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‘Radicalisation of *Laïcité*’: What’s in a Word?

By Romain Quivoij

Synopsis

*Misleading interpretations of *laïcité*, France’s way to implement secularism, have long been threatening the country’s social cohesion. What explains the longevity of these approaches, how do their various proponents justify them and why should they be labelled “radical”?*

Commentary

ON 21 DECEMBER 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron declared during a private meeting with France’s major religious leaders that he intended to be “vigilant” with regard to the risk of “radicalisation of *laïcité*”, which he defined as “intolerance towards religious beliefs”.

Critics were prompt to denounce the use of the term “radicalisation” and the implicit parallel that Macron seemed to draw between authors of terrorist attacks on the one hand and, as a commentator put it, “peaceful citizens (committed) to *laïcité*” on the other.

Radicalised *Laïcité*?

According to former Socialist Prime Minister Manuel Valls, one of the most vocal advocates of a conception of *laïcité* focusing on convictions as well as religious and/or cultural practices that are considered to threaten France’s system of secularism, “the real danger in French society is radical Islam, not radicalised *laïcité*”.

A diverse array of French citizens and politicians who range from the extreme left to the far right of France’s political spectrum share Valls’ analysis. In particular, some aim at extending the cardinal rule of religious neutrality of the state and civil servants

to society and citizens in the dual name of freedom and equality. These interpretations reduce *laïcité* to a simplistic, unrealistic and dangerous method used to exclude religions from public spaces.

Secularising Society

France's approach to secularism shares a certain number of traits with similar regimes adopted elsewhere. These include the freedom to choose/practice/change religion or belief and the religious neutrality of the state and public administrations. In few other countries, however, can such a high level of tension between the principle of state neutrality and the temptation to broaden its scope of application to some or all elements of society, be found.

Several attempts were made at the local and national levels to police French people's individual and collective behaviours, which seemed to miss the mark at best and looked like textbook cases of bureaucratic atheism at worse.

Efforts were made in the early 1900s to forbid priests from wearing their cassocks in public, followed by bids to outlaw religious processions of Catholics and, more recently, endeavours to ban the swimming costume favoured by some Muslim women and known as "burkini" on public beaches.

Interestingly, the notion of public order was consistently used (and, in most cases, successfully challenged) as a legal basis to these restrictions. By contrast, *laïcité* was referred to as an overarching "value" to defend, such as in the burkini case. Twin dynamics of abstraction and idealisation, which are still observable after more than a century of debates on the meaning and practice of *laïcité*, have turned the latter into a silver bullet that has nothing to do with the law anymore but provides a fertile ground for excesses of all kinds.

Freedom and Equality

Supporters of a society where religions would be less visible or simply confined to the private sphere are quick to invoke freedom and equality. Arguments based on the founding principles of the French Republic sound praiseworthy, respectful of history and patriotic, but they remain questionable.

Freedom in relation to *laïcité* points to the duty and the capacity of the authorities to ensure that communities such as religious groups do not act as substitutes for the state and exert pressures on citizens. Other proponents include in this basic definition the "liberation" of individuals from religions that are deemed to be inherently backward or, in the case of Islam, culturally inadapted.

The claim to guarantee people's freedom on behalf of *laïcité* may thus be used as a convenient mask for expressing antireligious convictions or hostility towards cultural specificities perceived as unfit and provocative.

This perverted use of *laïcité* fuels two ideas that are the exact opposite of France's non-discriminatory brand of secularism. The first idea is that equality should involve a

process of assimilation directed at Muslims only, which is in itself contradictory. The second idea is that some religions have a more important role to play than others.

For example, former far-right MP Marion Maréchal-Le Pen stated in 2015 that “[French Muslims] cannot have the exact same status as Catholics...I fight the left’s approach to *laïcité* as it is a sanitised version that deletes any reference to our Catholic roots”.

Crossroad of Choices?

President Macron concluded his speech by warning the audience that religions shall not influence France’s political life, and that he was not looking to establish a state religion.

Presenting himself as a balancing figure was appropriate, as France appears to reach a peak of polarisation between opposing forces. This is perceptible in societal issues such as *laïcité* that draw increasingly heated debate and discussion. It can also be observed in politics and economics where France’s long-standing conflict between aspirations and resistance to change has intensified over recent years.

The symptom of “radicalised *laïcité*” therefore works as a timely reminder that sectarianism is not specific to one religion or religions only, and reflects how convincing divisive rhetoric expressed in the name of state authority may sound.

Beyond national specificities, the French case illustrates that the work of ensuring peaceful coexistence between faiths and beliefs in multiethnic societies is an ongoing process. The lessons of history, as extensive as they might be for some countries, should obviously not lead to take this work for granted.

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