

# Laïcité, Fraternité, and Nationalité: Discontinuities in French Jewish Discourse

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In general, French Jews have always supported *laïcité*, a term that is usually translated as secularism. At the beginning of the century, Jews supported the Republican government's attempts to contain the power of the Catholic Church in the name of *laïcité*. After World War II, many surviving French Jews welcomed a return to *laïcité* after Vichy's deadly foregrounding and essentialization of religious identities. Today, many French Jews, and almost all institutional elites, approve of legislation designed to "reinforce" *laïcité*, including the 2004 decision to outlaw "ostentatious" religious symbols in public schools and the 2010 ban of the burqa in public spaces. Articulating a widely held position, Richard Prasquier, the president of one of the largest Jewish organizations in France, noted that the burqa "humiliates women" and undermines the face-to-face relations that form the foundation of social life in France. But this continuous support for *laïcité* hides a fundamental shift in many French Jews' attitudes toward religious pluralism and minority rights. This shift, in turn, highlights a potentially dangerous new trend in French Jewish negotiations of national identity, one that depends on distinguishing between and among religious minorities in order to claim Jewish Frenchness.

Despite widespread rhetoric about continuity, contemporary invocations of *laïcité* are quite *unlike* the principle of religious neutrality that animated the 1905 legislation establishing the separation of church and state in France. That older understanding created new possibilities for minority religious expression, in part because it removed Catholic influence from classrooms and curricula. In other words, the 1905 version of *laïcité* simultaneously guaranteed freedom of religion for those who chose to observe AND freedom from religion for those who did not. Today, *laïcité* is premised almost exclusively on freedom from religion, and particularly freedom from religions that are seen as grounded in corporeality (dietary restrictions, dress codes, organized daily prayers) and hierarchy (between believers and nonbelievers, the pious and the impious, men and women, etc.). Where the old version of *laïcité* targeted an established,

majority religion—Catholicism—the new version is being used to restrict the practices of a religious minority—Muslims.

Islam is not new to France; it dates back at least to the beginning of French colonization in the early nineteenth century. But Islamic practice in metropolitan France (and Europe more generally) has changed over the last few decades. The children and grandchildren of secularized immigrant families are returning to religious practices rooted in text-based orthopraxy. From the perspective of the new *laïcité*, these forms of religiosity are inherently problematic. One cannot be loyal to the French nation-state and be part of an ascriptive religious community that regulates a whole range of daily actions. In addition, deeply corporeal religions are thought to be "racist," thus fueling intolerance within and across social groups. Islam is thus accused of producing misogynists, anti-Semites, and jihadis—all of whom threaten the stability and values of the Republic.

Although the recent call to arms over *laïcité* focuses on Muslims, it could very easily begin to implicate Jews. Over the last forty years, changes in French Judaism have paralleled the shifts in French Islam. Between the 1950s and the 1980s, approximately 250,000 North African Jews immigrated to France. This wave of immigration transformed French Jewish practice. The postwar French Jewish population, which was overwhelmingly Ashkenazi, was relatively assimilated and bourgeois. Sephardi immigrants, however, were not. They reestablished visible ethnic and religious difference by building day schools, community centers, synagogues, and kosher butchers. They also turned in large numbers to Eastern European forms of ultra-Orthodoxy that had long been marginal in France. By the 1980s, as North African Jews were making inroads into establishment Jewish institutions, some Ashkenazim even accused new Sephardi leaders of promoting "fundamentalism," a word not accidentally associated with Iran and Muslim extremism.

