

An exchange of letters on the French headscarf ban

8 April 2004

Below we publish a letter written in response to an article published by the WSWS on February 18 headlined "France: National Assembly bans Muslim headscarves in schools" and a reply by the author of the article, Alex Lefebvre.

Dear M. Lefebvre,

I was interested to read a different perspective about the new French law banning religious symbols in public schools. I recognize that such a law could produce negative consequences, including more separation and less understanding among those holding different religious beliefs.

However, having experienced the troubling intrusion of right-wing-Christians into public and political matters in the United States, I find myself longing for political leaders who have the courage to reaffirm what we call separation of church and state or what the French seem to refer to as a secular state.

My sense is that American politicians have been soundly intimidated by the Christian right, as the recent example of Howard Dean shows. Mr. Dean initially declined to respond to questions about his religious beliefs. When the questions persisted he stated that he rarely attended church, but he ended up making public pronouncements about more devout personal prayer activities and beliefs. I interpreted that as him having been intimidated, when he should have been able to cite the principle of separation of church and state as grounds for not responding to the questions at all.

That French political leaders have taken the stance they have concerning religious symbols suggests to me that the principle of a secular state is stronger than the idea of religious freedom because religious freedom actually seems to elevate religion, as opposed to taking a neutral stance toward it.

Religion has served as the basis for horrific acts of cruelty, violence and persecution throughout history. Although this statement of fact is well known, it, unfortunately, applies to the present as well as the past.

The concept that people must be allowed to believe whatever religion they will seems to be a recognition of unchangeable reality. That is, religious belief seems to be such a compelling power that people *will* believe as they do, no matter what others who believe differently may do to try to stop them.

The concept that people must be allowed to *practice* whatever religious practices they will, on the other hand, is one that compels outside interference and management, in that practices such as human sacrifice and other human injury, degradation and discrimination have been, and continue to be, all too common.

You note that education is essential to support and promote secularism or religious freedom. I agree. The education I think to be most important is education about the historical excesses of religious practices and education about the distinction between religious beliefs, which are appropriately protected, and religious practices, which must be appropriately controlled.

Because I view the new French law as an effort to address religious practices and not religious belief, and because I have witnessed some

American politicians be intimidated by religious demagogues and other American politicians actually become religious demagogues, I have taken a supportive view of the French government's action on this matter.

Very truly yours,

AK

Dear AK,

Thank you for your letter. While your hostility to the influence of Christian fundamentalism in US politics is understandable, I must from the outset say that your appraisal of the French anti-headscarf law rests on a serious misreading of the political situation in France, as well as on conceptions of religion and religious freedom that we do not share.

You indicate that you support the French anti-headscarf law because you think it shows that French politicians are affirming the principle of separation of church and state.

Thus you write of the US, "I find myself longing for political leaders who have the courage to reaffirm what we call separation of church and state or what the French seem to refer to as a secular state."

You counterpose secularism to religious freedom, preferring your idea of the former because it allows the state greater authority to regulate religious practices.

I cannot agree with these positions. One either grants freedom of belief and the freedom to express these beliefs through actions that do not harm others, or one does not grant religious freedom. Your formulation of "secularism" essentially states that everyone has the right to his or her beliefs, but no one has the right to express them if they conflict with those of the state. No dictatorship could ask for more.

We have a different conception of the content of the principle of separation of church and state. From the standpoint of both history and the defense of democratic rights, the principle of secularism, or the separation of church and state, does not signify ceding to political elites the necessary tools to control religious life, but quite the opposite. It insists that the state has no business imposing its views on religion on the private beliefs of the people. From this point of view, it is false and ultimately reactionary to make a distinction between the separation of church and state and freedom of conscience or belief.

This concept of secularism does not imply harboring any illusions as to religion itself. Religion is a fantastical reflection of material reality, born of man's incomprehension of and alienation from the natural and social world in which he exists. However, instead of viewing religious illusions as "an unchangeable reality," we view them as a dynamic factor determined by socio-political developments and bound up with the struggle of humankind for its material, social and spiritual liberation.

Religious superstitions will be completely overcome only with the supercession of class divisions in society and the development of socialism, which will make possible a profound advance in man's productive forces and culture. This presupposes a revolutionary transformation in which the exploitative system of capitalism is abolished and the masses themselves consciously and rationally direct social life in response to their needs.

The material and psychological roots of religion will be washed away in the course of a quantum leap in man's material and spiritual culture. The first stages of this process involve the political education and moral uplifting of the working masses in the course of their conscious struggle to put an end to capitalism and establish the political and economic foundations for socialism.

