

France, Post-secularism and Islam

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LUCIE PEBAY, JUN 12 2017

In 2012, international Relations specialists Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito published 'The postsecular in International Relations: an overview', an article discussing post-secular theory and pointing out its 'increasing relevance in the social science' (Mavelli and Petito, 2012). Indeed, prior to the emergence of a post-secular understanding of the world, religion appeared to be a matter more or less disregarded in the field of international relations. Post-secularism thus appears to be way of apprehending the complex articulation between the religious and the secular which differs from the traditional secularisation theory. While secularisation theory can be defined in different ways, one of the key ideas suggests that modernity tends to reduce the importance of religion in societies. Daniel Philpott defines secularisation as a 'rather descriptive statement holding that the political ends of citizens, organizations, and societies themselves are no longer as explicitly religious as they once were or are no longer religious at all' (Philpott, 2002). Yet, this assumption offers a very generic and simplistic view of the world and its relationship with religion. In *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics*, Pippa Norris asserts that 'rich nations are becoming more secular, but the world as a whole is becoming more religious' (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). To explain her statement, she rightly brings forward a 'demographic hypothesis.' She explains that 'poor nations will remain deeply religious in their values' but, contrary to rich nations they have 'far higher fertility rates and growing populations' (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Peter Berger supports the same idea and states that: 'the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today, with some exceptions [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever' (Philpott, 2002). Norris and Berger thus criticize the secularisation theory by reminding the importance of taking into account the world's diversity. In a way, the authors criticize secularisation and its tendency to perceive the world through a Western scope. The enthusiasm for secularisation theory mostly originates from the study of the Western world and more specifically Western Europe. While the Western world as a whole embraces the theory of institutional differentiation underlined by Casanova in his definition of secularisation, religion, in some of these places, still appears to be an important factor shaping society. The United States for instance remains a state deeply permeated by religion: religious beliefs are not in decline and religion still plays a role in politics. However, Western Europe seems to fit the theory of secularisation better as there is a decline of religious beliefs and some states do favour a more strict privatisation of religion. In other words, these states seem to fit in Casanova's triple definition of secularisation.[1] France appears as a particularly relevant example of Western European trend of secularisation as the French model is often argued to be one of the most secular in the world. However, religion is currently a burning issue in France with Islam being at the heart of political and public debate. The French case allows an interesting outlook on the articulation of the religious and the secular in the contemporary world.

This essay will aim at demonstrating the flaws of the theory of secularisation through the study of the French model and its relation with religion. In other words, this case study tries to point out how a strongly secular state can also defend the post-secular theory. In order to have a good understanding of the current situation in France, this essay will try to define French identity in relation to historical and contextual information. This essay will more or less follow the double definition of post-secularism offered by Mavelli and Petito.[2] First, it will point out how religion is still a defining feature of the modern French society. Then it will look into post-secularism as a radical critique of secularisation theory by tackling actual contemporary political implications in order to see how secularism is sometimes considered as a 'potential site of isolation, domination, violence and exclusion' (Mavelli and Petito, 2012). The article will start by focusing on French history before looking into the current impact on globalisation on a national and international level. Finally it will consider the contemporary French political landscape as a way of looking into the theories of secularisation and post-secularism.

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In his book *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World*, French political scientist Gilles Kepel justly reminds that 'there is no exact equivalent in English of the French word *laïcité*' (Kepel, 1993). This simple language difference points out the uniqueness of the French model, a state dealing with religion in a very particular way. Olivier Roy also believes in the exceptional nature of France's secularism. He explains that the French word *laïcité* is a form of western secularism that has developed on a double level. First, there is what he calls a 'legal *laïcité*' which is a very strict separation of church and state with a 'law regulating very strictly the presence of religion in the public sphere.' He then considers an 'ideological *laïcité*' which is an 'ideological and philosophical interpretation [...] that claims to provide a value system common to all citizens by expelling religion into the private sphere' (Roy, 2016). In other words, the concept of *laïcité* goes further than a basic separation of the religious and the political, it is a deep structural and ideological system unique to France.

