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WAR OF WORDS

Did French author **incite racial hatred when he called Islam "stupid"?**



Houellebecq called on fellow authors as his defense witnesses

By NICHOLAS LE QUESNE PARIS

INSIDE COURTROOM NUMBER 17 AT PARIS' Palais de Justice, the defense witness breaks off from a rambling digression on Socrates. His right hand—which has been jabbing emphatically toward the courtroom's rococo ceiling—dives into his jacket pocket and re-emerges clutching a miniature bottle of brandy. "I drink to your health!" he calls out to the presiding judge, before knocking back a healthy swig.

Under normal circumstances, it's not very good for your case when the man testifying on your behalf is clearly under the influence of the hard stuff. But today, no one is particularly surprised by Fernando Arrabal's behaviour. In fact, it's O.K. for him to be drunk because of his job. Fernando Arrabal is a famous writer.

Michel Houellebecq, the man in the dock, is a famous writer too. According to a journalist who interviewed him for the French literary review *Lire* in August 2001, Houellebecq was "drinking like a fish" when he made the remarks that have landed him in court on charges of inciting racial hatred. "Islam is the most stupid religion," Houellebecq said. "When you read the Koran, it's appalling, appalling!"

When *Lire* published the interview last September, French literary circles didn't bat an eyelid. Houellebecq, at 45, has established himself as the enfant terrible of French letters. But Islamic groups were unimpressed by his literary credentials. Three French Muslim organizations and the Saudi-based Muslim World League—seemingly unaware of the Islamic press's own taste for inflammatory rhetoric—sued Houellebecq and *Lire* under France's hate-speech laws. If convicted, the author faces a one-year jail term and a €45,000 fine.

In the witness box last week, Houellebecq argued that criticizing a religion was not the same thing as attacking its believers. "I have never expressed the slightest contempt for Muslims, but I still have as much contempt as ever for Islam," he told the court. Such arguments cut no ice with Dalil Boubakeur, rector of the Algerian-government-financed Paris Mosque and one of the plaintiffs in the case. "It's part of Islamic doctrine that Islam is inseparable from the community of believers," says Boubakeur. "The distinction between Islam and individual Muslims is a false one."

Sensing a cause célèbre, Paris' liberal intelligentsia rushed to Houellebecq's defense. They received unlikely, and unwelcome, reinforcements when a delegation from the far-right National Republican

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Movement disrupted the hearing with chants of "Freedom of speech!" and "No to censorship by imams!" before being thrown out by police. "The only people who could be shocked by what Houellebecq said are those who aren't yet used to living in a secular society," said novelist and defense witness Philippe Sollers.

As the trial ground on, it was hard to dispel the impression of two cultures lost in a fog of mutual incomprehension. In their summing up, the Muslim groups' lawyers angrily rejected the defense argument as a "neocolonial lecture on freedom of speech."

Houellebecq, they argued, ought to have allowed for the fragile sensibilities of French Muslims. For Jean-Marc Varaut—a leading trial lawyer whose clients include Nazi-collaborator Maurice Papon (*see box*)—representing the Paris Mosque, the author's opinions risk "encouraging a transition from Islam to fundamentalism on the part of those who feel they've been humiliated."

The plaintiffs' attempts to trace a causal link between one writer's ramblings and Muslim alienation appear to have fallen flat. Though French law allows civil plaintiffs to instigate a criminal action, it's up to the state



THE PLAINTIFF Paris Mosque leader Boubakeur, left, claims that an attack on Islam is an attack on all Muslims

claimed moderate—attempts to project himself as that community's natural leader, he is in danger of being outflanked by the more traditional groups representing the majority of the country's mosques. For the Paris Mosque, taking on the enemies of Islam is a useful way of asserting its pre-eminence, especially in the wake of Sept. 11 and Jean-Marie Le Pen's electoral success.

But perhaps the most surprising aspect of the case is that anyone would take anything Houellebecq says seriously. He has courted controversy ever since *Atomized*, his second novel and first big success, turned a withering eye on swinger

sex and the end of the '60s free-love ethic. He followed up with last year's *Platform*, which offended liberals with its ironic defense of sexual tourism in Asia.

Lately, Houellebecq has been more successful at garnering column inches than critical plaudits. When the English translation of *Platform* was published this month, it was slammed by the British press. Whatever their doubts over the future of the French novel, foreign critics needn't worry about the health of one of the country's other best-known genres. In courtroom 17 last week, French farce was in fine form. ■

prosecutor to advise the court on whether an offense has actually been committed. And according to Deputy Prosecutor Béatrice Angelelli, the answer to that question is no. "It cannot be said that when one expresses an opinion on Islam, it implies that one is attacking the Muslim community," she said—and requested Houellebecq's acquittal.

The final judgment won't be delivered until Oct. 22, but the case is already looking like a public-relations disaster for the plaintiffs, who are under pressure from bitter power struggles within the French Muslim community. As Boubakeur—a self-pro-