# French Republicanism and Pluralism:

## CAN THEY CO-EXIST?

March 2018

Recent years have seen intense debates about France's national identity. Polling reveals a majority fear that France's national identity is weakening due to immigration and ethnocultural diversity. This fear is particularly focused on Muslim populations: their presence, behaviour and perceived lack of integration into French society. Such fears are found across Western Europe and different countries have sought to adapt, with mixed success. However, the French case is distinguished in part by the specific role that "republicanism" plays in defining the French national identity. Republicanism as an ideology puts particular emphasis on ideas of secularism *(laïcité)*, individual emancipation from tradition and undifferentiated conceptions of citizenship.

According to some critics, republican ideology has both artificially raised barriers to the integration of Muslim immigrants, and also foreclosed many of the policy tools that might promote integration. Others argue that the republican tradition offers its own resources for respecting pluralism: France could express a conception of "pluralist republicanism" rather than "multiculturalism". According to this view, the current exclusionary practices are not the inevitable result of republicanism. Instead they reflect specific and perhaps partisan (re) interpretations of republicanism, at the expense of a more open or pluralistic interpretation.

In commissioning the France case, the Global Centre for Pluralism seeks to better understand the ideological flexibility of French republican thought in relation to pluralism. What would a more pluralist conception of republicanism look like? Secondly, what were some of the key pivot points that pushed France towards a more exclusionary rather than pluralist conception of republicanism? How does republicanism shape the drivers of pluralism, including issues of economic opportunity and political representation?

# CASE NARRATIVE

France provides an excellent case to ask questions about the possibilities for pluralism in the interplay of social conditions, policy, and political theory. Ideas about "republicanism" play a particularly large role in France's approach to diversity, and have done so for several centuries. Republican political theory itself is a "driver of pluralism", not in the abstract but as it has been formulated with respect to and in response to specific challenges. Two ideas have been particularly important: that of "the public", including conceptions of boundaries of public space and public order *(ordre public)*, and the related idea of an indivisible French people that renders difficult the recognition of categories of religion, race or ethnicity.

In commissioning the France case, the Global Centre for Pluralism seeks to better understand the ideological flexibility of French republican thought in relation to pluralism. What would a more pluralist conception of republicanism look like?

French republicanism is not inherently incapable of pluralism, however. For example, Corsicans' nationalist claims have been answered with provisions for the island's greater regional autonomy than those granted to other regions. Some recognition of languages other than French--for example Breton or Basque—is represented by local signs in regional languages. Moreover, France has a very clear recognition of gender difference in its parity requirements for electoral campaigns. Legislation since 2000 requires equal numbers of women and men, in alternation, as candidates for list-based elections, and imposes fines on parties that do not meet the 50-50 target for direct elections. These examples clearly demonstrate that ideas about public space, public order, and indivisibility of the French people can be flexible and adaptable.

Yet intense conflict characterises political discourse, particularly around ideas and practices of governing religion and its place in French society. Two pivot points on this issue can be identified in French history. The first introduced the idea and resulting practices of state control of the physical church, its spatial manifestation. At the turn of the 14th century King Philippe IV asserted his political control over the Catholic Church. After the Revolution of 1789, the Republic continued this long royal tradition, known as the Gallican Church, whereby the government oversaw the temporal affairs of the Church while the pope set doctrine. Yet in the 19th century an associative principle was also introduced, and four associations were organized under the auspices of the state, representing Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Jews. The same principle prompted the Minister of the Interior's 2003 decision to create a national association to represent Muslims, despite the decentralized nature of Islamic authority.

At the beginning of the 20th century there was a second pivot point, this time about control of schools, the acknowledged primary institution for forging French citizens. 1905 brought the *Law of separation of state and religion*, celebrated

today for enshrining *laïcité*, or secularism, and for establishing the neutrality of the state with respect to religions. The law guarantees "freedom of conscience and the free exercise of [organized religions], subject to restrictions specified … in the interest of *ordre public.*" The bulk of the law concerns the church buildings and the objects within, a ban on "religious signs or emblems" in public places (except for churches, cemeteries, or museums), and most importantly over time a ban on religious instruction in schools. In support of the 1905 law, the radical socialist deputy Charles Chabert had proposed a ban on the wearing of priestly garb, on the grounds that such clothing endangered the *ordre public*, and that it infringed on the human dignity of the priest, who was a captive of the Church. While this proposal was ultimately rejected in 1905, these sentiments echoed the arguments put forward by supporters of the 2010 law banning full face-veils (burqa) worn in public.

