Laïcité: Value or Ideology?

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1. Discovery

In one of those strange quirks of personal history, I ended up in France for the first time in 1974, following the first oil crisis, which deprived me of the student summer job with Daimler-Benz in Germany that I had held for the previous two years. I spoke no French, having abandoned it at school in the belief that I would never really need it. As sometimes happens, however, this summer in France was to prove a turning point, an unintended consequence of which was that French was to become my working language for almost thirty years living in la Francophonie, if not in France itself. In a piece I wrote several years ago, I said: “I do not hesitate in describing myself as European by education, by cultural affinity and by personal preference.” To a great extent I think there is an important part of me that is now more than a little French and it was with this in mind that I undertook writing this paper since it means that I both love and am at times exasperated by the country in more or less equal measure – which in itself is, I think, probably très français!

In any case whatever I lost in monetary terms by not working for Daimler, I certainly made up for in excitement and interest, as well as the je ne sais quoi of living in France. I cannot claim to have been a soixante-huitard since les événements de mai ’68 were long past by the time I got there and, as you might imagine, they had not made much impact in Castlerea, Co. Roscommon - although I do remember that we did wear flowers in our hair in that very good summer! But that I’m sure had more to do with Scott McKenzie’s marvellous hit song of that year than with les événements à Paris the previous May.

1968 was, however, still alive in the collective memory of the mixed social circles I was discovering in France six years later. On the right, this was largely in terms of the horreur that had been avoided in what had clearly been for them an annus horribilis that threatened the very foundations of the conservative society they belonged to i.e. bourgeois, Gaullist,
and still ‘très Catho’. For others on the left, of course, it was seen as the beginning of their coming of age socially, politically and very often religiously or spiritually. It was in any case what Michel de Certeau has described as *une scène de crise,*¹ or, to use that favourite French trope, *un moment de rupture* with strong echoes of the Revolution. Certainly no self-respecting French intellectual of that generation can say that he or she was not driving a 2cv (I even drove one myself) and on a *’manif en 68’,* even if in the meantime he or she has upgraded their mode of transport and graduated from one of *les grandes écoles,* and perhaps even gone on to become an *’énarque’*² following the direct route into government, and often politics right or left, *via l’administration.* In any case my love affair and fascination with France, with all its obvious contradictions, was established from that first summer in the Midi and I went back every year for the following three or four years, eventually spending the entire academic year of 1976-77 at the Université Paul Valéry in Montpellier, seriously learning the language I had so rashly abandoned at school.

Full of enthusiasm, curious, and very interested in politics, this was probably one of the most enjoyable and important years of my life. I read widely, I engaged with culture generally, visiting galleries and museums, and particularly going to the cinema (I still remember Agnes Varda’s marvellous film *l’Une chante, l’autre pas* and François Truffaut’s *L’Homme qui Aimait les Femmes* both of 1977). I discovered French organ music for which I still have a deep love and listen to on France Musique every Sunday. Other parts of French music (Debussy, Ravel, and Fauré), as well as Impressionist painting, took on a new sense and vibrancy as I tried to find my way into ‘the French mind’: this was something very challenging and very new and I loved it and still do.

What fascinated me most, however, and continues to, was *l’imaginaire français* as expressed in French society and particularly in French politics. Always an avid newspaper reader, I very quickly began to read French papers on all sides of the political spectrum: *Le Figaro,* *La Libération* but above all, *Le Monde,* which I still consider page for page to be the best newspaper I read. Politically it was a fascinating decade, following the departure of *le général* in 1969 and with the departure of this eminently charismatic the emergence of a

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¹ See Albert Bastenier, ‘Le croire et le cru: Les appartenances religieuses au sein du christianisme européen revisitées à partir des travaux de Michel de Certeau,* Social Compass,* 54,1, March 2007, 13-32

