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France on Fire

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French President François Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, President of the European Council and former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, Jordan's Queen Rania and King Abdullah, and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi marching to protest terrorism following the attacks on Charlie Hebdo, Paris, January 11, 2015

On January 13, two days after millions in France marched to commemorate those assassinated by Islamist radicals the week before, Socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls gave a stirring speech in the French National Assembly that was celebrated by socialists and conservatives alike as among the best in recent memory. He was firm and balanced. He first praised the police and expressed the government's resolve to put in place security measures to win what he was not shy about calling a "war on terrorism, jihadism, and Islamist radicalism." He then insisted that France was not at war with a religion and must stand firm on its principles of toleration and laicity—that is, the separation of religion and state. He received a standing ovation. Then, to the nation's surprise, the deputies broke spontaneously and unanimously into the *Marseillaise*, the first time this had happened since the signing of the armistice ending World War I in 1918.

On the question of security, this unity is likely to last. There is a solid consensus that more resources will have to be devoted to tracking suspected terrorists and monitoring the Internet for signs of trouble. Legislation will be required to give the government sufficient legal leeway to accomplish that, which it will get, since all parties recognize the deficiencies yet none wants to reproduce the American Patriot Act. So firm has the government of François Hollande been that the leading conservative opposition party, the UMP, and its mercurial leader, ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy,

have found few plausible grounds for dissent. Even his party's more muscular demands—isolating Islamists in prison, stripping binational jihadists of their French citizenship, limiting the civil rights of nationals who get involved in jihadist movements (as was done with Vichy collaborators after World War II)—are under serious consideration by the government. By the end of January, 117 people had been placed under indictment for making statements justifying terrorism, and twenty-eight had been sentenced to prison terms. Among them is the poisonously anti-Semitic performer and activist Dieudonné M'bala M'bala.

On the questions of toleration and laicity, however, France is anything but united. For the past quarter-century a political and intellectual culture war over the place of Islam in French society has been bubbling along, and every few years some event—a student wears a burka to school, riots erupt in a poor neighborhood, a mosque is attacked, the National Front wins a local election—renews hostilities. Now, though, nearly one thousand French citizens are believed to have traveled to Syria to join other Islamist militants there, and heavily armed jihadists pledging allegiance to ISIS and al-Qaeda in Yemen have massacred seventeen people in Paris. Given the enormity of the crimes, it is hard to escape the feeling that a major battle is beginning and that it will overshadow economic and other issues here for months and years to come. And the battleground, as is typical in France, will be the schools.

Immediately after the murders the French press focused almost exclusively on the killers and their milieu: the poor neighborhoods, the radical preachers, imprisoned terrorists, and the international jihadist network that furnished arms, training, and indoctrination. While disturbing, none of this news was surprising (though the French had greatly underestimated the effect of the prisons, where young men who commit petty crimes fall under the spell of radical fundamentalists with terrorist connections). Western countries have had enough experience with Islamist terrorism to know how it breeds.

What genuinely shocked the public, and the political and intellectual classes that claim to speak for it, was the news that a noticeable number of students in what are euphemistically called here *les quartiers* (meaning poor and heavily Muslim neighborhoods) refused to recognize the moment of silence President Hollande had called for. And not only that. Some told their teachers that the victims got what they deserved because no one should be allowed to mock the Prophet; others celebrated the killers on social media, and circulated rumors that the entire crisis was manufactured by the government and/or Zionist agents.

The extent of these incidents is impossible to measure with precision. But newspapers were full of interviews with teachers in the *quartiers* who reported trouble and admitted their unpreparedness for the resistance and their anxiety about addressing it. The prudent education minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, who was born in Morocco, has said that there have been at least two hundred such incidents. Some teachers made matters worse. *Le Monde* told the story of one who was caught on tape telling her students that the killings were faked and the caskets of the “dead” were empty; another forced his students to look at cartoons of Muhammad in *Charlie Hebdo*, and when they resisted said, “I’m the boss here, you can take out your Kalashnikovs.”

