

# Veiled Intolerance

by RICHARD WOLIN

[from the April 9, 2007 issue]

Here are some scenes, culled from recent headlines, of a continent--"Eurabia"--seemingly on the brink:

§ A Berlin opera company abruptly cancels the performance of Mozart's *Idomeneo*--whose anticlerical finale features the bloody, severed heads of Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad--for fear of provoking a violent response on the part of Muslims in Germany, who number some 3.3 million. Undoubtedly, in the back of the director's mind was: (1) the global rioting spurred by the Danish cartoon controversy, which featured demeaning images of the prophet Muhammad as a terrorist; (2) the detection last summer of undetonated terrorist bombs aboard the beloved Deutsche Bahn, or German railway system. Ultimately, the decision to cancel *Idomeneo* was rescinded and the opera was performed in December, without a hitch.

§ In a recent speech, Pope Benedict XVI approvingly quotes a fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor's bellicose claim: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." Underlying the Pope's prejudicial characterization of Islam are his fears concerning ongoing negotiations over Turkey's admission to the European Union--an outcome that would result in an influx of some 70 million additional Muslims, thereby, in his view, challenging Europe's "Christian character." To his credit, the Pontiff modified his position on Turkey's admission to the EU during a November visit to Ankara, amid massive anti-Vatican protests.

§ In October Ekin Deligöz, a woman delegate to the German Bundestag, receives death threats for suggesting that Muslim immigrants remove their head scarves in order to "enter the historical present."

§ Robert Redeker, a high school philosophy teacher from Toulouse, publishes an incendiary article in the conservative French daily *Le Figaro* comparing Islam unfavorably with Christianity and Judaism ("Jesus is a master of love; Muhammad is a master of hatred"). Redeker is denounced by the Al Jazeera television network. Islamic groups post his photo, telephone number and home address on the Internet. Shortly thereafter, he must go into hiding in order to avoid numerous death threats.

§ British House of Commons leader Jack Straw admonishes Muslim women sporting the *niqab*, or full-face veil, for promoting social separatism. This stance is publicly endorsed by Prime Minister Tony Blair, who argued the *niqab* should be abandoned insofar as it constitutes a "mark of separation" and thus inhibits sociability. More important, Straw's and Blair's criticisms suggest that Britain and other European nations are re-examining their commitment to multiculturalism in the wake of fears concerning the rise of

"Islamism": the idea that Islamic precepts should trump the rule of law and Western secularism.

Of course, underlying these European anxieties are the 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid (191 deaths), the 2005 London Underground bombings (fifty-five deaths) and the September 11 attacks. The intemperate and overheated reactions to these events, however, indicate that it is increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to have a reasonable and fair-minded discussion about Islam and the West. Instead, in the Western mind, "Islam" has become inextricably associated with "Islamic fundamentalism": the attempt to subject all spheres of life to the theological precepts and strictures of the Koran.

Today there are an estimated 15 million to 17 million Muslims living in Europe. Anyone who wishes to address the theme of "Europe and Islam" immediately runs up against an intractable definitional conundrum. For in Europe, the monolithic religion known as Islam is functionally nonexistent. The national origins of the European Muslim population vary dramatically from country to country. To wit: Whereas the majority of Dutch Muslims hail from Indonesia, Suriname, Morocco and Turkey, most British Muslims emigrated from the Indian subcontinent. Germany's Muslims are predominantly Turks (Turkey is, of course, a secular republic, honoring the separation of mosque and state), whereas the origins of the French Muslim community may be traced to the Maghreb, or Saharan Africa.

The French Muslim community itself is further subdivided among Arabs, Berbers (from the mountainous Kabyle region of Algeria), Africans and converts, who compose 1 percent of French Muslims. How, then, might one classify a nonobservant Kabyle immigrant who is a French citizen, born in Algeria, educated in the French school system, who speaks Amazigh at home and French at work? Is he/she Berber, Algerian, French or, qua nonobservant, even veritably Muslim? Clearly, the vagaries of religion, identity and ethnicity are multifarious, rich and potentially dizzying. In *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves*, John Bowen, a professor of anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis, describes a discussion concerning the permutations of immigrant identity in which one woman avows, tongue-in-cheek: "We always mix up categories, so now I can be a *française d'origine algérienne musulmane non-pratiquante*"--a nonpracticing French Muslim of Algerian descent.