² See http://blogs.transparent.com/french/what-is-an-enarque/
broad left wing alliance eventually leading to the election of the somewhat less charismatic but more enigmatic Francois Mitterrand, le sphinx, in 1981. The overall effect on me was to open up a whole new world full of opinions, ideas, passion and a militantisme I had never encountered before. The spirit of de Gaulle was still, of course, present as, despite the vicissitudes of 1968, he had attained the status of an icon! He had been the incarnation of the Vᵉ République – the political word made flesh, if you will excuse this very ‘non-laïc’ expression! But then, as I was finding out, this quasi-religious language was actually an essential part of the French political lexicon!
2. Une certaine idée de la France

And it was a very different lexicon! I quickly came to realise that being a republican in France did not mean the same thing as it did in the United States and certainly not the same as it did in 1970s Ireland. Les valeurs républicaines françaises were quite different from the republican cant I had been hearing in those years of what were then quite naively known as ‘the troubles’. France was also very far removed from the kind of civil war binary politics I was accustomed to as I grew up. In that sense, it seemed to be almost multipolar, with a mind-boggling array of movements and parties and factions within parties and movements from the Gaullist right (the Front National then remained very marginal) to the Communist left, with all kinds of variants in between.

Above it all, however, like the Holy Spirit, there hovered de Gaulle and his celebrated certaine idée de la France. It is worth looking back at that short text, as despite a very different social and political context, it still has much to say about France today. You will allow me to read the text in French, as it is a very good illustration of the General’s prose style and, of course, the tremendous grandeur in his vision for France.

Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France. Le sentiment me l'inspire aussi bien que la raison. Ce qu'il y a en moi d'affectif imagine naturellement la France, telle la princesse des contes ou la madone aux fresques des murs, comme vouée à une destinée éminente et exceptionnelle. J'ai d'instinct l'impression que la Providence l'a créée pour des succès achevés ou des malheurs exemplaires. S'il advient que la médiocrité marque, pourtant, ses faits et gestes, j'en éprouve la sensation d'une absurde anomalie, imputable aux fautes des Français, non au génie de la patrie. Mais aussi, le côté positif de mon esprit me convainc que la France n'est réellement elle-même qu'au premier rang : que seules de vastes entreprises sont susceptibles de compenser les ferments de dispersion que son peuple porte en lui-même ; que notre pays tel qu'il est, parmi les autres, tels qu'ils sont, doit, sous peine de danger mortel, viser haut et se tenir droit. Bref, à mon sens, la France ne peut être la France sans grandeur.³

³ “All my life I have had a certain idea of France. I am inspired in this by both sentiment and reason. My affection leads me naturally to imagine France, as the princess of fables or the madonna of frescoes, as having a destiny that is both eminent and exceptional. I instinctively have the impression that Providence created her for real successes as well as exemplary misfortune. If it happens, however, that her acts and gestures are marked by mediocrity, I feel it to be an absurd anomaly, to be imputed to the faults of the French, and not to the genius of la Patrie. On the positive side, my spirit also convinces me that France is only herself when she is in the first row: that only vast enterprises are able to compensate for the ferments of dispersion that her
This quite remarkable text illustrates not only de Gaulle’s vision for France but also what has always been and continues to be, I think, how France imagines herself, more or less across the political spectrum: a fairy tale princess, a Madonna of the murals, destined from greatness and created by Providence (laïc ou religieux!). The text suggests the idea of a transcendent, universally applicable French norm for civilisation against which others may be judged – not least the often disdained anglo-saxons. The Oxford academic Sudhir Hazareesingh suggests that this “is existentially bound up with its sense of cultural excellence, and with the assumption that their ideas have universal appeal: “France,” claimed the historian Ernest Lavisse without any irony, “is charged with representing the cause of humanity.” Hazareesingh notes that: ‘Such lofty aspirations remain an integral feature of French thinking’, while the academician Jean d’Ormesson suggests: “More than any nation, France is haunted by a yearning towards universality.”

