

# The Redeker Affair

*Christian Delacampagne*

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THIS PAST September, Robert Redeker, a French high-school philosophy teacher at Saint-Orens-de-Gameville (a small city near Toulouse) and the author of several scholarly books, published an op-ed article in the newspaper *Le Figaro*. The piece, a response to the controversy over remarks about Islam made a week earlier by Pope Benedict XVI, was titled “What Should the Free World Do in the Face of Islamist Intimidation?” It was a fierce critique of what Redeker called Islam’s attempt “to place its leaden cloak over the world.” If Jesus was “a master of love,” he wrote, Muhammad was “a master of hatred.” Of the three “religions of the book,” Islam was the only one that overtly preached holy war. “Whereas Judaism and Christianity are religions whose rites reject and delegitimize violence,” Redeker concluded, “Islam is a religion that, in its own sacred text, as well as in its everyday rites, exalts violence and hatred.”

Having been posted online, the article was read all across France and in other countries as well, and was quickly translated into Arabic. Denunciations of Redeker’s “insult of the prophet” spread across the Internet. Within a day after publication, the piece was being condemned on al Jazeera by the popular on-air preacher (and unofficial voice of Osama bin

Laden) Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi. In Egypt and Tunisia, the offending issue of *Le Figaro* was banned.

As for Redeker himself, he soon received a large number of threats by letter and e-mail. On an Islamist website, he was sentenced to death in a posting that, in order to facilitate a potential assassin’s task, also provided his address and a photograph of his home. Fearful for himself and his family, Redeker sought protection from the local police, who transferred the case to the national counter-espionage authorities. On their advice, Redeker, his wife, and three children fled their home and took shelter in a secret location. Since then, they have moved from city to city, at their own expense, under police protection. Another teacher has been appointed by the French Ministry of Education to replace Redeker, who will probably never see his students again.

AS A LONG-TIME friend of Robert Redeker, I was, of course, deeply disturbed by these events and worried about his and his family’s safety. My distress was only compounded by the reaction to the Redeker affair of the French establishment. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin was virtually the only public official who took an honorable position, declaring that this “*fatwa*” against a French intellectual was “unacceptable.” A group of centrist intellectuals, including Pascal Bruckner, Alain Finkielkraut, André Glucksmann, and Bernard-Henri Lévy, also issued an appeal on Redeker’s behalf and in defense of France’s “most fundamental liberties.”

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But the vast majority of responses, even when couched as defenses of the right to free speech, were in fact hostile to the philosophy teacher. The Communist mayor of Saint-Orens-de-Gameville, echoed by the head of Redeker's school, deplored the fact that he had included his affiliation at the end of the article. France's two largest teachers' unions, both of them socialist, stressed that "they did not share Redeker's convictions." The leading leftist human-rights organizations went much farther, denouncing his "irresponsible declarations" and "putrid ideas." A fellow high-school philosophy teacher, Pierre Tévanian, declared (on a Muslim website) that Redeker was "a racist" who should be severely punished by his school's administration. Even Gilles de Robien, the French minister of education, criticized Redeker for acting "as if he represented the French educational system"—a bizarre charge against the author of a piece clearly marked as personal opinion.

Among members of the media, Redeker was scolded for articulating his ideas so incautiously. On the radio channel Europe 1, Jean-Pierre Elkabach invited the beleaguered teacher to express his "regret." The editorial board of *Le Monde*, France's newspaper of record, characterized Redeker's piece as "excessive, misleading, and insulting." It went so far as to call his remarks about Muhammad "a blasphemy," implying that the founder of Islam must be treated even by non-Muslims in a non-Muslim country as an object not of investigation but of veneration.

To be sure, Redeker's language had not been gentle. But since when has that been a requirement of intellectual discourse in France? One can often find similarly strong language in, say, *Les Temps Modernes*, the journal founded by Jean-Paul Sartre and on whose editorial board Redeker has long served. Yet, to judge by the response to his "offense," large sectors of the French intellectual and political establishment have carved out an exception to this hard-won tradition of open discussion: when it comes to Islam (as opposed to Christianity or Judaism), freedom of speech must respect definite limits.

How did France reach this point?

THE FIRST and most immediate explanation is that the country is about to enter an important electoral season, with races for the presidency and legislature scheduled for May of this year. As many as five million Muslims reside on French territory, and most of them are citizens eligible to vote. No political party can afford to be caught in a serious confrontation with this growing community. Moreover, memories are still fresh of the riots that roiled the suburbs of the largest French cities in the fall of 2005. Similar if less dramatic violence

remains an ongoing problem in these areas, with their large populations of Muslim, French-born young people of African or North African descent, and fear of another conflagration has steered the French political class away from anything touching on the subject of Islam.

