

ZOMBIE CATHOLICISM MEETS ZOMBIE ISLAM: READING MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ'S *SOUMISSION* WITH EMMANUEL TODD

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ABSTRACT

Following the publication of Michel Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* (2015), which depicts the French public electing an Islamist government in 2022, some critics accused Houellebecq of Islamophobia; others defended his novel as primarily an attack on the French intellectual class rather than Islam or Muslims. Reading Houellebecq's novel alongside the work of French historian and anthropologist Emmanuel Todd, this article suggests that *Soumission* attacks all three. Furthermore, Houellebecq's depiction of France being 'Islamized' does not represent a break from his earlier insistence that religion is becoming obsolete; the Islam of *Soumission* is devoid of the positive values that Houellebecq associates with religion elsewhere. In the novel, religion has died, as Houellebecq previously claimed it would, with Islam portrayed as a political system compatible with contemporary materialism. The apparent nostalgia for Catholicism in *Soumission* and elsewhere in Houellebecq's oeuvre does not express Houellebecq's desire to convert to Catholicism but his wish for a strong Catholic church to provide an opponent for French anti-clericalism; he portrays Islam as an unsatisfactory alternative.

Keywords: Michel Houellebecq; Emmanuel Todd; Islamophobia; *Soumission*; *Charlie Hebdo*; religion; materialism

MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ'S *Soumission*, which depicts France electing an Islamist government led by the charismatic Mohammed Ben Abbes, was published on 7th January 2015; the issue of *Charlie Hebdo* published that day featured Houellebecq, caricatured as a toothless drunkard, on its cover.¹ His novel, however, ceased to be the day's main news item when Saïd and Chérif Kouachi murdered twelve people at the satirical magazine's headquarters that morning. Two days later, Amedy Coulibaly took four more lives in an attack on a Parisian kosher supermarket. Following the attacks, *Charlie Hebdo* monopolized national and international attention; the most impressive demonstrations of support for the magazine took

place the following weekend, as millions of French people took to the streets to declare that ‘je suis Charlie’. For some time afterwards, national media outlets characterized these demonstrations near-exclusively in positive terms: the nation had united against hatred and in support of freedom of expression. Four months later, however, historian and anthropologist Emmanuel Todd broke this consensus. Todd noted that both Muslim immigrants and their descendants (of all social backgrounds) and working-class communities (of all ethnic and religious backgrounds) were significantly underrepresented in the demonstrations: he explained these absences by arguing that the marches expressed not the unity of the nation, but that of middle-class Islamophobes. The very injunction to assert that ‘je suis Charlie’ was problematic in Todd’s eyes: most Muslims condemned the attacks, but demanding that this already stigmatized minority, who had repeatedly seen the Prophet Mohammed mocked by the magazine, positively identify with *Charlie Hebdo* almost seemed calculated to exclude them still further.²

Todd was subjected to a furious backlash, just as Houellebecq had been after the publication of *Soumission*. Houellebecq was accused of Islamophobia: critics like Sylvain Bourmeau criticised him for reproducing in fiction a putative ‘grand remplacement’ that far-right polemicists such as Renaud Camus claim is being enacted in reality by Muslims whom they accuse of seeking to ‘Islamize’ France and Europe.³ Bourmeau argues that Houellebecq’s novel is ‘dangereux, participant comme beaucoup de choses, petites et grandes, toujours laides, à rendre [...] la vie en France un peu plus désagréable à tout ceux qui portent un prénom arabe ou qui ont la peau noire.’⁴ A report on the television station France 2 on the eve of the novel’s publication labelled *Soumission* a ‘cadeau de Noël’ for the Front national (now the Rassemblement national) on this basis.⁵ Todd’s text, meanwhile, was derided as the ego trip of a shameless self-publicist, which risked undermining a real sentiment of national cohesion; Jean-Laurent Cassely ironically congratulated Todd for having ‘[rendu] la lecture et la critique de son dernier essai incontournables’, praising his ‘génie pour accaparer l’attention [du] milieu médiatico-intello’.⁶ Both writers were criticized by then Prime Minister Manuel Valls, who claimed after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack that ‘La France, ça n’est pas Houellebecq. Ça n’est pas l’intolérance, la haine et la peur’. Valls later wrote an article in *Le Monde* criticizing what he characterized as Todd’s gross misrepresentation of the spirit of the 11th of January.⁷

The texts of Houellebecq and Todd have more in common than this, however. The idea that France is experiencing a ‘crise religieuse’ as its people struggle to fill the vacuum left by a diminished Catholic church is central to Todd’s argument. Houellebecq’s novel

depicts the French populace filling that void by embracing Islamism, and at the time of its publication he explicitly related this to the demise of Catholicism.⁸ Given this connection, this article will explore the convergences between Todd's ideas on how the Church's loss of influence has impacted upon French society, and those which emerge from *Soumission*. It will also argue that the novel's portrayal of Islam represents neither a break from Houellebecq's previous rejection of the Muslim faith, nor from his earlier claim that religion in general was doomed; *Soumission* expresses an evolution rather than a revolution in Houellebecq's thinking. Contrary to the arguments made by critics like Adam Gopnik or Mark Lilla, it communicates not just Houellebecq's rejection of the French political class but, equally, the rejection of Islam and Muslims of which critics like Bourmeau accused him.⁹

Before exploring how Todd can help us to understand Houellebecq's anti-Muslim sentiments, two comments are necessary regarding the scope and aims of this article. The first relates to how Houellebecq's expression of controversial views, either personally or through his protagonists, often seems calculated to provoke his readers. Houellebecq's apparent enjoyment of doing so, and savvy exploitation of the distinction between his own voice and those of either his narrators or protagonists, often leaves critics unwilling to engage directly with the more inflammatory ideas expressed in his work. Adam Leith Gollner, in a review for the *New Yorker* magazine, notes that Houellebecq has described *Soumission* as satire in some interviews while rejecting that categorization in others; such deliberate ambiguity, he suggests, problematizes any attempt to engage with his underlying motivations. Gollner goes so far as to imply that what Houellebecq enjoys more than anything is scandal, describing him as 'a polemicist who isn't discernibly for anything'.¹⁰ A related critical manoeuvre has been to imply that the way in which *Soumission* portrays Islam and Muslims is of secondary importance to some other, deeper underlying idea. Gopnik, for example, claims that the novel's real target is France's political class, with Islam 'really a bystander that gets, at most, winged'.¹¹ Lilla, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, agrees that the real target of *Soumission* is not Islam; rather, the novel expresses a fear that 'the single-minded pursuit of freedom [...] must inevitably lead to disaster'.¹² Within academia, Murray Pratt holds that although questions relating to Islam and French national identity are central to *Soumission*, Houellebecq's novel is more fundamentally concerned with 'how an individual aligns ideologically and personally with a shifting culture-scape, what life decisions make sense and how and why they are taken'.¹³

Such unwillingness to engage fully with the more obvious theme of *Soumission* may translate an anxiety not to be seen to be falling into the traps that Houellebecq sets for his

readers. This article intends neither to deny that Houellebecq enjoys baiting his critics in this way nor to dismiss as irrelevant the arguments of Pratt, Lilla or Gopnik. Rather, it seeks to reassert the primary importance of Houellebecq's portrayal of Islam and Muslims to any reading of *Soumission*.

