

# SECURITY AND IDENTITY

## BETWEEN FANTASY AND REALITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**ESTHER BENBASSA**  
 & **OLIVIER ROY**  
 BY **BENJAMIN JOYEUX**

European societies such as France suffer from a fixation with a distorted vision of Islam, rooted in stereotypes and a lack of understanding of the traditions and history of the religion. This fantasised vision serves to justify the double standards set by the media and politicians, and contributes to fuelling a toxic discourse around identity. As a result, current responses to incidents of terrorism – generally carried out by home-grown radicalised individuals – only serve to aggravate fears and deepen mistrust.

**BENJAMIN JOYEUX:** What observations would you make about the place of Islam today in the public debate in France and more widely in Europe?

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**SÉCURITÉ ET IDENTITÉ: ENTRE FANTASMES ET RÉALITÉS**

À quel point le sentiment actuel d'insécurité est-il dû à une vision fantasmée et imaginaire de l'identité et de la question de l'Islam en Europe ?

**OLIVIER ROY:** Islam occupies a central place in the public debate today in France and in Europe. It also overlaps with other topics: that of immigration, brought to the agenda by the Front National in France from the late 1970s onwards; that of refugees, as if all refugees were Muslim; and that of terrorist attacks. These three concerns are linked by the notion of a threat from the outside. And we also find the fundamental question of identity, which is framed as if essentially linked to Islam, but which, in reality, is much wider. The question of identity – and in particular, the feeling of insecurity over one's sense of identity, which is so widespread these days – arises from the crisis of the nation state, challenged on the one hand by the European project and on the other by immigration. It is no coincidence that anti-Muslim sentiment goes hand in hand with an anti-European attitude.

The second point is the reading in terms of the clash of civilisations: Islam is set in opposition to European values, which are presented as being founded on democracy, human rights, gay rights, etc. Yet, there are other value systems in Europe: the liberal one, for example, which defends all these rights, with at its centre the status of women and of sexuality. There's also a Christian one which, however, takes a different approach again: no-one can say that the Church defends gay rights nor that it has a very feminist approach to the emancipation of women. An example is the recent forceful opposition to the teaching on 'gender theory' in schools in France. Nobody wants to admit this ambiguity that exists with regard to the European sense of identity, for some people founded on Christianity; for others, on the liberal values of the 1960s. The question is therefore skewed from the start. People give a secular answer to a question of identity, and in France, the Left refuses to face up to the question of Christianity, as if it had been dealt with once and for all by the law of 1905, separating the Church and the State. And yet, religion in Europe is alive and well. And by trying to keep the Church out of the public space in France, we play into the hands of the Far Right, who simply take it over as a theme.

**ESTHER BENBASSA:** The debate about Islam has only become more inflamed since the wave of terrorist attacks that have hit European countries. It is by no means a recent phenomenon.

Historically, Islam – as the last monotheistic religion and considered by Christians to be incomplete – has never had the place it deserves in the Western imaginary. Similarly, the expansionism that followed the birth of Islam served to create a climate of fear for the West. As for France, we should bear in mind the colonial period, notably in the Maghreb, where Muslim Arabs were made to feel inferior. The native Muslim population were subjected to the *Code de l'Indigénat* (1881), which institutionalised social and legal inequality. In contrast, the Algerian Jews, considered to be 'useful' for colonisation, were granted French citizenship as early as 1871. This episode was to leave its mark on Jewish-Muslim relations, which would have repercussions for their communal living later in France. The legacy of this colonial discrimination lives on in the perceptions of Muslim Arabs held by the French people and by a section of the political class. Being French and Muslim sets you apart from other French people. Doubts about your true Frenchness are cultivated and used in times of crisis. The terrorist attacks have served as a pretext to reignite the issue. Every terrorist is portrayed as a Muslim and every Muslim as a potential terrorist. This type of binary thinking is dangerous when coupled with a mind-set clouded by inherited clichés from the past. Even more so, since today's French-born Muslims – unlike their parents, who were largely 'invisible' – have become 'visible' through their desire to claim their own identity.

