

# The Law and the Creation of Interreligious Space: The Gifts and Challenges of France's Laïcité in the Work of Building Bridges Across Boundaries of Religio-Cultural Difference in the European Union

David Wellman, DePaul University Chicago, IL (USA), [davidwellman7@gmail.com](mailto:davidwellman7@gmail.com)

Ratified in 1905 under the Third Republic, France's law of Separation of the Churches and the State codified three principles: the neutrality of the State regarding religion, the freedom of religious exercise, and the establishment of public powers regarding the Church. While some in France who identify themselves as practitioners of a religious tradition point to what they view as governmental overreach regarding the state's regulation of religion under laïcité, others whose work focusses on forging deeper alliances among diverse religious and secular communities praise its advantages. Still others argue that the law defining laïcité is applied unevenly, and in some cases is used to affirm the hegemony of normative French religio-cultural traditions.

As the European Union grapples with the long-term implications of the current influx of immigrants from non-Christian cultures, the need for practical tools to promote cooperation and diffuse increasing tensions across boundaries of difference is becoming more apparent. This is particularly true regarding the current state of relations among French Jews, Christians, Muslims and Atheists – relations which have deteriorated not only in the wake of the attacks of November 2015 and on the offices of Charlie Hebdo, but also with the rise of nationalist sentiments whose proponents call into question the legitimacy of the European Union itself.

In light of these developments, this paper will pose the following three core questions. What could be the role of laïcité in promoting moral claims that could inform a new lived out ethic of engaged religious pluralism, one that equally honors the contributions to both French and greater European life and culture of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Atheism? At the same time, to what degree have transnational ethical discourses – both explicitly religious and profoundly secular - already served to create the groundwork for an ethic of interreligious community which could be effectively applied in the context of the EU? In addition, how might the ethos of the law of laïcité, which equally privileges the importance of secular public space and religious private space, potentially contribute to a 21<sup>st</sup> century European ethic of sustainable religious and cultural pluralism beyond the boundaries of France?

This paper emerges from my ongoing work in Paris, where I am in the process of writing a book and refining a program I created for students from my university, whose aim is to examine Abrahamic Paris and interreligious engagement through the lens of four living communities: Union Libéral Israélite de France (Copernic Synagogue), Église Saint-Merry and its Centre Pastoral Halles-Beaubourg, La Grande Mosquée de Paris, and a constellation of Atheist thinkers and activists who are making significant contributions to building bridges among communities of diverse religious and secular identities. The questions my research and program invites our students and those who act as our teachers in Paris to consider include the following: How have the historical circumstances and narratives that have influenced Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Atheism in France served to inform the way these traditions are

understood and practiced in 21<sup>st</sup> century Paris? What are the requirements for building ethical, sustainable bridges among individuals and communities associated with Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Atheism in the French context, and what are the positive roles laïcité can play in achieving this goal? What unique insights regarding the requirements of building such bridges do those with religious and secular identities connected to Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Atheism have to offer, and in what regard are these insights drawn directly from the moral claims associated with these four traditions? How does a legal commitment to secular culture and secular space such as those found in modern France help and hinder such work? These questions are framed by the assertion that the challenges faced by the people of Paris are emblematic of the circumstances many other EU countries are currently facing or will likely face in the near future.

To this end, this paper's intention is to present both an ethical reflection and a report from the field, while inviting others to ask how similar circumstances are being addressed in their own countries and whether or not an adaptation of laïcité could prove useful in their respective contexts. At the same time, I want to address the observations of Pankaj Mishra, the Indian intellectual whose reflections on secular Europe's encounter with religion, the "Other" and Islam in particular necessitate what he describes as the "need for a new Enlightenment," one which features a new commitment to rigorous ethical self-criticism. While Mishra's reflections are ostensibly framed in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks, they provide a compelling meta-narrative – one which goes well beyond the headlines, while interrogating popular assumptions about the role and efficacy of normative theological and secular intellectual frameworks for building community across boundaries of difference.

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