A second preliminary comment relates to Todd. This article will start with an overview of what are, for its own purposes, some of Todd's key hypotheses; in the interests of balance, it will also outline some of the more persuasive criticisms levelled at his work. Other criticisms have been made of Todd, a public intellectual better known for the often abrasive views he expresses in newspaper opinion pieces, broadcast interviews, and bestselling essays than for his comparatively limited number of academic publications. However, the aim of the article is to explore Houellebecq's novel through the lens of some of Todd's more productive ideas rather than to critique both writers. While it does not unproblematically endorse every aspect of Todd's work, a more in-depth critique of it would fall outside this article's scope.

Necessary disclaimers aside, the most publicized aspect of that work has been Todd's concept of 'Catholicisme zombie'. Todd argues that Catholic religious practice had ceased to structure communal life in certain regions of France, particularly around the Parisian basin and the Mediterranean coast, by the eighteenth century. Elsewhere, and especially on the western periphery of the Hexagon, it remained stable until the mid-1960s before sharply declining. Catholicism has not, of course, disappeared; rather, the Church no longer holds the central position that it once did within French political or social life. Todd attributes these regional divergences to traditional family structures, which he largely characterizes as egalitarian in the regions which were de-christianized early, and inegalitarian in those which remained Catholic for longer.¹⁴ The populations of inegalitarian regions, he argues, could more easily accept the contemporary Church's role of maintaining existing social hierarchies; egalitarian regions fuelled the Revolution. Todd holds that despite the Church's decline, attitudes engendered by it remain rooted in the unconscious of the populations of more recently de-christianized regions: it is this survival of the Catholic mindset after the death of Catholicism that he labels 'Catholicisme zombie'. The Church, Todd claims, transmitted ostensibly egalitarian and universalist religious values to the forebears of zombie Catholics, but in practice taught them to accept and support social inequalities; zombie Catholics have retained both an open and often sincere adherence to egalitarian values and a more fundamental acceptance of inequality (LMF 58–60, 72; QEC 55–56, 110). Todd is not the only French public intellectual to have explored the ongoing legacies of Christianity in de-

christianized France. He is, however, separated from peers such as Régis Debray or Marcel Gauchet by his emphasis on regional variations, which interest the latter less than questions relating to the relationship between religion and social cohesion.¹⁵

This was important in January 2015 because attendances at the nationwide demonstrations which followed the Île-de-France attacks were significantly higher in Todd's zombie Catholic regions than elsewhere. Todd argues that the inherently inegalitarian populations of these regions supported *Charlie* so enthusiastically not out of a wish for national unity, but to express a xenophobic support for the continued exclusion of France's already discriminated against Muslim minority. Demonstrators expressed support for *Charlie* using the language of freedom of expression; however, the freedom that they championed was that to 'cracher sur la religion des faibles' by repeatedly mocking their Prophet (QEC 87–88). The marches, Todd claims, were an emblematic manifestation of the 'xénophobie différentialiste' of zombie Catholic populations: a xenophobia based on an unconscious conviction, beneath an often sincere adherence to Republican universalism, that all people are not equal, which appropriates the language of liberal humanism to justify the exclusion of various minorities, most notably Muslims (QEC 76–77, 98–99, 105–06, 108–09, 156–57, 173–74).

Another example of this, for Todd, is the support for the European project shown in zombie Catholic regions in the referendums of 1992 and 2005 on the Maastricht Treaty and European Constitution respectively. The EU, he claims, cloaks in universalist rhetoric its imposition of neoliberal economic policies which can only increase social inequalities. Zombie Catholic support for it expresses at best unconscious acceptance of and, at worst, support for that outcome, which, given the already marginalized position of postcolonial immigrants and their descendants, strikes Muslims (among others) particularly hard (QEC 53–55, 58–60, 81–83, 85–87, 89, 101). Todd attributes a quasi-religious aspect to zombie Catholic support for the European project, suggesting that their unquestioning allegiance to the single currency and a European utopia bears an analogy with that of their forebears to a single God promising a utopian afterlife. This resonates with Debray's claim that, while Christianity may no longer structure French society, all societies require some form of transcendent authority in order to remain cohesive. Debray adds that when such an authority is designated, an out-group is also required; the vertical relationship between above and below is indissociable from a horizontal counterpart separating insiders from outsiders. The European project, one could argue, designates both itself as a quasi-transcendental authority and Muslims (among others) as outsiders.¹⁶

Educational attainment and overall prosperity in zombie Catholic regions, Todd notes, are higher than the national average. He attributes both to zombie Catholicism, claiming that the downfall of a Church which opposed progress and education liberated the creative energies of populations previously in thrall to the clergy. Conversely, the survival of social structures engendered by the Church also helped to protect zombie Catholic populations from the ravages of neoliberalism: their communities remained strong, allowing them to flourish while their compatriots in egalitarian France became increasingly atomized and impoverished (QEC 118–20, 147; LMF 81–83). Again, links can be seen here with the work of both Gauchet and Debray. Both, like Todd, emphasize the historical role played by Catholicism in fostering a strong social bond in France. Debray holds that some form of religious or quasi-religious belief is needed in order for a society to remain cohesive, even if it does not take the form of organized religion; he associates *le religieux* with the transcendent Other needed to bind a society together. Gauchet, on the other hand, argues that religion truly is dead, but that this need not lead to anomie: contemporary societies no longer need a transcendent authority to provide the alterity needed for communion.¹⁷ Todd's position is closer to Debray's, crediting a survival of religion within a post-religious society with holding together those communities which remain strongly bonded: those in zombie Catholic regions. While he does not seem to feel that societies need religion to remain cohesive, he does imply, like Debray, that some transcendent authority is required: this is what he suggests historically de-christianized France lacks, implying that this gap might be filled by reinvigorating Republican values (QEC 55–56, 60–61, 233–36). All three thinkers, meanwhile, concur regarding the danger neoliberal hyper-individualism poses to life in common, even if their understanding of the role to be played by *le religieux* in defending collective life varies.¹⁸

By associating prosperity and educational success with zombie Catholicism for what verge on mutually contradictory reasons, Todd leaves himself open to accusations of twisting any and all evidence to fit his framework. He does, however, associate differentialist xenophobia with the middle class more generally, zombie Catholic or otherwise, noting that the marches of January 2015 were disproportionately well attended in the more affluent towns even of 'egalitarian' regions; he treats zombie Catholicism as an important factor underpinning differentialist xenophobia, but not necessarily the only one (QEC 82–84). Accusing the middle classes of Islamophobia was contentious in a nation where discussions of xenophobia are often limited to condemnation of a Rassemblement national (RN) assumed to draw most of its support from the so-called white working class. Todd instead associates

differentialist xenophobia with support for the traditional mainstream parties, and within what he labels the ‘bloc MAZ’: the middle-class, the elderly and zombie Catholics (QEC 90–91).

