

Gathering of Polish Atheists

SPALA – Presentation –

I would talk to you about **Atheism, Secularization, Anti-Clericalism and Laïcité/secularism in France (2026)**

The Decline of Christianity, the Visibility of Islam, and the Use of Laïcité as a Civil Religion to Neutralize Opposition

First of all, on behalf of the National Federation of Freethinkers (**La Libre Pensée**), I would like to warmly thank you for your fraternal invitation. It is a pleasure and a wonderful opportunity to establish links between our movements and our actions, and an excellent opportunity to better understand one another and to better understand what is happening in our respective countries.

1. The state of religions and atheism in France: a highly secularized society

France is obviously not in the same situation as Poland. Surveys indicate that more than half of the French population identifies as having no religion. However, caution is needed here: “no religion” does not mean either an absence of vague beliefs in an afterlife or an absence of superstition. Among those who identify with a religion, most do not actively practice it.

As regards Catholicism, **Guillaume Cuchet** has demonstrated that since the 1960s, it has experienced a very strong decline. We now hear that this decline has supposedly come to a halt, or even that the trend is reversing. Caution is warranted. The number of young adults requesting baptism appears to be increasing (slightly), but families are increasingly less likely to have their children baptized shortly after birth. Practicing Catholics account for only 1.5% of the French population. (It represents very little)

The vitality of Catholicism, even though it remains the largest religion in France, is not comparable to that of evangelical churches, which are multiplying throughout the country. Apparently, approximately one new evangelical church or community is emerging every week (cf the work of **Sébastien Fath** and Philippe Gonzalez). These churches offer women, in particular, a more prominent role in worship, as well as forms of solidarity and collective communion that the Catholic Church provides less frequently.

The **Muslim religion(s)** is also growing. (And it's a big difference with Poland. There's about 4 millions of muslims in France in a population of seventy millions of people. And it's due to the colonisation, the french colonies in North Africa and in the subsaharian Africa or in some island in the Pacific like Mayotte. Algeria till nineteen sixty two was three french departments. As a general rule, we observe that formerly colonized people go to live in the country of the colonizer.) However, one should be wary/cautious of speaking of Islam in the singular: there are different forms of Islam and Muslims whose relationships to beliefs and practices vary considerably. The report commissioned in 2024 (two thousand twenty four) by Gérald Darmanin (**Minister of the Interior**) on the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in France objectively shows that this influence remains marginal and that both its membership and its financial resources have been declining for around twenty years. Contrary to narratives promoted by part of the right-wing media, sociological and demographic research shows that the majority of Muslims practice Islam in a more individualistic than traditionalist manner. In some way, after two or three generations, muslims from immigrations are french people like any other. 63 % of immigrated people from North africa of the third

generation are making mixed wedding or intercultural, interreligious wedding. It's not the case with muslims from Turkish people for instance. They stay apart. But as a general rule, there's no multiculturalism in France, that is to say different ethnic or religious communities living separately from each other or from the rest of society. The right wing wants not only integration but assimilation. Assimilation means that immigrated people or people living in France and coming from an other culture has to give up completely their culture. But it's impossible. The result is that the immigrated people would never be as french as they should be and it gives reasons, pretexts for the rightist or the extremist right to discriminate these people.

France is a democratical Republic. That means that France is not an ethnic nation but a civic nation. You do not have to be a catholic or to like eating pork sausages, or to worship Napoleon or whatever to be a citizen with the same rights than the other citizens. This is already *laïcité* or secularism. The separation between religious, culture and political rights and obligations. The State or public agents must not consider what people think or worship. That's not its problem. What is important is the respect of the civil law. The public affair is the civil law, religious law is a private affair.

The gradual disappearance of practicing Catholics, combined with the increasing number of Muslims who are more religiously committed, produces significant political effects. When a religious community represents only 10% of the population, its mobilizations have far less direct impact on the country.

