

France will not be Decapitated

by Michael Curtis



It is not often that a middle aged, 47 year old, high school teacher is stabbed and beheaded in broad daylight in a street in the suburbs of Paris. Samuel Paty, a history and geography teacher, at the school in Conflans-Sainte Honorine suffered this fate. He had given an eight grade lesson civics lesson on the contours and limits of free speech during which he showed two cartoons from Charlie Hebdo, the satirical magazine, which depicted the prophet Muhammed. One showed a naked individual on his hands with genitals exposed, and a star on his backside, with a caption reading, "Muhammad, a star is born." Paty, conscious that the cartoons were controversial, suggested that students look away for a few seconds if they thought they would be shocked.

A man named Brahim Chnina, a parent of a female student in Paty's class, was informed of the event, even though she was not in class during the lesson, and posted three videos on social media attacking Paty, demanded his dismissal, and called on people to act. He was assisted in making the videos by Abdelhakim Sefrioui, an extreme Islamist of Morocco origin, notable for his antisemitic sermons at the exit of mosques, who claimed to be a member of the Council of Imams in France. Following these videos, Paty was interrogated by the French police, and explained the event, a discussion of free speech, to them.

Probably affected by these videos, a young man, 18 year old, named Abdoullakh Abouyezidvitch, a national of Chechen origin, who was born in Moscow and lived as a refugee in France, on October 16, 2020 killed Paty who was on the way home from school, and claimed responsibility for the crime before being shot by the police. The assassin who was unfamiliar with his victim had paid, giving 300- 350 euros, two school students to identify Paty. The two students stayed with the assassin waiting for Paty to come out of the school.

The brutal murder caused a stir. Demonstrations and makeshift memorials were held in homage to Paty, flowers were placed at the site of his death, and marches took place in several cities, including one with several thousand in Paris. Crowds brandished the French tricolor flag. Many people, echoing the slogan, "Je suis Charlie," adopted by supporters of free speech and freedom of the press after the murders by Islamists on January 7, 2015 of Charlie Hebdo cartoonists, carried signs "Je suis Samuel." On October 21, 2020, Paty was given posthumously the *Legion d'Honneur* in a ceremony at the Sorbonne in Paris, the symbolic embodiment of the spirit of enlightenment. French teachers, though often underpaid, personify the enlightenment. Paty it was proclaimed embodied the values of the French Republic. In his teaching he encouraged students to think critically.

There are two central questions. One is whether the outpouring of emotion and solidarity will lead to resolute action in preservation of those values. The other is not whether there will be another attack, but when. The Republic is still confronted by Islamist refusal to tolerate or accept criticism of their faith as the attacks on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* showed. Admittedly, *Charlie Hebdo* was and is controversial, referring to itself as "an irresponsible paper." But it can be considered in the one aspect of the venerable traditional style of French journalism, the slaying of heinous dragons using language, not only controversial but also may be insolent, garish, and ribald. Islamists regarded its cartoons of Muhammed as unacceptable, and the murders of journalists in January 7, 2015 and others in October 16, 2020 are viewed as occasions for avenging the prophet, and declaring Allahu Akbar, God is great.

For some years France has struggled with the issue of Islam and tension with its Muslim community. Its secularist ethos has led to ban in school rooms on Muslim headscarves and religious symbols. The October 2020 murder has led to governmental action being taken, adding to the 73 mosques, private schools and work-places, that have been closed since the beginning of the year. The government closed the pro-Hamas group, Cheikh Yassine Collective, the French group named in 1987 after the founder of Hamas who was killed by an Israeli strike in 2004. Its head, Abdelhakim Sefrioui, mentioned above, had denounced Paty in a video, and was thus indirectly implicated in his murder.

Many issues are involved in the struggle against Islamism. The first is that the murder of Paty was the latest example of Islamist terror, the second attack with a knife in a month. On September 25, 2020 an 18 year old immigrant of Pakistani origin using a butcher's knife, a meat cleaver, had stabbed two people in Paris and seriously wounded them.

Seeking revenge against Charlie Hebdo he had acted outside

what he thought was the office of the magazine, but he was mistaken since the magazine had moved to secret quarters. The assailant had not been known to the French police, but his father said that "the God's prophet had chosen him and assigned him to kill the blasphemers."

The danger remains whether the brutal murder of Paty will inspire other young Islamists , lone wolves, to carry out similar atrocities, and has left a clear path for others to follow. This is proclaimed in the English language monthly magazine, *The Voice of Hind*, produced by supporters of ISIS for the Indian subcontinent, which urged followers to emulate the attack on Charlie Hebdo. It called on followers to take revenge on everyone who has insulted "our beloved messenger. Our swords will not stop defending the honor of the prophet Muhammed."

A significant issue, one which is currently troubling the U.S. as a result of actions by Facebook and Twitter, is the impact of social media, the speed of messages that are broadcast. Extremist Islamists have been affected by those media. After seeing the videos, the killer of Paty had come from his home in Evreux, Normandy, more than 50 miles from Paris to commit the crime. Immediately after the crime, leaders and representatives of social media groups were summoned by a government minister to discuss the problem. Marlene Schiappa , minister in charge of citizenship, urged them to take more responsibility for what is on their platforms and to counter what she called "cyber-Islamism." The government has already tried to increase controls on social media. The paradox is that France has passed a law to control internet hate but the important clause in the law that the social media remove hateful media within 24 hours was struck down by the Constitutional Court as detrimental to free speech. It is an open question whether the beheading of Paty will lead to changes in social media policies in France, and influence attitude towards the media in other countries including the

U.S.

The French government has acted on this and wider issues. The security authorities are examining 51 associations, including religious schools and mosques, and has begun inquiring into extremist opinions expressed on online sources. Islamic organizations are being investigated especially the Collective Against Islamophobia in France, CCIF, and Baraka City that claims to be a humanitarian organization. CCIF supposedly monitors attacks against Muslims, but is now accused of being connected with the murder of Paty. Baraka has previously been investigated for financing terrorism. Though it presents itself as a humanitarian and charitable association based on Islamic values, it is linked to radical Islamist movements. Its founder and leader, a man named Idriss Sihamedi verbally attacked Charlie Hebdo, praying that the flames at the graves of the journalists should be increased. He was arrested on October 20, 2020.

President Emmanuel Macron at the ceremony for Paty on October 21 at the Sorbonne spoke passionately. Paty, he said, was a victim of hate, slain by cowards for representing the secular, democratic values of the Republic against those who transformed religion into a weapon of war. Already earlier this month on October 2, Macron declared action against "Islamic separatism," which he defined as an ideology of radical Islam which claims its own laws and seeks to create a parallel order which would be superior to those of the Republic. Macron declared that associations that indoctrinated children would be banned as well as all foreign interference in religious activity in France. The general French policy is to ban organizations that do not adhere to the secular institutions of the Republic.

The trial of those accused of being accomplices to the terrorists who killed murdered people in Charlie Hebdo office and the Jewish supermarket in Paris in January 2015 is going on.

Their punishment will be a hopeful sign that in France the lights will not go out.