The response of the Hollande government was swift and overshadowed the security measures unveiled by Manuel Valls the previous week. At a press conference Vallaud-Belkacem announced a vast program that included expanded civic education, both of students and of those training to be teachers; the celebration of an annual “laicity day”; expanded teaching on the history of religions; classes training students to look critically at information on the Internet; more emphasis on reasoning and the use of the French language, including for parents who do not speak it; greater involvement of parents in the disciplining of their children; and other proposals moving in the same sensible direction. The minister wants the school establishments to be much more active in teaching democratic values and laicity, and in confronting racism and anti-Semitism. Their attitude should no longer be “don’t make waves” but rather “don’t let anything pass.” She made the case that educational reform was crucial for national security: France has ten thousand more soldiers patrolling the streets, she said, but it has a million teachers at its disposal.

There are few other countries where public officials would have thought it necessary to introduce an education program as an antiterrorist measure. But the modern French have always treated education as the projection screen for their anxieties and uncertainties. The nineteenth-century conflict over the legacy of the Enlightenment and the Revolution was largely carried out by proxy struggles over lay and Catholic education. These were thought to have ended in 1905 with the passage of a law, still in effect, establishing *la laïcité républicaine* in church-state relations. Laicity, in the

French understanding, is not the equivalent of “secularism” in English. It means, in principle, freedom of belief and religious practice in society, but the strict neutrality of the state in relation to those beliefs and practices. In effect, it has until recently entailed the obligation of teachers and students to divest themselves of their religion while in the schools.

Laicity does not require or even imply toleration in society at large. And the idea of republicanism has historically been suspicious of it. Nearly everyone in France today declares himself and herself to be republican, but originally the term was used to describe a very specific kind of democratic ideal. It is one that guarantees rights but also envisages a strong state to provide for the public welfare and control the economy, and is proudly national—and therefore hostile to outside influences like Catholicism, international communism, the United States, and now the global economy and Islamism. Classic republicanism is not libertarian or communitarian; it presumes that rights come with public obligations, and that fraternity must be built through a common, quasi-sacred education in those rights and duties. One is not born a French republican citizen, one becomes one in school by being initiated into the republican ideal.

Throughout most of the twentieth century this model of political education went without serious challenge. That began to change in the 1970s as authority of any sort came into question and republicanism was charged by the left with being a cover for political, economic, sexual, and colonial domination. As the students of that period themselves became teachers, the older model was progressively abandoned without a coherent new one to replace it. In July 1989, the French republic celebrated its bicentenary, and with the simultaneous collapse of the Soviet empire it seemed indeed, as the historian François Furet declared, that the French Revolution was finally over and that France was becoming a “centrist republic” like others in the West. But in September of that year three Muslim girls in a Paris suburb were sent home by their school principal for coming to class in headscarves, on the ground that such an ostentatious religious symbol violated the principle of republican laicity. The war over the schools resumed and continues, to the incomprehension of much of the outside world.

That is because it is only secondarily about education. It is primarily about the state and status of the Muslim community in France, which has changed over the past quarter-century. Exact figures are hard to come by, since the French government by law cannot collect data on religious affiliation, but the consensus is that Muslims make up 6–8 percent of the population today, and that given birthrates that number should reach 10 percent by 2030. (Since the year 2000 the number of Muslim places of religious worship has also increased by 60 percent.)

The public perception is that Muslims make up a much larger percentage of the population than they do, which is an illusion: it has mainly grown more concentrated, in urban and suburban *quartiers* and declining industrial towns that non-Muslims have managed to flee. Unlike the immigrants of the postwar decades who easily found work in a booming economy, more recent arrivals have faced closing factories, extremely low economic growth, and rigid labor markets that make jobs scarce for everyone. The French used to pride themselves on not having ghettos like American cities do, but today the word is employed openly to describe the *quartiers*. Prime Minister Valls, in a hyperbolic moment, recently used the term “apartheid.”