The clear institutional divide was established in 1905 with the French law on the separation of church and state. Since then, France and its citizens seem to have maintained and developed a suspicious outlook towards religion. A poll conducted in 2012 by Eurobarometer looked into the personal religious background of citizens from different European countries. While the accuracy of polls on religious beliefs is questionable, they can still reflect the general decline of religious belief in contemporary Europe and even more so in France. Indeed, the poll asked: 'which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs', the choice being between 'don't know', 'you believe there is a God', 'you believe there is some sort of spirit of life force' or 'you don't believe there is any sort of spirit, God, or life force'. France appeared to be the country with the highest rate on the last answer: 40% declared they did not believe in any sort of spirit God or life force. This poll illustrates how French citizens tend not to be very religious. In other words, religion seems not to be important in the public as well as the private spheres. On that matter, French sociologist Olivier Bobineau declared that 'our culture erases religion.'

This decline in religious beliefs and the distrust with regards to religion is directly connected to French history. The Age of Enlightenment is of paramount importance in the founding of French identity. While the movement spread throughout Europe in the 18th century promoting ideas of liberty, progress, tolerance, and instigated the separation between church and state (which was then established in 1905), it had a special resonance in France where it originated. French philosophers defended individual liberty and religious tolerance in opposition to the oppressive power of the absolute monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church. Faith was very much challenged because it was associated with oppression and was seen as clashing with the new ideals of reason and science. The French Revolution ensued from this intellectual movement and underlines the power of these philosophical thoughts. The Enlightenment and the French Revolution are key elements to consider when looking at the contemporary French society. The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the 1880s Jules Ferry laws, and the 1905 law on the Separation of State and Church all confirmed the secular turn of the French state. Furthermore, key symbols defining the country emerged from the Revolution like the French motto 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' ('liberty, equality, fraternity') or the national anthem La Marseillaise. In other words, the ideas, values and symbols which emerged during the Enlightenment Era and the French revolution are at the core of today's French identity. Throughout this period, France embraced secular views and grew more suspicious of and distant from the religious. The concept of *laïcité* and of the République became the main defining traits of French identity. It explains France's gradual secularisation as well as the delicate position religion holds in this society. To use Bobineau's idea, since this period France has been inclined towards the erasure of religion from the French political and cultural environment. Considering this aspect of French history and identity, it seems that France might be a nation fitting in Philpott's descriptive definition of secularisation. Indeed, it seems that the 'political ends of citizens, organizations, and societies themselves are no longer as explicitly religious as they once were or are no longer religious at all' (Philpott, 2002).

However, while France has an uneasy relationship with religion it does not mean that it is completely out of the system. The idea that French culture completely erases religion is generally correct, but it has to be nuanced. The impact of the Enlightenment era on French identity has demonstrated how identity is partly shaped by history. But religion, before the revolutionary movement, occupied a dominating and leading position within society. Before the 1905 law on the Separation of the Church and State, Roman Catholicism was the state religion. Before the growing secularisation of the country, France had a long history of Christianity. France's religious past cannot be ignored when trying to pin down and understand French identity. Pippa Norris interestingly argues that 'even in highly secular

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societies, the historical legacy of given religions continues to shape worldviews and define cultural zones' (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). She believes that 'identifying the predominant religious culture in each country is important because we expect that the values and beliefs of Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Islam, and eastern religions will imprint themselves on each society' (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Olivier Roy brings forward a similar idea which he applies to the French model. In his book *La laïcité à l'épreuve de l'Islam*, he writes: 'our *laïcité* and our secularisation are, in their own ways Christian, because they both emerged from christianism' (Roy, 2005). He adds that 'religion inhabits society: it shaped it and is doing its come back under a *laïcised* form, or on the contrary, through outbursts of fundamentalism' (Roy, 2005). In a way, Norris and Roy are both arguing that religion is not completely absent from French society despite the secularisation trend. Christianity has left its mark on French society and Christian thoughts and values are embedded within French ideology. The contemporary French identity is of a paradoxical nature combining hidden Christian values with the unique concept of *laïcité*. This shows that while the idea of secularisation in France makes sense because it is based on empirical evidence, it still does not mean that religion is completely 'erased' from French culture as suggested by Bobineau. It may be argued that France is more disposed to erase religion from its structure and ideology, but this erasure cannot be complete. As suggested by post-secular theory, despite the trend of secularisation in France, the religious and the secular are still interconnected on some level.

