

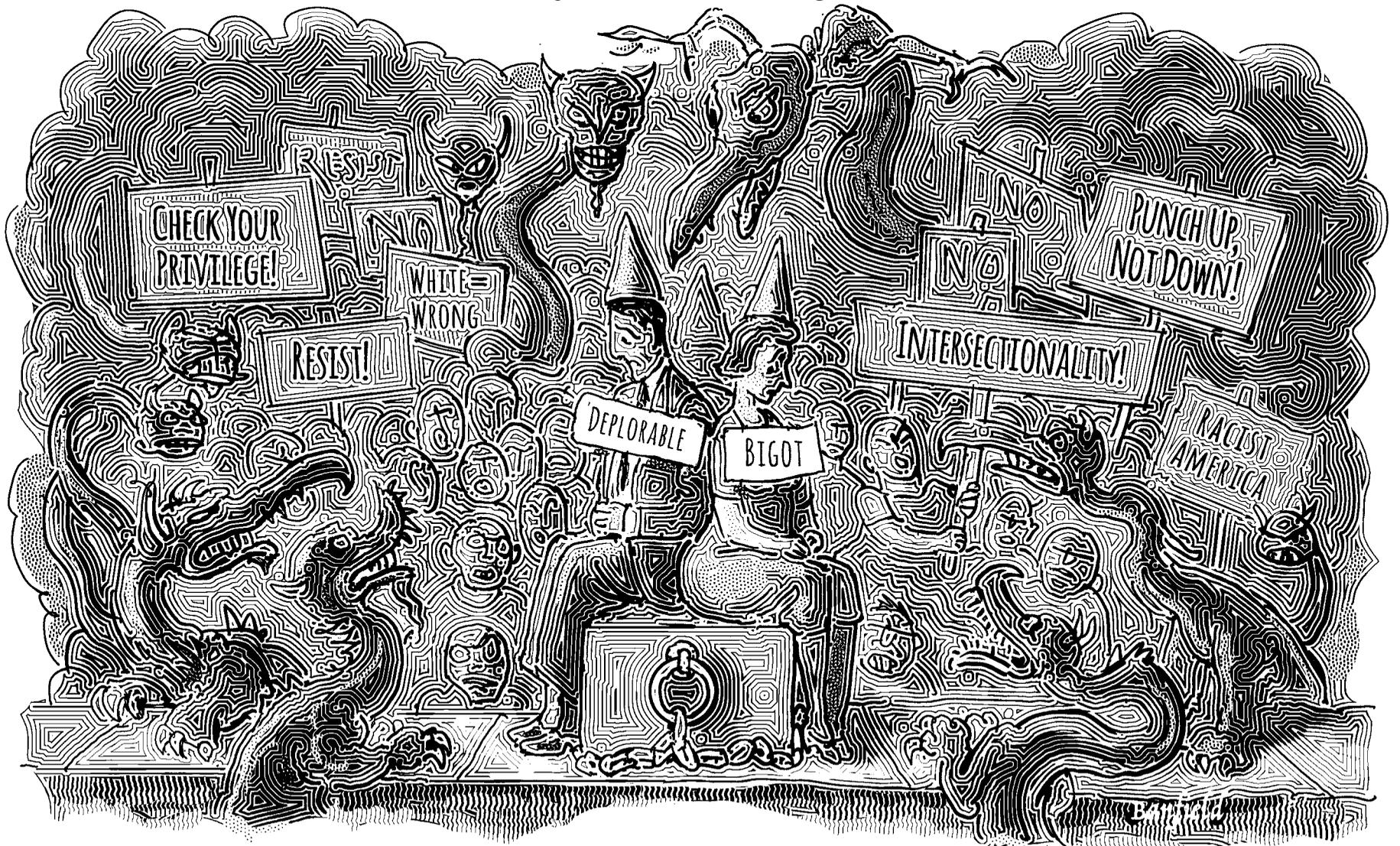
VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2018

CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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Book Review by Patrick Chamorel

THE SPECTER OF ISLAMOPHOBIA

L'islam et nous: Penser l'ennemi imprévu, by Pierre-André Taguieff.
CNRS Editions, 256 pages, €20

Un racisme imaginaire: La querelle de l'islamophobie, by Pascal Bruckner.
Grasset, 272 pages, €19



ACTUALITÉS

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

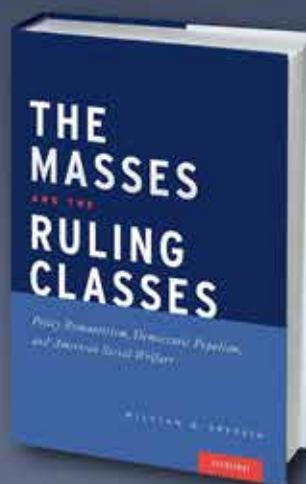
“WMD” (weapon of mass destruction) of any debate about Islam, Islamism, and Muslims.

