



ICCJ Philadelphia Conference 2016



**“The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World:  
The Philadelphia, United States and International Contexts”**

## ***PLENARY SESSIONS***

### ***PLENARY SESSION C:***

WEDNESDAY, JULY 13, 2016 - SAINT JOSEPH’S UNIVERSITY - DOYLE BANQUET HALL NORTH

#### **International Perspectives on Religious Pluralism: Challenges, Limits, and Possibilities – (The French perspective in 2016)**

##### ***Liliane Apotheker***

Since 1905, the French state’s relation to religions is governed by *Laïcité*, French Secularity. This system is unique and an adequate translation of the word does not exist in English. It is also important to understand that France has both the largest Jewish and the largest Muslim communities in Western Europe.

A few opening remarks to provide an understanding of *Laïcité*, French secularity, are therefore necessary.

Foreign observers of France see it as the root cause of France’s problems with its religious communities. Even though the system is certainly perfectible and is currently under a lot of pressure, its goal is and has always been to act as a cement for the French Republic. It aims to protect all religions, freedom of religion and of conscience, human rights, women’s rights and civil rights, and has sometimes served as a model for intellectuals in other countries with one dominant religion.

In essence, it enshrines the state’s neutrality with regards to all religions, with the declared intent of replacing a system in which the Catholic Church was the dominant religion in the country. Therefore, all religions, including the previously dominant one, recede to the privacy of people’s homes and places of worship, something a majority of French people of all religions agree with. Nevertheless the system also has its weaknesses. One unfortunate consequence is that religions are rarely seen in a positive light, whereas a negative light is amply shed by media coverage of sensational events or behaviors.

I argue that ignorance of religious traditions, one’s own and the other’s, is certainly more of a problem than the actual *Laïcité* in France.

For a number of years now it appears that the “cement” of the Republic, expressed by “*Fraternité*,” the last word in our Republican triptych, is showing severe cracks. France is now a fragmented society, with religious communities experiencing problems that sometimes affect them in an existential way. The same is true of many other aspects of the country’s economy and politics: radicalization of political discourse, the rise of populism, protection of sectional interests



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at the expense of a binding common vision. Confrontations in the religious realm should be seen and understood within the wider context of the fragmentation of French society. This has put heavy pressure on the social cohesion of the national community, which remains the quintessential goal of the French Republic.

The Jewish population feels under attack due to rising antisemitism stemming both from radical political parties from the extreme right and the extreme left, and from parts of the French Muslim population. Holocaust denial, in its various forms, is also a malevolent factor. Israel suffers from an extremely deteriorated image and is widely considered an illegitimate state.

Jewish schools, synagogues, community centers, radios and personalities are protected by armed security forces, which are unfortunately necessary and fuel a sense of strong discomfort. It feels a bit like being a protected species: what would happen if the protection were to stop remains an open question.

One of the most striking facts is that Jewish parents are no longer opting for state run schools, of which they have always been fierce advocates until perhaps the last decade. Their children now attend Jewish schools or Catholic schools. It is with sadness that I add that Jewish children are the only children in France who feel precluded from remaining in the national education system and are thus compelled to prefer other options. Neighborhoods within Paris with a numerically strong Jewish presence are an exception to this, as both parents and children feel a sense of safety in numbers that counters their sense of isolation. All in all, this is symptomatic of the state of mind of the Jewish community.

Jewish people feel targeted and isolated, despite the endless support of the French government. While recent terrorist attacks in France and in the world were aimed at a wider public: journalists, soldiers and policemen, young people at concert halls, night clubs or cafes, we all remember the savage murders of Ilan Halimi, of young children and their teacher in Toulouse at a Jewish school in Toulouse in 2012, and more recently, shoppers at a kosher supermarket in Paris on a Friday before Shabbat. Notably these attacks did not trigger large demonstrations like the Charly Hebdo attack. Mostly, it was Jewish people who feared and mourned for their victims. Even though the government was very supportive in its declarations, public opinion failed to follow by demonstrating solidarity.

It has often been said that Jewish people are like the canary in the mine, the first to sense the immediacy of danger. I never really understood what this meant until recently. How does one assess danger, especially when one looks in the rear mirror, seeing horrific recent events, and the tragedies of the last century?

As a result of this, Jewish people migrate, either to the Paris city center if they lived in the suburbs, or to quiet smaller towns in the country or abroad, to Israel but also to the UK or elsewhere. It is difficult to assess the numbers and compare them to the non-Jewish population that is also on the move, but clearly there is notable movement.