Looking into French history has demonstrated that religion still has a place within French society but remains strongly repressed by a very secular system. But, the current global context directly impacts French identity and France's relation with religion. Indeed, France is today part of a world facing the new challenges brought up by globalisation. American sociologist Saskia Sassen, looked into the traditional understanding of globalisation and tried to offer a more precise definition. She asserts that 'globalisation is not simply growing interdependence – its typical definition – but the actual production of special and temporal frames that simultaneously inhabit national structures and are distinct from national spatial and temporal frames as these have been historically constructed' (Hurd, 2012). With globalisation, states, cultures and ideologies are bound to interact, hence there is a necessity of reworking on a new world order. In his book, *World Order*, Henry Kissinger delves into this contemporary issue. He gives a dark outlook on globalisation asserting that today 'chaos threatens side by side with unprecedented interdependence'. As demonstrated previously: 'the world as a whole is becoming more religious' (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). This fact, paralleled with the current context of globalisation, seems to support the post-secular framing of the world. Indeed, growing interactions with big religious actors will ultimately lead to a world where the secular and the religious will encounter and merge together.

Today, France is facing the challenges of globalisation which shows through the country's relation with Islam. The latter is currently framed as a burning issue on the national and international level. Gilles Kepel has underlined the process of 're-Islamization' in the so-called 'Arab world' which is a great example of the ongoing power of religion in contemporary societies. The political scientist also connects the context of globalisation with the question of identity asserting that 're-Islamization 'from below'[3] is first and foremost a way of rebuilding an identity in a word that has lost its meaning and become amorphous and alienating' (Kepel, 1993). Indeed, globalisation is strongly connected to the notion of identity, as communities, groups and nations fear to lose their identity because of growing interconnections. The re-Islamization occurring in the 'Arab world' illustrates this matter. The supremacy of the West and its leading position on the world stage triggers reactions from non-Western nations. Religion appears to be used as a strong identity marker underlining their difference and their reluctance to bend to the Western hegemon. And, while religion manifest itself in different ways, Islamism being heterogeneous, all the different variations of the political application of Islam show that religion still has a powerful influence.

But Islam does not only occupy an important place in the 'Muslim world'. With globalisation, religion is exported throughout the world, and France appears to be one of the main countries facing the growing influence of Islam. Due to its colonial past and its geography, the French state has close ties with a number of Arab nations, especially Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria which are only separated from France by the Mediterranean Sea. As a result, the immigration to France from these regions has been, and still remains, relatively high. As a result, France has the largest number of Muslims in Western Europe (Hackett, 2016) and Islam is the second most widely professed religion in France behind Roman Catholicism.

For that matter, Gilles Kepel also used his theory of re-Islamization and applied it to the French nation. However, the

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growing influence of Islam in France appears to be problematic and has been turned into a major subject of debate within society. The debate revolves around two different issues. First, some part of the population fears that the Islamization taking place in France might affect the French identity because it could challenge the concept of *laïcité*. Olivier Roy claims that 'in the past the Catholic church was the enemy [...] today Islam has replaced Catholicism' (Roy, 2005). But the fact that Islam is specifically targeted could also be related to the fact that the French model is constructed on a Christian stand, as mentioned previously. Taking this into consideration, it could be argued that the re-Islamization process might be perceived as a threat for French identity because it does not fit with either the concept of *laïcité* nor the Christian values embedded in the state's ideology. This idea could be connected to Dr. Peter Pekoff's assertion that 'in many states, rightly or wrongly, religious differences are seen as a threat to public order' (Hurd, 2012). This hypothesis suggests, once again, the strong role religion plays in modern secular societies.

However, the specific targeting of Islam is first and foremost connected to the threat on national security brought up by terrorism. The past decades have been marked by the significant rise of the terrorist threat in the West and more recently within Western European states. The recent attacks in Paris and Nice have shed light on the fact that the French state is today the primary target for terrorists in the West. These violent acts made in the name of Islam have contributed to the rise of Islamophobia and strengthened an already visible anti-religious sentiment in the country. In her article 'How does religion matter? Pathways to religion in International Relations', Mona Kanwal Sheick explains how religion is prone to securitisation. In other words, she asserts that religion tends to be transformed into security threats. The current situation in France most certainly supports this idea. The rise of the terrorist threat leads to a dangerous association between Islam and violence. The securitisation of Islam sheds a negative light on this religion and leads the French state to hold on more strongly to its *laïcité*.