This was certainly De Gaulle’s vision and all his successors have all aspired to be part of it (certainly not always successfully in my view). I certainly believe, for example, that Francois Hollande’s recent intervention in the Grexit debate/debacle (whether successful or not?) illustrates this very well. In coming to the assistance of the beleaguered Greeks, he was representing not simply a more socialist approach to the problem and a defence of the cherished European chapitre social, but also France’s historically self-imposed vocation to represent the cause of humanity – as well, perhaps, as attempting to deny Germany the hegemony that many Europeans fear.

Nowhere is France’s aspiration to universality more apparent than in it advocacy of les valeurs républicaines. This goes right back to Jaurès who in a speech at the Lyceé in Castres in 1903 declared la république to be ‘the definitive form of French life, and still more, the

people carry within them; that our country as it is, amongst other countries as they are, must, under pain of mortal danger, aim high and remain upright. Briefly, to my way of thinking, France cannot be France without greatness.” (Charles de Gaulle, Mémoires de Guerre, Paris: Plon, 1954)


5  See ‘Hollande plaide pour un « gouvernement de la zone euro »’

En savoir plus sur http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2015/07/19/hollande-plaide-pour-un-gouvernement-de-la-zone-euro_4689349_3214.html#YerX2TMTD8HY7sYI.99. Accessed 05/08/2015
form towards which all democracies in the world were slowly evolving.\textsuperscript{6} In this there is surely the conviction that France has arrived at an almost theological, and certainly ‘transcendental’, synthesis of truth and reason, and that it has something to say to the world that is of universal significance. Her role both in Europe and in the wider world is seen by French people, and certainly presented, as essentially that of a \textit{mission civilisatrice}, even perhaps a \textit{mission rédemptrice}, carried out both by its very significant cultural institutions (i.e. the Alliance Française and the Centres culturels) and in its overt foreign policy.

\textbf{3. Ambivalence and a pervasive neo-religious rhetoric}

In my struggles with the French political lexicon I also had to come to terms, in a country that vaunts its laïcité, with what Hazareesingh calls the ‘pervasive neo-religious rhetoric’ that haunts it – proof perhaps of John Waters assertion that ‘although there are Catholics, lapsed Catholics and anti-Catholics, there is no such thing as an ex-Catholic’! This was true not just of de Gaulle who was a practising Catholic, but remained true of all French politicians including those on the left, not least Francois Mitterrand who cultivated a personal mystique that could only be described as quasi-religious. An illustration of this arose at the time of Francois Mitterrand’s death. In leaving instructions for his funeral service, he noted, somewhat laconically, \textit{“Une messe est possible”}. Despite the French socialists’ difficulty with \textit{le religieux}, President Mittérand had two Masses one in N.D. de Paris the second in his family village of Jarnac. The moment was taken by several observers as representing something of a rapprochement between the socialists and the Church after a crispation and several tensions that had followed the socialists’ ascent to power in 1981 – although one would hardly have thought it looking at the rather doctrinaire \textit{laïc} Lionel Jospin on that occasion. One imagines that Gambetta and Ferry, looking on from on high, must have been somewhat perplexed by this less than militant volte-face by one of the major figures of modern French socialism and the first to get a real grip on power - \textit{une laïcité quelque peu mitigée}! It would seem that, like the apocryphal story of Voltaire when asked on his deathbed if he ‘renounced Satan’, Mitterrand had taken the typically pragmatic decision that ‘this was not a time to be making enemies.” Ambivalence indeed!

But there is also a pervasive neo-religious rhetoric, which again is something outsiders find difficult to comprehend. One finds the following headline in *Le Parisien* of 15 May 2015 ‘Grand-messe des socialistes à la Mutualité en vue du Congrès’, or in *La Montagne*, a local newspaper in the Auvergne on 2 July “Une nouvelle association politique portée sur les fonts baptismaux par le sénateur du Cantal”. Mon dieu qu’en penserait Jaurès?

