

La Haine: Laïcité, Charlie Hebdo and the Republican War on Religion

Written by Giorgio Shani

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GIORGIO SHANI, JAN 29 2015

In *La Haine* (1995), Matthieu Kassovitz's powerful black and white film about life in a multicultural Parisian *banlieue* marked by tensions with the Police, three friends from a housing project mark out time in the aftermath of a riot in which a friend of theirs, Abdel, has been severely beaten. Vinz, from a working-class Jewish family, vows revenge on the Police if Abdel dies and intends to use the gun he took from the *flic* the night before. He is restrained by his friends: the hyper-active Said who, like Abdel, is of Algerian descent; and, more forcefully, by Hubert, an Afro-French would-be boxer who acts as the conscience of the group. Twenty-years on, what is remarkable about the film is the lack of animosity between the three ethnic communities depicted. Religious difference was noticeable by its absence. In this respect, *La Haine* –although deeply critical of the contemporary French State– was consistent with the values of the French Republic; it upheld a fictionalized account of an adolescent *racialized* underclass structured primarily on secular class lines. The implicit problem with the late twentieth century French nation-building project, the film suggests, was that it had failed to extend the cherished values of the republic – *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* – to the immigrants living in the *banlieue*.

The massive demonstration held in Paris in commemoration of the attacks on the satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, which left fourteen dead including the magazine's editor and several prominent cartoonists, was a powerful demonstration of support for republican ideals. Up to two million people from all shades of the political spectrum—including many prominent Muslim groups— took to the streets of Paris to show solidarity with the murdered journalists (and a murdered policeman of Algerian descent, Ahmed Merabet). Although not all the demonstrators agreed with the right of the magazine to depict the Prophet Mohammed (or other religious figures) in a deeply insulting and vulgar manner often bordering on racism, most upheld the sanctity of the principle of free speech and the principle of *laïcité* upon which the republic is founded.

Laïcité may be seen as a form of 'assertive secularism' (Kuru 2009) that encompasses legal and philosophical implications. In the first place, it involves a very strict separation of Church and State— a legacy of the political conflict between the state and the Catholic Church that resulted in a 1905 law regulating the presence of religion in the public life. Although the term '*laïcité*' does not appear in the legislative text, the 1905 Law on the Separation of Churches and the State is 'habitually viewed as having instituted *Laïcité* as the distinctively absolutist principle of French secularism' (Saunders 2009: 57). The guiding principles of the Law of Separation, which comprise forty-four articles under six headings, are contained in the first two articles. Under Article 1 the Republic 'ensures freedom of conscience' whereas under Article 2 the Republic 'does not recognize, fund or subsidize any religion' (*Assemblée Nationale* 1905).

Secondly, *laïcité* claims to provide all citizens with an ideological and philosophical value system by effectively 'privatizing' religion and excluding it from the public sphere. *Laïcité* defines national cohesion by asserting a purely political identity that relegates specific religious or cultural identities to the private sphere in order to protect the neutrality of the public sphere. As former President Chirac stated at the time in which legislation on the banning of conspicuous religious symbols in public schools was being drafted:

It is the neutrality of the public sphere which enables the harmonious existence side by side of different religions. (...)

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Laicism is one of the great achievements of the republic. It is a crucial element of social peace and of national cohesion. We cannot allow it to be weakened. We have to work to consolidate it. (Chirac cited in BBC 2003)

However, France remains a predominantly Catholic society. Relations with the Vatican were re-established by the Briand-Ceretti Agreement in 1921, which gave the state the right to participate in the selection of Bishops. Far from seeking to free French citizens from the 'pernicious' influence of Catholicism (*catholicité*) and inculcating Republican virtues among French youth, it has been argued that, in the light of immigration from France's colonies, an accommodation has been reached between the French state and the Catholic Church in order to protect France's European (i.e. post-Christian) identity. Étienne Balibar (2004) has gone so far as to label contemporary France a '*Catholaïcité*' given the degree of alleged collusion between the Church and State.

In contemporary France, *laïcité* is most closely associated with the assimilation of immigrants and rejection of multiculturalism. It is estimated that France has the highest percentage of Muslims in the EU, although no accurate figures are available since the Census does not include a separate category for religion. Muslims account for between 5 to 10% of the French population, with estimates being approximately 5 million out of a total of 60 million (Pew Forum 2011). Most Muslim migrants came to France in the aftermath of the Second World War and the war of independence in Algeria. France recruited immigrant workers from their former colonies in Muslim countries such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. The first generation of Muslim immigrants, who arrived in the 1960s and early 1970s, did not bring their families with them and confined their religious practices to makeshift facilities. Islam only became more visible in the 1970s when this first generation decided to settle in France. From then on the French government shifted from simply policing immigration flows to a policy of assimilation (Fetzer and Soper 2005).

In order to be 'French', immigrants are expected to assimilate to secular republican culture by confining their visible differences to the private sphere. In such a view, national cohesion is attained when the nation lives under the roof of the Republic as 'one and indivisible'; in other words when differences are not visible and everybody is equal. Education plays an important role in instilling republican virtues since it must prepare individuals for entry into the public sphere; children are encouraged to detach themselves from their prior cultural identities. This, as Balibar has pointed out, is a potentially violent process entailing a 'sort of dismemberment, a separation from their identities' (Balibar 2004: 357).

