



A STUDY OF FRENCH “LAÏCITÉ”

- 1 The 1905 French law separating the Church and the State is now over a hundred years old. The laïcité (or secularism) principle it defines is unique in the world and is an integral part of France’s contemporary political DNA.

5 The French school system has been based on the principle of secularism since the end of the 19th century. State schooling has been secular since the Jules Ferry (after the Minister for State Schools from 1879 to 1883) Education Act of 28 March 1882. Staff have been secular since 30 October 1886. Respect for the beliefs of pupils and their parents means an absence of religious education in the curriculum, the prohibition of proselytising and the secularism of staff. The principle of religious freedom led to the introduction of one day off every week to allow for religious teaching outside school.

- 10 “*Laïcité provokes a lot of incomprehension outside of the country*”

The conception of laïcité as a shared and accepted *modus vivendi* was destabilized twice from the 1980s onwards:

- first by the diversification of faiths caused by migration to France,
- and second by the “return of God” in politics, a movement spreading across the globe.

- 15 This unsettles the French elite like nothing before. Rethinking religion while at the same time retaining its founding principles becomes a matter of urgency. Confronted with the rise of extremisms, in particular radical Islam, and with the inflation of communitarian claims, the Republic stands strong. Religious signs at schools are restricted in 2004, concealing one’s face in public spaces is forbidden in 2010 and Nativity scenes were proscribed in town halls in 2016.

- 20 The public sphere springs from equality and neutrality, which take over religious license.

The Republic may still be standing, but it is facing increasingly persisting criticisms. In Paris, the political milieu and the media split between partisans of a strict version of laïcité, incarnating the general will against all the particular wills, and partisans of an open version of laïcité, both liberal and libertarian, i.e. aligned with their time.

- 25 The quarrel goes beyond the country’s borders, and France is regularly accused of intolerance towards religions by part of the international community.

Adapted from : Eurydice & Institut Montaigne websites

Read the text and highlight important words.

VOCABULARY ACTIVITY : Associate the words from the text to their synonyms.

contemporary (l.2) •
staff (l.6) •
curriculum (l.7) •
prohibition (l.8) •
proselytising (l.8) •
allow (l.9) •
faiths (l.13) •
concealing (l.18) •
proscribed (l.19) •
particular (l.23) •
quarrel (l.25) •
borders (l.25) •

• personal
• permit
• modern
• frontiers
• fight, argument
• workers
• school program
• banning, forbidding
• trying to convert people
• religious beliefs
• hiding
• banned, banished

QUESTIONS

- L.1-3**
1. Find the English word for “laïcité”.
 2. In what country was it created? Which law made it legal?
 3. What is “laïcité”?
 4. In what other country is it applied? Find a word in the first paragraph to justify your answer.
- L.4-9**
5. Who was Jules Ferry?
 6. Are French state schools secular? Justify.
 7. Are all French schools secular? Focus on the word “state schools”.
 8. How is secularism applied in schools? (3 items)
 9. Are French pupils allowed to learn about religion?
- L.10-20**
10. What has been destabilizing French secularism since the 1980s?
 11. What legal measures were taken to fight the rise of religious extremism?
 12. Is secularism limited to schools? Justify with three words from the text.
- L.21-26**
13. Define the two forms of “laïcité” which are debated in France.
 14. How is France perceived internationally?

OBSERVE AND COMPARE



Oath of Office

Donald J. Trump takes the oath of office to become the nation's 45th president and commander in chief at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., Jan. 20, 2017. White House photo

Source : US Department of war



One-dollar bill

1. Look at the photograph and answer : who, what, where, when.
2. Look at his hands: where are they? What he is doing?
3. Find the motto of the USA on the \$1 bill. Translate it in French.
4. Conclude : are the USA a secular country?

EXPLAIN

Your mission : write a letter to your American friend and include an explanation of what French secularism is and how “laïcité” is part of your daily life.