

“The Boycott of France Must End”

The French model is respectful of the universality of values without pitting communities against one another. Besides, no one can reasonably assert that this country is mistreating Islam, affirms a group of Muslim intellectuals including Sadek Beloucif, Chems-eddine Hafiz and Eva Janadin, in a collective Op-Ed article in Le Monde.

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Article. The recent call by parties in certain countries to boycott French products is incomprehensible, shocking and unfair. It represents an exclusionary process which ends up achieving precisely the ills it is supposed to fight. Who could reasonably assert that France mistreats its citizens of Muslim faith? No one, except perhaps those who would like to sow the seeds of discord within the French national community.

More than ever, harmony and unity must prevail within the French national community, which is currently the victim of a series of unspeakable attacks that are afflicting us all. We Muslims of France and other Mediterranean countries call for calm and reason.

There are two issues. On the one hand, the emotion aroused by the cartoons of the Prophet and the statements of the French authorities on this subject. On the other hand, President Emmanuel Macron's comments in a recent speech on separatism. Let's take them one by one.

The Prophet's caricatures. The authors of the calls for boycott criticize the Prophet's caricatures, finding them blasphemous and degrading. We, who write and sign this text, find them vulgar and shocking. However, in France, blasphemy is not a crime. It can therefore be criticized, but not prohibited. Since the Revolution of 1789, freedom of expression has been protected, as stated in Article 10 of the Declaration of Human Rights. The boundaries are clearly set out by law, prohibiting both insults and incitement to hatred as in the case of racism. In fact, all citizens are free to appeal to justice if they consider that these boundaries have been crossed, not in the name of the right to blasphemy, but rather in the name of respect for human dignity, regardless of the religion in question, whether Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism or Islam. But, in any case, there is no justification for the use of violence, neither in French law nor in Islam.

Against the Qur'anic Message

We do understand that some Muslims feel offended and shocked by these cartoons, but we recall that Islam also rejects any idolatry or sacralization of a human person. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad himself recalled that he was only a messenger. He has been repeatedly

mocked, called a madman, usurper or insulted by his opponents. At no time did God call to kill the perpetrators of these provocations, but He urged to adopt a wise and patient demeanor in the face of adversity: *“We certainly know that your heart is truly distressed by what they say. So glorify the praises of your Lord and be one of those who ‘always’ pray, and worship your Lord until the inevitable comes your way.”* (Qur'an 15:97-99). God encouraged early Muslims to ignore these attacks and show intelligence: *“when you hear Allah’s revelations being denied or ridiculed, then do not sit in that company unless they engage in a different topic, or else you will be like them.”* » (Qur'an 6:140) God not only does not prescribe any vengeance, but He asks never to sever ties with the perpetrators of such mockery by focusing on what unites them rather than what divides them. The murders in defense of the Prophet, the violence and calls for boycotts thus clearly go against the Qur'anic message and stem from secular and political motivations far from the spiritual and ethical depth of Islam.

Then, the subject of President Macron's speech on separatism. Contrary to what has been said here and there, this speech does not criticize Islam. It criticizes Islamism, which is a distortion of Islam. While criticizing Islamist ideology, he does respect Islam, a distinction that may have been misunderstood in the Arabic translation.

Contrary to what has been said here and there, at no time does the speech claim to reform or modify Islam. The President of the French Republic is respectful of each religion. And he is respectful of a French tradition, established by a law of 1905: the separation of the Church, churches, and the State. The State in France does not interfere in the life of churches, not a single one.

A Universal Ideal

In this speech of October 2, President Macron reaffirmed a number of public order measures and the neutrality of public service and clarified the provisions relating to the law of associations and schools, pillars and crucible of our French Republican Pact. Above all, he also insisted on the need to build an Islam in France, an Islam of the Enlightenment, free from foreign influences, structured and transparent in its funding, and fully integrating the cultural part of civilization-Islam, without encroaching an inch on religion-Islam.

With his foundational speech, President Macron wanted to recall that all French people must know that they are members of the French Republic, in particular its children who are most disadvantaged or suffering financial, social or cultural insecurity. He reminds everyone that racism, discrimination and separation do not belong in France.

