

22 August 1998 £1.40

THE TABLET



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Did Oxford's new lecturer justify murder of monks?

Oxford University has appointed to its theology faculty a Belgian Muslim who is believed to be the author of a booklet giving justification from Islamic tradition for the killing of the seven Trappist monks in Algeria in 1996 (see article, p.1084). The newly appointed lecturer is Jean Michot, a Belgian convert to Islam who formerly worked at Louvain-la-Neuve university and left his job there after a scandal broke over his pseudonymous work.

The work comprises a long introduction and the first ever European translation of a medieval text by an Islamic scholar, Ibn Taymiyya, on "The Status of Monks" (*Le Statut des Moines*): it explains circumstances in which it is permissible for monks to be killed – when they have dealings with other people rather than living a completely isolated life. The edition is published under the name of Nasreddin Lebatelier.

who relates Ibn Taymiyya's text explicitly to communiqué no. 43 issued by the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA), which said it was justifiable under Islamic principles to take the lives of the monks.

The monks were kidnapped from their Tibhirine monastery in the Atlas mountains on 27 March 1996, and their execution was announced on 21 May, after an unsuccessful attempt had been made to exchange them for Islamic terrorist prisoners.

Jean Michot has now been made a fellow of the Centre for Islamic Studies in Oxford – which is an associated institution of Oxford University, though still struggling to establish itself – and as a consequence of that appointment he has been elected to a theology faculty lectureship in the university. His position reflects Oxford's desire to expand the scope of its theology degree to include an element of religious studies.

Michot was not formally sacked from his post at Louvain-la-Neuve, but resigned after a discussion with the rector, Professor Marcel Crochet, who told *The Tablet* that both sides had "decided to make no declaration at all concerning this affair", and that Michot had never admitted that he was Lebatelier. That Michot is Lebatelier is, however, regarded as common knowledge at Louvain. It was stated outright in an article by Henri Tincq in *Le Monde* of 7/8 June this year that "Lebatelier's real name is Jean Michot", and the article was republished in the *Guardian Weekly* of 21 June.

A statement issued by Louvain-la-Neuve University on 27 June the previous year concerning the booklet said: "Having been asked to read this work, the authorities of the Catholic University of Louvain have agreed that its content is in flagrant opposition to the values which the university defends. They are eager to express their total disapproval regarding the commentary, and are trying to ascertain who the author is in order to check out information they have received on the subject."

The suggestion has even been made that some GIA papers contain evidence of scholarship that would have been beyond the terrorists themselves, but reveal the kind of erudition that could only have come from someone of Lebatelier's academic background.

It is understood that the scandal surrounding Michot's departure from Louvain was not known by Oxford when they appointed him. It is further understood that the allegations were later drawn to the attention of those most closely concerned with his appointment; when Michot denied that he had ever advocated murder or violence, this was accepted as sufficient to let the matter rest.

When senior members of the theology faculty were contacted by *The Tablet* earlier this week they reacted calmly. "I can see two points of view on that and I certainly would like to think them through", said Richard Swinburne, Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion. "I'd probably better say no more, I'll get the university into trouble if I do." In the absence on holiday of the chairman and deputy chairman of the faculty, the outgoing chairman Dr Paul Fiddes said: "I'm afraid I know nothing about him whatsoever, I

don't think I can comment on that at all."

The director of the Centre for Islamic Studies, Dr Farhan Nizami, commented: "A particular selection committee which included representatives of different faculties of the university – along with outside experts – made a recommendation and on the basis of this an appointment has been made. That's one thing. The second thing is that the centre is an academic institution which exists to promote better relationships between different cultures and religions and so on, and it is very important for us that all the people at the centre would contribute to that betterment of understanding."

While *Le Statut des Moines*, published in Beirut in 1997 by El-Safina Editions, appears under the name of Nasreddin Lebatelier, it contains many references to the work of Jean Michot: he is mentioned six times in the footnotes and has six books in the bibliography. Jean Michot himself replying to an article about him in the Belgian newspaper *Le Vif/L'Express* at the time of the scandal, sent in a somewhat enigmatic reply under his own name. He said that the introduction to the article "leaves it to be understood that I would justify the massacre of the monks of Tibhirine", although "the work of N. Lebatelier cannot be attributed to me with certainty; and it is less a text justifying the assassinations than a study of such texts."

The 35-page booklet includes a 21-page introduction which begins by quoting from the GIA communiqué no. 43: "Now these monk prisoners were not cut off from people. On the contrary, they mixed with them, lived with them, and interacted with them." And so the following acts are permitted by Islamic law, says the communiqué: "killing them or reducing them to slavery, relieving them or exchanging them for money or for Muslim prisoners".

Lebatelier continues by rejecting the condemnations of the kidnapping made by Islamic authorities such as the Supreme Islamic Council of France, which issued a *fatwa* condemning the kidnapping. Statements like this, he says, "have contributed nothing to clarify the religious framework." The GIA, argues Lebatelier, does not act as "source of its own law", but "recalls continually texts which, for Muslims, constitute their law *par excellence*".

Lebatelier quotes from the monks' own writings to show that their intentions were "a discreet, mysterious presence, separated from the world and in communion with people, humbly attentive to the material and spiritual needs of those around". Lebatelier comments: "Discretion and attentiveness... all the ambiguity is there." He says the presence of the Trappists should be seen in the context of the more clearly stated missionary aims of Charles de Foucauld, who was murdered by a fanatical band in Algeria in 1916.

Lebatelier continues by quoting from the monks' writings to attribute to them a seeking after martyrdom, and asks if that attitude was not "worthy of a sect". He adds "The drama could undoubtedly have been avoided with a little good sense, if the monks had followed the suggestion of taking a holiday in France."