This does not mean that RN voters are not xenophobes. Todd argues, however, that their xenophobia differs from the MAZ bloc’s inegalitarian version; theirs is a ‘xénophobie universaliste’, and is rooted among fragilized working-class communities in France’s traditionally de-christianized regions. Like their inegalitarian counterparts, universalist xenophobes paradoxically often support a political movement which publicly proclaims the opposite value: where the ostensibly universalist EU is supported by populations which unconsciously accept inequality, those whose structures of thought are fundamentally egalitarian often support the openly differentialist RN (QEC 110, 147, 153–54). Inegalitarian xenophobia is based on an unconscious assumption that humans are not all equal; universalist xenophobes assume the opposite. This becomes problematic when equality is equated with similarity: when confronted with visible difference, those who consider all humans to be equal (which is to say similar) can conclude that to be different is to be at best problematically human (QEC 155–56, 159). The economic instability of working-class communities in historically de-christianized France, Todd argues, has fed the growth of universalist xenophobia in these regions demonstrated by a steady rise in support for the RN since the 1980s. Participation in the demonstrations of January 2015 was low in egalitarian France not because its people necessarily oppose Islamophobia, but because the inegalitarian xenophobia of which the marches were an expression is of a different form to that which is prevalent in their regions: a differentialist form which universalist xenophobes reject, partially because it both fuels their own frequent economic subjugation and repudiates the outspoken differentialism of the RN (QEC 112–15, 156–57, 160–61).

The crumbling of the Church’s influence remains relevant to universalist xenophobia. The Parti communiste français (PCF), which Todd argues both helped forge strong communities and opposed discrimination, remained the predominant political influence in universalist regions until the early 1980s. The juxtaposition between anti-clerical Communist and right-wing Catholic regions, he claims, gave stability to the French political system, but was structured by the Church. French Communism drew its force from its ability to rein in the influence of Catholicism: when that influence crumbled, Communism lost its *raison d’être* and soon followed suit, explaining why French Communism started to disintegrate in the early 1980s, before the fall of the Berlin Wall or the USSR. As Communism was essentially a secondary product of Catholicism, the last in a series of ideologies defined by their conflict with the Church starting with that of the Revolution, no zombie form of it

survived. Where zombie Catholics inherited the strong social structures fostered by the Church, their universalist compatriots were thus left defenceless against the ravages of neoliberalism; this is why the social and economic problems that they face are now so much greater. Their consequent alienation has led many to search for scapegoats, fuelling the growth of universalist xenophobia (QEC 41–3, 62–65, 122–23, 149; LMF 66–68, 70–72).

Todd's methods have been criticized by several cartographers, demographers and sociologists, and some of their criticisms are convincing. His attribution of ideological stances to entire regions is based upon a problematic geographical determinism, which assumes the existence of something approximating a collective unconscious. Critics such as Thierry Joliveau also accuse him of committing an ecological inference fallacy: he draws conclusions regarding the motivations of individuals from statistical data concerning the socially heterogeneous populations of the regions in which they live. In other words, he attempts sociological analyses of the marches of January 2015 with data that support only a geographical one. Todd cannot say *who* Charlie was, only *where*. Joliveau adds that Todd's data can be more simply interpreted as showing that mobilization was low in regions where recent elections had seen high levels of abstention, support for the RN, or both; turnout was higher in regions where most of the population felt well represented by the contemporary political system and its mainstream parties, and lower in regions where a greater proportion of the population felt distanced from both.¹⁹ Jérôme Fourquet and Alain Mergier's analyses of regional variations in mobilization levels reached a similar conclusion, leading critics like Jean-Laurent Cassely to challenge Todd's entire framework.²⁰ Cassely has reasserted the conventional reading of the marches of January 2015, rejecting the notions of zombie Catholicism and differentialist xenophobia: the demonstrators *were* expressing an inclusive desire for national unity, which non-demonstrators rejected either because they were RN-supporting xenophobes or 'communautariste' Muslims.²¹ Todd's unequivocal characterization of the European project as a neoliberal exclusion machine, meanwhile, says more about his own ideological position than that of EU supporters: many such individuals sincerely believe in the universalist mission of the EU, even if they also believe it to be flawed in its current form. Finally, one could justifiably argue that Catholicism and its downfall are not needed to explain the crumbling influence of the PCF; this can more prosaically be explained, for example, through reference to deindustrialization, or the PCF's participation in Socialist Pierre Mauroy's coalition government of 1981–84.

Some of these critiques are convincing, but Cassely overstates his case. That RN voters rejected the *consciously* universalist rhetoric associated with the demonstrations of

January 2015 does not disprove Todd's claim that an *unconscious* logic of exclusion underpinned them. The debates around the 'real' motivations behind the marches perhaps simply demonstrate the futility of attempting to pinpoint any individual explanation for a social phenomenon of their scale. While many marchers surely believed that the demonstrations would promote national unity, others may equally have used ostentatious support for freedom of expression to cloak an underlying anti-Muslim sentiment. Todd's overarching point that the RN's outspoken xenophobia is complemented by a veiled form rooted in France's upper and middle-classes deserves to be taken seriously, and is supported by the work of researchers such as Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed.²² The same is true of his characterization of the European project: while it is reductive to imply that an inegalitarian unconscious motivates all or even most support for the EU, Todd is surely correct that nor does pro-European sentiment necessarily equate to the rejection of xenophobia.

How useful zombie Catholicism is in advancing our understanding of any of this is unclear: the reasons why either form of xenophobia is prevalent in a given region can perhaps more simply be understood with reference to the economic inclusion or exclusion of its population. Nonetheless, zombie Catholicism is a stimulating enough idea to merit further consideration. While Todd's use of it to explain the behaviour patterns of the socially composite populations of entire regions seems dubious, this is no reason to discount the possibility of the idea having any value on a smaller scale. This article will, therefore, explore the extent to which Todd's ideas resonate with the worlds depicted by Houellebecq, particularly in *Soumission* but also in his broader oeuvre.

Before starting such a project, one must understand the ambivalent attitude towards the Catholic faith that Houellebecq has displayed throughout his career. He has often treated Catholicism and religion more broadly with scorn, claiming in 2001 that belief in a single God was 'le fait d'un crétin', but has equally consistently evoked his belief that no society can survive without religious faith.²³ The latter belief seems to have motivated repeated attempts by Houellebecq to effect a rapprochement with Catholicism despite his personal disbelief: friends from his youth recall his 'réelle sympathie pour les milieux catholiques', which extended to include wearing a cross, and which he has never denied.²⁴ This attraction to Catholicism, and religion more broadly, has also been a constant in Houellebecq's writing, leading Louis Betty to describe him as 'a deeply and unavoidably religious writer'.²⁵ Houellebecq himself once claimed that the only thing stopping him from becoming Catholic

was his inability to believe in God, although at the time of *Soumission*'s publication he held that his previous atheism had become agnosticism.²⁶

The idea that no society can survive without religion is expressed in *Soumission* by intelligence agent Alain Tanneur, whose wife is a colleague of the narrator, François, and who plays the characteristically Houellebecqian role of appearing to ventriloquize for the author. Tanneur tells Sorbonne lecturer François that patriotism alone cannot maintain a cohesive national community; '[il] doit être reli[é] à [...] une mystique d'un ordre supérieur' (S 161–62). While the values of the secular Republic have lasted for over a century, he adds, those of medieval Christianity survived for over a millennium. A former Catholic who has converted to Islam agrees with Tanneur, even echoing the language used by Todd by explaining that during his Catholic days he had believed that 'sans la chrétienté, les nations européennes n'étaient plus que des corps sans âme – des zombies' (S 255). His conversion to Islam was partly motivated by a realization that, while Christianity had now become too weak to revivify Europe, Islam remained strong enough to do so in its place.