Of course, governance of religion and religious manifestations in public space are not the only challenges to a pluralistic version of republicanism. Post-colonial France saw high rates of immigration from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, often by people of the Muslim faith. Given housing policy and practices as well as labour needs at the time, these immigrants and their descendants are now concentrated in poorer suburbs of large cities and other neighbourhoods where large social housing complexes have been built. Such spatial concentration affects both access to housing and quality of schools. While sometimes blamed on "lack of integration," discontent among young people living in these place, most of whom are French

citizens and have been educated in public schools, is more directly tied to the effects of concentrated social exclusion and discrimination. For example, social science experiments that circulated the same résumé, differentiated only by name, documented that someone with an Arabic-sounding last name is 2 ½ times less likely to be called for an interview than someone with a "native French" sounding name. Republicanism's commitment to the indivisibility of the French people makes it difficult to track and therefore combat such discrimination, however. Citing the Constitution, a 1978 law concerning information technology, data files and civil liberties forbids the collection of data on racial or ethnic origins or on religious "opinions."

One can argue that the problems of social exclusion and the intolerance of a Muslim visible presence in public are not the inevitable result of republicanism, but of the failure to make good on promises of equal treatment.

Given this history, are there opportunities for the French republican project to become more pluralistic? Since the Revolution, French state-building has adhered to the idea of the general will as a blueprint for a centralized state apparatus, meant to absorb the thoughts and desires of the people and return them to those citizens by way of schooling, judging, and administering. But this was never the only option available, and French civil society and the state also always valued the principle of free association. The republican project

thus turned out to be more complex and capacious than initially envisioned, as the state gradually extended the right to form associations to guilds, labor unions, and finally to any association formed by French citizens. Catholicism's peace with the Republic came in part by the gradual public acceptance of its schools and cultural associations. Similar arrangements apply to the far smaller numbers of Jewish and Islamic schools. One can argue that the problems of social exclusion and the intolerance of a Muslim visible presence in public are not the inevitable result of republicanism, but of the failure to make good on promises of equal treatment as well as a long history of colonial rule, labour migration, and de facto segregated residential situations.

# THROUGH A PLURALISM LENS

## Sources of Inclusion and Exclusion

The Global Centre for Pluralism asked each author in the Change Case Series to reflect on the sources of inclusion and exclusion through pluralism – that is, using the Centre's "drivers of pluralism" framework. Some highlights from the full France change case are included here.

## Livelihoods and Wellbeing

• High levels of immigration in post-colonial France from North and Sub-Saharan Africa have resulted in concentrated populations of minorities in poorer suburbs. Persistent social and economic

exclusion in the job market and in schools drives violence and discontent in these neighbourhoods.

## Law, Politics and Recognition

• The 1905 law on the separation of church and state enshrined secularism as central to French identity by restricting demonstrations of religious affiliation in public spaces and banning religious instruction in schools. Stated attempts to preserve French secularism have served as the basis for later laws, such as the banning of full face veils.
• Collection of data on racial or ethnic origins or on religious "opinions" is illegal in France, making it difficult to identify patterns of exclusion along ethno-religious lines.

## Citizens, Civil Society, and Identity

• The notion that the French people are an indivisible, monolithic entity has made it difficult for categories such as religion, race, or ethnicity to be officially recognized in French discourse.
• Recognition of some languages other than French, as well as gender-based quotas for elections demonstrate a certain potential flexibility in ideas about the indivisibility of the French people.

# CONCLUSION

The two major social problems identified above—social exclusion and an intolerance of a Muslim visible presence—are not the inevitable results of republicanism, but the failure to make good on promises of equal treatment. That said, long-held

ideas shaping French politics and policies pose a challenge to pluralism. Persistent social and economic exclusion of Muslims in France is shaped by increased immigration, and a hyper-sensitivity to public religious symbols born out of long-standing tensions between the state and the church. While these are real historical problems, the ideological roots of French republicanism demonstrate that there are potential pathways to pluralism that will not compromise the values that are thought to be intrinsic to France's national character.

# CASE AUTHOR

**John R. Bowen** is the Dunbar-Van Cleve Professor in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. His current research focuses on comparative social studies of Islam across the world, and how Muslims work across plural sources of norms and values, including diverse interpretations of the Islamic tradition, law, codes and decisions, and local social norms.

**The Global Centre for Pluralism** is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at **pluralism.ca**