

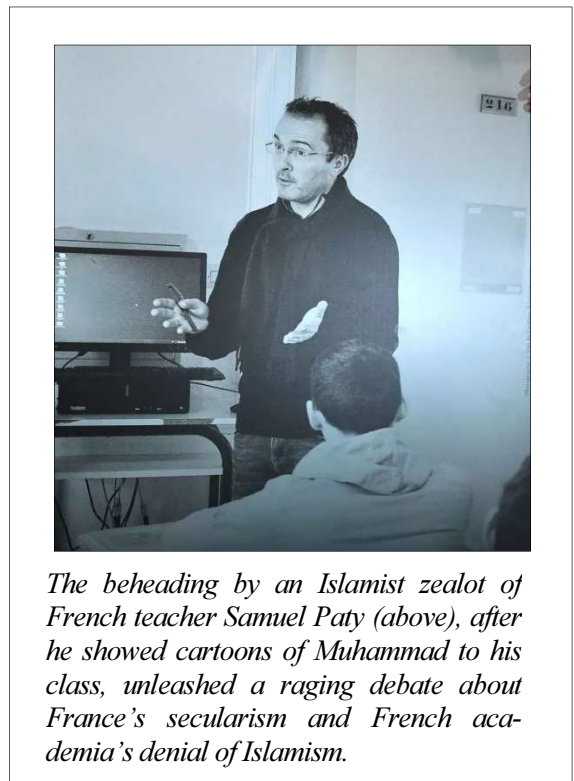
## *France's Islamist Challenge*

# A Top Issue for French Intellectuals

by **Martha Lee**

**O**n October 16, 2020, French school-teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded by an Islamist zealot after showing *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons of the prophet Muhammad to his class. Some two weeks later, one hundred French “professors and researchers of various sensitivities” published the “Manifesto of the Hundred” in France’s foremost daily, *Le Monde*, denouncing French academia’s persistent denial of Islamism and its menace.<sup>1</sup>

Sparking a string of heated counter-responses, the dispute not only underscored the campus fight between contending approaches to Islamism but also the transformation of French universities into a battleground between those seeking to preserve France’s universalist and secularist values and proponents of “multicultural” and “decolonization” theories, which often view Islamism as a legitimate response to long-standing white colonial oppression. Because France has one of the largest Muslim communities in Europe and its universities are widely seen as guardians and transmitters of the nation’s universalist values, the outcome of the recent dispute is bound to have far-reaching implications.



*The beheading by an Islamist zealot of French teacher Samuel Paty (above), after he showed cartoons of Muhammad to his class, unleashed a raging debate about France’s secularism and French academia’s denial of Islamism.*

<sup>1</sup> “Une centaine d’universitaires alertent: ‘Sur l’islamisme, ce qui nous menace, c’est la persistance du déni,’” *Le Monde* (Paris), [Oct. 31, 2020](#).

## The Islamism Debate

Paty's beheading shocked French society and produced a broad bipartisan pledge to defend secularism and freedom of speech in the face of an Islamist threat. The Manifesto of the Hundred condemned the reluctance of most universities and academic associations, including the Conference of University Presidents (CPU)—the organization of French universities—to blame Islamism for the atrocity and criticized their use of such general terms as “fanaticism” or “obscurantism.” The signatories ascribed this failure to the importation to French campuses of fashionable fads, notably “decolonization” and “multicultural” theories that fan hatred of “Whites” and of France. They urged the minister of higher education to put in place measures to detect drifts toward Islamism, to negate its underlying precepts, and to involve French universities in the struggle for secularism and freedom of speech by creating a body responsible for reporting violations of the republic's universalist values.<sup>2</sup>

The response to the manifesto came quickly. On November 2, a group of academics from French, European, and American universities published a rebuttal in *Le Monde* accusing the signatories of “an attack on civil liberties and the democratic rule of law,” of which academic freedom constituted an integral part. While conceding the need to criticize the denial and/or minimization of the Islamist danger, they accused their one hundred colleagues of waging a “McCarthyist witch hunt” aimed at “replacing the freedom of expression by saluting the flag” and subjecting universities to “political control that would ascertain teachers' loyalty with regard to the State.”

