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**La Laïcité: une chance ou un défi pour les religions?
En France et dans le monde**

**Secularity: Opportunity or Peril for Religions,
The French Experience and Global Perspectives**

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Conclusions

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I'm going to offer a slightly different perspective to Olivier, that of the "outsider". I won't discuss each session that we had because you've heard a summary of these already, but I will try to draw some of the threads together.

As someone who lives in England, who studies in a department of Religions and Theology and who teaches religion both at University and in secondary schools, "laïcité" was not a concept I was very familiar with and I think it is very difficult for "outsiders" such as myself to understand.

I first became aware of the term when the issue of veiling was in the media, with regard to the ban on "conspicuous" religious symbols in French schools and full-face veils in public spaces, and of course it has been in the news again recently regarding the Baby-Loup nursery case. In 2008 a Muslim employee of a privately-run nursery was dismissed for refusing to remove her veil. On 19 March 2013 the Court of Cassation ruled that she had been unlawfully dismissed but this seemed to be a contentious issue among some people and the debate began again.¹

¹ The Court of Cassation (Social Chamber) ruled that the principle of "laïcité" is not applicable to private sector employees and therefore this counted as religious discrimination. For the details of the case and the ruling see: <http://www.religare-database.eu/component/content/article/555-4-4-4-10-35associationbaby-loup19march2013>

Some consider the wearing of the veil as a symbolic representation of affiliation to Islam and the Muslim community, rather than the French community, and suggest that this undermines the unity and secularism of the French Republic.

As we know, “conspicuous” signs of religious affiliation, including the Islamic headscarf (hijab), Jewish skull cap (kippah) and large Christian crosses have been banned in public primary and secondary schools in France since September 2004,² although they are still allowed in universities, and the ban on full-face veils (including the burka and niqab) in public places in France took effect in April 2011.³

The BBC reported that on RTL radio, Eric Zemmour spoke about 1970s France as a time when French Jews “took off their skullcaps as soon as they stepped into the street”, so that nobody would be made to “feel awkward by an ostentatious expression of faith”. He said that this “French way of living together” was disrupted by the arrival of “the community-based Anglo-Saxon model”... On France Inter radio, Thomas Legrand said the problem did not lie with religious symbols as such but specifically with the Islamic headscarf and “what it says about the place of women in certain neighbourhoods”. Banning this piece of clothing from the “feminist” Baby Loup nursery northwest of Paris did not target a religion but “the expression of a sexist practice of religion”, he said. According to Mr Legrand, this line of argument “has nothing to do with supposed Islamophobia”. It is part of a “universal and quite simple fight for individual freedom, and in this particular case for sex equality.” As George Lentze comments, “All sides in this debate say they are committed to a secular state, but under the banner of secularism they pursue a diverse range of social and political agendas.”⁴

I was, and still am, firmly opposed to the banning of the headscarf, but before this conference that was my main knowledge of *laïcité* – that was my only knowledge, the part that the media portrayed.

We always have the danger of thinking our way is the only way or indeed the best way, so as an outsider I had seen the French system of *laïcité* as negative, as something that infringed on people’s rights to show their identity. My view has changed. This conference has been vital in explaining what the French people understand secularity to be and why, as Liliane Apotheker said at the opening of the conference, they stand behind it as religious people do for religion. Upon hearing the keynotes and speaking with French participants, I feel I have now developed a much more rounded view of *laïcité* – I understand the origins of the concept and what opportunities it can bring.

Laïcité, or French secularism, has a long history but the current model is based on the French law of 9 December 1905 on the separation of church and state.⁵ Its origins can be traced back to the French Revolution and the conflict between revolutionaries and the Catholic Church, which exercised great political control at that time. With the implementation of the 1905 law, the state no longer funded religious schools and public institutions were no longer under the influence of the Catholic Church. During the twentieth century, this evolved to mean the separation of state and *all* religions.