Both the influx of Arab Jews and the turn to visible, corporeal forms of Judaism left all French Jews at a crossroads. Some continued to support minority religious rights

and therefore opposed legislation enacted in the name of *laïcité*. This was the case for the French Chief Rabbi during the first "headscarf affair" in the late 1980s. Tunisian-born Joseph Sitruk argued that governmental attempts to restrict Muslim religious practice, including veiling, would negatively impact religious Jews, particularly *kippot*-wearing boys. In other words, although the national hysteria over *laïcité* had generally targeted Muslims, Sitruk feared it could negatively impact Jews. And he was right. In 2004, the French equivalent of the FBI warned that 300 neighborhoods were exhibiting a dangerous tendency toward "ethnic withdrawal," noting that the signs of such a threat were women with covered heads and bodies, butchers certified in ritual slaughter, shops selling religious objects, and well-attended houses of worship. All of these signs could be found in a range of Jewish neighborhoods and were encouraged by the French rabbinate and day schools. The 2004 published report of the Stasi Commission, the deliberative body created to advise the government on secularism, also highlighted breaches in *laïcité* that applied better to Jewish groups than to Muslims. For example, the Commission noted that, contrary to Republican law, "certain private schools under contract accept only students who can prove that they belong to the same religion as the establishment." At the time, there were no Muslim schools under contract, and anyone involved in Jewish schooling knew that admission required the presentation of an Orthodox *ketubbah*.

Sitruk's reluctance to support banning the veil was consistent with twentieth-century French Jewish discourse about minority rights. But the reaction to Sitruk's comments revealed the second possible path at this crossroads in French Jewish history. The religious newspaper that interviewed Sitruk in 1989 asked three times why he could not condemn veiling and yet support the wearing of *kippot*. This question was an attempt to divorce the concerns of practicing Jews and Muslims by insisting that two manifestations of religious obligation—the *kippa* and the headscarf—were incommensurable. In other words, a religious newspaper used the concept of *laïcité* not to argue for minority inclusion but to

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highlight the impossibility of Muslim French-ness while insisting that, whatever Jews might do, they were always already French. This second path has been the one most (visibly) taken. The attempt to divide Jews from Muslims with the language of laïcité has become increasingly common, even among religious Jews. Shmuel Trigano, an observant Algerian-born philosopher, argues Jews and Muslims in France have nothing in common. While he thinks Jews are indelibly French, the same cannot be said of Muslims:

[Arab Muslims] belong to a religion that has not modernized and has not been part of the Republican pact. Its members are former or current nationals of foreign countries that, although very close to France geographically, have historically been competitors with the West and Christianity in general... Entering this identity that I call "France"... would require that Arab Muslims completely reform their identity, their religion, and even their psychology.

Georges Bensoussan, a Jewish historian and public intellectual often cited in discussions of

laïcité, has denounced comparing Jewish and Muslim religious practices as a kind of false consciousness.

In the face of [the] disintegration of the social fabric, many figures of authority... tend to deny, ignore, and conceal recognized facts which are splitting French society in two... Rare cases of Jewish children refusing to go to school on Saturdays are blown up out of all proportion, such cases are all the rarer... People talk of students refusing to eat meat which [sic] has not been slaughtered in accordance with religious law, while intimating that this refers to Muslim students as well as their Jewish fellows. The latter, however, are at least ten times more numerous than the former... Roger Cukierman, the former president of one of the largest Jewish organizations in France, noted in a publicly recorded radio interview in 2004: "I dare to hope that a sincere government will help them [Muslims] with their social integration... We [Jews] have no problem with integration. Jews have lived in France for hundreds of years; we are an integral part of French society..."

So what appears to be a sign of continuity—Jewish support for laws associated with laïcité—actually marks a profound rupture. Like the French (post)Catholic majority, French Jews are using laïcité as a way of per- manently Othering Muslims. Why? There is no simple answer to this question. But postcolonial paradoxes in French ideologies of national belonging may be driving this seemingly dangerous Jewish move. To some extent, the inclusion of Arab Jews in postcolonial France depends on distinction from and disavowal of Arabness, which is almost always conlated with Muslimness. This may be fueling increasing Jewish religiosity and the imperative to establish ontological difference between and among French minorities. Perhaps for the first time since World War II, Jewish Frenchness thus depends on supporting exclusive and exclusionary visions of the nation. For Jews, as for the French mainstream, laïcité has become a weapon in this battle.

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