

# The Danger of Islamist Separatism

by Michael Curtis



**On September 2, 2020 a trial**, postponed because of Covid-19, opened in Paris concerning those alleged to have been involved in the deadly attack in 2015 on Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical weekly magazine. Besides recounting the gruesome account of the details of terrorist activity, the trial implicitly invokes the conflict in France between freedom of speech and freedom of thought and religion and hate speech in the context of terrorist activity that has caused deaths of innocent people. Freedom of conscience like freedom of speech is protected by the 1789 Declaration of Human and Civil Rights and by the Constitution. In France as in all democratic countries free communication of ideas and opinions is vital. However, the law also prohibits hate speech, and laws protect individuals and groups from being defamed or insulted concerning identification with ethnic, national, racial, religious, sexual , gender orientations. Inherent in the

present French issue is whether blasphemy, specifically against Islam, is a crime.

Accusation of blasphemy was the alleged basis for terrorist activity in France. In September 2005 the Danish paper Jyllands-Posten published twelve satirical cartoons about Islam. The one considered by Muslims of being most offensive was the cartoon showing the prophet Mohammed with a bomb in his turban. The French magazine Charlie Hebdo, CH, in a special issue republished the cartoons on February 9, 2006.

As a result, criminal proceedings for insulting the prophet on grounds of religion were brought against the chief editor Philip Val, but he was acquitted in a trial in March 2007. CH published other satirical cartoons of Mohammed in September 2012.

Declaring they were avenging the prophet, on January 7, 2015 two Islamist gunmen, the Kouachi brothers of Algerian descent, forced an entrance into the Paris headquarters of CH, killing 12 people and wounded another 11. The two gunmen shouted *Allahu Akbar* , God is great. Later, the Yemen based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claimed responsibility. After the attack, there were rallies in French cities, and the words "Je suis Charlie," became the symbol of support and sympathy for the murdered journalists, and more generally for the principle of free speech.

Two days later, a terrifying act of antisemitism occurred when a terrorist, Amedy Coulibaly , who pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, a friend of the Kouachi brothers, armed with an arsenal of weapons, submarine gun, armed rifle and pistols. attacked a kosher supermarket, Hypercacher in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in Paris, killing four, all Jews, and holding 15 others hostage during a siege before he was killed in a fight with police.

The 32 year old Coulibaly had already killed a police woman agent the day before.

Islamist terrorist attacks in France followed, all claimed by ISIL. They took place in cafes and restaurants, the Stade de France in Saint Denis, and especially at a concert at the Bataclan theater on November 13, 2015 when 130 died, including 90 in Bataclan, and more than 400 were injured in coordinated attacks. The risk of further attacks remains. Over 8,000 are on a national data base warning list of Islamist extremists.

On September 25, 2020, another attack took place near the former office of Charlie Hebdo, a knife attack by a 25 year old Pakistani that injured two journalists, employees of a TV production agency. The assailant had not realized that CH had moved to a new secret location.

The trial began on September 2, 2020. Fourteen alleged associates of the Islamist gunmen, the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly who attacked the CH and the Hypercacher went on trial. Three of them, perhaps dead, are being tried in absentia, including a woman named Hayat Boumeddiene, who apparently fled to Syria via Turkey and entered the Caliphate. The group, minor players, were accused of assisting in terror attacks, supplying weapons, and financing of the three jihadists. The trial is being filmed because of the judicial importance and emotion stirred by the attacks, and by the fear of national and international terrorism.

The trial has been revealing about terrorism present in France, in prisons, and especially in what has been called the Buttes-Chaumont cell, named after the picturesque park with lake and fake roman temple in the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in Paris where Muslims meet and engage in physical training. In essence this cell was a group that organized Muslims to fight against the U.S. in Iraq, and was connected with al-Qaeda in Yemen. It was dismantled in 2005 by French investigators. Most pertinent, at the trial on October 6, a man named Farid Benyettou, perhaps a false penitent, asked for forgiveness for his past terrorist role as head of the cell. He confessed he

had fought against France in Algeria in the 1990s. He had been a preacher, self-taught, a recruiter and spiritual guide, who had radicalized the members of the Buttes-Chaumont cell, and acknowledged he had encouraged the Koulachi brothers and Coulibaly.

