

ENOUGH BLASPHEMY IS A RIGHT, AND HAS TO REMAIN ONE

By Claude MONIQUET, President of ESISC

Two weeks ago, a reference by Pope Benedict XVI to an obscure controversy a thousand years old provoked the anger of a certain Muslim populace: "Show me what Mahomet has brought that is new and you will find only what is diabolic and inhuman, such as his order to spread the faith by the sword," said Byzantine Emperor Martin II Paleologus (who died on 22 July 1425 – hardly the latest news) to a Persian sage. By citing those words without in any way endorsing them, the Pope caused a storm. Churches burned in the Middle East, a nun who had devoted her life to helping children was murdered in Somalia, and fanatical crowds in Indonesia led by enraged madrassa students brandished replica weapons while beating portraits of the Holy Father, all in an effort to show that Islam is a religion of peace.

A few days ago in Germany, out of concerns for political correctness, the prestigious Deutsche Oper – the opera of Berlin – cancelled its production of Idomeneo, an opera written by Mozart in 1781 and considered offensive to Islam because Idomeneo the King of Crete brandishes the decapitated head of Muhammad.

Since the day before yesterday, a professor of philosophy in the south of France, Robert Redeker, has now to live under police protection for having written in Le Figaro an article in which he describes the prophet Muhammad as "a pitiless warlord, pillager, slaughterer of Jews and polygamous husband".

We ought also to mention as a reminder that Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a political refugee and elected member of parliament, had to leave the Netherlands and take refuge in the United States because her life had been threatened in her adoptive country, and she had been abandoned by the authorities there. The same Netherlands, that is, where film-maker Theo Van Gogh had his throat cut on an Amsterdam street in November 2004 for having directed a short film offensive to Islam.

I might also be permitted to recall that I myself was on leaving a Belgian TV studio in September 2004 by a celebrity who considered I had "insulted Islam" in a broadcast devoted to the third anniversary of September 11. I sustained a concussion and was unable to work for three weeks. But unlike the unfortunate Van Gogh, I am still alive. Alive enough, at any rate, to call out and declare that enough is enough! Hardly a week goes by any more, and hardly even a day, without a reminder of the intolerable reality: Islam, through the terror spread about by some adherents – and sadly by the silence of the others – had taken for itself an unthinkable position by placing itself above all criticism, and indeed all comment.

Enough! Islam is not above another other religion or creed. In Europe we have obtained the right to freedom of religion – that is, the freedom to have a religion or not to have one at all, as well as to change from one to the other and back should we see fit, whatever the view of a rigorous Islam which sees the punishment for apostasy as death. Our forefathers fought for the freedom of expression we now enjoy. We fought for a secular society, or at least for the neutrality of the state in religious matters, to our benefit. And those freedoms imply the right to criticise all beliefs, ideas and religions. I may blaspheme if I wish: the law and custom authorise me to. If I wish to say or write that Jesus was an impostor, Yahweh a cruel god and Muhammad a bloodthirsty prophet, that is my right and none may take it from me.

They might try. Faced with their sort; with those who monopolise the right to speak in the name of Islam; who give it a hideous and hateful image of beheadings and stonings, of the ripped-off heads and limbs of suicide bombers and mass murderers – an image which has nothing to do with the real faith – the Muslim community is too often silent. Some voices are raised, courageously, like that of our friend Mezri Haddad writing in *Libération* a few days ago: "Those who today cry conspiracy, where were they when so many atrocities were being committed – and are still being committed – in the name of the Quran? What does more damage to Islam: a citation without endorsement from a 15th century manuscript, or the indiscriminate murder of men, women and children in the name of a perverted conception of jihad?"

Yes, where were they? And where are the secular Europeans who ought to have the courage to defend their freedom yet who trade it not for a mess of potage, but for the detestable political correctness? It is time to rise up, all of us together, Christians, Muslims, Jews, atheists and others to state loudly and clearly: liberty is our law in Europe. It is written into our Constitutions, our laws and our customs, and we have no need and no desire of any other law. Let those who are not satisfied with that state of affairs go and live elsewhere. There is after all no shortage – from Somalia to Saudi Arabia, and from Sudan to Iran – of totalitarian states which kill and repress in the name of god. All we ask is respect for our rights, which include the right, if need be, to blaspheme.

On the first of July 1766, the Chevalier de la Barre was executed – his hand cut off and his tongue ripped out before he was beheaded – for a supposed blasphemy. Voltaire was one of his defenders. Today the Islamists and those who, by their silence and their cowardice, pave the way for the Islamists, would have us return to the days of such horrors. That is a backwards leap 240 years into the past which we will not tolerate. Enough is enough!