**How is the question of Islam linked to that of insecurity in Europe today, in particular since the terrorist attacks of 2015 and 2016?**

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**ESTHER BENBASSA:** Most of the terrorists were French or Belgian Muslims, born in the country in which they committed the atrocities. Linking insecurity with Islam creates confusion, which further undermines the Muslims living in those countries. A simple everyday Islam, both feared and despised in France where secularism, in its most dogmatic form, is nothing more than a veneer covering a visceral rejection of Muslims, was not meeting the needs of these young French people. The most vulnerable among them have been swallowed up in another Islam, radical and supposedly authentic, passed on by self-proclaimed spiritual leaders via the internet, but also in new social circles. A minority of them have ended up opting for a political and vindictive form of Islam, rejecting with hatred a Western society they judge to be 'impure'. But even in its most hard-line form, Islam does not automatically turn people into terrorists. Acquired as it is from sources that are partisan, purist, and lacking in critical analysis, this type of Islam can contribute to the crystallisation of a warped and, in some cases, destructive sense of identity. Conversion to this form of Islam also concerns young French people of non-Muslim backgrounds, living in areas that have been abandoned by public services and where there is a lack of cultural space. A sense of commu-

nity is built through this type of Islam, which is no longer simply suffering from aggression but has itself become aggressive. Without the existence of Daesh, such indoctrination would not, in and of itself, have been capable of spawning terrorism. But, on the other hand, without such a purist and politicised form of Islam, would Daesh alone have managed to achieve quite such a power of attraction? Either way, involvement in 'jihadi' activism only concerns a small number of Muslims, and to put all Muslims in the same boat smacks of instrumentalism.

**OLIVIER ROY:** The fundamental question is to what extent Islamic terrorism is linked to Islam itself. There have been other terrorist atrocities after all, such as that of Anders Breivik, for example, in Norway, who killed in the name of white Christianity in 2011. But yes, since 2001, terrorist attacks in Europe have largely been claimed to have been committed in the name of Islam. Yet, is this terrorism a consequence of the radicalisation of religion, or are we witnessing, as I would argue, a phenomenon the other way around: an Islamisation of radicalism? What relationship is there between the marginalised youths committing acts of terrorism and the religious community to which they claim to belong? There is a debate to be had on violence among young people that is certainly not simply a question of Islam. Whether they are new converts or second generation Muslims, it has

to be said that their revolt is part of an Islamic narrative. But this is because, in the world of radicalisation, the Islamic model is the most visible. This visibility is also due to the fact that the left-wing version of radicalisation has disappeared from the global stage. For decades, Europe has experienced a form of terrorism linked to the Far Left: the Red Brigade, the Baader Meinhof group, etc. But in the market for radical protest today on a global scale, sadly, only Daesh is on offer.

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**Can the rise of xenophobic parties in Europe be attributed to a sense of crisis or insecurity about identity experienced by a section of the population? And is this insecurity linked to the current debate around Islam in the public sphere?**

**OLIVIER ROY:** The growing insecurity felt around issues of identity is not caused by Islam, but by a crisis in the status of the nation state. The question of ‘identity’ is a relatively recent phenomenon; a newcomer in the arena of political debate. In the past, this question belonged to the Far Right, with writers such as Alain de Benoist. In France, it was Nicolas Sarkozy who legitimised the debate on identity. If this concept is omnipresent today, it is largely because other concepts are no longer on the table, such as the class struggle, the Left-Right divide, etc. The Left has become liberal on economic policy but has abandoned its liberal values. On the other hand, the Right has espoused a wider set of values. Until the 1980s, the Right tended to defend traditional values. Then came Margaret Thatcher, Nicolas Sarkozy, etc. Today, the new generation of the People’s Party in Spain, for example, has adopted liberal values, in the same way as the Italian Right-wing under Berlusconi became Epicurean, etc. The Left didn’t see this coming, whether on the question of class or of values. To find one’s place in society, the choice is identity or anarchy.

It seems to me that we should stop worrying about what the Koran says and stop all the theologising in order to deal effectively with the question

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of Islam in concrete terms. Religion is treated as if it constitutes a threat to our human rights, but religious freedom is an integral part of those very rights. No politician today is asking the Catholic Church to adopt the ordination of women, yet when it comes to Islam, anything goes. The question of Islam should be reconsidered within the framework of the religious freedom offered by modern democracy and we should return to basics; to a legal and constitutional vision of the religious question. By collecting basic sociological statistics, we will see that in France, as in Europe, the Muslim middle classes exist and that social mobility has been able to function. But in people's minds, Muslims are all either young suburban delinquents or 'bearded' fundamentalists. We have a fantasised and imagined vision of Islam and we don't see the real changes and developments that have taken place. It is time we opened our eyes.

