

# Freedom of thought: We French love our history teachers - Samuel Paty made us remember why

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**Religion struck another blow against freedom of thought with the vicious murder of a man whose mission was to civilise.**

Since that fateful morning of 7 January 2015, and the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, it sometimes feels as if we French are living our lives between terrorist assaults, each as vile as the previous but each more poignant in its viciousness and symbolism. When we think this can't get any worse, a new attack proves us wrong.

In the past five years, Islamists in France have targeted and murdered journalists, cartoonists, policemen and women, soldiers, Jews, young people at a concert, football fans, families at a Bastille Day fireworks show, an 86-year-old priest celebrating mass in his little Normandy church, tourists at a Christmas market... the list goes on.

Last week, a history teacher was beheaded while walking back home from his school, in the quiet town of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, halfway between Paris and Giverny. The speed with which we learned the facts sharpened the blow, deepened our emotions and focused our minds.

The teacher called Samuel Paty was murdered by an 18-year-old refugee of Chechen origin for having shown satirical cartoons, some of them caricatures of the prophet Muhammad, during a history lesson about freedom of speech and freedom of conscience. We tried to process the facts we were given. We had to read and hear the words several times; they just did not add up. In 2020, a history teacher had just been beheaded in France for teaching his pupils tolerance and the use of a critical mind? Worse was to come: his murder was the result of a campaign of hatred and misinformation led by a few bigoted parents and relayed on social networks by a well-known Salafist imam. Children could see the shock on adults' faces, they could feel their seething anger. They asked what had happened, but how to tell them? We gritted our teeth, swallowed hard and gave them the news. And a country went to bed thinking about its history and its teachers.

There are very few countries where the figure of the history teacher is more symbolic and powerful than in France. Since the Third Republic firmly took education from the hands of the church in the early 1880s and made it free, mandatory and secular, its peaceful infantry of teachers has been the bedrock of the French republic. Their task was clear: to spread the values of the Enlightenment to the remotest parts of France – in other words, to open young minds to the world around them in all its complexity. Young, devoted teachers were thus trained by the state not only to educate children but to root out superstition from the classroom. State schools became the places where the French

entered as infants and left as citizens. The church was still free to teach children in its schools but those were closely monitored by the state and had to scrupulously follow the national curriculum.

*"I would go to class with the elation of an explorer about to discover a continent"*

These first generations of teachers were nicknamed the "Black Hussars of the Republic" because they wore a black uniform during their training years and looked decidedly solemn in pictures. They had to. After all, everywhere they were posted, they had to gain ground opposite the local priest who continued to exert a powerful influence. Wholly dedicated to their civilising mission, those Black Hussars and their heirs, such as Samuel Paty, succeeded in emancipating minds. They did it with a heightened sense of duty and sacrifice. Thanks to them, religion was eventually relegated to the spiritual realm. They had successfully destroyed the church's aspirations to weigh in on France's political life and choices.

Like many of my compatriots this past week, I have thought about what I owe my teachers and my history teachers in particular. I looked back with tenderness at their many quirks. One was always dressed in red or green, from head to toe. We thought he was either a communist or a green, only that he couldn't quite make up his mind.

There was another, called Pierre de Panafieu. I was 13 and, just as for Paty's pupils, this was the year I learned about Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot and the French Revolution. Of all disciplines, history is the one telling us that the people of France have the power to change our destiny, whether we're sons of peasants or daughters of the bourgeoisie. Powerful stuff for young minds.

It was like being struck by lightning. I would go to his class with the elation of an explorer about to discover a continent. I remember where I sat, the colour of my fountain pen and the south-eastern light from the window. I remember every detail vividly, as you do when something momentous is taking place in your life. He was softly spoken, with a kind smile, a man of quiet passion and quick wit. And all the while he was, effortlessly, making us free thinkers and citizens. We just didn't know it yet.

A century after they helped tame religion's interference in our public life, France's teachers find themselves again at the vanguard of a new fight against obscurantism. They will need energy, courage and determination, just like the Black Hussars before them. They will also need the whole country behind them. That's the least we can do, for we now know what we owe them: free thinking.

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**P.S.**

- The Guardian. Sun 25 Oct 2020 07.28 GMT:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/25/we-french-love-our-history-teachers-samuel-paty-made-us-remember-why>
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