

Refugee in his Own Country

NIDRA POLLER

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Last October, the French author and philosophy teacher Robert Redeker, accompanied by two bodyguards, went to the office of his publisher in the charming fifth arrondissement of Paris. Redeker has been in hiding for more than two years, ever since he addressed the question of Islamic intimidation in a newspaper article in *Le Figaro*, which led to a string of death threats. He is France's Salman Rushdie, but his case has already been largely forgotten by his compatriots.

When the staff left for lunch, Redeker encouraged his bodyguards to take a break too. He felt safe. In an interview with *Standpoint* he explained what happened next:

"At 1.30pm, a young man of North African origin came to deliver a package. 'Monsieur Redeker,' he said, 'I know who you are...' adding, 'I won't kill you but someone else will.'

"He lashed out at me for ten, maybe 15 minutes. The genocide of the Muslims, Arabs are Semites, Hitler was Christian... 'You make a distinction between moderate, fanatical and Islamist Muslims. You're wrong. A person is Muslim or not Muslim, period.' Over and over, he accused me of insulting all Muslims by criticising Muhammad. 'Muhammad is more than a father for Muslims,' he said. 'What you did is serious!' He stormed out in a rage. I called my two RG [*Renseignements Généraux*, the domestic intelligence service] protectors, who rushed over. They whisked me away to the airport."

It was in Paris 60 years ago that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed, on 10 December 1948. France has always claimed a special relationship with the Declaration, affirmed as a defining national quality, carried as a banner whenever and wherever human rights are threatened - more or less. In the words of René Samuel Cassin, recognised as its principal author, the Declaration "is the most vigorous, most necessary protest of humanity against the atrocities and oppressions endured by millions of human beings through the ages". Cassin, who refused to take his seat as a delegate to the League of Nations after publicly denouncing the Munich Agreement, maintained a lifelong association with the Alliance Israélite Universelle, under whose auspices he frequently visited Israel.

Today in France, demonstrators equate the Star of David with the swastika, scream their hatred of Israel, burn its flag and chant promises of destruction. Schools that bear the name of René Cassin are vandalised. Cassin was a *résistant*, sentenced to death *in absentia* by the Vichy government. Where is the Resistance today? Is it the enraged crowd in keffieh, vowing allegiance to Hamas? Or courageous thinkers who dare to denounce the greatest totalitarian threat since Nazism and communism?

The Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations and the European Union mark the determination of the free world to build institutions that would protect all human beings against the resurgence of tyrannical systems. Are they becoming, tragically, facilitators of a movement - global jihad - dedicated to the destruction of Western values?

The EU's Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) - part of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia - held its first annual conference in Paris last December, to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the Declaration. Delegates split up into five working groups to review freedom of expression from five angles: its relation to democratic society, the new media, defamation, diversity in the media and "challenges". The working groups reported briefly on their conclusions at a plenary session open to the media.

Freedom of expression is indeed challenged by Islamic fundamentalism. The universality of human rights is attacked at the UN. Anti-blasphemy legislation is pushed aggressively at all levels, both domestically and internationally. The expression of certain opinions has become life-threatening. But the FRA only has eyes for the rights of "visible minorities" and the values of "diversity". The issue of Islamic thought control is, however, broached obliquely in a background paper entitled "Freedom of Expression and Hate Speech: some points for consideration". It states:

"Free expression is a cornerstone of democracy and one of the core values of the European Union, but so is equal treatment and non-discrimination. Socially vulnerable groups and individuals who are often the target of intolerance, racial abuse and hatred need to be protected not only from discrimination, but also from verbal abuse. It should not be forgotten that the battle for freedom of expression in European history was a battle of the oppressed for a voice against their oppressors. This historical lesson should not be forgotten. Therefore insensitivity for the existing societal power relationships is crucial for the interpretation of the limits of free expression."

The document concludes with the warning that hate speech regulation is inadequate if it is not extended to active promotion of diversity and non-discrimination, as proposed by the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

The Danish cartoon controversy is cited briefly in the background paper as an illustration of divided opinion between those who advocate limiting free expression to respect "religious sensitivities" and those who oppose restriction on the grounds of "a more absolute interpretation of this right". While extremists torched European embassies in Muslim countries, "moderate" European Muslims pleaded for respect for the Prophet in their adopted homelands. Lawsuits, death threats and a whole range of less dramatic pressure have produced lasting effects in Europe.

In its exquisite concern for "visible minorities", the agency ignores the fate of an *invisible* minority - intellectuals reduced to silence because they dared to criticise Islam. The freedom to say what one thinks about any religion - its clerics, practices, precepts and sartorial rules - is as much a part of the European heritage as giving voice to the oppressed. At the dawn of the 21st century, in a once enlightened Europe, Theo van Gogh was savagely murdered. Authors and

politicians need police protection, have been forced into hiding, reduced to silence and deprived of their fundamental rights. For Robert Redeker, a former philosophy teacher at a lycée in Toulouse, the consequences of this thought control have been devastating.