The book by Charles Mercier and Philippe Portier, *Les jeunes et leur laïcité* (2025), also shows that people aged 18–30 (from eighteen to thirty years old) have a more liberal relationship with *laïcité* than their elders. These young people, may believe more strongly in an existence after death while maintaining a non-institutionalized relationship with religion. Not necessarily attending places of worship and no longer referring to traditional dogmas, they may view beliefs as elements of connection rather than separation. We thus encounter people who describe themselves as Catholic without possessing any real religious culture: they do not know what a sacrament is or have never heard of the Trinity. **Emmanuel Todd**, a french sociologist, use the concept of “zombie Catholics,” as opposed to “active Catholicism ». (As an example, you go to a museum with paintings, and it is possible to hear a child or a young student asked : excuse me, who is that man on that cross?)

This decline in religious practice corresponds to a strong and rapid secularization of French society: religion occupies an increasingly less important place in the lives of the French, both symbolically and practically. It entails a loss of religious culture without automatically encouraging scientific culture. The removal of mathematics from the common core of the upper-secondary curriculum under the Blanquer reform, even though mathematics has since been reintroduced in a reduced form, certainly did not contribute to improving the population's scientific and epistemological literacy or knowledge.

2. The persistence of clericalism

Although French society has become highly secularized since the 1960s (nineteen sixties) and Catholicism has lost a large part of its influence, one should not conclude that clericalism, or even religion itself, belongs to the past.

The Catholic Church continues to exert pressure on politics. The **Pope's visit to France at the end of September** will be a visible example of this. While a law on **end-of-life care** was adopted by the National Assembly on July 15, authorizing, under specific conditions, assisted suicide and euthanasia for certain people suffering from incurable conditions, Pope Leo XIV will speak out against this law during his visit. **This has to do with secularism since it concerns freedom of conscience. Like all major secular laws, it is a law of freedom. It allows those who do not want to endure unnecessary suffering to leave sooner. But it takes no freedom away from Catholics who reject assisted suicide or euthanasia. It was the same principle with the abortion law. This law gives women freedoms, but it takes no freedom away from practicing religious women, except the freedom to impose their religious beliefs on the whole of society. The meaning one gives to one's life, the meaning one gives to one's death is a personal matter.**

In a secular country, the Church obviously has the right to call on its faithful to comply with its religious prescriptions. On the other hand, it has no right to demand the repeal of a law or to exert political pressure. The issue is all the more sensitive because the Pope's reception and security will be provided by state services, and therefore partly financed by all taxpayers.

The everyday clericalism of the Fifth Republic, however, takes the form above all of the use and instrumentalization of religions by politicians. The right and the far right, but also part of the center and the left, may use Islamism, and even Islam itself, as an object of fear in order to justify new forms of control and repression, while mobilizing Christianity as an element of French identity through which a "we" is opposed to foreigners or to those supposedly threatening our national cohesion.

As you know, in 2015 (two thousand fifteen), France suffered major terrorist attacks claimed by Islamists or by the Islamic State. Very popular figures who championed freedom of caricature and freedom of expression and who worked for the newspaper Charlie Hebdo were brutally murdered.

The problem is that the government at the time, particularly Prime Minister Manuel Valls, used secularism to fight Islamist terrorism. Yet Islamist terrorism or phenomena of religious radicalization cannot be fought with secularism. If we do so, then we turn secularism into an instrument of repression, a policing tool, a tool for surveillance and control. Terrorism or incitement to hatred and murder, just like sectarian abuses, are already prohibited by law.

Furthermore, the 1905 (nineteen five) law on secularism includes legal provisions that require the State to protect individuals against all forms of religious pressure or religious discrimination.

Right now in France, the bill against Islamist infiltration, introduced by **Bruno Retailleau** and adopted at first reading by the Senate, is representative **falsified laïcité**. It targets an Islamist separatism presented as a threat to republican values, particularly equality between women and men, without always considering that certain forms of Christian fundamentalism could be subject to the same criteria.