The Muslim population is also experiencing great difficulties. Islam is the most talked about religion in the media; not one day goes by without it being discussed. Unfortunately, most of this is media talk, not malevolent, but superficial, lacking in depth content. Thus, Islam suffers from a deficit in knowledge and understanding including among French Muslims. Islam is feared as a



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religion, wrongly perceived as inherently violent and dangerous by a large public. French Muslims experience discrimination when applying for jobs or searching for housing. This happens despite a legal system that protects everyone’s rights, as is contained in the “*Egalité*” part of the Republican triptych.

Nevertheless the majority of French Muslims adheres to *Laïcité*, French Secularity, and desires nothing more but to lead a quiet life. The most recent assassination of two police officers in a suburb of Paris has triggered outraged reactions from the local Muslim community with people denouncing this extreme violence as something that concerns them directly as French citizens.

France’s depressed economy is taking its toll with high numbers of unemployment, particularly among youth, thus impeding their integration. There are numerous layers of complexity in this process: France’s former colonial past, the War of Independence in Algeria, politicized anti-Semitism around Israel-Palestine, the influence of a multitude of foreign media and websites that have anchored “conplot or conspiracy theories” in particular among some younger people, all born in France, dreaming of an idealized country of origin they know very little about. Most of these conspiracy theories involve the USA, Israel, the Mossad or even the Elders of Zion.

The impact of all these, and a memory adorned by both myth and reality of what the relationship between Jews and Muslims was in France’s former colonies, makes for a troubled relationship between Muslims and Jews. Anti-racist movements of the 1980s had a universal appeal, but now it appears that there are multiple forms of resentment, hatred that result in both political and physical violence. These need to be addressed separately nowadays, with the unfortunate result of producing a rivalry of memories and suffering in both the Jewish and the Muslim communities.

Solidarity and compassion shared beyond one’s own community or group are the main victims of this sad state of affairs since most people put their own suffering first.

I will say little about French Christians, I know that it is inaccurate to lump them together in one group. Protestants and Christian Orthodox often hold different views than Catholics. Christians mostly do not define themselves as a community that integrates religion into their identity building. In this they differ from Muslims and Jews. It seems that there is no need for them to do that. Perhaps I should say, they do not do so yet, as some glimmers of this can be observed when controversial subjects arise within public debate on themes like marriage for all. Though very vocal, groups claiming a Christian identity remain small segments of the population. It is interesting to point out that on matters of social liberalism versus conservatism interests sometimes converge across different faiths.

I would like to conclude with some positive points:

The “Declaration of Fraternity for the Coming Jubilee” given to the heads of all the Christian Churches in France by a pluralistic group of Jewish leaders has been a highlight in Jewish-Christian relations in these very troubled times. It is proof of the maturity of Jewish-Christian dialogue in France and was welcomed by many.

Christian Churches spare no effort to maintain good relationships with both Muslims and Jews. They engage in dialogue with both communities and often host interfaith events that allow for



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the three monotheistic faiths to engage with each other. Catholic schools are open to both Jewish and Muslim students.

Personalities like Latifa Ibn Ziaten, the mother of Imad Ibn Ziaten (the first of the soldiers murdered by the perpetrator of the terrorist attacks in Toulouse), Rabbi Michel Serfaty, the head of the Jewish Muslim Amity, and Mrs. Jacqueline Cuhe, the president of Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France, are positive actors in the field, sparing no effort and no contact in order to provide content and sense that furthers better understanding among all.

The Chief Rabbi of France, Haim Korsia advocates publicly to distinguish between migrants and refugees and to remember the strong shared biblical duty to take in the latter, doing so in spite of a generally unfavorable public opinion on this.

Religious institutions are doing what they can, but unfortunately the acts and voices of violence sometimes fill up peoples' minds and hearts.

I have often felt that it is easier to engage with people that maintain an honest critical distance from one's own religious tradition. Dialogue with Christians and Muslims has transformed my religious identity: it is more open to question, more aware of the potential for violence inherent in religious absolutism. How we relate to tradition is a challenge for us all, and constitutes a key challenge for Muslims and Jews today.

It is time for us to follow and emulate the path of the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Ignorance has to be fought and religion alone cannot win that battle. Culture and education have to join forces in order to foster critical minds, the only efficient means to counter obscurantism, bigotry and lies.

This is what films, books, cultural events and sometimes even sport attempts to convey.

One book in particular captures the essence of what can be done: *The History of Relations between Jews and Muslims*, edited by Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora with contributions from 120 authors of different countries, including Dr. Reuven Firestone who is here with us today. It encompasses various fields of research, linguistics, literature, history and demography, to name but a few. It provides depth, background and understanding for today's troubled times, in a clear and accessible way. It is a great tool for a better future and should become a benchmark for similar endeavors.