Redeker has been in hiding ever since his op-ed article "*Face aux intimidations islamistes, que doit faire le monde libre?*" (How should the free world confront Islamist intimidation?), appeared in *Le Figaro* on 19 September 2006, two days after Pope Benedict XVI's speech at Regensburg. The outrage provoked by the Pope's observation on the relation between Islam and violence, wrote Redeker, was an attempt by this same Islam to stifle freedom of thought and expression, the most precious Western value, which did not exist in any Muslim country. Islam was trying to impose its rules on Europe, he added, citing, among others, prohibition of caricatures, pressure to allow girls to wear the hijab to school and accusations of Islamophobia.

For Redeker, Islam, like communism - another totalitarian belief-system - sold itself as an alternative to Western culture and played on Western sensibilities by claiming to speak for the impoverished masses. Islam, he went on, was contemptuous of "decadent" Western society with its secularised Christianity, open-hearted generosity, sexual freedom and democratic values.

Redeker described the Prophet as a warlord enriched by plunder, who slaughtered the Jews of Medina. As opposed to the fundamental violence of Islam, Christianity surmounted its shameful periods by returning to the fundamental Evangelical values. "Jesus is a master of love, Muhammad a master of hatred," wrote Redeker. Judaism and Christianity had eliminated their archaic violence, adding that while Islam still nurtured it.

All Muslims, he wrote, were taught from holy texts that were steeped in hatred and violence. Islam, like 20th-century communism, aspired to rule the world. Now as then, concluded Redeker, the West was "the free world," and its enemies swarmed and multiplied in its midst.

Immediately after publication of this op-ed (ironically, such articles are called "*libre opinion*" in French), Redeker received credible death threats from Muslims and was forced into hiding. The support of a handful of courageous minds was outweighed by criticism from academic and journalist colleagues, teachers' unions and public officials, who accused him of reckless insensitivity. Today, Redeker is still in hiding, under government protection.

Redeker explained to *Standpoint* his current situation: "I am a sort of political refugee within my country." He has given up teaching, moved away from his home region and must be protected by two bodyguards when he goes to any city. His life has become a crippling exercise of perpetual precautions, but Redeker is not a *cause célèbre* in France.

He still publishes articles on other subjects in the national media but his case has been forgotten, except by those who want to kill him. Their interest has not subsided, their numbers constantly increase, as indicated by the incident in Paris in October. Redeker concludes from that confrontation that his photograph is still doing the rounds, and that Islamist ideas have taken hold in the minds of ordinary Muslims.

Who stands up for Robert Redeker today? Intellectuals such as Roger-Pol Droit, Claude Lanzmann and Pierre-André Taguieff. Certainly not his former colleagues. "Leftists and teachers' unions would rather defend a terrorist convicted of murder like Cesare Battisti than defend me, a man in danger of being murdered by terrorists," he says. (France agreed to extradite Battisti to Italy. He had lived in France for 20 years under the protection of a refuge policy established by President François Mitterrand and repealed by the Sarkozy government. But after a campaign led by Carla Bruni, he has since been granted asylum in Brazil.

Is it possible to speak freely about Islam today in France? No, replies Redeker, freedom of expression is under constant pressure from the fallacious notion of "Islamophobia". The term, invented by Ayatollah Khomeini to stifle critics, equates the legitimate criticism of a religion and its ideology with racism. Reasonable people are frightened, he says, by Islamist ideology and barbaric practices. "It's not a question of Islam as religious belief but as a coercive ideology that crushes millions of human beings under its implacable yoke." Europeans justifiably fear the loss of freedoms won in bitter struggles over centuries; they fear the intrusion of religion in politics, jeopardising the separation of church and state.

"Islam is the only religion that frightens people," says Redeker. "All over the world, Islam shows a face of hatred, intolerance, injustice, and archaism." The term "Islamophobia," he explains, was invented to make opposition to Islam a criminal offence, a typical totalitarian ploy. (Indeed, the parallel between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia is systematically established in FRA documents and echoed in tracts published by associations for Jewish-Muslim entente. Islamophobia is invoked whenever a mosque is vandalised, Muslim tombs are desecrated or an act of jihad mass murder is denounced.)

How does Robert Redeker reply to detractors who ask why anti-Semitism is punished while defamation of Islam is defended? He argues that criticism or fear of Islam - a religion, a system of thought, a world view, an ideology - is acceptable in a liberal society. Hatred of Jews as a people is not.

Asked to comment on the FRA's preoccupation with discrimination against "visible minorities", coupled with its indifference to pressure for anti-blasphemy legislation, Redeker observes tersely that Muslim nations, world champions in discrimination - eg, the statute of *dhimmi* - are pushing to make blasphemy a crime. "That would be discrimination against freedom and intelligence. Durban I was a festival of anti-Semitism; Durban II is heading the same way."

Does Islam ultimately endanger rational thinking? Is the French educational system resisting this pressure or gradually abandoning intellectual discipline?

