

Living better together: French secularism risks being destroyed by political ambition

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Despite occasional conflicts, France's tradition of secularism has served both social cohesion and religious freedom well. Terry Sanderson argues that misusing secularism for political aims risks undermining both.

The French ban on so-called burkinis – all enveloping swim suits – raises all kinds of questions about the state's approach to secularism, identity politics and its growing Muslim minority. The civil authorities of a number of seaside resorts on the Mediterranean have decided the garment goes against their concept of secularism that is central to the French constitution.

Of course, this part of southern France is still reeling and traumatised from the events of Bastille Day in Nice when an Islamist fanatic used a lorry to kill 85 innocent revellers and maim 400 others on the promenade. In such a time many may have personal objections to what they see as a very noticeable statement of conservative Islamic identity. But transferring these personal views into political actions is problematic. Prime Minister Manuel Valls told *La Provence* newspaper last week "The burkini isn't a new line of bathing suit, a style. It's the translation of a political project, counter-society, notably founded on the servitude of the woman."

French secularism which seeks to avoid conflict between personal identity and civil law has rightly or wrongly become a source for such conflict. A small number of Muslim women, who think that their religion is more important than the civil law will resist the rules. And so now we are seeing increasingly unpleasant confrontations with the police who are tasked with enforcing the ban.

In Britain, of course, we have a much more laid back approach to religious clothing. Many people (some based on legitimate concerns and some based on prejudice) feel uncomfortable about full face-coverings or when they see women in niqabs in the street, but few feel the need to do anything about it and (outside of specific practical circumstances) few would be comfortable with the state preventing such practices.

In France, though, there is a very different response. The French do not permit face coverings in the streets, they do not permit religious symbols (and that includes crosses, hijabs and yarmulkas) in schools. They do not permit any public institution that provides food to ban pork from its kitchens.

Repeated challenges to these bans at the European Court of Human Rights have failed. The Court has ruled that France has the right to enforce these restrictions because a wide margin of appreciation makes it acceptable if the country thinks it necessary for living together harmoniously.

French secularism differs from the more liberal secularism of other European and North American traditions – noticeably almost every British and American secularist organisation of note is against the ban.

The French had to have a revolution to get the clerical classes off their backs and put the over-powerful Church in its place. They have since come to some kind of uneasy resolution with the Vatican that allows the churches and state to function almost independently – although for various

historical reasons there are exceptions. For instance, some Catholic schools are publicly funded and all churches built before the passing of the 1905 law that separated church and state are maintained by the state, albeit partly in compensation for the buildings having been sequestered by the State during the revolution.

Despite its public pronouncements, the Catholic Church is no lover of secularism in France. It will gladly join any campaign to damage or destroy it. Like Islam it is prone to strands of totalitarian theology, with an unwavering belief that it has a god-given right to run the world. So, for the purpose of ridding France of the secularists, it will pragmatically join with Islamists in the attack.

But it is this very alliance that shows the importance of secularism. How can two such authoritarian regimes ever live together in peace when someday there may be the possibility of one or the other taking over and running the state? Both at base want a theocracy, but secularism prevents either having it.

The Catholic Church still has a place in the life of many French people, and the state does not interfere in its operation. Occasionally there are clashes as the Church tries to reassert its influence over political processes – as in the case of gay rights.

Sometimes there is a cross-over of concern, as when an Islamist fanatic killed a Catholic priest in his Church. At that time, President Hollande – a great defender of laïcité - met the Pope and said the message of France's secularism hoped to unite people, not to "wound," so "the Republic must defend the right to believe and also to not believe. When a religious figure is assassinated, the Republic is also profaned."

Unlike in Britain, with its established church, where many major national ceremonies, including the coronation, are held in cathedrals and overseen by priests, in France the Church has no place at state functions. When the Islamist attacks on Paris were commemorated, the President held the ceremony in a secular setting and priests were conspicuous by their absence.

Of course, church services were also held, but they were personal, for the benefit of the believers, and had no state input.

Now, though, many feel (again some for legitimate and some for prejudicial reasons that) Islam is increasingly asserting itself in France and it is a determined and powerful force, unused to compromise and frequently insistent on having its own way, which is not, for many, the French way.

France's colonial history means that it has a very large Muslim population, the largest in Europe, mainly from its former territories in North Africa. This population feels marginalised and discriminated against, and it has good grounds to feel this way.

The Associated Press quoted Rim-Sarah Alouane, an expert on Muslim issues at the University of Toulouse, as saying "Islamophobia is a new way to say I'm a patriot and that's the way I'll defend my country against you people who cannot integrate. Politicians are actually making sure the population does not integrate. They are making Muslims feel like that they cannot be French."

This is a narrative which serves the interests of both Islamists and anti-Muslim bigots.

Muslims say they find it difficult to get jobs because of religious and racial discrimination . At the same time, the mainstream population feels resentful at the apparent unwillingness of many Muslims to totally embrace French culture. The number of horrific attacks by Islamists perpetrated in recent years in France has done nothing to increase trust or improve relations.

Of course, this is not entirely true. Countless Muslims have made their home in France – indeed generations have been born there - and come to love the country, its traditions, language and culture. They have integrated while still holding on to their faith as a private matter.

But as the world-wide Islamist insurgence intensifies, the confrontations will grow stronger. Muslims feel like victims and outsiders in what is, for many of them, the country of their birth. Meanwhile, much of the mainstream population who are non-religious or religiously unconcerned, feel that Muslim religious demands are undermining their concept of France.

It is fertile breeding ground for far right groups like the Front National which is using its own twisted version of laïcité as a rallying cry not only for those worried by the growth of Islamism but also for the straightforwardly racist. As one academic put it, it seeks to turn laïcité into an "instrument of Islamophobia" and confrontation.

Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front National says: "I'm absolutely not afraid to be called anti-Muslim because I'm not." She says that the anti-Muslim feeling that is growing is the result of "political-religious groups" who want to install Sharia law in France and use "massive immigration" to do so.

"We don't have problems with Islam," she said. But "France has Christian roots. They [the French] want to recognize their own country, recognize their lifestyle, their habits, their traditions."

This is a potent message that has become ever more popular in the parts of France where large Muslim populations are making a big impact on communities, and where Islamist radicals have been active in stoking resentment.

The present Government of Francois Hollande has seen, and been alarmed by, the growing influence of the Front National and seems to be responding by claiming to be the true secularist. But in trying to compete with Marine Le Pen for votes, Hollande and his government risk having to embrace her skewed understanding of secularism as being a tool to control and disadvantage Muslims.

Nicolas Sarkozy, who is running in next year's election in France, has written a book in which he addresses the issue of Islam in France. He makes quite clear that he thinks Islam (not Islamism or extremism) is the problem, pure and simple. He says that no other religion causes the problems that Islam does.

The danger now is that French secularism becomes a political football that will cause it to be redefined as anti-religious and particularly anti-Islamic. Its great potential for uniting the country will be sacrificed on the altar of electoral ambition.

Laïcité, that noble aim to treat all citizens as equals, is under threat not only from its Islamist and Catholic challengers, but also from politicians who will ruthlessly misuse it for electoral gain.

Terry Sanderson is the president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author, and may not represent the views of the National Secular Society. You can follow Terry on Twitter: [@TerrySanderson4](https://twitter.com/TerrySanderson4)

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