earth,” Muslims and other immigrants represent the new proletariat and avant-garde of the revolutionary army. Islam, however, is not the goal of this odd coalition. What binds the radical feminists, Trotskyists, anti-imperialists, and pro-Palestinians together is their hatred for liberal democracy, Western values, global capitalism, Christianity, Judaism, and the nation-state. They all share a fascination for political violence.
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United Nations (whose main objective is a universal ban of blasphemy against Islam), Islamophobia has increased in the West since the Iranian Revolution. But a recent survey on discrimination against Muslims in the European Union shows a wide discrepancy between the number of Muslims saying they have been victims of discrimination at least once in the last five years (20% in France) and those believing that Muslims are discriminated against as a group (75%). Such a widespread, irrational feeling of victimization—conspiracy theories are also pervasive—is almost akin to an ideology.

**French Muslim Organizations such as the “Collective Against Islamophobia in France” (CCIF), which is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, also conduct regular surveys on the topic.**

But as journalist Isabelle Kersimon and legal historian Jean-Christophe Moreau document in their rigorously researched book *Islamophobia: la contre-enquête (Islamophobia: the Counter-Investigation)* (2014)—which both Taguieff and Bruckner quote abundantly—the CCIF fails to distinguish between acts of hatred, discrimination, and violence against Muslims, on the one hand, which are crimes punishable by law, and opinions about Islam on the other, which citizens have a right to hold in a free society. Most acts classified as “anti-Muslim” were refusals by public employees to grant Muslims special privileges such as different hours for men and women in municipal swimming pools, daily Halal menus in school cafeterias, and the assignment of women doctors for treating Muslim women. What Muslim organizations denounce as “State racism” includes search warrants in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, the expulsion of a Salafist Imam, and the closing of a mosque for safety reasons.

Kersimon and Moreau even investigated claims that Muslim cemeteries are desecrated more often than others, that crimes against Muslims are not as harshly punished as others, and that the media harbor an anti-Muslim bias. All proved groundless. Interestingly, the scholars found that most media outlets bend over backward for fear of being perceived as Islamophobic—for example, by inviting Islamists to give their opinions on public issues—and because they assume their audiences hold anti-Muslim prejudices that need correcting.

In fact, the notion that a pervasive hatred of Muslims has engulfed Europe is dispelled by most surveys. Instead of anti-Muslim backlash, widespread sympathy for Muslims typically follows each terrorist attack in France. Surveys also show that European societies have been increasingly accepting of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. But Islamic culture has moved the opposite way: the values of Muslims, especially among the new generation, are increasingly at odds with those of the rest of French society. This is particularly true about religion, secularism, free speech, the legitimation of political violence, anti-Semitism, and patriotism.

**Accusations of Islamophobia are an effective tool to constrain freedom of expression and to advance Islamism, shifting the debate away from Islamist propaganda and terrorism.** Such accusations cast Muslims as the victims, pit them against the rest of the population, legitimize residential and cultural separatism, intimidate would-be critics, and pressure Muslim communities to conform to Sharia law. This is why Bruckner thinks Islamists themselves are the main source of Islamophobia.

He finds the treatment of Islamism in Europe and North America excessively indulgent. As Islamism has become more aggressive, he notes, Westerners have increasingly blamed themselves. Our tolerance even for intolerant acts and doctrines, our guilt over past colonialism and social inequalities, our fear of resurgent religious conflicts, as well as our self-hatred, has contributed to political Islam’s growing influence. Unfortunately, concessions continue to be made to Islamist organizations by journalists, intellectuals, politicians and the courts. Charlie Hebdo now self-censors itself. *Laïcité*, France’s version of secularism, has been undermined by courts that allow the public financing of mosques and exempt some educators from the ban on wearing the veil. Courts have even acquiesced in the argument that *laïcité* discriminates against Islam, even though the 1905 law applies to all religions. And history curriculums have been modified to shun national heroes considered guilty of racism, and to devote more space to an embel-lished history of Islam.

Bruckner warns against accepting constraints on our way of life to accommodate religious fanatics. For both Bruckner and Taguieff we must protect freedom of expression, secularism, and gender equality, and oppose granting special privileges to any religion. They also urge us to vigorously support those Muslims who reject Islamist oppression. As Bruckner says, “Islamists hate France not because it oppresses them but because it seeks to liberate them.” We can only hope that his call for Islam to shift from a strategy of victimization to one of introspection will be heard.

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