More puzzling is the complicity of the French media. Naturally, they too wish to avoid being perceived as adversaries of the Muslim community. But they have gone beyond the mere exercise of caution. In the wake of the riots, major newspapers, magazines, and news shows have shown little interest in the sociological reality of French Islam, especially the rising influence of Islamist propaganda. Thus, it was not a journalist but the extreme-Right politician Philippe de Villiers who drew attention recently to the Islamization of the workforce at Charles de Gaulle airport. This phenomenon was hardly a secret—the airport is located in the mostly Muslim *département* of Seine-Saint-Denis, and hires locally—but no respectable publication saw fit to investigate it. In the face of Islamic militancy, French journalists as a class would seem to have lost their nerve and compromised their professionalism.

As for the French academic world, that is a more complicated story. Working on sensitive issues related to race and religion has never been an easy choice for a French scholar, especially one whose views fall outside the conventions of the academic Left. During the 1950's, the great historian Fernand Braudel tried to discourage Léon Poliakov from writing a Ph.D. on anti-Semitism, a subject about which Poliakov would go on to compose many distinguished books. Years later, I too was steered away from the subject of anti-Semitism by well-intentioned people concerned about my career prospects. Having ignored their advice and published a book titled *L'Invention du Racisme* (1983), I was unable to find a job at the university level. Happily, I have fared better in the United States.

Today in France, research on the most contested issues of race and religion is taboo unless one exhibits the "right" politics. To speak at conferences or to be considered for important posts, a scholar must be prepared to describe the colonial era in French history as nothing less than an exercise in genocide and to denounce American policy in the Middle East as barbaric cruelty. Those who refuse to comply find themselves shut out.

A notable instance of such blacklisting occurred in 2004, when a scholar applied for a three-year position at the prestigious Collège International de Philosophie. His credentials were formidable, but when his "pro-American" views became known to one member of the committee (the candidate, it

seemed, was not completely opposed to the war in Iraq), a quiet but effective campaign was organized to deny him the post. Details of the case were reported in the weekly newspaper *L'Express*. The name of the unjustly treated candidate was Robert Redeker.

ONE CAN point to many explanations for these extraordinary, interlocking biases, but I am convinced that their origins lie in the complex history of the relationship between France and the Arab world over the past 150 years. The dominant factor in that history, of course, has been France's various efforts to establish an overseas dominion.

French colonialism started in Algeria in 1830, later extended to Morocco and Tunisia, and eventually reached Syria and Lebanon when, after World War I, the Versailles Treaty made France the mandatory power in those two newly established countries. In Algeria, the colonial period was the longest, lasting until 1962, and the most bitter. Its final years were stained by a bloody war of independence, in the course of which Algeria's Muslim clerics played a crucial role, not only by supporting the military operations of the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*) but by making Islam the defining ideology of the war.

So fraught a historical background might be assumed to imply the persistence of a strong antagonism between the ex-colonial power and its former colonies. But, strangely enough, the reality has been just the opposite. With the exception of the aborted Suez expedition of 1956, when France was allied with Great Britain and Israel against Egypt, successive French governments have maintained notably friendly relations with the Arab countries. Indeed, if there has been one permanent trend in French diplomacy from Charles de Gaulle to François Mitterrand to Jacques Chirac, it is the country's firm position in the pro-Arab camp.\*

The foundation for this alliance was laid by de Gaulle. At the end of the Algerian war, he decided that it was vital to restore good relations with the Arab leaders, especially with the Egyptian regime, which had strongly backed the FLN. To achieve that goal, however, he had to break the diplomatic and military partnership that had existed between France and Israel since 1948. The Six-Day war of 1967 offered him the pretext he needed.

The most vivid episode of this realignment (and certainly the most famous) was de Gaulle's remark, at a November 1967 press conference, that the Jews were "an elite people, self-assured and domineering." The significance of this comment was not lost on the distinguished commentator and political scientist Raymond Aron, who recognized it

as a classic anti-Semitic trope about the supposed Jewish thirst for power. It was de Gaulle's signal of a new turn in French foreign policy—going beyond close relations with the Arabs to an embrace of the anti-Zionist cause.

De Gaulle's shift reinforced other ideological trends in French society that were already strong at the time and remain powerful today. The first of these was the long-standing resistance of French Catholics to seeing Palestine—the Holy Land, the birthplace of Jesus—returned to the Jews, whom they regarded as the enemies of Christ. More practically, the Church had always sought good relations with Islamic regimes in order to protect Christian interests in the region. France's early sympathy with Israel had strained those efforts; de Gaulle gave the Church a diplomatic asset.

Of even more enduring importance was support for de Gaulle's about-face among ideological partisans of the "non-aligned countries," as the third world was then called. For these elements in French politics, Zionism was just a form of Western colonialism, now backed by the brute strength of an imperialistic United States. This idea has become, over the years, nearly universal on the French Left, to say nothing of *bien-pensants* intellectuals elsewhere in the West. Indeed, one of the sad ironies of French politics is that the Left, through its unthinking hatred of Israel, has become much more anti-Semitic than the extreme Right, with its long and well-known history of animosity toward Jews.

A FINAL (if often unappreciated) factor in the peculiar attitude of French elites toward the Arab world has been the influence of the country's academic community of "Orientalists." As a result of colonization, French universities were early in developing programs of North African and Middle Eastern studies. But the field, despite its many achievements, was tainted from the outset by some of the ugliest ideological undercurrents in French society.