There are also prodigious generational differences among Europe's Muslims. As a rule, Islamism's greatest appeal is among second- or third-generation "immigrants": maladapted youth whom the integration process has failed and who feel desperately torn between two worlds--their parents' country of origin, which many have never seen, and their adoptive European homeland. Sadly, psychologists have shown that, whereas depression is prominent among first-generation immigrants who experience adaptational difficulties, schizophrenia predominates among maladjusted second-generation migrants. Such youth turn to Islamism in order to resolve what is often a severe and protracted identity crisis. Given the prevailing logic of social exclusion, it is little wonder that Europe's immigrant ghetto communities are concentrated in dismal neighborhoods characterized by high unemployment, poverty and criminality. Under these

circumstances, fundamentalist Islam provides "existential meaning," a sense of belonging as well as an astringent critique of Western mores, which are often perceived as "corrupt" and "materialistic"--a critique that resonates profoundly with the immigrants' own severe adaptational disappointments and failures.

These facts strongly suggest that converts to Islamic fundamentalism are made and not born. In most cases, Islamism is a conscious choice embraced by frustrated second-generation immigrants who feel they are growing up in an ethnic and cultural no man's land. In *French Hospitality* (1984), Tahar Ben Jelloun, a Moroccan writer based in Paris, accurately describes them as "a generation doomed to cultural orphanhood and ontological fragility." Thus, Islam and Islamism are two different things--a point that "clash of civilization" theorists like Samuel Huntington have failed to register. (In a recent book, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Huntington goes so far as to characterize Muslim immigrants as an "indigestible" minority.)

Thus the rise of Islamism in Europe has very little to do with the intrinsic nature of Islam as a religion and everything to do with the failures of integration and Muslim immigrants' sense of de-territorialization. As Olivier Roy comments in his foreword to Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse's *Integrating Islam*: "All serious studies of the formation of terrorism in Europe show that the process is more likely to be the result of alienation, isolation and generational crisis." This conclusion distinctly belies the claims of scaremongering jeremiads like Bruce Bawer's *While Europe Slept* and French author Emmanuel Brenner's *The Lost Territories of the Republic*, which misleadingly contend that, à la Bernard Lewis, Europe is undergoing a process of "reverse colonization." The implication is that in twenty years' time, Europe as we have known it will cease to exist; it will have instead become "Eurabia."

Official government policy toward Muslim immigrants has also differed vastly from nation to nation. Britain (1 million to 2 million Muslim immigrants out of a total population of 60 million) and Holland (1 million Muslim immigrants out of a total population of 16 million) have for the most part embraced a flexible, multicultural approach. Instead of assimilating, immigrants have been encouraged to maintain their time-honored, traditional religious and cultural orientations. In many instances, the state has actively nurtured such allegiances, practically, financially and rhetorically. As visitors to these countries well know, nightly newscasts might readily be confused with ad spots for the United Colors of Benetton.

Following the November 2004 murder of filmmaker and provocateur Theo van Gogh--who was fond of referring to Muslims as "goat fuckers"--by a Moroccan Dutchman with Islamist leanings, Dutch patience with multiculturalism, already strained in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, seems to have reached a tipping point. In 1999 immigrants made up 45 percent of Amsterdam's population. Projections suggest that the percentage will increase to 52 percent by 2015. The authors of *When Ways of Life Collide: Multiculturalism and Its Discontents in the Netherlands* deem the Dutch multicultural experiment to be a grand and unequivocal failure. In their view, multiculturalism and liberal democracy are fundamentally incompatible. Their argument is a relatively simple

one: By encouraging "difference" among ethnic subgroups, multiculturalism ends up turning these groups into targets of resentment and thereby insuring their rejection by the majority culture. As the authors remark in mock astonishment: "No one anticipated that liberal values would be used to legitimize illiberal practices. But so they have. What other reaction could the majority have but to reject Muslim immigrants? What other conclusion could they draw but to oppose cultural pluralism and to press for assimilation?"