The tension between the contempt that Houellebecq has often expressed for organized religion and this sense that society needs it is linked to his loathing for the disasters that he associates with the rise of social and economic liberalism since May 1968: social atomization, immorality and the penetration of market values into every aspect of life. As Douglas Morrey argues, for Houellebecq religion seems to '[offer] the elusive but alluring promise of something more than just quantifiable value to the market'.²⁷ Houellebecq appears to feel that the ritual dimension and focus on self-abnegation in religious practices can '[cut] us off from desire', providing us with 'the only kind of serenity we can hope to reach' in our frenetic, consumerist world.²⁸ Todd's claim that zombie Catholicism protects the populations of France's recently de-christianized regions from the most deleterious effects of neoliberalism resonates with this (QEC 118–19).

Betty sees religion as still more centrally important to Houellebecq's work. He argues that, where it is commonly held that Houellebecq sees social and economic liberalism as having corrupted the West, his worldview is better described as one in which 'materialism [...] represents the true menace'.²⁹ By 'materialism', Betty means a belief system holding that everything real is composed of physical matter, with anything that cannot be explained in material terms becoming at best fiction and at worst outright fabrication. This belief has, by undermining ideas central to religious doctrines like the existence of an immaterial soul, gradually eroded religious values, enabling the rise of 'a social order in which the value of human life is restricted to the parameters of economic exchange – that is, the human being is

understood in essentially economic terms'.³⁰ Liberalism has proven the most durable ideology within this paradigm, but neither liberalism nor even capitalism is to blame for the problems of the contemporary West; the real culprit is the materialist worldview. Betty holds that, in Houellebecq's eyes, humanity needs moral principles legitimated by a transcendent authority to avoid sliding into selfishness and narcissism: something which the author feels can only be provided by religion, and more specifically religious worldviews which underline the immortality of the soul.³¹

Houellebecq's relationship with Catholicism, then, has vacillated between rejection and longing. The latter is demonstrated in the novel *La carte et le territoire* (2010) when Houellebecq himself, introduced as a character and then promptly murdered, is buried in a Catholic funeral. To the shock of those who considered the fictional Houellebecq an intransigent atheist, it transpires that he discreetly converted several months earlier.³² François makes similar attempts to convert in *Soumission*, visiting the Catholic shrine of the Black Madonna at Rocamadour and later retreating to the monastery of Ligugé (S 166, 169–70, 211–20). Consciously or not, the character clearly seeks some kind of religious revelation; his failure to experience one, symbolized in his failed epiphany beside the Black Madonna, suggests that he simply cannot make himself believe.

We might be tempted to infer that Houellebecq, like François, longs to convert. Viewed through Todd's work, however, we might come to a different interpretation, given that the populations most harmed by the downfall of the Church have been those which would formerly have identified with anti-clericalism and often the PCF. As outlined above, Todd holds that the Church's decline precipitated that of an anti-clerical movement defined by its opposition to it; where zombie Catholic populations have been protected from anomie by the survival of Catholic social structures, no zombie Communism has emerged to provide similar protection to their compatriots in egalitarian France (LMF 66–72; QEC 37–43, 62–65).

Houellebecq's nostalgia for Catholicism, then, may translate less a desire to personally be Catholic than for a strong Church to lend meaning to an anti-clerical movement which relied upon it to have meaning, and to which he could more easily adhere. This suggestion is supported by his insistence, early in his career, that he was an atheist and by his continued assertions, although he now claims to be agnostic and underlines his sympathy for the Catholic right, that he could never become Catholic.³³ While the anti-clerical movement cannot be wholly reduced to the PCF, it is significant that Houellebecq has a communist background. His paternal grandmother, who raised him and whom he recalls fondly, was a

communist; he has also spoken of his nostalgia for the heyday of the PCF. Equally significantly, he claimed in 2003 that his entire family had been atheist ‘depuis cinq ou six générations’.³⁴ This family history of atheism resonates with Todd’s description of a historically de-christianized France within which the Catholic mindset is dead, which has been left adrift by the disappearance of its Catholic antagonist.³⁵ That Houellebecq pines for the social stability provided by the opposition between Communism and the Church is further suggested by the comparatively fond portrayals of both in *Les Particules élémentaires*. The legalization of the contraceptive pill is credited with having destroyed ‘le couple et la famille’. So-called family values, and opposition to contraception, are in the French context most commonly associated with Catholicism; however, the symbiotic relationship between the Church and Communism is underlined when these apparently religious institutions are characterized as the ‘dernier îlot de communisme primitif au sein de la société libérale’.³⁶ Communism, like the Church, thus becomes a bulwark against all of the detrimental effects that Houellebecq associates with sexual liberation.

The air of regret permeating *Soumission* may, then, spring less from the demise of Catholicism than the concomitant disappearance of its opposition with anti-clericalism. This does not mean that Houellebecq *consciously* attributes the failure of Communism to the demise of the Church: as Gavin Bowd notes, he seems rather to blame the inability of Communist movements to promote altruism for their failure in various national contexts.³⁸ His nostalgia for Catholicism may, however, on some unconscious level be fuelled by a sense that French anti-clericalism relied upon the now diminished Church to provide it with meaning; it is, after all, primarily in the unconscious that Todd locates the ongoing legacies of the Church’s demise.

That demise, and the Church’s consequent inability to resist the hyper-individualism of modern life, is demonstrated during François’s stay at the monastery of Ligugé, where he is unable to access the calming of desire that Houellebecq seems to value in religion. Even while reading, alone, about the benefits of a monastic retreat, he cannot escape a desire for hedonistic pleasure demonstrated by his craving for a cigarette (S 217–19). Robert Rediger, a convert who is appointed president of the Islamized Sorbonne, underlines that his first port of call in his quest to escape atheist humanism was Catholicism; it was only upon realizing that the Church was too diminished to resist the decadence of modern life that he turned to Islam (S 254–55, 274–76).

