

Religion and Politics: the French principle of *laïcité*

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The French principle of laïcité is a unique concept inherited from the French Revolution The Third Republic and is the subject of contemporary debate. It prohibits proselytism or any attempt to advertise one's religious faith in government affairs and in public institutions. It could be approximated as secularism, although it is really more stringent.

During the Revolution, on 12 July 1790, the law on the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* initiated the separation of Church and State through the seizure of Church properties. In November of the same year, The Constituent Assembly passed a law requiring all Roman Catholic priests to swear an oath of allegiance to the new Constitution: hence the difference between the *prêtres assermentés* (who accepted to swear the oath) and the *prêtres réfractaires* (who rebelled). The year 1882 was also of great importance, as it marked a further secularisation of French society: the Jules Ferry laws made secular education mandatory. Finally, “freedom to practice religion” was enshrined in French law in 1905 when the Law on the Separation of the Church and State (*la loi sur la séparation de l'Église et de l'État*) came into effect, under President Emile Loubet: this effectively abolished the 1801 Concordat signed by Napoleon (then First Consul) with the Vatican that recognized Catholicism as the official state religion. A law was passed on 15 March 2004 that outlaws the wearing of religiously-charged garments in the public sphere (in public schools, in State ministries etc.).

Here is the work of 2 Mauritian students whose speeches answer the following prompt: *You are a candidate for the French presidential elections of 2021, you must intervene during a presidential debate on what you envision of religion in your presidential project.*

Meiya Gujjalu

Citizens,

Our founding fathers adopted the unique political philosophy that every citizen has certain inalienable rights, including the right to practice their religion or not, and to be free from government fiat. Today, in a society as diverse and rich as ours, with a convergence of cultures, we can still ponder this postulate: Should religion have a role in the State?

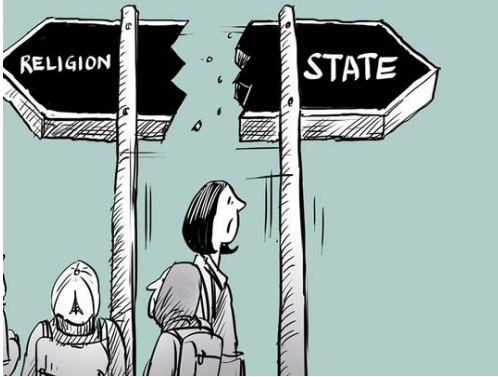
Citizens, we are all equal before the law, defined by a social contract that binds us. There is no divine superior hierarchy.

And it is a mistake to seek social coherence in the religious fraternity. Admittedly, Augustine agrees with Latin grammarians on an etymology of the word *religion* germane to the *ligare* (or *religare*) "to bind", thus suggesting that faith fulfills a vital social purpose, acts as the necessary cement of the social fabric. However, Cicero likens it to the word *repeat*, as in repeat over and over again, as in reading, cogitating, *thinking*.

To my mind, religion is anchored not in the sense of being linked, as Augustine's etymology implies, but in the sense of having a central concern, a transcendental preoccupation, something to ponder carefully. The believer becomes a thinker.

In the current context, religion takes on a whole new meaning, sometimes bloody, in the face of the weight of history. A painful historical experience has shown that this limitation is necessary to preserve peace. We want to avoid the bloody conflicts that have too often accompanied religious conflicts. On the other hand, there is no way to resolve religious disputes using generally available evidence. Ultimately, religious beliefs are based on faith. They are isolated from ordinary standards of evidence and rational justification. The establishment of a secular state recognizing the importance and the right of each individual to think without constraint is essential to the proper functioning of our democracy but above all to respect for others. Laicity is the best guarantee we have for true religious freedom. This same secularism encourages us to reason with each other, to bond and think together. If we want peaceful coexistence, we have to understand each other. To understand and engage with each other, we must use a common language, that of laicity. Citizens, secularism is not only a necessity, it allows us to dream together, without fear. I invite you to believe in this fair and tolerant vision, to commit yourself to building together safe values for the generation of tomorrow.

Thank you!



Sophie Ponton

Ladies and gentlemen.

Dear compatriots.

I think that we can all agree that part of what contributes to our country's beauty is cultural diversity. Our inhabitants are from the most diverse cultures and backgrounds; but at the end of the day, we are all French. In my opinion, every French citizen must be free. Free to think and act without impeding the freedom of others. Free to believe or not to believe, to practice a religion or not. This is what I call secularism.

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's".

I do not consider secularism as a mutual repulsion but rather a call for the state and the churches to coexist, to cohabit and to be independently free. In other words, secularism is freedom.

Article 1 of the 1905 law affirms that the Republic ensures freedom of conscience and guarantees the unfettered private worship.

Every citizen can therefore live according to his convictions safely, without fear of oppression because of his belonging or not to a religion.

The parliament and the town hall are and will remain secular places. As for the schools, the law of 15 March 2004 prohibits the wearing of signs and outfits advertising a religious affiliation. Schools are and will continue to be secular places in order to provide the best learning environment for our students and staff. One of public education's missions is to impart the values of the Republic, in particular that of the equal dignity of all human beings. In fact, secularism also allows the equality of all: by dissociating the state from religion, each religious community is equal and coexists together in perfect harmony.

Secularism is one of the pillars of civil peace. It is this secularization that makes it possible to avoid the manifold religious wars that have devastated, and continue to devastate, many countries. Yet not ours. France is a country where everyone can live without fear of being persecuted, discriminated against, or even condemned for belonging to a religion or not.

Certainly, French history is anchored in Christianity, but in a world that is constantly evolving, our country must evolve with it and include all religious communities in its society. I advocate positive, non-restrictive secularism.

Public spaces are and will remain secular places, where our citizens, visitors and

residents have the right to show whether or not they belong to a religious community. To extend the law of March 15, 2004 over the entire territory as some have wished, would be to deprive our citizens of one of their fundamental rights as human beings.

By voting for me, you are not voting only for a secular France, but a free, egalitarian, open-minded and inclusive France. I am a believer but I am also a French citizen, like you. It is not a question of excluding the churches but of allowing them to prosper freely. To allow the Republic to prosper. To allow France to prosper. When I am president, we will prosper.

Thank you.