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<sup>2</sup> [Ibid.](#)

The rebuttal directed particularly scathing criticism at Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer's claim, endorsed by the Manifesto of the Hundred, that Islamo-leftism sympathy and support by leftist segments for Islamism as a legitimate response to Western imperialism and as the religion of the oppressed—had wrought havoc on French universities. The critics denied the existence of this phenomenon and decried the “ludicrous assumption that terrorists were guided by ‘decolonization studies.’”<sup>3</sup>

Similar accusations were leveled by yet another public statement, published that month and signed by two thousand left-wing academics from French, European, and American universities. Failing to mention Islamism by name, let alone to connect it to recent terrorist attacks in France, the two thousand accused the Manifesto of the Hundred of seeking to subject universities to a “thought police” and of using extreme, far-right vocabulary evocative of “dark times.” The statement read:

It is appalling that at a time of mourning in the face of terrorist attacks ... academics use the despicable murders to settle scores and accuse their colleagues of complicity ... We will continue to defend the place of an open, critical, and tolerant approach, and the transmission of knowledge based on emancipation and dignity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Cette attaque contre la liberté académique est une attaque contre l'Etat de droit démocratique,” *Le Monde*, [Nov. 2, 2020](#).

<sup>4</sup> “Pour un savoir critique et émancipateur dans la recherche et l'enseignement supérieur,” [Wordpress.com, Nov. 2020](#).

The failure to mention the identity of those who perpetrated “the terrorist attacks” and “despicable murders” afforded tacit confirmation of the Manifesto of the Hundred’s charge regarding the universities’ “persistent denial” of the Islamist threat. But, the Conference of University Presidents sought to obfuscate the issue further by diverting the debate to the broader issue of the role of scholarly work in society. In contrast to the manifesto’s assertion that “ideas have consequences” and that “universities have an essential role to play in the struggle to defend secularism and freedom of speech,” the CPU insisted that “research isn’t responsible for the ills of society, it analyzes them”; hence, “universities cannot be considered accomplices of terrorism.”<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the response of the minister of higher education, Frédérique Vidal, was not well planned and only served to inflame the situation further. Agreeing with the gist of the Manifesto of the Hundred, on February 14, 2021, she asked the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS) to investigate the spread of Islamo-leftism in universities with a view to distinguishing between “academic research” and “activism and opinion.” Denying the spread of Islamo-leftism on French campuses, the CNRS condemned the “attempts to delegitimize certain areas of research including postcolonial or intersectional studies.” Then, hundreds of academics published a statement denouncing the requested investigation as a “witch hunt”



*“March against Islamophobia,” Paris, 2019. Some universities have caved in to demands by Islamists and their sympathizers to cancel events for fear of violence or stigmatization as racist or “Islamophobic.”*

and calling for Vidal’s resignation.<sup>6</sup> In response, the anti-Islamist scholars Gilles Kepel (a signatory to the Manifesto of the Hundred) and Bernard Rougier published an op-ed claiming that the real issue at hand was the “contamination of knowledge by activism,” which necessitated a thorough investigation by an independent body.<sup>7</sup>

The resurgent debate seems to have caught the French government unprepared. While Education Minister Blanquer reiterated his charge regarding Islamo-leftism’s damaging presence in French universities, backed by Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin, other members of Macron’s ruling party distanced themselves from the debate with government spokesperson Gabriel Attal insisting that if Islamo-leftism was indeed present in academia, it was “extremely marginal, and the current

<sup>5</sup> “Polémique après les propos de Jean-Michel Blanquer sur ‘l’islamo-gauchisme’ à l’université,” *Le Monde*, [Oct. 23, 2020](#).

<sup>6</sup> *Le Monde*, Feb. 17, [Feb. 20](#), [Feb. 22, 2021](#); *Le Figaro* (Paris), [Feb. 24, 2021](#).

