INTERVIEWS 18.11.2020

'We need a debate on Islamism without stigmatising Muslims'

Islamist attacks haven shaken France. Vincent Tiberj on Muslims under general suspicion and the difficult role of the Left

Read this interview in German.

The assassination of the teacher Samuel Paty has shaken the French population to its core, more so than comparable attacks. Why?

Indeed, France has witnessed several attacks since 2015, including very dramatic ones. But in Paty's case, we are talking about schools, which are particularly significant for the French. Right from the Third Republic at the end of the 19th century, schools have not just had a mission to give lessons and to teach. They were and are supposed to bring the Republic closer to pupils in order to make them good citizens. So, with Paty, it was also a symbol that was attacked. Furthermore, Samuel was a teacher of history and geography. And these subjects play a special role in conveying a civic awareness and fundamental values such as freedom of expression or gender equality. All of that makes this attack stand out.

The assassin was motivated by the notion that the Prophet should not be shown, caricatured or mocked and therefore no caricatures about him should be presented. As in similar cases, a young man had become radicalised. The primarily sociological question behind this is: Does he represent the entirety of the Muslim minority? And the answer is a resounding “no”.

In early October, President Macron warned of the emergence of Islamist parallel societies. Which concrete measures are currently being discussed to prevent this development?

The problem starts with the actual extent of this phenomenon. As a sociologist, I have great doubts. After all, the examples that are being drawn on to show a kind of separatism are ultimately very much

reflecting a minority. Of course, the Samuel Paty case can serve as an example, especially since there was a mobilisation of very conservative Muslims against him on social media. But for the majority of French Muslims, the principles of the Republic and of religion do not contradict each other.

French Muslims are often accused of violating the principle of secularism or of being fundamentally incapable of understanding secularism. But the majority of them support it and are even positive about the public education system that has no religious teaching. It should be borne in mind that this attack hits an institution that immigrants and their descendants rely on to climb the ladder of French society.

So when President Macron puts separatism in the spotlight, he means very specific groups and behaviours – people who leave their children at home or send them to Arabic-language religion classes. There are also problems in France with *imams* sent from Turkey or Algeria who do not know the French context well. These problems are not new.

On the other hand, French society is partly responsible for this phenomenon. Sociological studies show that, between the early and late 2000s, the children of immigrants from the Maghreb increasingly defined themselves as Muslim. And that was not because they are necessarily pious or religious but because French society has often identified the headscarf as a problem. Thus we create a form of reactive identity and tend towards a general suspicion of Islam. But the vast majority of Muslim French people are perfectly integrated and practise their faith without any problems.

Representatives of the Muslim community in France have condemned the murder of Samuel Paty as a departure from the Islamic faith. At the same time, 70 per cent of French Muslims see the publication of the *Charlie Hebdo*cartoons as a mistake. How can the contradiction between freedom of expression, freedom of art – especially in a secular State – and the sensitivities of a religious minority be resolved?

First of all, it can be said that the mosque communities have positioned themselves very clearly after attacks. This is no different at the moment. But we should be careful: 70 per cent think that it was a mistake – what does that mean in concrete terms? The willingness to attack *Charlie Hebdo?* For the vast majority of Muslims, this is not the case. Is it a mistake to be shocked? For devout Catholics, caricatures of the pope would also be shocking. In principle, the cartoons of *Charlie Hebdo* are hurtful and unpleasant for a great many people. But here we point the finger at the Muslim minority. Muslims have the right to say that they do not agree with it. This, too, covers

freedom of expression. Here we should all pay attention to our reactions to those affected.

Let's go back to Macron's speech. After Macron's speech, the French Left criticised the stigmatisation of all Islam, while other separatist currents were not addressed enough. What alternative action does it propose?

That's a good question. The Left is already divided on these issues. After the attacks, people such as Manuel Valls, François Hollande and Bernard Cazeneuve pointed the finger at *la France Insoumise* and some of the Greens who had demonstrated against Islamophobia. But the latter is a real problem. Some women wearing headscarves were banned from going into restaurants. This is simply discrimination and racism. Taking to the streets on the other hand is very important. But accusations were made because these demonstrations also included very conservative Muslim organisations. They have taken the opportunity to spread their views. This is just normal in such demonstrations.

