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**La Laïcité: une chance ou un défi pour les religions?
En France et dans le monde**

**Secularity: Opportunity or Peril for Religions,
The French Experience and Global Perspectives**

Tuesday, July 2, 2013

Can modernity survive without religion?

By Dr Deborah Weissman, ICCJ President

It is an honor to have been asked to respond to this brilliant paper. The paper is truly an intellectual *tour de force*, showing that clarity, good organization and profundity can go together. There is much here with which I completely agree, so that I could almost just say, “D'accord, moi aussi.” Almost, but not entirely.

We certainly agree on the major point; namely, that modernity needs religion and religions. I would like to make a comparison with another very different field—sports. An individual can get along without sports—I myself am an example of this. I always say that it's good that the international sports industry doesn't depend on me, because if it

did, millions of people would be out of work. But I think societies need sports, for a whole variety of reasons. Some, as with religion, are related to sources of identity, meaning, belonging, rootedness, values, stories. Individuals can survive without religion, but not society as a whole.

In a manner very similar to the one in which Prof. Bouquin developed his argument, I'm fond of quoting Rev. Dr. Bill Vendeley, head of an organization called Religions for Peace. I heard him some years ago suggest that we would do well to listen to the accumulated wisdom within the various religious traditions. After all, the religions of the world have been around, in some cases, for thousands of years, and, in other cases, for "only" hundreds of years, but that's a long time, too. In that time, they have all had conversations about two basic questions: 1) What does it mean to live a good life as a human being? 2) What does it mean to live in community?

Now, there are three issues I would like to raise, in terms of slightly disagreeing with Prof. Bourquin. First of all, I don't think that religions actually provide answers. In a few cases, they do, but usually, they help us refine and improve the questions and help us develop different ways of thinking about them. Secondly, even with religion, we aren't always ensured that we'll be just and ethical. I wish that were the case. Perhaps the solution lies in some kind of synthesis between religion and enlightenment. But there are religious people in several faiths, including Judaism, who are far more modern than I am, technologically, and might even consider themselves enlightened, but I deeply fear for the future of society with them around.

Finally, we disagree on the issue of religion and state in general and French laicite in particular. I hinted at our opening session that as an outsider, I may have a different approach. I believe that there are different models of religion and state that work, in different contexts. Britain has an established church with freedom for members of other religions, as well as atheists and agnostics. Australia's Jewish day schools have flourished, through receiving government aid, and the Jewish community has been free to thrive. Complete separation isn't the only acceptable model, in my opinion.

I also disagree, both principally and strategically, with the French ban on the *hijab* in public. I can understand not wanting people to conceal their faces. I can't understand a ban on hair covering.

Thank you for the intellectual pleasure and challenge of preparing a response to this paper.