This assumption seems to contradict an argument introduced by Norris in *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*. When analysing the secularisation theory, she argues that in times of insecurity people tend to cling on religious beliefs more deeply. The idea of 'insecurity' can be understood in different ways having social, economic and political implications. As mentioned previously, countries around the globe are facing the new challenges of globalisation and post-colonialism. In that context of global instability the countries of the 'Muslim World' appear to face the various forms of insecurity. The rise of Islamism in this part of the world seems to support Norris' idea. Yet the situation in France, which faces 'insecurity' because of terrorism, is in sharp contrast: religion is not embraced but rejected. This difference in terms of approaches is, once again, directly connected to questions of identity, history and context. Comparing the French model with the 'Muslim World' highlights the impact of globalisation on different communities. It points out that 'insecurity' does not necessarily lead to stronger religious beliefs. The case of France suggests that societies are more inclined to cling on their identity which can be more or less religious. This can be connected to Juergensmeyer's understanding of religion and secularism as ideologies of order. In his article 'The New Religious State' he explains that 'religion and secular nationalism are species of the same genus' (Juergensmeyer, 1995). These two ways of structuring societies work in the same way as they both rely on a set of beliefs. With globalisation, these two ideologies interact on an international as well as the national level. This interaction can be conflictual because 'from this perspective, both religion and secular nationalism are about order [and] are therefore potential rivals' (Juergensmeyer, 1995). This rivalry between these two ideologies can be seen on a national level. Olivier Roy believes that 'France is living through Islam, the crisis of its identity' (Roy, 2005).

The current securitisation of Islam has called into question the integration of the Muslim community. The French model of integration differs in many ways from other Western European countries, such as the United Kingdom for instance. In an interview with *Le Monde*, Trevor Phillips, chair of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), compares the French and the British models of integration. He declared that the 'UK lives a form of two-way integration where immigrants are given some space and flexibility to adapt and where the host culture takes on board some elements of the immigrant's culture.' He describes the British model as multiculturalist. By contrast, he argues that the French model is one of assimilation: 'France has a one-way approach to integration where immigrants have to assimilate French culture and leave their origins behind.' Once more, to understand this model of integration it is necessary to look into French history and identity. Gilles Kepel, who studied the French model deeply, recalls that 'France, first under the absolute monarchy and then influenced by the Jacobinism 'one and indivisible', took care to level out regional peculiarities whether linguistic or religious' (Kepel, 1993). This idea has not only been expressed by academics but also by contemporary French politicians. In an article for the *Huffington Post*, French Prime

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Minister Manuel Valls declares: 'France, in this respect, different than other countries, does not see itself as a juxtaposition of communities with each having their own autonomous process. To say it another way: We do not view the French identity as something ethnic' (Valls, 2016).

However, like any model, it has its flaws. There is a sense of marginalization from a part of the Muslim community who does not feel that their religious identity is accepted and recognized. French secularism, which claims to advocate freedom, is thus perceived as oppressive. The debate on the veil and more recently on the burkini have shed light on this issue. As a matter of fact, Manuel Valls' article was written in response to another article published in the *New York Times* magazine: "The Way People Look at Us Has Changed': Muslim Women on Life in Europe.' This article portrays the French deeply secular French system as oppressive and intolerant with regards to Islam. It criticizes the ban on the veil and the burkini in public places. This way of framing the issue fits in Mavelli and Petito's definition of post-secularity. Indeed, beside the descriptive definition, they also understand post-secularity as a radical critique of secularisation. In that sense, secularism can be seen as a 'potential site of isolation, domination, violence and exclusion' (Mavelli and Petito, 2012). The strong reaction triggered by the ban on the veil and the burkini seem to support this idea as some people argued that it goes against the very idea of freedom. Nevertheless, it is important to recall that religion causes similar problems. People defending the ban have argued that it is to defend women's rights and denounce the oppressive nature of Islamic beliefs. Freedom is questioned in both cases. This goes back to Juergensmeyer's idea of ideologies of order. In the public sphere, both religion and secularism are bound to be seen as 'sites of domination' as they have to structure society to maintain order. In other words, it is neither secularism nor religion that is a 'potential site of isolation, domination, violence and exclusion' (Mavelli and Petito, 2012), it is the political system itself and the interaction between these different ideologies within the spheres of power. Isolation and violence are the results of the plurality of beliefs within the state and the struggle to create a unified identity.