So we find ourselves in a situation where people are basically unanimous in their support for secularism, tolerance and diversity. But behind this are two models of secularism that stand in conflict to one another. This is also reflected in the opinion polls: on the one hand, there are, for the most part, younger, well-educated people, who regard France as having become multicultural society in the meantime. Wearing a headscarf or *niqab* is therefore no problem. On the other side are those who call themselves Republicans. Rather, they believe that religion has no place in it. They want a completely neutral public space. This raises new questions.

For example, the left-wing student union in France (Union nationale des étudiants de France, UNEF) has a vice-president who wears a headscarf. She was once invited to speak to the Assemblée Nationale [National Assembly]. The members of the right-wing parties and of *République en Marche* refused to listen to her and left the chamber on the grounds that the headscarf had no place in Parliament. Are we to seriously infer that she is necessarily moving to a kind of thinking whereby women have less worth in society by wearing a headscarf? No. After all, she is vice-president of a left-wing trade union. What can the Left parties do to counter the Right and part of the political centre on that point? At the moment, this is difficult for the Left.

After the attack the German Social Democrat Kevin Kühnert described Islamism as a blind spot on the political Left. He argued that one does not want to give political opponents living off racist resentment any unintended ammunition but one would achieve

exactly the opposite of the intended effect by silence. Is this true of France's political Left?

It is absolutely right that we need a debate on Islamism without stigmatising Muslims as a whole group. This is very difficult. After the assassination of Samuel Paty, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin portrayed, in all seriousness, selected supermarket shelves for specialities and food of some minorities as a danger and a sign of a lack of integration. A part of French society turns a blind eye to diversity or rejects it altogether. This is also dangerous. François Fillon, the Conservative presidential candidate in the 2017 election, has even said that France is not a multicultural nation. That is simply wrong. It is now, like many other European societies.

We have reached a point where the positive aspects of diversity are no longer seen. Diversity itself is not ruling out a harsh policy towards its opponents and Islamism is an opponent of diversity. The problem in France, for example, is that the history of Algeria or the African slave trade are not talked about. Islam is still considered a foreign religion, although the grandchildren of Algerian immigrants now grow up in France, whose parents were born here and who call themselves Muslims. So Islam is part of France. Of course, it remains a majority Catholic country. Moreover, Islam is much more plural than is often assumed. It is usually associated with 'conservatism' or 'Islamism', but people are not aware of the different mindsets among Muslims. In this respect, they are much more diverse than Catholics.

There is currently a high level of tension between France and Turkey. Does French society agree with Macron's policy towards Turkey or is it seen as an attempt to distract from his coronavirus policy, which has been heavily criticised?

Several factors come into play. One difference with Germany is that many French people do not associate Islam directly with Turkey but with the Maghreb. Few French people are aware that there is also immigration from Turkey and that this brings a different Islam with it. If one compares the integration of the various migrant groups, it is striking that those with Turkish migrant backgrounds are much more closed and that they are more likely to remain among themselves in Turkish clubs. The descendants continue to speak Turkish and there is much less exchange. Moreover, Turkish-style Islam is heavily controlled by the Turkish state.

The French do not recognise this connection [between the State and religion]. Erdogan fully recognises it. So he is trying to influence French politics in the interests of Muslim minorities. However, given the way in which Turkey and tensions with Turkey are being

discussed, the issues are rather about international relations and security policy, the intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkey's role in Syria and Libya or the tensions with Greece. The issues are less about minorities within France. I don't think that Macron is using this issue as a distraction. The question of separatism, however, may well serve as a distraction from his coronavirus policy.

The interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch and Oliver Philipp.

Vincent Tiberj
Bordeaux

Vincent Tiberj is a university professor, researcher at the Centre Emile Durkheim and research associate at Sciences Po Bordeaux.