The presence of Muslim headscarves, hijabs, in public places led to a series of long and drawn-out public confrontations between Muslim communities and the state which eventually led to their banning. An Act passed in 2004 outlawed the wearing in state schools of signs or dress by which pupils 'overtly' manifest a religious affiliation. The term 'overt' (ostensible in French) was preferred to visible, since 'overt' implies that the wearer wants to be seen and was furthermore deemed to be in conformity with the European Convention of Human Rights which guarantees the right to freely manifest one's religion (Joppke 2009:51). This Act was followed in 2010 with the passing of a law banning face-covering garments—the *niqab* and *burqa*— in public spaces such as restaurants, schools and public transportation. Under the bill's provisions, women wearing a face-covering veil in public spaces could be fined 150 Euro or asked to take classes on the values of French citizenship. Although, as Baehr and Gordon have recently noted, the ban on the wearing of the *burqa* was justified on the principle of democratic reciprocity and not on secularism, both have been 'deployed dualistically to construct Islamic symbols as expressions of resistance to democratic integration' (Baehr and Gordon 2013). Consequently, the ban may be viewed as another attempt to 'securitize' the veil and to 'secularize' religious subjects of minority backgrounds by extending state control over their bodies. This was followed by the passing of a law in 2011 which banned praying in the street, a directive clearly aimed at Muslims. The French state, at least under Sarkozy, evidently believed the 'overt' manifestation of the Islamic faith publicly to be incompatible with the core values of the Republic.

Seen in the context of the post-9/11 retreat from multiculturalism, the position adopted by the French state to first 'other' and then 'securitize' their devout religious (Muslim) subjects appears consistent with those of other member states of the European Union. After 9/11, many states in the European Union have watered down or abandoned multicultural approaches to immigration and sought to promote policies which would lead to greater integration of immigrants into the host culture through the privatization of cultural identities. This is particularly true of the Netherlands, which may be considered a pioneer of multiculturalism in the EU through its Ethnic Minorities Policy;

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Denmark after the controversy surrounding the insensitive depiction of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in a national newspaper; and the UK after the terrorist attacks on London on 7 July 2005. Following the murder of the politician Pim Fortuyn and the filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, anti-immigrant 'populism turned mainstream' in the Netherlands with the rise of the Freedom Party and retreat from institutionalized multicultural policies (Prins and Saharso 2010:86). The London suicide bombers, who detonated explosives on the transport system killing over fifty people, were British citizens; home-grown children of Britain's multicultural society (Modood 2007: 10-14). More recently, the British Prime Minister David Cameron pronounced 'state multiculturalism' to be a cause of the radicalization of Islamic youth in the UK. The doctrine of 'state multiculturalism' which he considered a failure, had 'encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream' (Cameron 2011). This view, however, overstates the extent to which the British state was indeed committed to the creation of a multicultural society, particularly in light of the hostile reaction to the publication of the Parekh Report which called for a rethinking of Britain's national identity as a multi-ethnic 'community of communities' (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000). Cameron, however, was correct to argue that Britain had 'failed to provide a vision of a society to which they [immigrants] feel they want to belong'. Only 7% of British Muslims put nationality over religion when asked to choose their primary identity as opposed to 42% of French Muslims (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2006). Cameron's comments echoed those of his host in Munich for the 2011 Security conference, German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel stated that the German concept of '*multikulti*' whereby Germans and her 16 million immigrants (over 3 million of which are from Turkey alone) 'live happily side by side' had 'utterly failed' (Connolly 2010). Sarkozy similarly pronounced the concept a 'failure' stating that France had been 'too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving him' (The Telegraph 2011).

Twenty years on from *La Haine*, it appears unthinkable- despite 'new French citizen' Lassana Bathily's heroics in hiding customers at the *Hyper Cacher* store in a walk in freezer (BBC 2014)- that solidarity could exist between working class Jews, Arabs and Africans in contemporary France to the same extent as before. The presence of a politicized form of *Jihadi-Salafism* is present in the *banlieues* even if it is shunned by the majority of French Muslims. Although this may be seen as a legacy of the radicalization of Sunni Islam by *Al Qaeda* and their successors, the Republican war against religion has, post 9/11, played its part in creating the conditions whereby the message of the *jihadis* now has resonance amongst the alienated youth of the *banlieue*. In so doing, it bears partial responsibility for the senseless attacks carried out by the Kouachi brothers and Amedy Coulibaly. Only a sustained engagement with *post-secular* conceptions of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* can guarantee human security for all in France (Shani 2014).

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About the author:

Giorgio Shani is a Professor of Politics and International Studies at International Christian University (ICU), Japan and was a Visiting Professor in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) from 2022 to 2023. Chair of RC43 Religion and Politics of IPSA, he is author of *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age* (Routledge, 2008) and co-author of *Sikh Nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2021). He can be followed on X @GiorgioShani.