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.

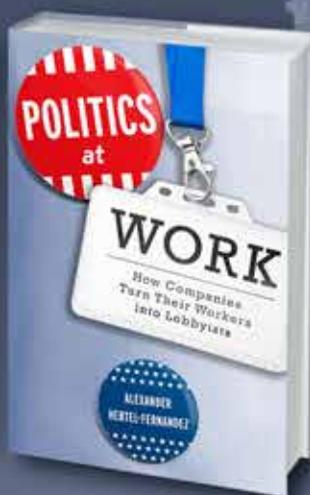
Taguieff underscores our resistance to accepting religion as Islamists' main motivation, even though they make no mystery of it. Unlike many Americans, West Europeans tend to consider religion a thing of the past. After a long quest to secure freedom of and *from* religion, the French, for example, fear 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,

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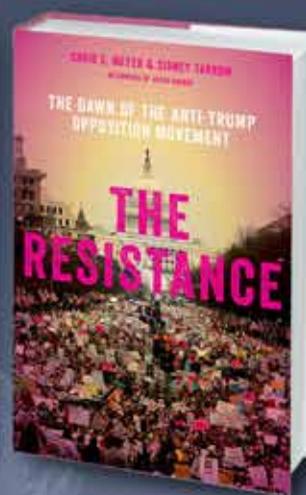
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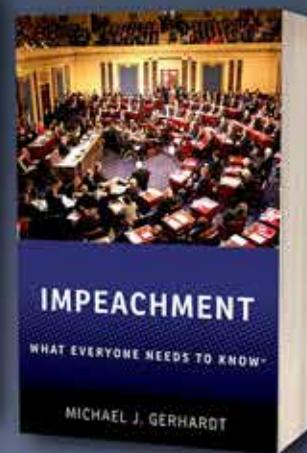
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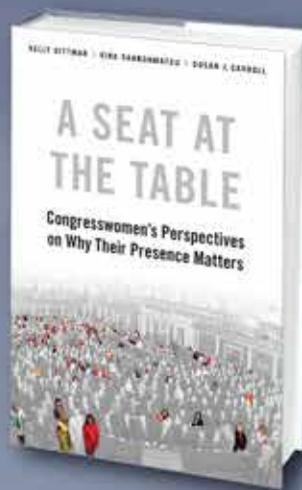
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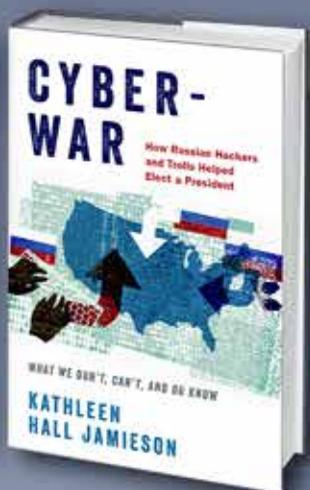
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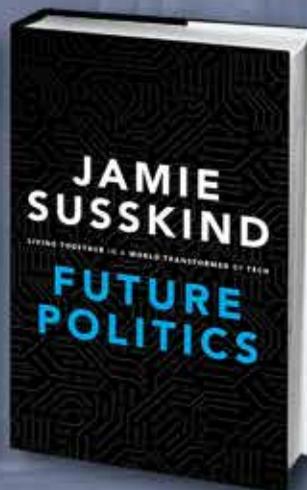
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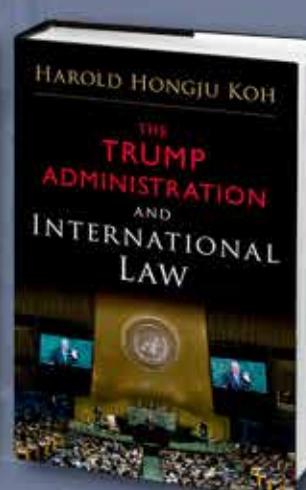
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Muslims claim, is the word of God Himself, and so immune to criticism. Violence is a prescription for Muslims, not the mere context of Biblical stories. As historian of Islam Gabriel Martinez-Gros noted in an interview, “Islam is the only monotheism integrating the duties of war into those of religion.” This fusion of religion and politics is one of Islam’s fundamental principles, whereas the difference between what “belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God” is spelled out in the New Testament. In *Islamic Exceptionalism* (2016), Brookings Institution’s Shadi Hamid warns us not to expect Islam to take the secular path of other religions. Yet for many progressives, Islam is merely retrograde; there is no point in analyzing it as unique since it’s simply a historical laggard and bound to catch up.