For example, this year the right called for a parliamentary commission of inquiry to determine whether there are Islamist political parties or whether certain political parties are pursuing a clientelist policy toward certain Muslims.

The inquiry showed that there was no Islamist or Muslim infiltration of political parties. There is no Muslim vote. Muslims are more conservative than atheists and should therefore vote for the right. But because they are discriminated against by the right, they vote for left-wing parties because these left-wing parties do not pursue identity-based, nationalist, and discriminatory policies.

Vincent Tiberj, a political sociologist, drawing on surveys, shows on the contrary that Catholics are more uncompromising than Muslims, that is to say that they are more likely to consider that religious law takes precedence over civil law.

One could therefore say that many political leaders, from the Socialist Party to the far right, claim to be fighting Islamist separatism while simultaneously Christianizing the state and society and implicitly presenting Christian separatism as a normal situation because France, from an historical and cultural point of view would be a christian country. This normalization of a particular form of clericalism is accompanied by a reversal of the meaning of the principle of *laïcité*.

3. “Falsified *laïcité*”

Historically, *laïcité*, established under the Third Republic, guarantees freedom of conscience and ends public funding of religious organizations.

When the law of December 9, 1905 (nineteen and five) was being drafted, several conceptions were in conflict. Freethought itself was divided between a liberal tendency, represented notably by **Aristide Briand**, and an uncompromising tendency embodied by **Maurice Allard**. The latter did not merely seek the separation of Church and State, but the weakening, or even the suppression of the Churches by the State. It therefore advocated a prohibition-based form of *laïcité* that could lead to state atheism.

Briand, although himself an atheist, considered **this strategy politically counterproductive**. It would have allowed Catholics, who were then overwhelmingly the majority, to present themselves as martyrs / victims. The law therefore had to guarantee freedom of conscience and freedom of worship while imposing the neutrality of the State. Rather than banning, for example, the wearing of clerical clothing in public spaces, he preferred to regard it as clothing that anyone was free to wear.

The National Federation of Freethinkers (la Libre Pensée) remains committed to this conception. Philosophically, it advocates atheism, free inquiry, the scientific method and rationalism, while also defending freedom of conscience, an indispensable condition for freedom of research and thought.

Freethought or la Libre Pensée is not in favor of banning religions from society or the public sphere even though it opposes/ fights religions.

Yet this historical, liberal conception of *laïcité*, associated with Briand and Jean Jaurès, has been the subject of numerous distortions for more than thirty years—particularly since 1989 (nineteen eighty nine) Creil islamic headscarf or veil affair/case. Some political leaders act as though *laïcité* meant relegating religion to the private sphere. Yet while it imposes a separation between the State and religious authorities, it by no means prohibits religions from manifesting themselves publicly through processions, gatherings, posters or acts of proselytism. *Laïcité* concerns the State, its representatives and its officials; it does not concern society as a whole.

The “new *laïcité*,” theorized notably by **François Baroin** in 2003, breaks with this conception. It tends to replace freedom of conscience with a duty of religious discretion and thus paved the way for the 2004 (two thousands and four) law on conspicuous religious symbols in schools, which notably targets the Islamic veil.

This development must be understood in **its context**: the Creil affair/ Veil case, the end of the Cold War, the September 11, 2001 (two thousand and one) attacks, the spread of the “clash of civilizations” thesis, growing difficulties in integrating populations originating from postcolonial immigration, the far right reaching the second round of the presidential election in 2002, and, last but not least, the repercussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in France.

The new *laïcité* thus acquires a repressive, identity-based and nationalist dimension. It tends to transform a democratic principle guaranteeing pluralism into a quasi-religious national value, or even into a form of civil religion. In a France undergoing de-Christianization while Muslim visibility is increasing, certain political leaders turn *laïcité* into an instrument of repression: either one adheres to the “values of the Republic,” or one is suspected of separatism. These values, which are rarely defined, are then implicitly presented as being closer to Christianity than to Islam.

It is therefore essential to distinguish principles and values because secularism is a modality of politics.