Houellebecq has validated this reading, claiming that he originally intended François to convert to Catholicism rather than, as seems to be the case by the end of the novel, Islam,

but found such an outcome impossible to write. He adds that he considers the novel's key scene to come during François's brief stay in Rocamadour, during which he makes daily visits to the Black Madonna. He apparently hopes for some kind of epiphany, but is unable to experience one; he is left despairing after 'il sent une puissance spirituelle, comme des ondes, et d'un seul coup elle s'éloigne dans le siècle'.³⁹ It seems that Catholicism, to Houellebecq's regret, is a spent force. This resonates with concerns expressed in his earlier works; the decline of religion throughout the West is notably evoked in *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998) by an Englishman whom the protagonist meets in Ireland. *Configuration du dernier rivage*, a volume of poems published in 2013, contains numerous mournful references to the death of religion, which include the lines 'Disparue la croyance | Qui permet d'édifier | D'être et de sanctifier | Nous habitons l'absence'.⁴⁰

It is within historically de-christianized populations destabilized by the crumbling of the Church that Todd situates the nucleus of 'universalist xenophobia'; if we accept his position, it therefore seems logical that Houellebecq may be susceptible to this form of prejudice. Todd does not, however, suggest that these populations are in their entirety mechanistically doomed to become universalist xenophobes. We may, therefore, be tempted to accept Houellebecq's argument that as he does not portray the Islamist takeover of France in *Soumission* negatively, he should not be accused of anti-Muslim sentiment. He may simply aim to show, as he suggested in his interview with Bourmeau, that 'le catholicisme [...] paraît appartenir au passé, ça s'est défait. L'islam a une image à venir'.⁴¹ Any hostility towards Islam would then be anti-clerical rather than anti-Muslim; depicting an Islamist takeover could even be a form of wish-fulfilment, with Islam replacing the obsolete Catholicism as the anti-clerical movement's nemesis. This reading is supported by the emergence in Ben Abbes's France of an anti-clerical opposition led by 'laïques de gauche' like Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Michel Onfray (S 200–01).

This essay, however, will not accept Houellebecq's claim: if he portrays Islam as a substitute for Catholicism, it is wholly unsatisfactory. Firstly, François's apparent decision to convert does not equate to an endorsement of conversion. Houellebecq has repeatedly underlined that his protagonists' voices should not be confused with his own, and François is an exemplar of the typical Houellebecqian protagonist described by André Jacques as 'haïssable'.⁴² Like Houellebecq's earlier protagonists, his actions are rendered loathsome by their very banality: he drinks excessively, wallows in self-pity and uses the services of escorts after his girlfriend, Myriam, emigrates for Israel (S 134-135, 185-186, 196-197). Although he seems largely depoliticized, the views that he does express are provocative; he muses, for

instance, that a return to a patriarchal model of society could be beneficial for France (Houellebecq being Houellebecq, the idea that French society ever ceased to be patriarchal is never challenged) (S 41, 43-44). François is an exemplar of the calculatedly unsettling Houellebecqian protagonist; that he seems tempted to convert at the novel's end, reflecting hopefully that it will allow him to live 'une deuxième vie, sans grand rapport avec la précédente', does not imply that Houellebecq either shares or intends the reader to share his enthusiasm (S 299-300).

Furthermore, his apparent conversion not only fails to give him what Houellebecq seems to want from religion, but does precisely the opposite. As noted above, Morrey argues that 'Houellebecq seems drawn to religion [...] as a practice that values self-abnegation', allowing agents to 'think outside the focus on individual desire that has become ingrained in us through decades of [...] consumerism'.⁴³ However, François's probable conversion (the novel ends in the conditional voice, with François reflecting that 'je n'aurais rien à regretter' if he converted to Islam) seems entirely motivated by individualistic self-interest (S300, my emphasis). He expresses no spiritual conviction; his primary motivation appears to be that within the polygamous marriage system Ben Abbes introduces, his social status will see him granted several attractive wives. Converting will also allow him to recover his post at the Sorbonne, where only Muslims are now allowed to teach, and to earn a handsome salary funded by Saudi petrodollars. Islam does not allow François to escape from his individualistic desires, but to satisfy them. Sacrifices often associated with conversion to Islam, such as renouncing alcohol, also appear not to apply to the privileged elite that François joins.

The new regime's polygamous marriage system, in which men of a sufficiently high social status are granted multiple wives, may suit François, meanwhile, but this does not mean that Houellebecq intends it to be read positively. The idea that since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, our sex lives have become increasingly aligned with the logic of the free market, has been a recurring thread in Houellebecq's work since his earliest novels; unrestrained sexual liberalism has led sexual relations to become a 'système de hiérarchie sociale' which, like unrestrained economic liberalism, leaves many in a situation of 'paupérisation absolue'.⁴⁴ *La Carte et le territoire's* inspector Jasselin considers sexuality as 'le combat brutal pour la domination, l'élimination du rival [...] sans aucune raison d'être que d'assurer une propagation maximale aux gènes'.⁴⁵ This critique is developed further in *Configuration du dernier rivage*, where a poem laments the 'darwinisme avalisé' of modern-day sexuality.⁴⁶

The polygamy introduced by Ben Abbas's government is clearly not sexually liberal, but strengthens this market logic. Even if one accepted Houellebecq's implication that women would welcome such an arrangement, granting multiple wives to some men necessarily must leave others sexually pauperized; the Sorbonne's new president Rediger sees this not as an 'effet pervers' of polygamy but its 'but réel'. With winners and losers decided by outside evaluation, sexual relations are thus a more merciless system of social hierarchy than ever. Although the criteria on which dominance is judged have changed, with intellect taken more seriously than before, the struggle for it remains just as fierce. Sexuality has become more capitalist than ever: monogamous marriages represented a state-imposed regulation of the sexual market, while Ben Abbas's legislation allows a restricted number of men to monopolize the resource that women have become. With men considered dominant also rewarded financially, the economic and sexual markets are now more closely aligned than ever. Rediger even references Darwinism in his justification of polygamy, arguing that granting dominant males greater sexual prerogatives than those judged to be inferior specimens is good for human evolution: because 'les desseins du Créateur [s'expriment] au travers de la sélection naturelle [...] seuls certains individus [sont] appelés à transmettre leur semence, et à engender la génération future'. (S 268-269, 292-93).

All of this can equally be expressed in Betty's critical terms. The above-noted motivations underpinning François's probable conversion are decidedly material in nature. Rediger's arguments in favour of conversion invoke Islam's role as a bulwark against liberalism, but make equally little effort to move beyond the material realm. The immaterial benefits that Islam might provide are evoked only at the novel's end, when François reflects that if he chooses to convert, 'je me pénétrer[ai] de la grandeur de l'ordre cosmique' (S 298-99). This takes place, however, in François's imagination: it suggests that this is what he *wants*, albeit less consciously than material satisfaction, but not necessarily that it is what he will *get* by converting.

Islam, then, seems at best unlikely to provide François with the means to escape from materialist society that Houellebecq seems to want from religion. Furthermore, it blocks him from escaping in the other way that Houellebecq prizes: through love. Numerous critics, and Houellebecq himself, have noted the importance of love in his writing; Houellebecq seems to feel that the shared bond of fidelity that it creates between two people can, like religion, provide them with something unquantifiable in terms of market value and thus allow them to sidestep the consumerist present.⁴⁷ Not only does this kind of relationship seem implausible within the system of forced marriage to which women are subjected by Ben Abbas's reforms;

François's chance of love comes with Myriam, who emigrates with her Jewish parents before Ben Abbes is elected specifically because they fear the potential for anti-Semitic persecution in Muslim France (S 102–03). Houellebecq has validated this reading, noting that after Myriam leaves 'Il y a un truc qui s'est cassé en [François]. C'est l'amour, l'amour de Myriam qui fait qu'il n'a plus de plaisir après elle'.⁴⁸ Polygamy may allow French society to survive, but it is at the expense of love; and, as the narrator of *Plateforme* (2001) notes, 'en l'absence d'amour, rien ne peut être sanctifié'.⁴⁹

One could object that it is unfair to claim that Houellebecq portrays love as any more absent from Islamist France than was already the case in the secular Republic. Rediger and at least one of his wives enjoy a happy relationship, and prior to the introduction of polygamy the divorce rate was steadily rising. Musing on this, François observes that before divorce was an option, remaining together may not have left couples as unhappy as they now believe would be the case. Love, he reasons, takes time to develop; furthermore, most women secretly desire the life of domesticity granted to them by Ben Abbes's conservative reforms. This provocative claim comes from narrator rather than author, but is diegetically validated when an overwhelming majority of French women accept the financial incentives provided by Ben Abbes's government in return for their leaving the workplace. What this implies about the extent of women's aspirations may be abhorrent to many readers, but one could argue that Houellebecq intends for the reimposition of traditional gender roles to be read as positive for men, women, and society at large (S 93–96, 199–200, 247–48).