Equally, in a somewhat surprising and certainly not very *laïc* analysis of what might be happening at the time of the Grexit crisis, François Hollande’s economy minister, Michel Sapin, suggested that: “The eurozone is going through a war of religion, with a northern Europe that’s Calvinist and that doesn’t want to forgive sinners, and a Catholic Europe in the South [presumably including France my emphasis] that wants to turn the page.” This before adding that: “the Greeks have bolstered the hard-line Calvinists.”7 *Bon, enfin, je veux bien mais…. Mais soyons laïcs quand même !!!*

In any case it is certainly remarkable that in contrast with Britain and much of the rest of the developed world this kind of rhetoric endures even in a period of *crispation* when there is added emphasis on the absolute need for an increasingly vigilant approach in order to protect *les acquis de la laïcité* in the face of a growing Islamic threat both within France and in the world, and indeed the threat of any resurgence or renewal of *le religieux* as a socio-political phenomenon in public space.

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7 Anne-Sylvaine Chassany *et al.*, ‘Fears over German power as Merkel and Schäuble end the good cop, bad cop routine’ *FT Weekend*, 19 July 2015, 18
4. *Laïcité* – what do we mean?

The most common and indeed apparently easiest way out of translating this unique French term is simply to use the very loose English terms ‘secularisation’, ‘secularism’ or perhaps Charles Taylor’s more recent, and in my view, perhaps, closer term, ‘secularity’.\(^8\) However it is clear that this Gallic abstraction has a precise philosophical meaning that distinguishes it from the more functional anglo-saxon terms describing a social process. The social process of secularisation is largely the fact that almost all Western societies have moved from being societies where both religious belief and church belonging were, to use Charles Taylor’s term, ‘axiomatic’ to one where there are perfectly acceptable and even respectable and popular alternatives, notably *unbelief* and *non-belonging*. As Taylor has expressed it, we have moved ‘from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option amongst others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace’.

Steve Bruce is succinct in describing it as ‘the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.’ Bryan Wilson elaborates a little when he says, we have had ‘a radical reorganisation of the structure of society...a process in which the major areas of social organisation [have] become differentiated and autonomous, and in which organised religion has finally relinquished the last remnants of the presidency that it once enjoyed over the whole gamut of social affairs.’ Here the dominant social doctrines are those of *choice* and *rights* rather than those emanating from a religious *auctoritas*.

While there are similarities, the abstract concept of *laïcité* is, however, much broader, describing what, at its best, is a positive civic value – but in my view a value that can certainly become an ideology and perhaps particularly in the present climate and a French penchant from binary oppositions that allows little room for anything else.

But let us first look in some more detail at the concept, which is mentioned in the first article of the 1958 Constitution which states quite simply: « *La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale.* »\(^9\) Of course there is a need to unpack this and

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\(^9\) Article 1er de la Constitution de 1958
where better to look that *Le Monde* where it is defined as follows:


Another helpful definition would be the following:

In the second half of the 19th century, under the Third Republic, *laïcité* became an understanding of the organisation of society seeking reciprocal neutrality between the spiritual and religious authorities and the political, civil, and administrative authorities. The aim was to struggle against clericalism, by which is meant the influence of the clergy and movements or religious parties in public affairs. *Laïcité* is also an ethical code based on freedom of conscience seeking the development of the human person both as an individual and as a citizen.  

In it broadest and most positive sense, therefore, *laïcité* is an ethical code based on freedom of conscience seeking the development of the human person both as an individual and as a citizen. It is both an ethical world view and a set of rules regulating the public services and the way they are run, most notably education. Effectively, and admirably in my view, it seeks to develop an ethical *Weltanschauung* freed from all religious considerations. Its advocates see it as protecting freedom of thought, independence of spirit, the respect of difference and tolerance to the degree that this is reciprocal “*and without laxity*.” In this, it is very different from the anglo-saxon idea of secularisation as a more or less neutral social process or evolution. It is a value that has now come to be presented as an essential and in some cases it has simply been tacked on to what Hazareesingh calls ‘the French Revolution’s classic triad of liberty, equality and fraternity.  

