



The ICCJ is an organization with an international perspective. We know, however, that the universal is made up of particularities and that the international reflects different national circumstances. In 2011, we explored the effects of ideologies on religions in the 20th century, through a Polish prism; in 2012, we looked at multiculturalism and social responsibility, though the situation in the UK.

In 2013 we will be in Aix-en Provence, which was the home of Jules Isaac (1877-1963), a French Jewish historian who coined the phrase “the teaching of contempt” to characterize the traditional attitude of the Church to the Jewish people and Judaism. He pioneered in the area of Christian-Jewish dialogue, which ultimately led to a refutation of this dangerous doctrine by many official Christian bodies. Isaac’s spirit will inform the conference, part of which (the annual meeting of the International Abrahamic Forum) will be devoted to confronting, honestly and unabashedly, “the teaching of contempt” towards the Other in the three Abrahamic faiths.

The main conference theme, however, will reflect its contemporary French setting and will be an exploration of the concept of *laïcité*.

What is *laïcité* ? [French secularism]

The principle of *laïcité* has a long story. It means a particular regime in which State and religions are separated. In a certain sense, *laïcité* is the offspring of both the XVIIIth century philosophy and French Revolution. Indeed,

The fact that people as a whole (laos in Greek) came to be or became again the unique reference of Law modified not only the regulatory guidance of laws but also their scope and registry. The sovereign people decides its own laws and therefore cannot expand their normative power beyond what is necessary [...] or make any discriminative stipulations that could break its own unity. As the religious domain is the concern of some and not of all, it needs to have a status of a private right.

In fact, secularism finds its origin and its meaning in the proclamation that only the individuals and not the communities can have rights. For this reason, secularism particularly condemns the groups that want to dominate the individual and limit his critical mind: it stands in opposition of all clericalism (Charles Coutel). It celebrates the free exercise of human reason and its capacity to pass judgment on all things in an autonomous way, and this against all attempts of community constructions.

The history of secularism in France starts in 1905 with the law of separation between the Churches and the State. This law establishes the legal framework of our lives.



According to Article 1 of the law of separation between the Churches and the State, “the Republic ensures the freedom of conscience. It guarantees the free exercise of religions [...] in the public interest”. According to Article 2 of the same law, “the Republic does not acknowledge, remunerate or grant funds to any religious cult”.

These two articles therefore break with the past. Against all Christian (particularly Catholic) claims of introducing the truths revealed in the Gospel in the social life, the secularism regime imposes a difference between the public and the private affaires.

This new relation between the State and the religions was not without consequence on the religions themselves. Forced to redefine themselves, the religions found new ways to be present in the public sphere. Seen as equal by the public authorities, these religions acknowledged each other as partners.

Our conference will explore the relevance of a concept that developed in opposition to the integration of the state and Roman Catholicism, to a multi-cultural and multi-religious reality that includes non-Catholic Christian minorities, Jews and Muslims. The latter are especially visible in the public arena and so the challenge they pose to the separation is especially notable.

We will be particularly interested to find out how *laïcité* has affected inter-religious dialogue in France. In general, we will consider the relationship of religions to secular society and vice versa.

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