This argument fails to convince. Firstly, François makes his reflection on the potential benefits of obstructing divorce in relation to an acquaintance's unhappy marriage: a monogamous, consensual one in which the spouses presumably once considered themselves in love. Even Houellebecq would surely struggle to argue that forced, polygamous marriages would systematically produce loving relationships. When such relationships emerge in his earlier novels, for instance between Bruno and Christiane in *Les Particules élémentaires* or Michel and Valérie in *Plateforme*, they are between equal and consensual partners: any suggestion that Houellebecq would support forced, polygamous marriages is not supported by his overall oeuvre. Ben Abbes's relegation of women to the private sphere is also not portrayed as entirely positive; François seems uneasy with their disappearance from public life, noting for example the strained atmosphere at a male-only drinks reception (S 235–36).

Equally, even if polygamous marriages enable a certain kind of love to flourish under particular circumstances, they do so by reconciling love with materialism rather than by escaping it. Betty notes that in materialist societies, 'love is bound exclusively to the body'.⁵⁰

When the body starts to physically decay, becoming a source of disgust and suffering, love thus becomes impossible to maintain. In *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005), Houellebecq imagines scientific advances saving love from this fate: individuals can commit suicide when the ageing process begins, their memories subsequently being transferred to a clone in a fresh body. With physical decay thus overcome, love can survive; this solution, however, fails so completely that the novel's neo-human protagonists end up living solitary, ascetic lives in isolated compounds.⁵¹ Love, it seems, must be unbound entirely from materialism in order to provide the benefits it promises. *Soumission* offers a similarly materialist solution, at least to 'dominant' males entitled to multiple wives: older wives offer companionship to their husbands despite their physical decline, while younger and more attractive ones satisfy their bodily needs. Even if we discount the more obviously problematic aspects of this vision, love thus remains bound to the body. François's positive descriptions of polygamy fit a pattern noted by Per Buvik and Bruno Viard in Houellebecq's earlier novels, in which an unreliable narrator describes a dystopian future in utopian terms.⁵³

The Islamist takeover of France, then, makes the kind of love Houellebecq seems to value improbable at best. Far from ending the system of sexuality as social hierarchy that he finds so abhorrent, it institutionalizes it. While religion is apparently present, meanwhile, it is devoid of the benefits that Houellebecq associates with faith. Ritual and self-abnegation are both absent from Islamist France: Islam's ritual dimension is mentioned only when François describes his imagined conversion, while Rediger drinks alcohol in private and believes that the poverty of the majority should be counterbalanced by the existence of a super-rich minority. If François converts, it is not to calm his desires but to facilitate their satisfaction, and doing so does not enable him to escape the materialist paradigm. At no point is any belief in the immortality of the immaterial soul mentioned, and Houellebecq has underlined he considers such a belief crucial to the benefits religion can provide: although even 'a religion with no God may be possible [...] none of this seems to [Houellebecq] to be conceivable without a belief in eternal life'.⁵⁴ In fact, François hopes to obtain precisely the opposite if he converts: he hopes that it will grant him 'une deuxième vie, sans grand rapport avec la précédente' (S 299–300). He seeks not immortality in the next world but a new start in this one. Both ritual and self-abnegation are, however, present in the Catholic monastery of Ligugé: the latter is symbolized in the cigarette that François cannot have, and the former in the monastery's seven daily masses. He only considers converting to Islam after realizing that he cannot maintain either commitment, leaving the monastery early after realising that 'ce séjour ne [peut] être qu'un échec' (S 217–19, 244–45, 271–72).

Given that the features of religion that Houellebecq seems to value are absent from *Soumission*'s portrayal of Islam, it is tempting to ask whether he portrays it as a religion at all. When Rediger seeks to persuade François to convert, he does not use theological arguments. The closest he comes is invoking intelligent design: an idea which, even if accepted, does not imply the acceptance of any specific religious doctrine. Otherwise, he champions Islam primarily as a means of overcoming the decadence of atheist humanism; Islam thus appears as more of a political system than a religion. The quotation from Ayatollah Khomeini which introduces the novel's second section assumes its full significance in this context. Taken literally, 'Si l'islam n'est pas politique, il n'est rien' says not just that Islam is inherently political, but that Islam is *only* political (S 224, 253–55). Houellebecq himself has supported this reading, claiming that 'Il n'y a aucun vrai musulman dans ce roman. Il y a des personnalités politiques qui ont des ambitions politiques et l'idée de se servir de l'islam pour accomplir leurs ambitions. Aucun fanatique. Aucun pratiquant: juste des politiques.'⁵⁵

Both *Plateforme* and *Les Particules élémentaires* support the view that Houellebecq believes that Islam is slowly being emptied of religious content. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, one character holds that Islam is even more doomed to succumb to materialism than Christianity; the narrator of *Plateforme*'s hatred of Islam evaporates when a Jordanian banker explains to him that young Arabs secretly yearn for access to an American economic model based on consumption and sex.⁵⁶ At the time of *Plateforme*'s publication, Houellebecq himself made the same argument, claiming that Islam was dangerous but was also being undermined from within by consumerism.⁵⁷ *La Possibilité d'une île*, meanwhile, depicts events which resonate with those of *Soumission*, as Islam assumes the 'official' role once held by Catholicism in mainland Europe only to collapse in turn as liberal Western values spread to the Muslim world. *Soumission*, with its portrayal of the triumphant return of religion, has to date mostly been read as breaking from Houellebecq's previous claim that religious faith, Muslim or otherwise, is doomed. In this light, however, it appears to represent more of an evolution in his thought. As a religion, the Islam of *Soumission* is as dead as Houellebecq predicted; it lives on only as a political system, and there is no indication that its hegemony will last any longer than it does in *La Possibilité d'une île*. Islam has accommodated the materialism which defeated Catholicism, but has lost its properly religious aspects in doing so. Forget zombie Catholicism; this is zombie Islam.