In public affairs, of course, it insists upon the Jacobin primacy of the State, conferring upon *la Republique*, its values and institutions an almost sacral status. It insists on confining the religious to a purely private sphere and is completely opposed to any public manifestation of religious allegiance, particularly perhaps what it describes as the “ostentatious wearing” of religious symbols in public places. This last point has become increasingly contentious in

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recent years because of the insistence of young Muslim women on wearing the *hajib*. The secular Franco-Moroccan Muslim intellectual Tahar Benjalloun, speaking in an interview following the *Charlie Hebdo* atrocity, described this particular polemic as simply ‘stupid’.

For people outside France, and indeed many in France, this argument indeed seems at times to be incomprehensible, to the point of being perceived as an ideological intolerance – but, this time, on the side of the secularists.

5. *Laïcité – a French solution to a French problem*

But, of course, it didn’t all start in 1958. There is general agreement that Descartes and what became Cartesian philosophy lies at the origins of the concept. It is deeply rooted in the particular history of France and most particularly the French Revolution. While the term itself came into public discourse in 1871 in the dispute over the removal of religious teachers and instruction in primary schools, it dates to 1842. It was not, however until the latter half of the 19th that it began to take on the significance we know it has today. It was articulated with passion by figures of Leon Gambetta (1838 –1882), Jules Ferry (1832 – 1893), Jean Jaurès (1859 – 1914) and Émile Combes (1835 – 1921). It was during this time that the laws that have somehow come to epitomise this socio-political movement were enacted, most notably ‘*le lois Ferry*’ of 1881-82 dealing specifically with schools and the more celebrated *Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Eglises et de l’Etat*, which it can be fairly said is *le texte sacré de la laïcité* – no pun intended, well only slightly intended!

Perhaps one of the most remarkable characteristics of *laïcité* in its form ‘*pur et dur*’, when it does certainly come to look more like an ideology (but then everything in France can sometimes look like an ideology), is its anti-clericalism. This can certainly be explained in the context of that time. The British sociologist of religion David Martin noted that where there is almost no other form of Christianity available, which would allow for dissent from the dominant church, and when the church is so tied to conservative political authority as it was up to that time (I won’t into the Dreyfus affair here but it is certainly significant), then liberalism and socialism bring strong anticlericalism – as for instance in France, Spain or

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12 Tahar Benjalloun, ‘Ce qui nous sommes’, *France Culture*, 3 juillet 2016
Italy, and of course, in my view, now also the Republic of Ireland. \(^{13}\) Writing of the French case in *Le Monde* the former UMP Senator Gérard Larcher notes that: ‘considered to be introducing elements that threatened the unity of the community of citizens in an indivisible republic, religion was feared as a political competitor leading to that which was struggled against with ardour by the founding fathers of the III\(^e\) Republique “the government of parish priests”’\(^{14}\). This, no doubt, was what led Gambetta to declare passionately to the Assemblée Nationale: « Je ne fais que traduire les sentiments intimes du peuple de France ...: le cléricalisme ? Voilà l’ennemi ».\(^{15}\)

