



Paris, September, 22, 2016.

DECLARATION FOR LAÏCITÉ*

* “*Laïcité*” is usually translated by “*secularism*”; in view, however, of its particular status in France, as a cardinal principle enshrined in the Constitution, guaranteeing the same rights and duties to believers and non-believers alike, *Laïcité* will be retained in this Declaration.

Laïcité is our common good. It must be promoted and defended. It must unite us, not divide us.

In the present times, when there is much questioning and also a tendency to be over-zealous, it is the responsibility of the *Observatoire de la laïcité* to recall what is meant by *Laïcité*, as defined in the Constitution of the Republic and organised by the law of December 9, 1905.

Laïcité is first the freedom of conscience, the freedom to believe or not to believe. The freedom to believe implies the freedom to practice a religion, in private or in public, as long as the manifestation of the practice does not disturb the peace.

In the public interest, there are limits set to the freedom to manifest one’s convictions. To start with, it is forbidden for public servants, and all those who have public service duties, to display their own religious faith: public service must be neutral, so that users are treated equally, regardless of their convictions. In 2004, in order to protect schoolchildren against any form of pressure, the ostensible manifestation of a religion through insignia or dress was banned in all state-run primary and secondary schools. In 2010, for public security reasons, concealing one’s face in public was prohibited (burka, niqab, hoods, helmets, etc.)

It is possible to impose limits, but freedom must remain the basic principle. General prohibition of any outward religious sign in public or in private collective areas would not strengthen *Laïcité*, but would denature it, by turning a freedom into a prohibition.

LAÏCITÉ GUARANTEES RESPECT FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY

Laïcité, which implies the separation between the Churches and the State, guarantees equality among all citizens, regardless of their philosophical or religious convictions. Atheists, agnostics, believers of all creeds enjoy the same rights. The law cannot distinguish among citizens according to their convictions. No religious obligation can be imposed by law. Religions cannot intervene in the affairs of State, and the State must respect the independence of religions.

Stigmatising a religion, imposing restrictions on the religious practices of one particular religion, would be an attack on the Republican principle of Equality, and would be discriminatory.

LAÏCITÉ CONTRIBUTES TO THE REPUBLICAN IDEAL OF FRATERNITY

As the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proclaims, “*Men are born and remain free and equal in rights*”. And yet they are not all alike. They are free to express their own particular convictions and what they adhere to.

Adhering to the values of the Republic helps to bring citizens together and to accept their differences. *Laïcité* federates and reinforces the unity of the nation. It guards against all that divides or separates. It is a factor of national union and concord, and thereby contributes to the Republican ideal of Fraternity.

Laïcité must be defended against all those who fight it or deny it. Those who do not respect its rules must be sanctioned.

But a *Laïcité* based on exclusion and prohibition would weaken itself by denying its founding principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

After centuries of religious conflict, *Laïcité*, born of the 1789 Declaration of the rights of man and the citizen, of the legislation secularising education at the end of the 19th century and the law of December 9, 1905, has enabled France today to strike a balance that is a precious asset. We must neither allow it to be brought into question, nor succumb to excessive zeal, even if the difficulties encountered in applying it in a new social and international context call for greater vigilance.