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Kepel and Bernard Rougier, “Le problème n’est pas tant l’‘islamo-gauchisme’ que le dévoiement militant de l’enseignement et de la recherché,” *Le Monde*, [Feb. 22, 2021](#).

priority is to help students through the [Covid-19] crisis.”<sup>8</sup>

## The Fight over French Values

The disagreements on the extent of Islamism’s presence on French campuses and the ways and means to combat radicalization are emblematic of the wider conflict not only within academia but also within French society as a whole. It is a struggle between the quintessential French values of universalism and secularism and the contending doctrine of multiculturalism. During the 2010s, notions of multiculturalism, political correctness, intersectionality, and identity politics became more prevalent across French campuses, with the attendant anxiety about the sensibilities of minorities. This included a certain tolerance of Islamism and the denunciation as “Islamophobia” of any criticism or concern about this ideology thus conflating Muslims with Islamists. It should, however, be noted that while some regularly denounce these notions as a wholesale importation of American ideas, this does not necessarily reflect the reality as French students have shown themselves to be perfectly capable of developing and promoting such ideas on their own.

Indeed, a growing number of universities found themselves obliged to cave in to the demands of Islamists and their sympathizers, and to cancel events for fear of violence or stigmatization as racist or “Islamophobic.” In October 2019, for example, the Université Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne, perhaps France’s best-known institution of higher learning, canceled a course on preventing radicalization that was to be taught by anti-

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Islamist activist Muhammad Sifaoui as a result of denunciations by Islamist organizations and leftist student groups. University president Georges Haddad explained the cancellation on

the grounds of “quieting all recriminations and rumors.” Saying he hates censorship, he claimed that his responsibilities forced him to give in to the pressure so as to prevent campus violence.<sup>9</sup>

In 2021, the main student union at the Sciences Po university in Grenoble denounced two professors who had questioned the use of the term “Islamophobia.” Students posted the professors’ names on the walls of the university along with their description as “fascists” and a call for their resignation. These professors had to be placed under police protection.<sup>10</sup>

While identity theory (or *communautarisme* as it is known in France), with its definition of communities along racial, ethnic, or religious lines, has not caught on among the general public, it has gained considerable traction in academic circles. This is so much the case that in June 2020, President Emmanuel Macron himself felt obliged to accuse academia of “encouraging the ethnicization” of social issues, a step that can lead to “secession.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, a poll published three months after the president’s warning found that 74 percent of French Muslims under the age of 25 prioritized their religious beliefs over the republic’s values—

<sup>8</sup> *Le Monde*, [Feb. 22, 2021](#).

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Sifaoui, Twitter, [Oct. 21, 2019](#); *Les Inrocks* (Paris), [Oct. 23, 2019](#); *Le Figaro étudiant* (Paris), [July 29, 2020](#).

<sup>10</sup> *Le Monde*, [Dec. 2, 2020](#); *Le Figaro*, Mar. 5, Mar. 8, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> *Marianne* (Paris), [June 30](#), [Sept. 16](#), [Nov. 9, 2020](#).

three times as high as Muslims older than 35. Seventy-three percent of French Muslims between 25 and 34 thought “Islam is the only true religion” while 45 percent of Muslims younger than 25 agreed that “Islam is incompatible with the values of French society” (an opinion shared by “only” 24 percent of French Muslims over 35).<sup>12</sup> These findings and the growing multicultural tendencies on campus were deemed by the center-right *Le Figaro* as alarming enough to warn that the ideological war was only just beginning. Yet the center-left *Le Monde*, perhaps the best-known French newspaper, which has become increasingly sympathetic to the multicultural Left, dismissed such fears (and concerns about a deleterious American influence on French campuses) as sheer fantasy.<sup>13</sup>

### Decolonization as an Islamist Vehicle

While the manifesto’s description of “decolonization studies” as an importation is debatable, it is certainly true that the subject is more often than not taught in a way that serves Islamist interests. Indeed, Islamist apologists tend to rely on decolonization ideology, a Marxist-influenced view that reduces everything to unequal dynamics between whites and non-whites, northern countries and the global south, imperialists and indigenous peoples. Unsurprisingly, according to this limited and flawed understanding of history and geopolitics, Islamists are often presented as the most authentic Muslims.

