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The challenges of multiculturalism: regional and religious differences in France today

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This chapter will take us to the heart of the debate over French *national* culture. How you view the questions raised here may depend on your own experience of regional and/or religious diversity. With its long history of centralization, the French state has traditionally been unsupportive and often positively hostile towards both regional and religious diversity. Only in recent decades have regional cultures had significant but still limited state support. Meanwhile religious minorities, particularly those of recent immigrant origin, are still faced with a system of *laïcité* (i.e. the formal separation of church and state) which in principle guarantees the neutrality of the state towards different religious faiths, while in practice tending to favour the Catholic Church. Yet *laïcité*, as will be seen, is not an empty formula.

The reappraisal of regional cultures has been fostered by at least three factors: first, the anti-centralizing spirit which emerged from the events of May 1968 and helped to shape the political agenda of the left when it came to power in the 1980s; second, fear of Americanization – regional diversity has come to be seen as a valuable element contributing to the uniqueness of French culture; and third, the growth of tourist industries trading on picturesque and folkloric traditions which offer holiday-makers a respite from the sort of global culture they can get at home.

By contrast with the improved fortunes of long-established regional minorities, immigrant groups – particularly those originating in Islamic countries – have yet to find among the majority ethnic population in France a comparable degree of openness towards their cultural traditions. These inhibitions are linked partly with still painful memories of French decolonization and also with the recent revival of Islam as a major force in world

politics, seen in heavy media coverage of anti-western states and terrorist organizations. While few Muslims in France have any connection with violent movements of that kind, this is not always understood by the majority ethnic population.

To review these issues, this chapter is divided into two main parts, the first tackling regional cultures while the second focuses on religious differences, with particular reference to minorities of recent immigrant origin.

Regional cultures

France is a country with striking regional variations in the physical and human landscape. It is the only country looking out on to both the Mediterranean and the North Sea as well as the Atlantic Ocean. The building materials and architectural styles of northern France have more in common with those of neighbouring Belgium and Germany than with the urban and rural landscapes of southern France. The 'Midi' more closely resembles other Mediterranean countries such as Italy or Spain. Culinary traditions are no less diverse, reflecting different patterns of farming. These and other local traditions such as variations in folklore and costumes are commonly highlighted in tourist brochures. Regional identities have also been foregrounded by a number of prominent film-makers. The films of Marcel Pagnol and those inspired by his stories, with their strong emphasis on the regional heritage of southern France, have helped create an appealing image of Provence. Using powers and resources devolved to them by the socialist-led government of the early 1980s, many regional councils now offer subsidies to film-makers with the aim of gaining publicity for their regions among cinema-goers (Guyotat 1999). An unlikely beneficiary of so-called 'heritage cinema' has been the former coal-producing area in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region. Claude Berri's block-buster screen adaptation (1993) of Emile Zola's nineteenth-century novel *Germinal*, set amid the coal-tips of northern France, was made with regional council support and helped to attract visitors to an area suffering from industrial dereliction.

De Gaulle is reputed to have joked about the difficulty of governing a country with 246 different varieties of cheese. Despite the centralist tradition, centrifugal forces are undoubtedly present in France, but where regional cultures acquire a political profile this seldom depends on the local cuisine or folklore. The most potent cultural forces around which regionalist movements now mobilize people are minority languages and dialects.

Distribution of regional languages

According to a government-commissioned report by Bernard Cerquiglini (1999), as many as 75 regional and other minority languages are spoken in

territories currently administered by France. This headline figure needs to be treated with some caution. Two-thirds of these minority tongues are spoken solely in the Départements et Territoires d'Outre-Mer (DOM-TOM), remnants of the French colonial empire now officially known as Overseas Departments and Territories. Dotted around the globe, the DOM-TOM are characterized by a long and complex history of inter-continental population movements. As the total population of these overseas areas is relatively small – about two million compared with 58 million in metropolitan France – many of the minority tongues identified by Cerquiglini overseas are spoken by very small numbers of people. Within metropolitan France, around half of the 25 minority tongues listed by Cerquiglini would probably be classified by most linguists as dialects, i.e. sub-forms, of two broadly scattered regional languages – *la langue d'oïl* and *la langue d'oc* – rather than as a dozen separate tongues in their own right.