Interestingly this remains a feature of the debate in France one hundred and fifty years later, something which is difficult for even non-religious outsiders to comprehend. It is often represented. sometimes in strikingly acerbic terms sometimes in a more restrained *moquerie*, in a long tradition of popular culture; the songs of Jacques Brel and George Brassens, the films of Fernandel, notably in the *Don Camillo* series, and the writing and films of Marcel Pagnol. Hazareesingh notes that ‘there has been an ardent tradition of anticlericalism in France, assertively upheld in recent decades by publications such as *Charlie Hebdo*, and in a colourful lexicon of derogatory designations of priests, with terms such as *bouc, calotin, corbeau and ratichon*.’ One of my own favourite depictions of this is to be found in author and film-maker Marcel Pagnol’s (1895 –1974) charming 1990 French film *La Gloire de Mon Père*, directed by Yves Robert. This gives wonderfully humourous description, through the eyes of child circa 1905, so at the height of the debate on the separation of Church at State. The son of a strictly laic, fanatically anti-clerical, schoolteacher father, Pagnol is not unaware of paternal foibles or of what has produced them.

\(^{13}\) The intimacy of the relationship between Church and State in France before the Revolution is well illustrated by the following: “Cardinals were government ministers, and Catholicism was an instrument of statecraft for the royal administration, guaranteeing a functioning system of bishops and priests as well as the assurance of liturgical worship and preaching everywhere in the kingdom. Though formally united to Rome, the French church, the *Ecclesia Gallicana* had a special set of rights and privileges back to the Concordat of 1516, between King Francis I and Pope Leo X.” Joseph F Byrnes, *Catholic and French Forever: Religious and National Identity in Modern France*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, p.2


\(^{15}\) Léon Gambetta devant la Chambre des députés, 14 mai 1877 in *Discours et plaidoyers choisis*, (Paris : Charpentier, 1883).
Gambetta had spoken of the state primary school as ‘the seminary of the future, our seminary, from which will file out citizens, mature and ready for the difficulties of the inner life, and also for the external service of France, the republican seminary, which in my view implies a triple necessity: obligation, gratuity, laïcité.’ In Pagnol’s affectionate memoir however, it is presented somewhat differently. Writing of the same ‘republican seminaries’ he says

...theology was replaced by modules in anticlericalism. These young people were taught that the Church had never been anything but an instrument of oppression and that the purpose of priests [...] was to blind people with a black mask of ignorance [...] 

The bad faith of the ‘curés’ was in fact proven by the use of Latin, a mysterious language, which had, for the ignorant faithful, the perfidious virtue of magical formulae.”

The papacy was well represented by the two Borgias, and the kings only looked after their concubines, when they weren’t playing bibloquet....

What is certainly true is that this spirit is still very much present and easily brought to the surface in moments of crispation or indeed in simple dinner table conversations in many ‘gauchisant’ parts of France today. In addition there is what Hazareesingh calls France’s ‘profoundly ambivalent intellectual relationship with religion’, which I have come to see at times as an almost completely inability to engage with any form of ‘le religieux’ with anything other than a disdainful Gallic sniff, which in the situation France finds herself in today is hardly good enough. One only has to try mentioning anything related to it at a French dinner table to be left with the impression that one has indeed uttered a gros mot or breached some kind of etiquette; as they say ça arrive comme un cheveu sur la soupe!

Perhaps more worryingly since in itself it can be said to represent a serious form of censorship, is the relative absence of the ‘study of religions’ or indeed ‘religion’ (as opposed to the study of theology for instance, or simply as a minor branch of sociology) as a subject worthy in itself of serious academic investigation in French universities in comparison with other European and US institutions, which often have specialist ‘study of religions’ or ‘religion’ departments. This can, I believe, be explained this it terms of a kind allergy reaction to anything ‘religieux’ and exaggerated and indeed warped sense of the concept,

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16 Marcel Pagnol, La gloire de mon père, Paris (Editions de Fallois), 1988, p15
value or indeed ideology that is laïcité, which prevents what is surely a useful academic pursuit if only to understand what is going on in this world of the other as other rather than a somehow incomplete version of the French self. This again is hardly good enough in a country which, whether it likes it or not, has a very significant other living in its midst and in need of acknowledgement. France in fact has Muslim population of 4.7m or 7.5% of the entire population in 2010 projected to rise to 6.8m or 10.1% of the population by 2030. Regis Debray put it somewhat apocalyptically when he said we can no more dis-invent religion than we can the atom bomb. Wherein, of course, the importance of engaging with it with a view to gaining some kind of insight rather than remaining in a situation of perpetual mésentente. Indeed, nowhere in Europe is this more important than in France today.