A principle is a rule that is discussed and rationally established and that must be respected. A value is something in which one must believe, to which one must adhere. Secularism is a political principle that guarantees freedom of conscience through the separation of the State and the Churches, the neutrality of the State in religious matters, and the non-financing of Churches or religious denominations. But secularism is not a civil religion, is not a value, is not an object of worship.

In the name of combating Islamism, a suspicion of separatism is thus developed in order to demand allegiance to the Republic, or even to the government in power. *Laïcité* has consequently become ethnicized: it primarily targets Muslims and becomes a means of disqualifying certain political opposition movements, dissolving associations or banning mobilizations. Whereas it should remain a fundamental democratic principle, it is instrumentalized to silence, prohibit and produce a depoliticizing national unanimity.

The new *laïcité* is therefore, in several essential respects, the opposite of historical *laïcité*, even though its proponents claim to follow in the tradition of Briand and Jaurès.

Amid this confusion, Freethought (la Libre Pensée) may give the impression of defending religions, and Islam in particular. Yet it is important to be clear: philosophically and politically, la Libre Pensée (or Free thinkers) opposes Islam just as much as Catholicism and fights all forms of monotheism. But its activist work must take the political context into account. Its atheism must not lead it to make statements about Islam that could strengthen the nationalist right and the far right, which use religion to divide popular mobilizations against neoliberal policies. (And i know that is a problem for some of you or that it's an important issue to fight strongly against islam and even more islamism, to protect society against islamism and not belonging to a far right party or to finally having the same speech and project of a far right movement.)

In France the suspicion of Islamist infiltration has become a potential instrument for repressing left-wing opposition.

The Palestinian question particularly illustrates this situation. Criticism of the Israeli government's policy toward the Palestinian people is frequently equated, from the far right to the Socialist Party, with antisemitism or support for terrorism. A Yadan bill, ultimately abandoned or taken up in a heavily watered-down form in the Berger-Lecornu bill, was intended in particular to equate criticism of Zionism, as an ideology and political project, with an antisemitic act—that is to say with a criminal offense. The proposals to fight Islamist infiltration and the Yadan bill thus form part of the same logic of restricting political debate.

La Libre Pensée or Freethought is secular because it considers *laïcité* to be the best safeguard against the reactivation of religious, identity-based or nationalist conflicts for purposes of domination and exploitation.

TO CONCLUDE:

This is the first time that my partner Émilie and I have come to Poland, and we are surprised by the extent of the religious presence. There are crosses everywhere. Everywhere, there are churches, religious wayside crosses, religious hymns, and religious ceremonies. Religion still permeates everyday life.

Moreover, yesterday I heard that the Polish state gives 70 (seventy) billion zlotys to the Catholic Church every year. Polish taxpayers' money is used to pay the salaries and allowances of priests who take advantage of people's credulity.

For a long time, French republicans did not want to separate Church and State or abolish the Concordat, because whoever pays is the one who controls, and the State wants to control the Churches and individuals.

But when secularism was established, what was decisive was Article 2 of the law concerning funding: it states that the State shall neither pay the salaries of nor subsidize any religion.

If believers want churches, they must organize themselves to pay for them.

When the Church no longer receives money from the State, there are always wealthy people willing to finance it, but its visibility diminishes and its decline begins.

Since the law establishing secularism, it has no longer been possible to erect a cross or any other religious symbol on public property. And almost every month, la Libre Pensée takes legal action to enforce the law and have religious symbols removed from public spaces.

This is the path France has followed and la Libre Pensée try to maintain the direction. Poland must find its own path.

Because it promotes atheism and the liberation of the individual, Freethought (la Libre Pensée) wants neither God nor master. It proclaims: **“Down with the clerical cloth, and long live the Social!”**

Secularization is a process that must be pursued continually, and you can count on Freethought (la Libre Pensée) not to stop halfway.

Thank you for your attention, and I wish you very productive meetings.

Clément Denuit (pour la FNLP)