It reveals how France is struggling to construct a new French identity which satisfies its entire population. In *La laïcité à l'épreuve de l'Islam*, Olivier Roy tries to look into this debate. He explains that some part of the French population believes that the Muslim dogma is incompatible with the French model of *laïcité* because of three main reasons. First, Islam does not advocate a separation from church and state. Second, the 'charia' is incompatible with human rights (and more specifically women's rights) and democracy. Finally a believer can only identify itself to the 'umma' (Muslim community) (Roy, 2005). This outlook on religion is very limited and simplistic and tends to completely blur the boundaries between the private beliefs and the political application of religion.

This understanding of religion can partly explain the rise in popularity of the far-right movement in France. Indeed, the Front National is a conservative and nationalist political party strongly opposed to immigration and rejecting the belief that there could be a combination between Islam and the République. Political leaders from the left-wing tend to argue against this assertion. Manuel Valls declares: 'where the extreme right wants to see Muslims as second rate citizens, we want, on the contrary, to make it resoundingly clear that Islam is totally compatible with democracy, secularism, and the equality of men and women. It is the most striking blow that we can deliver to radical Islam, which aspires to only one thing: to set all of us against one another' (Valls, 2016). Manuel Valls sheds light on the dangers of both religious and secular forms of 'extremisms,' he seems to believe that religion still has its place within the French culture but should not overstep secularism, a key trait of French identity. The clashing of opinion within the political stage reflects the delicate position of France through its confrontation with the new world order. The nation is facing the necessity of finding a balance to preserve French identity while adapting to the current reality.

France is often pictured as one of the world's most secular states. Yet this essay has demonstrated that the nation's relation to religion is very deep and complex. It is true that the French model relies on the principle of *laïcité* which alleviates the role of religion in the public sphere and seems to support the theory of secularisation. However, this theory has to be nuanced. Indeed, the very idea of French identity has been built upon Christian values and the current context of globalisation seems to give a second wind to religion in France. The country is testament to a strong re-Islamisation which occurs both on a national and international level. The case study of France and Islam reveals the strong influence of religion in our contemporary world. It also shows how both the secular and the religious necessarily merge into one another due to growing interactions. Henry Kissinger rightly asserts that 'the mystery to overcome is one all people share - how divergent historical experiences and values can be shaped into a

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common order.' France is currently dealing with the challenges of building up a common order around diverging values. The political debate around Islam and religion in France points out the difficulty to structure a fractured society. Today, the French state is struggling to reshape its identity and get back to its initial ideal of being 'one and indivisible.'

Considering this study, the French model can be considered as a great example demonstrating the complex intertwining of the religious and the secular in modern times. Despite its deep fondness for secularism, France still defends the theory of post-secularism as defined by Mavelli and Petito. Religion is still present in the private and, under a certain form, in the public sphere. The political turmoil shows the impossibility to completely erase religion and have a purely secular organisation of the state that would not lead to some form of 'isolation, domination, violence and exclusion' (Mavelli and Petito, 2012).

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Notes

[1] For Jose Casanova secularisation has three decisive factors: institutional differentiation (separation of church and state), the progressive decline of religious beliefs and the privatisation of religion in modern states.

[2] In 'The Religious as Political and the Political as Religious: Globalisation, Post-Secularism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Sacred', Samantha May, Erin K. Wilson, Claudia Baumgart-Ochse and Faiz Sheikh explain that Mavelli and Petito make a distinction between two different ways of approaching postsecularity. The first is in a 'descriptive fashion' suggesting the return of religion in modern societies, the second sees postsecularity as being a critique of the purely secular framework.

[3] Kepel makes a distinction between re-islamization 'from below', i.e. coming from the people and a re-islamization 'from above' i.e. instigated through political institutions

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