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.”

Is Islamism then the full realization of Islam, or its perversion? Taguieff admits that it is only one way to understand Islam and that many Muslims do not identify with it. Yet he dismisses the sort of reassuring statements made after each terrorist attack (including by some survivors), claiming “this has nothing to do with Islam, a religion of love and peace.” This is like the Trotskyists who insisted Stalinism did not reflect *real* Communism. Why, Taguieff asks, do terrorists invariably invoke the Koran rather than the Bible or Torah? His answer is that only Islam is the religion of Jihad. As one Islamist leader puts it, “Islamism is Islam in motion.”

Another way some social scientists minimize religion’s role in Islamism is illustrated by Islam specialist Olivier Roy’s concept of an “Islamization of radicalism”—a counterpoint to his colleague Gilles Kepel’s thesis of a “radicalization of Islam.” It is true that many terrorists do not know the Koran or at-

tend mosque, and they eat pork. But Taguieff counters that few Communists ever read *Das Kapital*, either! Roy argues, predictably, that terrorism is caused by economic hardship, social exclusion, and Western racism. As political scientist François Burgat seconds the point, “Islamist violence is not rooted in Islam; revolt stems from the West’s failure to achieve social harmony.”

Yet, analyses of political Islam emphasizing its barbarism, nihilism, and fanaticism instead of its religious roots are just as unsatisfactory for Taguieff. Here again he disagrees with Roy, who equates Jihadism with “a generational and nihilist revolt.” Taguieff acknowledges that Islamism fits the main criteria defining political extremism: an intransigent ideology, an “us versus them” Manichaeism, and the certainty that the ends justify the means. But he considers Islamism to be a new kind of totalitarianism, irreducible to a resurgence of fascism or Nazism. The boast “we are as eager to die as you are eager to live,” for example, reflects the unique role of martyrdom in Islamism.

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 universalistic 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 “damned 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 also share a fascination for political violence.

THE NEW PARADIGM POSITS THAT whites are always oppressors and non-whites invariably exploited. It is best illustrated by the reaction to the mass rapes perpetrated by Muslim refugees in Cologne, Germany, in New Year’s Eve 2015/16. For the anti-racists, the crime was not the rapes but the stigmatization of the rapists by the Islamophobic media and mainstream feminists. Such role reversal is part of the Islamists’ attempt to transform Western social norms and values. Why the Left jettisoned its values of liberty and equality for a repressive religious ideology remains a puzzle for Bruckner.

Islamists see anti-Semitism as the model for Islamophobia, again hiding religion behind racism. They equate their own victimization with the Jews’. Jews, however, were victims of well-documented discriminatory policies, whereas Muslims in today’s Europe enjoy the equal protection of the law. And Jews did not hate the various nationalities among whom they found themselves, or spread terrorism; on the contrary, they strived to integrate in societies to the extent they were permitted to do so.

An allegedly colonialist and nationalistic Israel is now blamed for turning Palestinians into the new Jews and Israelis into the new Nazis. Meanwhile, most Muslims deny the deep anti-Semitism running through their culture. A French historian of the Holocaust, Georges Bensoussan, was recently taken to court under hate crime legislation for simply documenting that long-running reality. Likewise, after a group of 300 intellectuals wrote a column in *Le Monde* last April denouncing the growing anti-Semitism among Muslims, the response of 30 leading Imams was to deny it and point to...Islamophobia.

According to surveys conducted by Islamist organizations within and outside the

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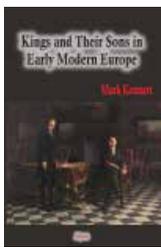
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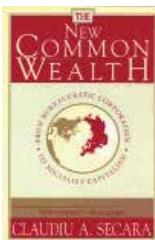
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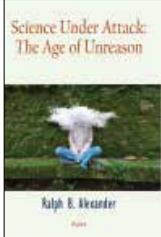
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United Nations (whose main objective is a universal ban of blasphemy against Islam), Islamophobia has increased in the West since the Iranian Revolution. But a recent survey on discrimination against Muslims in the European Union shows a wide discrepancy 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 *Islamophobie: 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 legitimization 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, all contribute 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 embellished 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.

Patrick Chamorel is a senior resident scholar at Stanford in Washington.

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