But the practice of Islam in France has also changed, especially in these *quartiers*. This has been documented with remarkable thoroughness by a number of Islam specialists, especially Gilles Kepel. In the past few years he has published two revealing books, *Banlieue de la République* (The Suburb of the Republic) and *Quatre-vingt-treize* (Ninety-Three), echoing the title of Victor Hugo’s famous novel. Both are the fruit of a year he spent studying daily life in Seine-Saint-Denis, the French *département* 93. Saint-Denis is a storied place: it is where most French kings are buried, and was until recently a bastion of union workers who voted overwhelmingly for the Communist Party. Today it is a stronghold of the National Front and also has a large impoverished Muslim population.

Kepel notes that while older immigrants overwhelmingly practice a pacific Islam and see no contradiction with French citizenship, more and more of their children have been affected by the fundamentalist currents flowing from the Middle East. Different groups—some strictly Salafist, some associated with the Muslim Brotherhood—compete for control of local associations and actively recruit younger members, to the consternation of the more integrated and shrinking establishment.

The charismatic preachers—called “older brothers”—who attract young boys and men are largely trained in Saudi Arabia, Syria, or Iraq and have never lived outside a Muslim country. A great number do not speak French. Their

followers—though born in France and French-speaking—are much more observant and separatist than their parents are and have much more extreme views on issues like sexuality (particularly homosexuality), female purity, and Jews and Israel. They and the older brothers can be seen policing certain neighborhoods, singling out girls and women whose dress they find inappropriate.

It is in this setting that recent French debates over laicity in the schools must be seen. The positions are highly polarized. Integrationists see an increasingly fundamentalist Islam as a threat to the French model and think that the schools should actively resist it by teaching secular values; classic republicans think that the state must keep religion completely out of the schools but should not interfere with private beliefs; and multiculturalists think that Islam is simply being stigmatized, that social exclusion is mainly to blame, and that differences of all sorts should be represented and celebrated in schools.

The three assassins who massacred innocents were seen not only as fanatics, like the hundreds of French people who, over the past year, have made their way to the battlefields of Iraq and Syria. They were seen as products of a collapsed educational establishment that either failed to integrate and secularize them, failed to make them citizens, or failed to respect them, depending on one's general outlook. The posthumous support the killers received from young people in *quartiers* across France was taken by everyone as confirmation of what they already thought.

Each of these views has problems, but it is the multiculturalist one that seems the least in touch with social and political reality today. Not because the French don't need to learn to accommodate more differences, but because it refuses to recognize the very disturbing developments in the Islamic world today (which are anything but accommodating to differences) and how they have already affected French life. The current mantra, which President Hollande felt obliged to repeat, is that Islamic terrorism has "nothing to do with Islam" and that the most important thing is not to "make an amalgam" of all Muslims. (The Socialist mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, went even further, declaring the terrorists to be "without faith"—in other words, infidels.) But this attitude only reinforces an institutional and intellectual *omertà* that makes it difficult even to discuss what is really going on in the schools.

The evidence has been there for anyone who cared to look for it, in books like those of Kepel and the growing literature of memoirs written by former teachers in the *quartiers* who gave up because they could not control their classes or enforce the principle of laicity. In 2004, for example, the Chirac government received a report it had commissioned on the presence of religious "signs and belonging" in the schools, which was promptly buried because its results were so disturbing. This Obin Report was based on on-site visits government inspectors made to over sixty middle and high schools across France, concentrating on disfavored *quartiers*.

The extent to which life in many of them had been, to employ Kepel's term, "halalized" shocked them. The report recounts stories of girls being under constant surveillance by self-appointed older brothers who mete out corporal punishment with fists and belts if they deem modesty to have been violated. Wearing skirts or dresses is impossible in many places, also for female teachers. There is an obsession with purity, as students and their parents demand separate swimming hours or refuse to let their children go on school trips where the sexes might mix. If they do go, some refuse to enter cathedrals or churches.

There are fathers who won't shake hands with female teachers, or let their wives speak alone to male teachers. There are cases of children refusing to sing, or dance, or learn an instrument, or draw a face, or use a mathematical symbol that resembles a cross. The question of dress and social mixing has led to the abandonment of gym classes in many places. Children also feel emboldened to refuse to read authors or books that they find religiously unacceptable: Rousseau, Molière, *Madame Bovary*. Certain subjects are taboo: evolution, sex ed, the Shoah. As one father told a teacher, "I forbid you to mention Jesus to my son."

