

## **Open letter to Madame Catherine Bréchnignac, Présidente du CNRS, from California Scholars for Academic Freedom**

June 24, 2009

Dear Madame la Présidente:

The members of California Scholars for Academic Freedom wish to express our concern regarding the disciplinary commission convened by CNRS on June 29, 2009 for our colleague Vincent Geisser. California Scholars for Academic Freedom was formed in 2007 to defend academic freedom and freedom of expression in institutions of higher learning in California and elsewhere; it includes more than 125 academics who teach in 20 California institutions. Many of us are scholars of France and/or the Muslim world, and we believe that Mr. Geisser has made, and continues to make, valuable intellectual contributions to the study of Islam, the Maghreb, and Muslim minorities in France. Moreover, as scholars in the U.S. academy, we have learned from the McCarthy era and the recent Bush years of the importance and fragility of academic freedom and liberty of expression. Regardless of whether or not we agree with his politics, all of us are therefore adamant that Mr. Geisser's academic freedom and liberty of expression be respected.

We are disturbed that a private email, which Mr. Geisser had no intention of making public, is being used as evidence that Mr. Geisser defamed a CNRS security and defense officer, and therefore as evidence that Mr. Geisser has made public statements damaging the reputation of CNRS. The private email was made public without Mr. Geisser's knowledge or consent (the email was intended by him as a purely private correspondence to a single person) and therefore through no fault of his own. We are troubled that a scholar is being administratively disciplined for opinions expressed in private correspondences.

We are equally concerned that Mr. Geisser is the subject of a disciplinary commission in large part because of his work on Islam in France, a concern already expressed publicly by numerous colleagues of Mr. Geisser's, including many at CNRS. If this is the case, Mr. Geisser's disciplinary hearing and the charges against him of a serious lack of political neutrality in public discourse (*le manquement grave ... à l'obligation de réserve*) constitute a form of ideological surveillance, a deeply disturbing occurrence that is contrary to the spirit and laws of a democratic republic that claims the Rights of Man and Citizen as its founding principle. We believe that Mr. Geisser's research should be evaluated by his peers on scholarly rather than ideological grounds – to do otherwise would constitute a grave violation of academic freedom.

We support the call by the *Comité de soutien à Vincent Geisser* for the immediate revocation of the disciplinary procedure against Mr. Geisser.

We also echo the *Collectif pour la sauvegarde de la liberté intellectuelle des chercheurs et enseignants-chercheurs de la fonction publique* in underscoring the importance of academic freedom, which is foundational to our research and our intellectual and scientific legitimacy as scholars. While the majority of scholars in France may also be public servants, they cannot thereby be considered subservient to political institutions and political power and must be

guaranteed the same academic freedom and intellectual liberty as all scholars. Intellectuals in a free society best serve the public interest when left free to make critical judgments, especially unpopular ones, about taken for granted political views. Liberty of thought, of opinion, and of expression is indispensable to critical thinking, which is in turn necessary for any democracy to function.

Respectfully,

California Scholars for Academic Freedom

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