6. The reality on the ground

It is certainly interesting to observe that at a time when l’Etat français had finally reached some kind of entente plus ou moins cordiale on the matter with the Catholic Church, le genie religieux is more or less out of the bottle again, albeit in a very different but perhaps even more challenging form. In an ironic turn, some more conservative Christians are now making common cause with moderate Muslims on a number of issues most notably perhaps the perpetual vexed question of the hijab, the subject of an ongoing symbolic confrontation between the State, notably educational institutions, and the Muslim community. The French sociologist Jean-Paul Willaime has observed that “Islam has reactivated the public presence of the Christian churches… It’s part of a new religious configuration.” Not surprisingly this has led to a definite crispation in radical and socialist circles who perceive it as some kind of religious alliance that will compromise les acquis de la laïcité and ultimately les valeurs républicaines of which they see themselves as the privileged keepers. Before his election as President wanted laïcité to be further sacralised by having it enshrined in the constitution although he now seems to have backdo off on this in the light of more recent developments, including the Charlie Hebdo atrocity.

It is significant that in his ‘certaine idée’ text de Gaulle pointed to what sees as « les ferments de dispersion que son peuple porte en lui-même » by which he means the cultural,

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social, religious and ideological fissures that often threaten France’s social cohesion and her unity – her demons. It is clear that in the present contexts these have once again come to the fore and France is involved in a very public debate with the concept of laïcité at its heart. The debate has certainly taken on a sharply political edge as the left becomes increasingly doctrinaire, often simply ideological, in its opposition to any kind of compromise, while the moderate right is reviled as less than républicain for what is seen as its shilly-shallying on the issue.¹⁹ The xenophobic FN is quite willing to espouse any half-ideology that will further its cause.

Steven Englund has argued that France “should be seen as a complex system – indeed a force field – of ideological discourse that gave rise in French history to several political traditions (republican, Bonapartist, constitutional monarchist) of which one (republican) became so hegemonic within the country that it has successfully stifled much awareness that there were or are any alternatives.”²⁰ As Rod Kedward noted of the colonial period, France’s “republican self-image was one of ‘reason’ and ‘civilisation’. Both concepts were the product of the specific history of France but they were raised into absolutes of universalising power, occluding and obscuring the history and culture of colonised peoples.” By way of example he refers to Professor Ferdinand Buisson, on his way to Tunisia in 1903 who declared with almost evangelical fervour that the newly emerging French concept of laïcité was “ready to continue its triumphal progress in ‘this African extension of the soil of France.” ²¹ The situation has now been reversed as France becomes to some extent the extension of a severely dysfunctional post-colonial Africa, shouldering the burdens of its not always glorious colonial history. Its historical relationship with its former North African colonies of Morocco, Tunisia and particularly Algeria is to say the very least fraught. As part of its colonial legacy, however, France has a large immigrant population precisely from these countries, now being asked to take on the values of ‘reason’ and ‘civilisation’ in France by becoming completely assimilated, something they are less than enthusiastic about. This is perhaps not surprising as they find themselves to a great extent on the margins of French society in the HLMs of the least salubrious banlieues of many French cities, where what

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¹⁹ See ‘Le discours de Nicolas Sarkozy’, Le Monde, le 14 septembre 2008
²¹ Kedward, Le Vie en Bleu, p.11
Gilles Kepel has described as ‘the war for Muslim minds’ is being waged, apparently not very successfully. In his work with that title he wrote presciently: “The bombings in Madrid on March 11, 2004, established Europe as the new frontline for terrorist attacks. Before 9/11, Europe had provided a sanctuary where Al Qaeda's planners could complete preparations for the world-shattering operation they had conceived in the mountains of Afghanistan. But with events in Madrid in spring 2004, Europe emerged as the primary battlefield on which the future of global Islam will be decided.” Following the Charlie Hebdo atrocity this has moved much closer to la Hexagone.