Benyettou explained he and his followers had been affected by the fate of Mohammed Merah the 23 year old French petty criminal of Algerian descent who claimed allegiance to al Qaeda and who was responsible for Islamist terrorist attacks in March 2012 in the cities of Montauban and Toulouse in the midi-Pyrenees region of France. He shot French army soldiers, and children and teachers at the Jewish school, Ozar Hatorah in Toulouse, and using a .45 caliber gun, killed 7 and wounded another 5, before being killed after a siege by police on March 22. 2012.

On the occasion of the trial, Charlie Hebdo republished the controversial cartoons. Its new editor Laurent Sourisseau (Riss), who had been badly wounded in the original attack, and who now lives under round the clock protection, did not regret the original publication. The cartoons, he said, belong to history, and history cannot be rewritten or erased: "if we don't fight for our freedom, we live like a slave and we promote a deadly ideology."

President Macron is preoccupied with the resurgence of coronavirus Covid-19 as well as with the continuation of strikes and the economic decline in the country. Nevertheless, now he is concerned with fighting violent extremism and with social divisions, and with what he calls "Islamist separatism" in a country with an estimated six million Muslims, 8% of the population. France is a secular country; it is the cement of a united France. Religious symbols, head scarves are banned from schools and educational institutions, as are face veils of women.

Central to France is secularism, laicite, based on the 1905

law that officially separated church and state in France. The secular society permits people to belong to any faith they choose, but does not allow displays of religious affiliation in schools or in public service. As recently as September 27, 2020, a member of Macron's political party walked out of the parliamentary meeting because a young woman student in the audience, a leader of the National Union Students in France, was wearing a hijab.

Macron declared it is necessary to defend the Republic and its values. One must fight against those who go off the rails in the name of religion. This would bolster our ability to live together. He did not condemn Islam as such, and had no plan against Islam, but he did say it was a religion that is "in crisis all over the world."

Macron acknowledged France was to blame for current problems to some extent. The colonial past, especially French rule in Algeria, had left scars on French society which "has not unpacked our past." He continued in partly conciliatory fashion. France created its own separatism, in essence ghettos, in some areas. We have created areas where the promises of the Republic have not been fulfilled. France concentrated populations of the same origins, the same religion, and this created economic and educational difficulties. Most important, Macron warned of the peril of "communitarianism," communities governing themselves. The task is to aid the integration of Muslims into the wider society.

The problem of integrating the large Muslim population is crucial in France, especially in the present climate of disputes over race, colonialism, inequality, police violence, protests by yellow vests, and when a Spanish born woman, Anne Hidalgo is the first female Mayor of Paris.

In a speech in the city of Les Mureaux on October 2, 2020, Macron outlined his plan to deal with Islamist separatism. His basic aim is to limit foreign influence on Muslims which

has led to radical ideas and terrorist attacks. This would foster an Islam which is compatible with the values of the Republic. Among his suggestions are education in Islamic culture and civilization in public schools, reform in housing, ending gender segregation at municipal swimming pools. Extremist religious teaching in schools and mosques must be eliminated. All children from the age of three must attend state registered French, not religious, schools. where Arabic instruction would be included but the state has control over the courses.

Schools Macron held, are the heart of secularism where children become citizens.

Above all, France must end the system of importing imans and teachers from abroad. Since 1977 a program allows nine countries to send imans and teachers to France to provide classes that are not subject to supervision by French authorities. France wants to prevent Islamist radicals from taking control of mosques. Imans should be trained and certified in France, must speak French and do not spread Islamist views. This would end "consular Islam," a process by which Algeria finances the Grand Mosque of Paris, which then distributes funds to mosques throughout France, and trains the imans in Rabat, Morocco. Four majority-Muslim countries and Turkey send 300 imans to France every year. Turkey is able to control a number of mosques under its Diyanet, Directorate of religious affairs which is used as an instrument of Turkish foreign polic . It states it is the legitimate representative of Muslims of Turkish origin in France, and that they are expected to show loyalty to Turkey.

The religious beliefs and practices of Muslims differ, and there is no consensus on a link between the religion and the inherent assumption of Islamic orthodoxy, and abetting acts of violence and terrorism. Yet it is wise to be cautious of a religion that often claims its laws are superior to those of the state, and whose extreme adherents justify murder in the

name of Islam.