More accurately, it is a zombie form of Houellebecq's conception of Islam, which uncritically reproduces a virulently Islamophobic discourse holding that Muslims wish to 'Islamize' the non-Muslim world. It is this putative conspiracy to impose political Islam upon

the West, which cannot be confused with the observation that Islam, like Christianity, is a proselytizing faith, that Camus labels the ‘grand remplacement’.⁵⁸ The unquestionably fundamentalist Islam that Ben Abbes implements is even described as ‘modéré’ by Tanneur, who has spent years of his career as an intelligence agent monitoring his party, on the basis that the new President opposes jihadi terrorism. If Tanneur – an expert on Ben Abbes and his party, whose predictions concerning them are consistently validated – is to be believed, the contested term of ‘moderate Islam’ means a faith determined to impose itself upon the world, but unwilling to do so using violence; the 22.3% of the French electorate that vote for Ben Abbes in the election’s first round support not just a Muslim party, but an Islamist one. While François notes that some non-Muslims vote for Ben Abbes, that he is able to attract such support surely implies that most French Muslims would support the imposition of Islamism (S 51–52, 75–77). This implication is rendered still more problematic by the way in which Houellebecq, or François, uses the term ‘musulman’ to designate not just practising Muslims, but postcolonial immigrants and their descendants more broadly: François uses the services of an escort named ‘Nadiabeurette’, of Tunisian descent, on the basis that ‘ça m’excitait [...] de choisir une musulmane’ (S 185–86). When he discovers that she is not religious, he does not correct this erroneous categorization; the category of ‘Muslim’, it seems, encompasses racial as well as religious markers. It is thus not only practising Muslims that *Soumission* depicts as potential Islamists, but a larger racialized population assumed to be Muslim.

This vision has implicitly been accepted by some critics. Lilla praises Houellebecq’s ‘genuine insight’ that no political party currently represents Muslim interests, implying that French Muslims vote as a homogeneous and entirely religiously motivated bloc; Gopnik argues that the novel cannot be described as ‘Islamophobic’ on the basis that Houellebecq’s portrayal of Islamist France is ‘quite fond’.⁵⁹ Gopnik’s argument only holds if we accept that France’s Muslims would support a *grand remplacement*, and define Islamophobia as the belief that such an outcome would be undesirable. His claim that the real target of *Soumission* is not Islam or Muslims but ‘the spinelessness of the French intellectual class’ is similarly unconvincing: the idea of a complicit, self-serving elite is central to the discourse of ‘Islamization’ propagated by the likes of Camus or Bat Ye’Or, both of whom are name-checked in *Soumission*.⁶⁰ A rejection of Muslims and of some poorly defined ‘elite’ are not mutually exclusive, and can form part of the same worldview.

Soumission is not *purely* anti-Muslim propaganda, but Houellebecq’s use of the trope of Islamization to express his distaste for France’s governing class is not politically neutral. His novel rejects liberal humanism, but also rejects Islam; by implying that most French

Muslims would vote for an Islamist party, it extends this rejection to Muslims. That rejection of Muslims has more in common with Todd's 'universalist' xenophobia than its 'differentialist' counterpart. The latter uses the language of equal rights and social liberalism while supporting neoliberal economic policies which in practice can only increase segregation; Houellebecq's critique of both economic and social liberalism has always been central to his writing. His rejection of Islam in *Soumission* may not be as visceral as it was in *Plateforme*, but nor is it hidden behind putatively 'progressive' rhetoric. That Houellebecq expresses a form of xenophobia rooted in an anti-clerical heritage through nostalgia for Catholicism seems paradoxical, but is consistent with Todd's claim that previously anti-clerical populations have been the most destabilized by the Church's demise.

Soumission's portrayal of the European project is also consistent with the rejection that could be expected from a universalist xenophobe. Prior to Ben Abbes's assumption of power, Tanneur, seeming once again to ventriloquize for Houellebecq, holds that the primary aim of the mainstream parties on both right and left is to bring about 'la disparition de la France, son intégration dans un ensemble fédéral européen' (S 145–46). The danger represented by the European Union is further underlined when Ben Abbes uses it to extend the Muslim conquest beyond France's borders; he seeks to develop the EU into an 'Union pour la Méditerranée' including numerous Muslim-majority nations (S 156–58, 198–99, 289). Houellebecq himself, meanwhile, has consistently expressed his opposition to the European Union, which he couches in egalitarian terms by critiquing its undemocratic nature.⁶¹

If rejection of the EU on these grounds is often associated with universalist xenophobia, this does not mean that support for it equals anti-racism; Todd, as outlined above, associates such support with differentialist xenophobia, noting the correlations between high turnout at the demonstrations of January 2015, support for the European project and zombie Catholicism (QEC 85–88). The EU is, for Todd, a toxic system of complementary xenophobias, with that of the zombie Catholics joined by a 'zombie Protestant' equivalent prevalent in northern and central Europe. Where the inegalitarian values of zombie Catholic populations are partially restrained by a residual attachment to the universalist message of Catholicism, zombie Protestant populations face no such restraints: their ongoing attachment to the Protestant belief in predestination, Todd claims, allows them to more unproblematically assume their belief that not all humans are equal. Although in times of financial plenty such inegalitarian beliefs can manifest themselves in the benign form of multiculturalist respect for difference, at times of crisis they need scapegoats: this is

why Islamophobia is now being imposed from above by Europe's dominant zombie Protestant nations, particularly Germany and the Scandinavian countries, and accepted by zombie Catholic regions in France and elsewhere (QEC 50–60, 87, 130–32, 134–35, 147, 225–28).

In this context, it is significant that the only organized movement against Islamization depicted in *Soumission* is not nationalist but Europeanist. Led by Godefroy Lempereur, another of François's colleagues, the pan-European 'Indigènes européens' reject Islam on the basis of their shared European cultural heritage. While their stance on the EU itself is not made clear, their xenophobia is rooted in the European identity that it has strived to foster. The French wing of the organization is also post-Catholic; Lempereur notes that adopting a European outlook allowed them to overcome the 'nostalgie' of the old, Catholic right. The movement, then, is simultaneously zombie Catholic, anti-Muslim, and pro-European (S 60–61).

The zombie Protestant north is acknowledged as a leader in this pan-European far right; Lempereur identifies Scandinavia as the European region in which an anti-Muslim insurrection is most likely to start. Also consistent with Todd's theory is the fact that the zombie Catholic Islamophobia of Lempereur's movement is rooted in the middle class: the elegant Lempereur, a Sorbonne lecturer in his twenties, exemplifies this (S 71). The only aspect of the movement that does not fit Todd's characterization of zombie Catholicism is that its Islamophobia is explicitly assumed rather than unconscious: as the novel is set in 2022, having been written in 2015, this could however be explained as its radicalization over time. While this timeframe may seem unrealistically short for such an evolution, Houellebecq has acknowledged that the same is true of the rise of Ben Abbes's party; *Soumission* is a thought experiment in which the author deliberately speeded up an evolution which he considers plausible in the longer term.⁶²

In the novel, the Indigènes européens have sworn to wage civil war on what they consider the Muslim colonizer, but mysteriously disappear after Ben Abbes is elected. What happens to them may be explicable in terms of Houellebecq's opposition to the European project: a rejection of Islam expressed through a post-Christian European identity cannot, *Soumission* suggests, resist Islamization. If this is all that remains, it will inevitably be crushed; Rediger's assertion that Europe has committed suicide is correct. That this xenophobic ideology is inherently compromised is further suggested when, as François first meets Lempereur, his otherwise stylish clothing incongruously includes the football shirt of

Paris Saint-Germain: a club with a notorious far right element in its fan base, but which is now funded by Qatari petrodollars.⁶³

Soumission, then, dramatizes the conflict between two forms of xenophobia: Houellebecq's own universalist xenophobia is central to the text, and Lempereur's differentialist counterpart is granted a space within it only so that it can crumble when challenged. *Soumission*'s egalitarian xenophobia perhaps helps to explain why, of all the real-life politicians depicted in the novel, Marine Le Pen emerges with the most credit. Unlike the leaders of the traditional mainstream parties, who prioritize the maintenance of their own privileged status over the protection of the secular Republic by forming a coalition behind Ben Abbes, Le Pen goes down fighting. Hammering home Republican values in speeches rumoured to have been written by Renaud Camus, she comfortably wins the first round of the election; only the formation of the coalition prevents her from taking office (S 75–77, 109–10, 150). While the real-life Le Pen's rhetoric is openly differentialist, Todd claims that many universalist xenophobes support her party. *Soumission* should not be read as a declaration of Houellebecq's support for Le Pen, but his universalist xenophobia may explain his comparatively fond portrayal of the RN leader.