In a grim analysis following serious immigrant riots in France in 2006 Jean Baudrillard wrote in the in the NLR:

Fifteen hundred cars had to burn in a single night and then, on a descending scale, nine hundred, five hundred, two hundred, for the daily ‘norm’ to be reached again, and people to realize that ninety cars on average are torched every night in this gentle France of ours. A sort of eternal flame, like that under the Arc de Triomphe, burning in honour of the Unknown Immigrant. Known now, after a lacerating process of revision—but still in trompe l’oeil.

The French exception is no more, the ‘French model’ collapsing before our eyes. But the French can reassure themselves that it is not just theirs but the whole Western model which is disintegrating; and not just under external assault—acts of terrorism, Africans storming the barbed wire at Melilla—but also from within. The first conclusion to be drawn from the autumn riots annuls all pious official homilies. A society which is itself disintegrating has no chance of integrating its immigrants, who are at once the products and savage analysts of its decay. The harsh reality is that the rest of us, too, are faced with a crisis of identity and disinheritance; the fissures of the banlieues are merely symptoms of the dissociation of a society at odds with itself. As Hélé Béji [1] [Tunisian writer, author of L’Imposture culturelle (1997).] has remarked, the social question of immigration is only a starker illustration of the European’s exile within his own society. Europe’s citizens are no longer integrated into ‘European’—or ‘French’—values, and can only try to palm them off on others.

This is almost by definition a social powder keg and it is certainly not a place to be throwing matches. And for many in this situation a pedantic French discourse on the virtues of what is perceived doctrine of laïcité and symbolic confrontations on issues such as the hajib are not advancing matters at all. French scholars of radicalised Islam such as Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy are pointing to the central importance of Muslim youth in the hope these European Muslims could yet "present a new face of Islam - reconciled with modernity - to the larger

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world." This is surely desirable but on has to ask how far we are getting in the real world where there is ample evidence of radicalisation not just in France but throughout Europe.

I have no doubt that laïcité is a positive value, that it is one of the building blocks of social modernity. However, the world is a very complicated place with everybody moving at a different pace and at the same time needing to be brought along. La mission civilisatrice in its historical sense was not particularly successful. While I certainly would not want to generalise, I am not sure how well the French deal with otherness and they certainly struggle to deal with the religious other. An ideological crispage on the question of laïcité has the genuine danger of further alienating an already volatile minority. The classical French triad of liberté, égalité et fraternité is surely France’s greatest contribution to the development of a more enlightened world, it can be shared by all peoples as it has its own tremendous integrity and nothing should sully that and it should certainly not be ideologised.

Since we are remembering Conor Cruise O’Brien this week, I might as the second last word an interesting thought from Conor at this contrarian best.

"The philosophers of the Enlightenment had thought they were putting an end to the world of dogma and priestcraft. But they had not destroyed dogma, only opened the way to new sets of dogmas, all the more plausible because they were apparently secular and scientific. They had brought down a feeble and somnolent priesthood, and had ushered in a far more dangerous breed of priests in plain clothes, using secular discourse to promote millenarian schemes."

Both France and Europe are at a very serious impasse in very many ways. The European project, even in my very Europhile eyes, has lost its way and is in a deep crisis. This is hardly the moment for ‘une querelle stupide’ on the choice of dress made by young Muslim women. It requires some much larger than that, with more vision and grandeur. Let us perhaps leave the last word to de Gaulle in saying, la France, « sous peine de danger mortel, [doit] viser haut et se tenir droit. Bref, à mon sens, la France ne peut être la France sans grandeur. »

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