<sup>12</sup> *Le Figaro*, [Sept. 8, 2020](#).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 20, 2020; *Le Monde*, Dec. 21, 2020.



*Memorial at the site of 2016 Tel Aviv terror attack. Following the attack, which killed four people, a French decolonization activist congratulated the perpetrators on Twitter for leading an “operation of resistance.”*

Contrary to the accusations of the signatories of the first counter-manifesto, the legitimate concern expressed in the Manifesto of the Hundred is not that Islamist terrorists will be directly inspired by decolonization ideas or activists; in fact, many of these activists know little about the religion and seem interested only in instrumentalizing it as a weapon of the oppressed. More worrying is the possibility that as this decolonization ideology becomes more popular, its proponents will use any influence they have to continue blurring the distinction between Muslims and Islamists, which will obviously benefit the latter. Some of these proponents focus on the West’s alleged racist attitudes, notably “Islamophobia,” viewing anti-Islamism as present-day continuation of the West’s colonial policies. Others deny Islamism’s very existence while still others defend abhorrent Islamist practices—anti-homosexual attitudes, misogyny, imprisonment for not fasting during Ramadan,

and even terrorist attacks —as defiant assertion of indigenous will that refuses to submit to Western domination.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, for example, after Islamist terrorists murdered four people in Tel Aviv in 2016, decolonization activist Aya Ramadan took to Twitter to congratulate the perpetrators for leading an “operation of resistance.”<sup>15</sup> For their part, some elements of the French academic Left have incongruously lent support to Islamists in the name of far-left doctrines: sociology professor Jean-François Bayart asserted the existence of a “capitalist Islamophobia” and claimed that a “republican McCarthyism” was consolidated at the heart of the French state and media.<sup>16</sup> While philosopher Alain Badiou described the 2004 law banning religious symbols in school as “capitalist,” condemning it as the imposition of a “mercantile paradigm” involving the “circulation” of the “female body.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite the French Left’s long tradition of opposing religious symbols in the public sphere and its support of religion as belonging in the private domain, parts of the movement currently denounce France’s limitations on religious symbols as evidence of “Islamophobia.” And yet, bans on these symbols began not in France but in its former colonies. As early as 1957, Tunisia’s first president, Habib Bourguiba, banned hijabs in schools, and in 2019 post-“Arab Spring,”

**Some French leftists denounce France’s limitations on religious symbols as “Islamophobia.”**

Tunisia outlawed niqabs, which cover the face, in all public institutions.<sup>18</sup> Several years prior to France’s decision to ban the burqa and niqab, the Algerian government

passed a law forbidding government workers from wearing face coverings at their workplace, and in 2017, despite Islamist protests, Algeria banned face coverings in schools.<sup>19</sup>

The prominent decolonization activist (and staunch defender of Islamism) Houria Bouteldja, founder of the party of the Indigenes de la Republique, went further than her colleagues in whitewashing Islamism. In her published response to the Manifesto of the Hundred, she claimed that its signatories were totally isolated in their defense of universalism and suggested that they examine their connection to state racism and break with the “nationalistic and imperialist logic ... they call universalism.”<sup>20</sup> Asked for her opinion on the latest developments in French universities, Bouteldja replied that while many academics were “very critical” of the “One Hundred,” the latter were “linked to the interests of the power and the media.” In her view, “white resistance” to decolonization ideas was “very strong,” because “reactionary” academics are “very frightened that we are progressing.”<sup>21</sup>

Against this backdrop, the unabashed

<sup>14</sup> Sadri Khiari, “Non-jeûneurs condamnés : Un problème d’arbitraire de l’Etat ou de liberté individuelle?” *Nawaat* (Tunis), [July 15, 2017](#); *Marianne*, [June 9, 2016](#).

<sup>15</sup> *Le Figaro*, June 10, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-François Bayart, “Que le terme plaise ou non, il y a bien une islamophobie d’Etat en France,” *Le Monde*, [Oct. 31, 2020](#).