For a long period, the early form of what is today recognized as standard French was spoken by only a small minority of the population living in the territorial area that is modern France (cf. chapter 10). What was to become modern French gained its ascendancy because of the privileged status accorded to it by the unifying power of the state, rather than by simple weight of numbers. For many centuries, as the power of the central state grew, other dialects and languages were spurned or repressed. But as they remained widely used, their minority status was political rather than numerical in nature.

Before the French Revolution, the monarchy imposed a standardized form of French as the sole language recognized for administrative, legal and other official purposes while allowing other languages and dialects (often dismissively referred to as 'patois') to be used in other, more lowly social contexts. In France's Caribbean and Indian Ocean colonies, new dialects of low social standing known as *créoles*, mixing French with elements drawn from other languages, were developed by slaves of African origin. During the French Revolution, regional languages and dialects were regarded as reactionary by the centralizing faction known as the Jacobins, who wanted standard French to be spoken everywhere. While French was by then firmly established as the dominant language in towns, throughout most of the nineteenth century, regional dialects and languages continued to flourish in rural areas, especially in outlying regions around the borders of France.

By introducing a nationwide system of compulsory, non-religious schooling conducted solely in French, the Third Republic (1870–1940) set out both to tame the cultural influence of the Catholic Church and to marginalize or eradicate regional languages, which were forbidden altogether on school premises. This marked a turning point, greatly increasing the use of standard French among the general population. Other dialects and languages now became minority tongues not only politically but also numerically (Weber 1976).

During World War II, certain regionalist movements, in areas such as

Brittany, were badly compromised by collaborating with the Nazis, who played on cultural differences in the hope of weakening resistance to the Occupation of France. By contrast, regionalist movements in south-west France, where Catalan and Basque are spoken, are unusual in having relatively long traditions of left-wing leanings. It was not until the events of 1968 ushered in a wave of new thinking that regionalist movements elsewhere began to lose their reactionary image, with a shift to the left in Brittany for example.

Autonomist and separatist movements tend to gain support where cultural demands are linked with regional economic grievances. At present, the most explosive cocktail of this kind is in Corsica, where the cultural and economic demands of autonomist and independence movements are further complicated by the activities of mafia-style groups which have helped to create a climate of intermittent violence and lawlessness. There has also been sporadic violence in Brittany and the French Basque country, but nothing on the scale of the paramilitary operations carried out by Basque separatists in Spain. In the DOM-TOM, autonomist and separatist movements fuelled by cultural and economic grievances have gained varying levels of support. The overseas territory which has been most deeply marked in recent years by independence movements is the Pacific island of New Caledonia, where bands of guerrilla fighters challenged French security forces as recently as the 1980s.

The number of people resident in France today who are able to speak or understand regional dialects and languages is not known with certainty. No data on this subject are collected in national censuses, a fact that reflects the traditional reluctance of the state to grant official recognition to these languages. Créoles are known to be spoken by most people in overseas *départements* such as Martinique. Within metropolitan France, the best available estimates suggest that regional dialects or languages are known by around 10 per cent of the total population, or about 30 per cent if the highest (but doubtful) estimates of Occitan-speakers are accepted (Ager 1990, 29). Many have only a passive understanding of a regional language; those who can really speak one are far fewer in number. Their age profile is older than that of the general population. Virtually all also speak French, which predominates everywhere for official purposes such as administration, education and legal transactions. Most regional languages are spoken in less formal contexts such as in the family home or in rural workplaces. The name given by linguists to this co-existence of different languages or dialects serving hierarchically distinct functions is 'diglossia'.

Even when regional languages are spoken by elected representatives during local or regional council meetings – as sometimes happens in Brittany and Corsica, for example – the official minutes are kept solely in French. When the Regional Council in Corsica voted in 1983 in favour of bilingualism, which would have given equal status to Corsican and French, this was ruled out by the socialist-led central government in spite of its commitment

to administrative decentralization and limited support for regional cultures (Laroussi and Marcellesi, 1993, 89).