The first of the great Orientalists was Louis Massignon (1883-1962), a Catholic intellectual who published his first books a century ago and, as France became embroiled in the Dreyfus affair, moved openly in anti-Semitic circles. Then along came a famous trio: Jacques Berque (1910-95), Maxime Rodinson (1915-2004), and Vincent Monteil (1913-2005). An expert on Indonesia, Monteil

\* For more on the historical roots of the pro-Arab orientation in French foreign policy, see David Pryce-Jones's excellent "Jews, Arabs, and French Diplomacy: A Special Report" in the May 2005 COMMENTARY, now expanded in *Betrayal: France, the Arabs, and the Jews* (Encounter, 171 pp., \$23.95).

converted to Islam and, after World War II, subscribed to various right-wing theories denying the reality of the Holocaust. Rodinson, a Jew, was a Communist activist during the cold war. As for Berque, who grew up in colonial Morocco, he lived for so many years in Arab countries, both in North Africa and the Middle East, that with the passing of time he became progressively less able to maintain a critical distance.

Indeed, while working in the cultural section of the French embassy in Cairo in 1988, I was regaled by Berque over lunch one day with stories of his complete assimilation into Arab culture. Traveling through Iraq in the early 1970's, he had pretended to be a Moroccan, and as such was invited by the imam of a big mosque to comment on a Qur'anic verse during the Friday sermon. Had he been discovered as an imposter, he would have risked death. But, as Berque happily told the story, his Arabic was so fluent (he was the only non-Arab member of the Egyptian Academy of Arabic Language) and his knowledge of the material so extensive that no Iraqi could have detected he was a mere Frenchman.

Nor was Berque's identification with the Arabs strictly cultural. Looking back over his political pronouncements, one finds a clear pattern. He called Israel's birth an illegitimate act and insisted that the Jewish state would not survive more than a few years. In 1967, he predicted that Nasser would wipe Israel off the map. In the late 1980's, he declared that Saddam Hussein was a great socialist and secular leader who was going to bring democracy to the Middle East, and demanded that France treat him as a good friend. In his final years, he argued that Islamism might make inroads here and there, but that it could never gain much of foothold among elites in a country like Egypt.

Unfortunately, today's heirs to this Orientalist tradition in France entertain similar biases and are no more reliable in their political judgments. Gilles Kepel, in *The War for Muslim Minds* (2004), has proclaimed Islamism a failure and al Qaeda a spent force, going so far as to describe the attacks of 9/11 as an act of sheer despair. Olivier Roy, the author of *Globalized Islam* (2004), sees Islamism as a revolutionary program that answers popular aspirations, even if it happens to express itself in reactionary terms. Another scholar, François Burgat, argues in *Face to Face with Political Islam* (2005) that Western countries, instead of fighting Islamist leaders, should enter into a friendly dialogue with them.

None of this is to suggest that these scholars lack knowledge of the political situation in the Arab world. But they give a distorted image of that situation—and, I believe, they do so deliberately. Eager

to discourage any sense of menace that the West might feel from the direction of Islam and the Arabs, they minimize both the importance of radical Islamism and its threat to international peace and freedom. In defiance of what the Islamists themselves say, France's Orientalists insist time and again that there is no "clash of civilizations."

The effect of these views on the wider political discussion in France is profound. The present generation of Orientalists is omnipresent in the French media, unavoidable on radio and television. They assure the country that the progressive Islamization of European suburbs, plain for all to see, poses no danger. They suggest that the problem with Israel is its very existence. They inspire the open sympathy with Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran that can be found in newspapers like *Le Monde* and *Libération*. And they encourage the use of the term "Islamophobia" (a coinage of Iranian clerics) in order to delegitimize all those who might be tempted to disagree with them—individuals like Redeker.

I AM NEITHER an Orientalist nor any kind of expert on the issue of Islamism. But I have spent years in the Middle East, as well as in other Muslim countries, and I know that the situation in the Islamic world corresponds very little to the wishful thinking of so many French scholars, journalists, and political leaders. A quick look at a world map—from Chechnya to Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, Kashmir, southern Thailand, and the southern Philippines—reveals that the planet's most devastating wars are now of the jihadist type. All are fueled by Islamism.

I also know that the growing anti-Semitism one encounters in France, combined with the increasing tendency of the country's elite to speak of Israel as a "temporary" state, is not only dangerous in itself but bad for France. A republic founded on principles of freedom and equality cannot easily accommodate such noxious ideas. Corruption is difficult to confine, and the moral and intellectual compromises that allow educated people to deny the nature and reality of today's struggle against Islamism—a struggle facing the West as whole—soon find their way into other aspects of public life.

When I finally reached Robert Redeker by e-mail a few weeks after he had gone into hiding with his family, he was still astonished by his fate. "I never thought that such a thing could happen in our old Republican France," he wrote to me in a short, stoic message. Neither did I. But things have changed. What was once unthinkable in France has already come to pass.