<sup>17</sup> *Libération* (Paris), [Apr. 5, 2016](#).

<sup>18</sup> *Jeune Afrique* (Paris), [Aug. 28, 2006](#); *Le Point* (Paris), July 5, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> *Acteurs Publics* (Neuilly-sur-Seine), [Oct. 22, 2018](#); *Marianne*, [Sept. 22, 2017](#).

<sup>20</sup> Houria Bouteldja, “L’intelligentsia française et le Petit Poucet,” blog, *Mediapart* (Paris), [Dec. 10, 2020](#).

<sup>21</sup> Houria Bouteldja, “Day Two: France’s Islamophobia: Religious ‘Separatism’ or Disciplining Muslimness,” YouTube, [Dec. 13, 2020](#).

assertiveness of the Manifesto of the Hundred not only reflects the deepening schism in French academia and society between the anti-Islamists and their detractors but also underscores the prospective role of universities in society and the values they should promote. This is occurring at a time when a demographic shift in attitudes toward religious separatism means universities will play a crucial role in determining societal outlooks in general, and vis-à-vis Islamism in particular. In a recent French poll, half of respondents under 25 years of age believe that *Charlie Hebdo* was “wrong” to publish the cartoons of Muhammad.<sup>22</sup> The findings of a January 2020 poll by the center-left Jean Jaurès Foundation were no less alarming: 49 percent of schoolteachers were found to have self-censored while teaching subjects related to religion in order to avoid incidents with their students. At least 53 percent of teachers had students challenging their teachings in the name of religion.<sup>23</sup> This increasing radicalism is bound to have repercussions at the university level.

But, the religiously-motivated defiance over certain teachings might be countered by more university classes on the various branches of Islam, which is much more diverse than Islamists lead their adherents to believe. Unfortunately, as Gilles Kepel lamented, the increased focus on race, gender, and religious identity has been matched by a failure to study

**A 2020 poll found that 53 percent of teachers experienced students challenging their teachings in the name of religion.**

Arab civilization and Arabic. Similarly, Islam is often reduced to Islamism, which makes it difficult to differentiate one from the other. Instead, classes on Islamic theology should offer evidence that this

faith has never been a monolith composed of the most conservative interpretations but is rather marked by the ideological and intellectual disagreements that have always been part of any religion. It might prove enlightening to study less well-known sects such as the Ismaili Nizaris who focus on the inward aspect of Islam; such writers as the Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi, reviled by Islamists; or philosophical works by classical Muslim philosophers such as Avicenna.

## Conclusion

It is too soon to know whether the Manifesto of the Hundred will entice French universities or the Conference of University Presidents into greater public assertiveness vis-à-vis Islamism, or even into a real discussion of the issue. The best way forward in the highly polarized French academic environment may not be to create a body responsible for reporting violations of republican principles and academic freedom as suggested by the manifesto. Rather, it might be preferable to organize talks and workshops in universities on the subject and to resist any cancellation attempts vigorously. Such events would also spur the Conseil national des universités to live up to its responsibilities and ensure that universities fulfill their goal of being an “intellectual community” that guarantees the transmission of knowledge, rather than indoctrinating students into ideologies that are presented as scientific realities.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Vallières, “Sondage Ifop: pour 69% des musulmans et 47% des moins de 25 ans, publier des caricatures religieuses est un tort,” *Marianne* (Paris), Sept. 2, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Iannis Roder, “Les enseignants de France face aux contestations de la laïcité et au séparatisme,” Fondation Jean Jaurès, Paris, Jan. 1, 2021.

Should some professors choose to support the inevitable protests of Islamists and their sympathizers, this will provide further evidence of their toleration of this illiberal ideology. That the vast majority of the manifesto's opponents went to great lengths not to mention Islamism is telling. The manifesto's warning of French academia's persistent denial of Islamism may thus prove the first step in inducing academics—regardless of where their sympathies lie—to recognize the reality of Islamism as an ideology and the existence of its proponents.

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