Soumission, despite Houellebecq's claims to the contrary, demonstrates a clear rejection of Islam and by extension Muslims. As well as uncritically reproducing the discourse of the *grand remplacement*, Houellebecq depicts Islam not as a means of escaping from either capitalist consumerism or materialism but as a political system of domination which exacerbates the damage done by both. Love is near-impossible in the Islamist France that he portrays, with religion represented only by a Catholic church too weak to recover its role as a structuring force in French society. While Houellebecq seems to wish that it were able to do so, this is not because he himself wishes to be a believer; rather, it is because the downfall of Catholicism led to the disintegration of an anti-clerical movement to which he may otherwise have belonged, leaving him culturally rootless. It is this rootlessness that motivates his rejection of Islam and Muslims, fitting neatly into Todd's framework as 'universalist xenophobia': an analysis supported by his opposition to the European project and comparatively positive portrayal of Le Pen. *Soumission* is a novel about Islam and Muslims, but one which cannot be understood without reference to de-christianized France's complex relationship with Catholicism.

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¹ Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015). Further references to this edition are given as S in the text.

² Emmanuel Todd, *Qui Est Charlie? Sociologie d'une crise religieuse* (Paris: Points, 2015), pp. 20–21. Further references to this edition are given as QEC in the text.

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⁴ Sylvain Bourmeau, 'Un suicide littéraire français: Critique de Soumission suivie d'un long entretien exclusif avec son auteur, Michel Houellebecq', Médiapart, 2 January 2015, <<http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/sylvain-bourmeau/020115/un-suicide-litteraire-francais>> [accessed 28 May 2015]

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⁶ Jean-Laurent Cassely, 'Manifestations du 11 janvier: qui était (vraiment) Charlie?' Slate, 6 May 2015, <<http://www.slate.fr/story/101221/11-janvier-qui-etait-vraiment-charlie>> [accessed 8 May 2017]

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⁸ Bourmeau, 'Un suicide littéraire français'.

⁹ Adam Gopnik, 'The Next Thing: Michel Houellebecq's Francophobic satire', *The New Yorker*, 26 January 2015, <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/26/next-thing>> [accessed 21 June 2015];

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¹⁰ Adam Leith Gollner, 'What Houellebecq Learned from Huysmans', *The New Yorker*, November 12 2015, <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/what-houellebecq-learned-from-huysmans>> [accessed 15 September 2018].

¹¹ Gopnik, 'The Next Thing'.

¹² Lilla, 'Slouching Towards Mecca'.

¹³ Pratt, 'Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*', pp. 31–32.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Todd and Hervé Le Bras, *Le Mystère français* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), p. 16, 55–60, further references to this edition are given as LMF in the text; Todd, *Qui Est Charlie?*, pp. 30–31, 58, 143–44.

¹⁵ See for example Régis Debray, *Dieu, un itinéraire. Matériaux pour l'histoire de l'Éternel en*

Occident (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2001); *Le Feu sacré. Fonctions du religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007 [2003]); *Les Communions humaines. Pour en finir avec "la religion"* (Paris: Fayard, 2005); Marcel Gauchet, *Le Désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985); *La Démocratie contre elle-même* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002); Marcel Gauchet and Luc Ferry, *Le Religieux après la religion* (Paris: Grasset, 2004).

¹⁶ Debray, *Dieu, un itinéraire*, p. 364; *Le Feu sacré*, pp. 88, 183; *Les Communions humaines*, p. 156

¹⁷ Debray, *Le Feu sacré*, p. 88; Régis Debray and Claude Geffré, *Avec ou sans Dieu? Le Philosophe et le théologien* (Paris: Bayard, 2006), pp. 36, 71; Gauchet, *La Démocratie contre elle-même*, pp. 29–31, 86.

¹⁸ Todd, *Qui Est Charlie?*, pp. 111–12; Debray, *Dieu, un itinéraire*, pp. 364, 381; Gauchet, *La Démocratie contre elle-même*, pp. 332, 378.

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²⁵ Louis Betty, *Without God: Michel Houellebecq and Materialist Horror* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), pp. 47–48.

²⁶ Bourmeau, 'Un suicide littéraire français'; Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé*, pp. 250–51.

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²⁸ Morrey, 'Stillness and Slowness in the Work of Michel Houellebecq', p. 9

²⁹ Betty, *Without God*, pp. 10–11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10–12, 50–51.

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- ³³ Valérie Toranian and Marin de Viry, 'Michel Houellebecq: "Dieu ne veut pas de moi"', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, July–August 2015, 8–33 (pp. 22–23).
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- ³⁶ Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Mesnil-sur-l'Estrée, Flammarion, 1998), p. 144
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- ³⁹ Bourmeau, 'Un suicide littéraire français'.
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- ⁴⁴ Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002 [1994]), pp. 124, 134.
- ⁴⁵ Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, pp. 303–04.
- ⁴⁶ Houellebecq, *Configuration du dernier rivage*, p. 49.
- ⁴⁷ See, for example, Morrey, 'Stillness and Slowness in the Work of Michel Houellebecq', pp. 18–21; Pierre Jourde, *La littérature sans estomac* (Paris: Esprit des péninsules, 2002), pp. 281–82; Sébastien Sacré, 'Désirs frustrés, aliénation et souci d'autrui: les rapports de l'éthique et de la morale dans les romans de Michel Houellebecq' in *Michel Houellebecq à la Une*, ed. by Clément & Van Wesemael, pp. 113–25 (pp. 120–21); Bruno Viard, 'Situation psycho-politique de Michel Houellebecq' in *Michel Houellebecq à la Une*, ed. Clément & Van Wesemael, pp. 127–39 (pp. 135–36).
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⁵⁸ Camus, *Le Grand Remplacement*

⁵⁹ Gopnik, ‘The Next Thing’; Lilla, ‘Slouching Towards Mecca’.

⁶⁰ Gopnik, ‘The Next Thing’; Camus, *Le Grand Remplacement*, pp. 91–92; Houellebecq, *Soumission*, pp. 109–10, 158–59; Bat Ye’Or, *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005).

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READING HOUELLEBECQ'S *SOUSSION* WITH EMMANUEL TODD]