Yet behind such claims lies an additional, unsupported insinuation or suspicion: that Islam and liberal democracy are incompatible. As others have noted, this perspective, rather than encouraging tolerance and openness among citizens, ends up blaming the victims and pandering to majority prejudice. Moreover, it conveniently overlooks the many highly successful instances of European Muslim integration. In France, for example, it has become fashionable to speak of the rise of a successful and prosperous *beurgoisie*. ("Beur" is French slang for second-generation North African immigrants.)

A similar disillusionment with multiculturalism suffused Britain after the July 2005 London Underground attacks. Yet, far from being a one-way street, the spiral of mistrust and suspicion has been mutual. The flip side of heightened European Islamophobia is that Muslim immigrants increasingly feel subject to the hurt and injustices of harassment and discrimination. As a Moroccan immigrant writer recently quipped: "When Samia wants to rent a studio apartment that has been advertised in Paris, she finds upon giving her name that the apartment has been unavailable since September 11." *In Murder in Amsterdam*, his recent book on the death of Theo van Gogh, Ian Buruma interviews a gifted Muslim law student who, with admirable concision, explains: "Before [September 11], I was just Nora. Then, all of a sudden, I was a Muslim."

France is another case entirely. In keeping with the precepts of "Republicanism," it has followed a rigorously assimilationist approach--a color-blind, one-size-fits-all, "immigrants into Frenchmen" model of citizenship. The Hexagon experienced a foretaste of future difficulties during an October 2001 "friendly" soccer match between the French and Algerian national teams intended to promote interethnic solidarity. The match was staged at the Stade de France in Paris, the scene of France's brilliant 1998 World Cup triumph. Expectations were high. The black-beur-blanc French squad, which prominently featured Africans and Arabs (notably captain Zinedine Zidane), was a walking advertisement for multiculturalism. But with France leading 4 to 1 in the second half, things fell apart. Frustrated *beur* fans suddenly mobbed the pitch, and the match had to be discontinued.

According to the best available estimates, there are 5 million to 6 million Muslims in France out of a total population of 60 million. French republican ideology is so studiously tone-deaf to considerations of "difference" that the law forbids the statistical tracking of immigrants according to their ethnic or religious backgrounds. Whereas the rigidly assimilationist approach seemed to work well for an earlier generation of predominantly Eastern European immigrants, the balance sheet vis-à-vis North Africans and their descendants has been decidedly mixed. With the November 2005 riots in the *cités*, or suburban housing projects--events that gave the lie to the fiction that "there are no ghettos

in France"--a point of no return was apparently reached. In the aftermath of the 2005 disturbances, French President Jacques Chirac explicitly instructed state-run television networks to begin featuring more persons of color. Even Interior Minister and presidential contender Nicolas Sarkozy, who helped stoke the 2005 eruption with his racist characterization of Muslim youth as *racaille*, or "scum," has come round to embracing some form of affirmative action as both inevitable and indispensable, given the failings of France's traditional "integrationist" model.

The political and ideological challenges of reconciling republicanism with the demands of diversity are well illustrated by Azouz Begag's fine study, *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance*. Begag was France's first minister for equal opportunities. He was also the first person of North African descent to occupy Cabinet-level rank. At one point in his narrative, Begag recounts his experiences as an Algerian growing up in Lyon, where he attended the Ecole Sergent-Blandan. It turns out that the school was named for an officer who, during the 1840s, played a prominent role in the French conquest of Begag's native Algeria. As Begag observes:

The day I learned the story of Sergeant Blandan I felt a strange combination of emotions. To think that he and I had been born in the same town, Lyon! To think that he had probably fought and killed some of my poor, defenseless ancestors in one of the tribes in the Sétif region.... To think that, a century later, I went to a school bearing his name and learned to become French there. It was in that same school that I also had my first experiences of racism.