Always and everywhere, the application of the principle of secularism and its corollary, religious freedom, remains under capitalism incomplete, diluted and hypocritical. Religion is but one form of the mystification of the historically evolved social relations within and through which people carry out the struggle, anchored in the labor process, to change and transform external nature. The very forms of social production under capitalism obscure the real relationship between capital and labor, and generate the illusion of an exchange of equivalents between the owners of the means of production and those compelled to sell their ability to work to the capitalist owners. When human labor itself, in the form of "labor power," becomes a commodity, the inherently exploitative character of the relationship between the owners and producers is obscured.

This mystification fuels all sorts of false conceptions about the world, including religious ones. The ruling class, moreover, has a vested interest in keeping the working masses in the dark, and religion is a tried and tested instrument for keeping the working population disoriented and stupefied.

However, calling on the bourgeois state to prescribe what the masses may or may not believe does not hasten the day when they will be freed of ignorance and superstition. It is rather the opposite: such a policy increases illusions in the state and reinforces the obstacles that confront working people as they seek to understand the world in which they live, in order to change it.

The actual history of the democratic struggle for secularism and against state sponsorship of religion as it unfolded in the American colonies, culminating in the revolutionary war for independence from Britain and the establishment of the United States as a republic, demonstrates the link between the principle of separation of church and state, on the one hand, and freedom of conscience, on the other.

Although the initial colonial settlements were largely founded by refugees from religious persecution in Europe, many—most notably the Massachusetts Bay Colony—established theocratic governments in the New World. The religious atmosphere of the time found its most tragic expression in the 1692 Salem witch trials.

In the course of the eighteenth century, however, theocratic principles generally lost ground to the growing influence of democratic and anti-clerical European Enlightenment thought. William Nelson writes in *The Americanization of the Common Law*, "Taken together, the various libertarian changes in law [in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries] did far more than merely restructure institutions, safeguard the procedural rights of criminal defendants, and grant equal rights to certain previously underprivileged classes. Those changes contributed in important ways to the breakdown of the ideal inherited from the pre-revolutionary period that communities should stand united in the pursuit of shared ethical ends."

Thus the growing sentiment for a separation between church and state was intimately bound up with a rising movement for personal and religious liberties in the early US.

James Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments," in which he argued against proposals for citizens to donate tax money to religious institutions in Virginia, gave powerful expression to these ideals. He wrote: "Religion ... of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable; because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds, cannot follow the dictates

of other men."

Measured against this historical conception of secularism, the Raffarin government's claims to defend secularism by targeting a particular religious minority are absurd. The supposed commitment of the Raffarin government in France to secularism provides a concrete example of the hypocritical and inconsistent position of the capitalist ruling elite on this, as on all other, questions of democratic rights.

The French government is far from viewing its campaign "for secularism" as reaffirming its "neutral stance" towards religion, as you put it. Indeed, a common theme in government statements on the headscarf debate has been the need to encourage and promote religion. To cite only one prominent example, Prime Minister Raffarin told the *Journal du Dimanche* on January 25 that "Our society needs hope, which is why I do not want an aggressive secularism." Raffarin, a practicing Catholic, subsequently told his interviewer that he had repeatedly met with Paris Archbishop Cardinal Lustiger to discuss his intentions and plans for the law's implementations.

As everyone knows, the ban on the wearing of head scarves is directed, not at religious observance in public schools in general, but rather at the expression of religious beliefs by members of the Muslim minority. The French state, and the Raffarin government, make all sorts of concessions to the more established and powerful religious authorities.

The full mendacity of the Raffarin government's anti-headscarf crusade becomes apparent when one considers its not-so-hidden links to the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps the most blatant example of state interference in religious matters is the special religious status of three *départements* (counties) in northeastern France—Moselle, Haut-Rhin, and Bas-Rhin. As these areas were under German control between the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871 and the First World War, the French 1905 law on separation of church and state does not apply on their territory. Instead, a bizarre combination of laws from Napoleonic times and the German Second Reich prevails, recognizing three official religions—Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish. Officials of those religions (but not Islam) are recognized and paid as state officials. Public school students in those areas have to choose instruction in one of the three official religions, or go through a cumbersome process to request exemption.

One could also cite the French state's generous financing of private schools that apply for state funding, the overwhelming majority of which are Catholic. The French Ministry of Education's 2004 budget shows that out of a total expenditure of 55.5 billion euros, over 10 percent—6.8 billion euros—went to financing private schools. In addition to paying teachers' salaries, the state gives money for textbooks, school supplies, and scholarships.

One cannot reconcile an image of the Raffarin government setting out to do battle with religious demagoguery with the reality of a government which, as it grants massive subsidies to the Catholic Church and barely hides its own pro-Christian sympathies, stokes anti-immigrant sentiment by excluding Muslim girls from public schools.

Sincerely,
Alex Lefebvre



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