² The ban was voted through on 10 February 2004 in the National Assembly by a large majority. See Article L141-5-1 of the Education Code which states that “Dans les écoles, les collèges et les lycées publics, le port de signes ou tenues par lesquels les élèves manifestent ostensiblement une appartenance religieuse est interdit (In primary and secondary public education, the wearing of conspicuous signs of religious affiliation is forbidden.) For the full text see:

<http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichCodeArticle.do?cidTexte=LEGITEXT000006071191&idArticle=LEGIARTI000006524456&dateTexte=20110410>

³ Law No. 2010-1192 of 11 October 2010 “interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l’espace public (prohibiting the concealment of the face in the public sphere). For the full text see:

<http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichLoiPubliee.do?idDocument=JORFDOLE000022234691&type=general>

⁴ Georg Lentze, “Islamic headscarf debate rekindled in France” (BBC Monitoring, 2 April 2013).

⁵ For the full text of the 1905 law see: <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/histoire/eglise-etat/sommaire.asp>

As we've seen from the keynotes, proponents assert that this secularism is based on *respect* for freedom of thought and religion- in fact Article 1 of the law guarantees freedom of worship, provided that it does not interfere with public order. So, this separation of church and state, preventing the state from supporting or enforcing any religion, is considered by proponents to be a prerequisite for such freedom of thought, and can in fact provide a framework for tolerance.⁶

Laïcité relies on a clear division between a citizen's private life, where religion dwells, and the public sphere, where proponents suggest citizens should appear as equals. It does *not* necessarily imply any hostility of the government with respect to religion. It is best described as a belief that government and political issues should be kept separate from religious organizations and religious issues.⁷

Proponents would argue that is actually a way in which religions can thrive and minorities are not oppressed. It seems at first paradoxical to say religion thrives best under secularism but in France in general it seems to be working. That is not to say that it works perfectly, or indeed that it would work everywhere, but is easy for outsiders to dismiss something in its entirety because they don't understand it.

Personally, I have my own disagreements with the French system- I believe that learning about the major world religions should be made a compulsory subject in all schools, and I also disagree wholeheartedly with the way that some schools in England are currently choosing only to teach their own religion. We need to find a middle ground, because ignorance of other religions can breed fear and contempt.

I found especially interesting Dr Giles Bouquin's keynote lecture on whether modernity can survive without religion. He asserted that "in modernity religion's scope is in no way closed. These questions remain open and if I understand clearly the spirit of modern secularity, it does not pretend having the role of solving them, nor to ban their expression, but rather to regulate their social expansion, preventing that a religious answer wins over any other possible answer." Again, we need to strike a balance.

The workshops were a great space to find out about how this issue is impacting on other countries. I attended workshops on "The Christian presence in the Holy Land" and "Anti-Semitism in Hungary", and I heard from other participants about the workshop on circumcision and the question of whether Israel is a secular state, and the interesting debates and indeed arguments, which ensued in both. I gave my own workshop on "Religion and Education in Secular and Religious Schools" with Dr Edouard Robberechts and it was fascinating to compare the problems we face in England (where religious education is compulsory in all schools and 35% of state schools are religious schools) with the completely different situation in France and to hear his thoughts on the lack of religious education in secular schools creating a kind of symbolic vacuum. The workshops always feel much too short but I think that's a good sign and we were able to debate the topics further over coffee breaks and lunch.

We are discussing difficult issues and inevitably we end up with more questions than we will ever have answers. It is vital that we have somewhere like this, a conference like this, where we can ask

⁶ It should be noted that these ideas of freedom of thought and worship existed before the 1905 law. "Freedom of thought" can be traced back to the 1789 declaration "*La Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen*" (Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen) and "freedom of worship" to the French Constitution of 1791. Therefore, one should not argue that "laïcité" is the only way to achieve these ideals.

⁷ In fact, it was suggested that Nicolas Sarkozy had violated the principles of *laïcité* by working with the Muslim organization UOIF in 2002. However, he replied "What does the law say? The Republic guarantees organised religious practices without favouring any single one. I devote equal energy to allow all our compatriots to live their faith." John Bowen, *Why the French don't like headscarves: Islam, the State and public space* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 100-101. Sarkozy was later criticized heavily for seemingly going back on his word and supporting the ban on the burka and niqab, although he would argue that these two attitudes were not incompatible.

the difficult questions and learn from others whose experiences are different to our own. Since I came to my first ICCJ conference in Krakow, I've learnt more about other cultures, other religions and people in general than I could possibly have learned in the classroom. None of us is perfect (except Debbie our President!), and we have so much to learn from one another and to take back to our communities and I'm grateful to the ICCJ for bringing us all together.