Since, in France, discrimination against North Africans still abounds--"You kicked us out of Algeria in 1962; you're not going to take over here now" is Begag's apt summary of the prevailing anti-Maghrebian mentality--to redress this situation, Begag sees no alternative but to encourage, *comme les Américains*, some minimal form of multiculturalism. He gazes admiringly across the Atlantic at the "melting pot" model in America, where, unlike in France, the idea of hyphenated identities has gained broad public acceptance. Begag speaks glowingly--and perhaps naïvely--of his experiences as a visiting professor at Cornell University during the 1980s: "I have been fascinated by the pragmatic way in which different ethnic groups have been mixed together in that enormous country. I was struck the most by what I saw on television. Journalists of every color under the sun held front-rank positions in prime-time slots."

Begag is understandably frustrated with the snail-like pace of upward social mobility among France's North African immigrants, which in his view reveals the bankruptcy of the republican-assimilationist model. As he observes: "I am...disappointed personally by the extraordinary slowness of the system during an entire generation in responding to the urgent demands of young ethnics for proper social recognition." Yet, on the whole, and despite his coveting of cultural diversity *à l'Amérique*, Begag's remedies and proposals are quite timorous. In his view, measures bearing any resemblance to American-style affirmative action--what the French disparagingly refer to as *la discrimination positive*--are unacceptable, insofar as they remain irreconcilable with republican values. In Begag's view, French occupational life must come closer to being a genuine meritocracy, thereby

harking back to the French revolutionary--and quintessentially republican--battle cry of "careers open to talent."

Begag's "equal opportunities" approach stresses the need to overcome racism and prejudice by insuring that qualified minority applicants gain access to the employment prospects from which, historically, they have been systematically excluded. But in what ways would this "occupational" approach effectively cut through the thick tangle of existing prejudice? And how, exactly, might Begag's "equal opportunities" desideratum be achieved in lieu of more active methods and approaches? On this matter, France's first minister for equal opportunities is strangely reticent: a good indication of just how difficult it remains--even for those with good intentions--to surmount those aspects of the republican tradition that remain irreconcilable with the realities of contemporary cultural diversity.

Three years ago, eyebrows were raised when, following a voluble public debate, France passed a draconian law banning the foulard, or Islamic head scarf, from public schools. The issue first arose during the late 1980s, following a series of Middle East-related terrorist attacks in Paris and the fallout over the Salman Rushdie affair (Rushdie's Japanese translator was killed, his Italian translator was stabbed and his Norwegian publisher was brutally assaulted). Among the leading advocates of the ban were French feminists, who were concerned about Islam's repressive effects on girls. Confusing Islam and Islamism--and apparently oblivious to how their rhetoric might sound in some Muslim ears--women's rights advocates confidently decreed that the foulard was a sign of women's submission as well as a symbol of Islamic fundamentalism.

But clearly, to sport the foulard in Bobigny, France, means something qualitatively different from wearing it in the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran or contemporary Saudi Arabia. In the French case, it bespeaks a conscious attempt on the part of second-generation "immigrant" girls to reconnect with an otherwise fragmentary religious heritage. In certain instances, it may indeed connote female servility, as Muslim feminist opponents of the foulard have argued. But many Muslim girls view the head scarf as a source of empowerment: a public profession of faith that provides their lives with an indispensable source of meaning and purpose. As John Bowen shows in his excellent book, sociological surveys have confirmed that "young women [choose] to adopt Islamic dress, including the headscarf, as part of efforts to negotiate a sphere of social freedom and authority and to construct an identity as a Muslim, and that the relative weight of these two reasons depended on their age and social situation."

The other major group to vigorously oppose the head scarf was committed republicans: a formidable alliance of socialists and left-leaning intellectuals. In their overwrought view, to allow the foulard in French public schools would represent the "Munich of the Republican school"--an ignominious surrender to the forces of ignorance and superstition. One of the signal achievements of French republicanism was the 1905 law establishing the rudiments of *laïcité*: delineating firm lines of separation between church and state but also insuring that, unlike in the ancien régime, public education would remain firmly in the hands of state officials. It was only at this point that French

secularists definitively won a battle that had begun approximately 110 years earlier, with the July 12, 1790, Civil Constitution of the Clergy--the law that required clerics to swear an oath of allegiance to the Constitution.

