

Yueyue Guo

French Law on Secularity: Stifling Religious Freedom

In his *Reflections on the Revolution of France*, Edmund Burke contended that history is a continuum, that to predict the future we must look to the past; if we are to ignore the lessons of our ancestors, disaster would ensue. The French government must have forgotten about the philosophy of this brilliant Irish statesman when they passed the French law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools—technically called law 2004-228—banning all conspicuous religious wear in public schools. If we examine French history, we find it bloodied by countless religious conflicts; only after establishing religious freedom and separating church and state was France able to become a modern state. This ban not only makes the government step into forbidden territory but also blemishes France's reputation for toleration. Because this ban fails its intent to completely secularize schools—rather, discriminating against certain religions that require more conspicuous wear—French citizens and the global community need to take measures in pressuring the French government to scrape the bill.

Though now regarded as a pillar for religious freedom, France was muddled in religious turmoil for the past few centuries. Ever since King Clovis converted to Roman Catholicism, most future kings and citizens of France have followed suit. Other religions—like Protestantism, Islam, and Judaism—however, gradually spread and since then, the French have engaged in all sorts of conflicts to persecute those with different beliefs. Wars like the Crusades, Wars of Religion, and Thirty Years War could all be traced directly to religious reasons. The St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre resulted with thousands of dead Huguenots, and then the Edict of Nantes in 1598 that granted some toleration for other religions was revoked by Louis XIV in favor of a strongly Catholic nation. Only after the French Revolution, when Napoleon issued the

Concondat in 1801, recognizing Judaism, as well as the Lutheran and Calvinist sects of Protestantism, did the modern French belief in toleration really start to emerge. Jules Ferry's 1880 Laws on education mandated a free and laïc education. Finally in 1905, France passed law separating church and state (Viault). And for the most part, the church and state have been separated until law 2004-228.

The current French Republic, built on the idea of laïcité, does not have a state religion. A survey conducted for French newspaper *Le Monde* shows that only about a third of the population believes that there is a God, a third believes in some sort of spirit or higher power, and a third is atheist. However, of those who had a religion, an overwhelming majority identified with Roman Catholicism, 2% was Protestant, 5-10% Muslim, and 4% other (Les Francais). Because religions like Islam, Judaism, or Sikhism have a much smaller presence, most people, ignorant of these religions, may automatically discriminate against them, dubbing them as inferior or as terrorists.

When passed in 2004, the law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools directly attacked those religions. It violates the laws separating church and state and granting religious toleration—for banning religious wear requires government intervention of religious affairs and muffles religious expression. It subjects the population into a medieval mindset of intolerance. In a truly tolerant state, people should have the freedom to believe what they want to believe, and express their beliefs however they want to as long as it does not injure others. In a statement to the Sikhist community of Darbar Sahib, Ambassador Girard said, “We are not refusing multi-culturalism. What we are refusing is to have people trying to destroy the system from inside...” When has a harmless turban, headscarf, or yarmulke ever “destroy[ed] the system?” (Chowdhary).

Former president Jacques Chirac contended that banning all conspicuous religious wear would help protect the lay republic (Henley). Based on that statement, proponents of the bill have argued that many students wearing religious articles may be discriminated against, or pressure others with the same religion to wear headscarves or yarmulkes to fit in. They claim that those forced to wear religious attire by their parents are now liberated. But surveys have shown that most of these kids chose to wear their headscarves or turbans against their parents' wishes. As one Muslim girl said to the Washington Post: "I've been wearing [the headscarf] for a month. My father is against it...I wear it because I had a mystical feeling...I'm not against France, just in favor of my religion" (Williams). Banning students' religious expression protects no one. So what does the bill actually achieve? Well, aside from taking a step backwards in history, it also promotes homogeneity and intolerance.

This ban would be hard to uplift, as its existence brings about more prejudice against less known religions, which in turn will help the ban remain in effect. First, the population must be educated to be more accepting of different beliefs. Many people too readily believe anyone with a turban, long beard, or headscarf is related to a terrorist. People must learn to distinguish between those with Muslim or Sikhist religions from the extremists. Only the radical sects are actually terrorists, just as only the radical cults of Christianity still practice polygamy, not just any Mormon. This will take time, but will become reality. Just as atheism has been accepted and religious tolerance engrained into French culture, one day, religions like Islam or Sikhism will become just another part of society. However, people will have a harder time accepting other beliefs because the ban essentially validates the unfounded suspicions that people already have about others and makes them acceptable (Mullen). But they are not.

Countries that endorse religious toleration, such as many European or North American countries, need to become aware of this ban. They need to see that it does not promote a laïc environment for learning, but stifles religious expression. Students learn from one another as much as they learn from the textbooks and teachers, but if the government strips those with different perspectives of their right to practice their religions, the student population becomes homogenous. As comfortable as it may sound, education is not about learning and interacting with people who share all the same beliefs as you, but about experiencing and appreciating the differences. We live in an age where freedom of expression is highly valued, but this ban constitutes one of the many restrictions on freedom. Before everyone who is different is told to conform, this ban needs to be stricken. I'm not calling for a revolution here, but just a minor change backed by history.

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