"Freedom of expression is the most precious invention of Europe, a treasure that no other civilisation was able to construct," Redeker replies. "This freedom is the heart and soul of Europe's spiritual existence. Those who try to destroy Europe or force it to submit to a totalitarian ideology aim first at this freedom of expression. This happened with the major totalitarian movements of the 20th century. Many recent affairs - the scandal over the Muhammad cartoons in Denmark and in France is a perfect example - show that for the enemies of European civilisation, freedom of expression is the first obstacle that must be eliminated.

Pressure against this freedom is constant. Many history teachers in French lycées censor their courses when there are Muslim students in the class. Often, they cannot teach the history of the Shoah, though it is on the programme. The great historian Olivier Pètré Grenouilleau was taken to court because he explained, in his masterpiece *Les Traités Négrières* [The Slave Trades], that the slave trade was an invention of Islam, conducted with the active participation of African kingdoms and it caused more fatalities than the Western trade. This example shows that attacks against freedom of expression are also attacks against the truth. Negationism, the falsification of historical truth, is energetically peddled by Islamists and finds eager consumers in the *banlieues* [suburban housing estates]."

Though Robert Redeker's case is the most dramatic, other intellectuals are subject to cruel and unusual punishment. Careers have been destroyed, damaged or interrupted. The expression of ideas that might arouse the ire of Muslims is suppressed. Reprimanded in 2004 for his classes on Muhammad, Louis Chagnon, a history teacher in a Parisian *banlieue*, was only recently rehabilitated. The philosopher Alain Finkielkraut - promoted last month from *chevalier* to *officier de la Légion d'honneur* - was intellectually lynched in 2005 for highlighting the ethnic and religious aspects of the *banlieue* uprising.

Sylvain Gougenheim, history professor at the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure in Lyon, was denounced for claiming, in *Aristote à Mont St Michel*, that Islam does not deserve exclusive credit for the transmission of classical philosophy. "Arab" translators of Aristotle, she wrote, were often Christian *dhimmi* scholars in lands conquered by Islam, and copyists at Mont St Michel conserved texts brought through non-Muslim circuits.

The philosopher André Glucksmann provoked furious, snide anti-Jewish comments from *Le Monde* subscribers after publication of a thoughtful essay on the principle of "disproportion" in the current Gaza operation. Arrests of sleeper cells in France and other European countries have yielded hit lists of intellectuals, including the popular philosopher Bernard Henri-Lévy.

This challenge to freedom of expression is not mentioned in FRA documents, which focus on racism, discrimination, socio-economic problems, the underprivileged, migrants and immigrants. Coupling anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, classifying anti-Semitism statistics with extreme right-wing crime, the FRA makes much ado about Muslim schoolgirls fighting for the right to wear the hijab, niqab and burqa to school and never mentions Jewish children forced to abandon state schools in Europe because the administration cannot protect them against harassment and physical attacks.

Speakers and delegates at the FRA conference repeatedly denounced a post-9/11 climate of fear induced, they claimed, not by any real danger but motivated by a determination on the part of Western governments to "control populations". The irony is that the city of Paris has declared the Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen an honorary citizen and is putting her up in the Couvent des Récollets, an international centre for scholars and artists housed in a refurbished convent.

Ms Nasreen has been on the run ever since she published a novel describing the persecution of a Hindu girl by Muslims in Bangladesh, followed by other works denouncing the persecution of

women under sharia. A brief article in the French news weekly *Le Point* reduced it to a blanket "Nasreen denounces the persecution of women by religions."

The convent, with its pricey hotel apartments, is located on Rue du Faubourg-Saint Martin in the tenth arrondissement, equidistant from the partially gentrified banks of the Canal St Martin and the still sleazy Gare de l'Est, with its bustling station population - long-distance passengers, commuters, lost souls and illegal immigrants.

Though the tenth arrondissement is moving upscale, with an influx of young professionals, the Gare de l'Est and nearby Gare du Nord sectors are quite shabby. The Recollets international centre also houses a cultural association that works to "dynamise" relations between the centre and the surrounding neighbourhood. Nasreen was quoted in the *Guardian* as saying how happy she will be to walk freely through the streets of Paris.

Could Robert Redeker enjoy such liberty? Could he walk from the Couvent de Récollets south to Place de la République, where the cries of "*Israel Assassin*" rang out last month, and from there down to Place Jean-Pierre Timbaud in the 11th arrondissement, site of one of the most radical mosques in Paris?

For the time being, Redeker pursues his professional career in books, the media and cyberspace (www.robertredeker.fr), with an occasional carefully prepared public appearance. His latest opinion piece, "*La rue, la mosquée et la télévision*" appeared in January in *Le Figaro* and describes with unflinching lucidity the French street transformed into the Arab street - the same slogans, same flags, same shameless support for Hamas, same calls for the destruction of Israel.

Demonstrators waving the green banners of Islam, the red of communism, the black of anarchy marched together, not for peace but for the victory of Hamas. This coalition of the Left with a Muslim population whose Islamic identity is forged in the mosque and whose rage is inflamed by emotionally charged television images bodes ill for the future of the Republic.

By the publication of this opinion in the same newspaper in which he wrote the article that thrust him out of the city, the forum and the academy, Robert Redeker is demonstrating lasting courage.