In order to understand the often baffling complexities of the foulard affair, one must appreciate French republicanism's longstanding aversion to the idea of groups or associations trespassing on the sacrosanct terrain of state authority. From an orthodox republican standpoint, laicization's triumph was the result of a bitter and protracted Hundred Years' War against ecclesiastical backwardness. Republicanism's defenders were not about to cede to Muslim immigrants hard-won gains that had been made over the course of a century-long struggle against Catholicism. Nor was it by chance that the conflict over the public face of Islam erupted in that traditional republican bastion, the *école*, or public school system. For during the heyday of the Third Republic, it was the *école* that was charged with the herculean task of politically integrating France's culturally and linguistically diverse regions: turning an assortment of unruly provincials (Bretons, Languedocians, Basques and Corsicans) into loyal and committed "citizens of the Republic." French republicans proudly distinguish their *étatiste* conception of citizenship, which guarantees a neutral public space, from the atomistic Anglo-Saxon model, where the individual is the primary bearer of rights. As political philosopher Blandine Kriegel, head of Chirac's High Council on Integration, confidently asserts: "The public school is part of the public because it is where civic education takes place. And so is public administration. There will never be Sikh civil servants in France!"

Opponents of the head-scarf proscription aptly pointed out that if the overall goal was to facilitate Muslim integration, the ban would be radically counterproductive. For the penalty, expulsion, would merely result in the exclusion of Muslim girls from the public school system, that crucible of republican socialization. Thus, in the eyes of many, the ban seemed to be a classic instance of a cure that was worse than the disease. Fortunately, by the mid-1990s, the conflict over the foulard seemed to have been successfully defused via the tactful negotiation of individual cases at the local level. Why, then, in 2003 did the Chirac government decide to revisit the entire vexed and contentious issue? The decision seems especially baffling in light of the fact that, according to French government statistics, of an estimated 250,000 Muslim schoolgirls, a mere 1,200 wore the foulard with any regularity. Under the circumstances, why not leave well enough alone?

Clearly, one of the reasons had to do with anti-immigrant candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen's stunning showing in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections, when, by edging out the Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, he acceded to the second round against the incumbent, Jacques Chirac. The mainstream political parties--especially Chirac's Union for a Popular Movement, which stood to lose the most--were determined not to leave the hot-button issue of Muslim integration to right-wingers like Le Pen. By resuscitating the foulard affair and flaunting a zero-tolerance approach vis-à-vis Islam, center-right politicians like Chirac and Sarkozy sought to exploit the issue for political gain. But was Islam really the issue, or did it merely happen to be the religious credo of France's largest immigrant group--a prospect that casts the head-scarf controversy in an entirely different light?

In fact, when viewed from a distance, it appears that the foulard affair has much less to do with Muslim integration than questions of French identity--an identity that, in recent years, has found itself markedly under siege. Among convinced republicans, drawing a line in the sand over the head scarf was a way of preserving Frenchness in an era when what it meant to be French had been exposed to a variety of threatening, centrifugal political challenges. In recent years France has, with varying degrees of success, attempted to fend off threats to national sovereignty from the European Union (hence the resounding no vote in the May 2005 referendum on the European Constitution) as well as the forces of globalization. Having to stand by helplessly in 2002-03 as America began recklessly funneling troops into the Middle East--a former French sphere of influence--seemed another cruel reminder of a once proud nation-state's geopolitical inconsequence. Moreover, the humiliating military defeats France endured in the era of decolonization--Dien Bien Phu (1954) and Algeria (1954-62)--have left permanent discernible scars on the national psyche. Thus, over the last several decades, the French state has seen its room for maneuver drastically curtailed in the realm of both foreign and domestic affairs.

Advocates of laicization thought that reviving the foulard controversy would allow them to engage in a last-ditch, rear-guard action to preserve the contours of French republicanism. Unfortunately, the thought that success might come at the cost of further alienating several million Muslims crossed their minds only after the fact--if at all.