We intellectuals committed to a desire for harmony at the international level, have chosen to support such ideas testifying to a universal ideal, and of which civilization - Islam is one of the expressions. In 2019 at UNESCO, during a conference organized by the association Islam in the XXIst Century, we welcomed such an initiative aimed at *“making one from many”* allowing, thanks to culture, to unite rather than divide, to bring together rather than ostracize and exclude. Cultural and religious diversity is the will of God for men, He who states: *“If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to*

test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about.” (Qur’an 5:48) Any aggression against one religion is an attack on all religions.

It is because the Republic in France does not "recognize any cult" that it protects them all. According to Article I of the 1958 Constitution, *“France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs.”* While General de Gaulle considered the secular character to be obvious, his drafter, Michel Debré, reportedly insisted on the latter for it to be mentioned. More than sixty years later, we can observe how necessary this mention was for France, one of the few countries in the world to have enshrined equality in its motto, and which strives to follow these ideals.

The accusation of an alleged French interference violating the privacy of Muslim consciences is false

We intellectuals coming from very different backgrounds, testify in favor of this French probity and its legitimacy. These are not empty words. Knowing the world, we can easily paraphrase and make the expression our own "happy as a Muslim in France" ... Because Islam is a religion of conscience which addresses itself directly to the individual, each Muslim being "a Church" to himself, being accountable only to God.

"whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve.", the Qur'an tells us (18:29), reaffirming the value of the individual. Man being submitted only to God, is in essence not subjugated, in a form of universal emancipation conforming to the republican ideal of individuals freed from the worship or enslavement of their fellow men.

This is why the accusation of alleged French interference violating the privacy of Muslim conscience is fundamentally untrue. It would also tend to denounce the law of men, as wanting to contradict the law of God. But in France, religious freedom is the rule!

“No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law”, tells us the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. The political order and the religious order are separated in France, in full respect of the fundamental rights of citizens. Distinguishing these two orders makes it possible both to respect the transcendence of believers and to limit the claims of some who might imagine themselves speaking for God (and therefore competing with him).

Republican Paradigm

As observers of French society, we acknowledge the fact that it sometimes asks questions ahead of its time, with universal considerations in mind. Some may consider such an attitude arrogant. We do not share these criticisms. Allowing everyone to take their destiny into their own hands, while integrating themselves into a republican melting pot, in our view represents all the beauty - and the difficulty - of the republican paradigm, in no way in opposition with individual intimate belief.

Beyond taking into account the diversity of cultural expressions, the French model respects the universality of values, without opposing communities to one another... The Qur'an affirms this uniqueness of man: "[We] made you into races and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the best in conduct" (Qur'an 49 :13).

Following the republican foundations, President Macron recalls that we are all different and all equal, guaranteeing universalism of reflection, without falling into the pitfalls of enslaving cultural relativism. This is how we denounce with the greatest force the attacks, violence and manifestations of hatred. Let us walk on the footsteps of Alain, the philosopher and fight for Freedom, defend Equality, and promote Fraternity: "*Wanting to form a society only with those whom one approves of in everything is illusory, and it is fanaticism itself.*" Because Fraternity makes the link between Liberty (or my autonomy) and Equality (or my ethical duty to respect others).

In conclusion, the boycott of French products is the boycott of France. Boycotting France is ignoring the truth of its ideals, it is ignoring its respect for religions, that of the Prophet and others. The boycott of France must end and dialogue, listening and mutual respect must resume.

Signatories: **Farid Abdelkrim**, author and actor; **Mohamed Bajrafil**, Islamic scholar and essayist; **Sadek Beloucif**, president of the association Islam in the XXIst Century; **Chemseddine Hafiz**, Rector of the Great Mosque of Paris; **Eva Janadin**, General Delegate of the association Islam in the 21st century; **Hakim El Karoui**, founder of the Muslim Association for Islam of France; **Khaldoun Nabwani**, philosopher; **Tareq Oubrou**, Grand Imam of Bordeaux; **Hachem Saleh**, writer; **Youssef Seddik**, philosopher, anthropologist of sacred texts.