

FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS NOT NEGOTIABLE

*By Claude MONIQUET
President of ESISC*

*On September 12, 2004, when leaving a television studio in Brussels, **Claude Moniquet** was violently assaulted by a certain **Rachid Belabed**. Punched and kicked repeatedly to the head, Claude Moniquet suffered a concussion and had to give up her activities for many weeks. When confronted by the police, **the defendant repeated several times that 'he did not regret' his action**. On the next day, standing before the investigating magistrate, he reiterated: **'I am pleased with what I did. I do not regret it.'***

*The trial relating to this attack took place this morning – three years and three months after the events! – before the 43rd Penal Chambers of the District Court of Brussels. **You will find below the statement issued to the hearing by Claude Moniquet on this occasion.***

This morning I do not want to take too much of your time, which I know is limited.

I also know that the matter which brings me here today before you as a victim is, at the level of justice in general, a 'small' matter. No one died, nor was there some permanent mutilation. Certainly, I was severely affected, to the point that I suffered a concussion and had to spend three weeks away from work; to the point as well that during the first few days my friends and relations feared there would be permanent consequences. But all of that is **today far away and I do not bear any physical trace of the act of violence. That being said, this fortunate state of affairs strictly speaking owes nothing to the author of the violence committed against me**. My attacker struck me directly and repeatedly with his fists and feet, hitting my head and particularly the temples, an area that everyone knows is especially fragile. If we had had less luck, both the author of these deeds and myself, I would not be here before you this morning.

This being so, and I repeat it, if the deeds are serious they do not require a long discussion.

Nonetheless, **though this affair was not very serious in terms of the consequences that resulted, it was very grave in terms of principles**. Because it was not some brawl in a bar that you are going to judge this morning, nor was it a banal fight of the kind that too often has tragic consequences which burden your courts every day.

No, what you have to pass judgment on is the irruption violence into the field where normal democratic rights are being exercised. I was violently, savagely attacked because what I said had the misfortune to displease the author of these deeds.

Indeed, he accused me of being a 'racist' and of insulting Islam because, for several years - and this was notably the case on September 12, 2004 – I have attacked Islamism and fundamentalism, as well as extremism in all of its forms.

I totally reject all idea of racism and Islamophobia. Those who know me and those who have read the thousands of pages that I have published over many years on these subjects know what is in them. Racism is alien to me. I hate it and 'Islamophobia' was never my deed. If my attacker felt some personal insult, an insult to what he holds dear or to his faith, he could

have lodged a complaint against me in the courts. He did not do that. He preferred to take the law into his hands, using violence, to correct an offense that never existed outside his own mind.

The problem that this affair shows up is that **such conduct is not an isolated case in Europe today**. In the days which followed the attack on me, my photograph was published on many internet websites accompanied by captions speaking of me as a '*Nazi swine*' and congratulating my attacker or minimising the seriousness of his deeds.

Above all, **two months after the attack on me, on November 4, 2004, the film director Théo Van Gogh had his throat slit on the sidewalks of Amsterdam for having made a film deemed to be blasphemous by certain Islamists**. Closer to us, at the beginning of 2006, we saw demonstrations of hatred unleashed by the affair of the so-called 'caricatures of Mohammed.' **In Europe today there reigns a detestable climate which bans all criticism of Islam and of its abuses. This has to stop. Islam is a religion like all the others which can be criticised. Above all, in its extremist and intolerant variants.**

After all, European culture is the culture of freedom.

This freedom for which we have paid the price ever since Voltaire and across the centuries. **Freedom, of course, is also the freedom of religion and its peaceful practice, whatever the religion may be. But this freedom of religion is the freedom to have a religion or not to have it, to practice it or not to practice it and, of course, to change it, if one so wishes.**

To be sure, it is also the freedom to speak blasphemy. Those who feel insulted are free to seek justice in the courts. However, they are not free to try to silence someone else by violence.

I will stop here.

This morning I did not come to demand vengeance. I obviously do not ask that the author of these deeds receive a disproportionate penalty, and I do not want him to serve as an example, but he should be judged for what he did, nothing more. I do not ask of you, Mr. President, that you weigh down the future of my attacker with an excessively heavy obstacle. But I wait to see in your judgment and in the grounds for your decision that you say loudly and clearly that freedom of speech is not negotiable and that the irruption of violence into public discussion cannot be tolerated and will not be tolerated.

I thank you for having let me speak.

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