**Would you say that politicians and law-makers are coming up with the right responses to the challenges of these questions around security and identity?**

**ESTHER BENBASSA:** Those in power have been caught up in the drama of the terrorist attacks and made it their priority to reassure people by putting on a show of strength. But the challenge of terrorism cannot be dealt with overnight, and there is a whole long-term effort to be made to put in place preventative measures. There can be no excuse for these acts committed by young people seduced by the evil of radicalism, but that should not prevent us from asking what incites them to commit such atrocities. If we had managed to let them share more equally in the values we hold so dear and from which we consider them to be excluded, perhaps these young people might have made other choices. There are those who need to have something to believe in, and not just in religious terms. The same goes for the issue of 'de-radicalisation'. There is no dialogue, no rational discussion, no commitment to thought and debate. Public perception takes centre stage because, sadly, in politics, things have to move fast.

**OLIVIER ROY:** In terms of security, the current policy adopts the same old approach of measuring effectiveness solely in terms of ensuring the physical protection of the population. Fundamentally, this type of policy on security comes into conflict with freedoms and the safeguarding of human rights. There is, then, a legitimate debate to be had on the right balance to be struck between security and respect for freedom. It is, of course, of vital importance, but it seems to me more urgent to be clear about where the threat is coming from. If we consider, for example, that any sign of religious radicalisation is taken to indicate a potential terrorist threat, we have the wrong target in our sights and risk missing the real threats. Banning headscarves in universities, for example, clamping down on halal products, or taking vegetarian meals off the menu in our schools while somehow equating these things with a potential terrorist threat is completely outrageous.

**In your opinion, what would the right response be – in political as in economic and social terms – to this identity insecurity and to the fear of Islam that we see on the rise in France and throughout Europe?**

**ESTHER BENBASSA:** If there is no real work of long-term prevention through reviewing the catastrophic policies in urban development, real opposition to discrimination, racism, and the precarity faced by young people in urban

neighbourhoods, identity politics will only increase. Thankfully, not all inward-looking attitudes to identity lead to terrorism. It is time we stopped raising the spectre of communitarianism. There is nothing unusual in the fact that people will turn to their community for answers in the face of rejection from outside. What about trying, for example, in France to collect statistics based on ethnicity, or at least a census of the birthplace of an individual's parents and the previous nationality of that person, in order to obtain a more precise breakdown of figures? There is opposition to this proposal through fear that the results might result in a call for a policy of 'affirmative action'.

**OLIVIER ROY:** We are in the middle of a crisis in the political imagination. And the European Union is unable to give us the sort of vision we can believe in. We have reached the limits of the European model. It is vital to make the European institutions more democratic, and the European Parliament in particular must have a greater role to play. Equally, we must rethink the nation state, based on a restoration of the political engagement of citizens and starting at the grassroots level of local councils. Democracy at a local level must be developed and encouraged, rather than stunted. In economic terms, the Left has completely failed in its engagement with deprived urban areas, in particular with regard to the question of police violence. The French are European 'champions'

in terms of violence in the relations between police and citizens. We also have to accept the consequences of religious liberty and stop, for example, painting all those who take part in protests, such as ‘La Manif Pour Tous’ in France (a campaign opposed to equal marriage), as fascists. Many people have a religious faith, and they are not all potential terrorists. We need to revise this authoritarian conception of secularism which simply leaves religion to those who are marginalised or have radical tendencies. We need to reinvent a peaceful relationship with all religions. There is a lot of talk of communitarianism in a Muslim context, but it is just as present in Orthodox Jewish circles, particularly in the area of education. The State ends up simply forcing religions to set themselves up as counter forces of society. What is needed is a rethink on religious freedoms in France within the framework of the law of 1905, which is an excellent piece of legislation.

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**ESTHER BENBASSA**

is the French senator for the Val-de-Marne, representing Europe Écologie – Les Verts, and vice-president of the Commission des Lois at the French Senate. She is a professor at the École Pratique des Hautes Études and has published *Vendredi noir et nuits blanches* and *Nouvelles relégations territoriales*.



**OLIVIER ROY**

is a political analyst, a professor at the European University Institute in Florence and an expert on Islam. He has authored numerous books such as *Secularism Confronts Islam* (2005) and most recently *Jihad and Death* (2016).



**BENJAMIN JOYEUX**

is a lawyer, ecologist, libertarian and anti-globalisation activist. He is the co-author, with Edouard Gaudot, of *L'Europe c'est nous* (2014).