In general the report conveys a sense of enormous religious pressure in certain places. During Ramadan, the more



Richard Bord/Getty Images

Marchers at the Place de la République, Paris, January 11, 2015

“pious” students harass less observant Muslims, and scared kids have been found eating food on the sly in the bathrooms. One child attempted suicide due to the harassment.

The situation of Jewish students is far worse and a great number have transferred to private schools (though also because they, too, have become more observant). In 1996 a principal in Lyons had to arrange the departure of the last two Jewish students in his school because he could not assure their safety. As the report says, “there is a stupefying and cruel reality: in France, Jewish children, and Jewish children alone, cannot be educated in all of our schools.”

There is little way of knowing how widespread these phenomena are, though since the massacres teachers in the *quartiers* have gone to the press to unburden themselves. And the instinctive response of many journalists and scholars every time stories like these are told—that they are totally unrepresentative, that even if true they are stigmatizing and play into the hands of the National Front—simply isn’t adequate. The deeper question the Obin Report raised was whether the French educational establishment had a coherent response to offer when these incidents do occur. The inspectors note in the report that administrators minimized the problems teachers reported and gave little support, though they themselves had little guidance from above. This is what Najat Vallaud-Belkacem meant when she criticized the tendency not to “make waves.” After Chirac received the Obin Report it took a year of nagging for his government education minister to release it, to little effect. Since the massacres, however, it is being widely discussed.

If anything plays into the hands of the National Front, it is this resistance to reality. The famous bon mot of Charles Péguy, a hero of French republicanism, applies: “One must always say what one sees. But especially—and this is the hard part—one must always see what one sees.” And what have average French voters seen recently? Since 2012 they have seen some of their own citizens, born and raised and educated in France, gun down Jews (including children) and soldiers and journalists, praising Allah as they do. They have seen hundreds more leave to fight in Iraq and Syria, in the same spirit. They are aware of teenagers posting pro-ISIS material on social networking pages. They saw that during the demonstrations against the most recent war in Gaza people chanted “death to the Jews” and others spray-painted graffiti with the same message. And they have read reports about a survey showing that 16 percent of the French, and 27 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-four, have a very favorable or somewhat favorable view of ISIS (compared to 7 percent in Britain and 2 percent in Germany).

There are things they find harder to see. The sense in the poor and crime-ridden *quartiers* of abandonment by “the French”; the humiliating struggle to find decently paying permanent jobs; the tireless work of teachers and community workers to keep order and maintain the dignity of their neighborhoods; the successful integration of the majority of Muslims and their attachment to France. These, too, need to be publicized. But it is a major mistake to think that average French voters will see these things better if their eyes are turned away from another part of social reality—particularly the religious pressure I have described—or if they are called racists for discussing it.

Following the journalistic and academic response to recent events, I am reminded of American racial politics in the 1970s, when it was considered racist in liberal circles to discuss cultural factors in persistent poverty in African-American urban neighborhoods. Not only, as black Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson has recently been arguing, did this taboo prevent researchers and policymakers from addressing such factors. It also made American liberalism seem out of touch with reality—giving the right wing the opportunity to present itself as living in a “no-spin zone” and inviting voters in. And we know what happened then.

Before the Paris assassinations, many commentators had written off François Hollande and were convinced that Marine Le Pen could very well win the first round of the presidential elections of 2017, forcing the other parties to join forces against her in the second. Hollande’s sangfroid during the crisis has increased his popularity, but 2017 is still a long way off and the far right is already crowing that the killings prove everything they have ever said about immigration, Islam, and the schools.

That is why it will be important to see whether Minister Vallaud-Belkacem’s gesture toward rerepublicanizing the schools will lead to concrete changes. That such changes could, over time, have a major effect on young people in the *quartiers* is doubtful, but they are very much steps in the right direction. And at least they create political space to address all the other factors that contribute to the hopelessness of so many. What is entirely out of the government’s control—out of anyone’s control—is what happens next in the larger Muslim world.

—Paris, February 5, 2015; this is the first of two articles.

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