Occitan, the name given to a group of dialects spoken across a wide area of southern France, is spoken or understood by a larger number of people (variously estimated at between three and 12 million) than any of France's other regional dialects or languages. Like standard French – derived from one of the group of northern dialects known as *la langue d'oïl*, as distinct from *la langue d'oc* in the south – Occitan is a variant of the Gallo-Roman language, which developed from Latin during and after the Roman occupation. A third group of Gallo-Roman dialects, known as Franco-Provençal, is spoken in south-east central France. The other regional languages spoken in France are all confined to narrower and more peripheral areas. In clockwise order, starting from the north-west, they are Breton, Flemish, Alsatian, Corsican, Catalan, and Basque.

Alsatian dialects, variants of the German language, are spoken or understood by about a million people, who make up a majority of the population in the Alsace region. Breton, spoken by about 1.5 million people early in the twentieth century, is now spoken by only about half a million. There are perhaps 180 000 Catalan-speakers and 80 000 Basque-speakers in France, with larger communities of both language groups across the border in Spain. Most of the population in the *département* of Pyrénées Orientales speak or understand Catalan, while probably less than half of the population in the Pyrénées Atlantiques know Basque. In Corsica, out of a total population of 250 000 more than half are able to speak Corsican. There are probably only about 40 000 Flemish-speakers in France, concentrated in the area around Dunkirk, close to the border with Belgium (Ager 1990, 18–81; Laroussi and Marcellesi 1993).

Although the precise number of people able to speak these languages is unknown, there is no doubt that the overall trend is one of steady decline. A survey conducted in 1992 jointly by the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (INSEE) and the Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques (INED) found that only a minority of parents able to speak these languages used them regularly with their children (Héran 1993). With declining family usage, minority languages face a difficult future unless more is done to promote them through the educational system and the mass media.

Public policy towards regional languages

The 1951 Deixonne Law permitted a small amount of optional teaching of certain regional languages within French state schools. The dividing line between approved and unapproved languages revolved around the unwillingness of the authorities to support any language that might enjoy a power base distinct from that of the central state in France. Four languages were

approved: Breton and Occitan, which are not spoken to any significant degree outside France, and Basque and Catalan, which at that time were prohibited by the Franco regime in Spain. Alsatian (a variant of German), Corsican (a form of Italian) and Flemish (more widely spoken in Belgium) were excluded on the grounds that the languages of which they were variants were recognized by states other than France. Corsican eventually gained approval in 1974, and during the 1980s and early 1990s socialist-led governments further widened the approved list of languages in both metropolitan France and the DOM-TOM (Laroussi and Marcellesi 1993, 87; Aub-Buscher 1993, 204).

In spite of this official recognition, lessons in regional languages remain optional and the public funds committed to them are still very limited. In 1996–97, in state and private schools across the whole of metropolitan France a total of 320 000 children were receiving at least some of their lessons in regional languages. They represented 2 per cent of France's total school population. With only a few hours tuition each week, few were likely to achieve a significant degree of proficiency. Corsica was the only area where most children (as many as 85 per cent) received at least some schooling in the regional language. In other regions, Catalan lessons were being given to 13.5 per cent of local schoolchildren, while the figure for Breton and Occitan was just 5 per cent. A fully bilingual education was being given to 5 per cent of schoolchildren in the Basque country and to a mere 1 per cent of those in Brittany (Andreani 1998; Andreani and Dupont 1998).

These figures include not only state schools but also language programmes run by private and voluntary organizations, such as the Diwan schools in Brittany, which since 1977 have catered for children of kindergarten age. Ikastola schools, launched in 1969, play a similar role in the Basque country. In both regions, these privately-run schools now receive public subsidies and have extended their activities to older groups of children. It is usually possible to study regional languages in one or more local universities, and CAPES (teacher training) qualifications can be taken in Breton and Corsican.

Regional languages enjoy at best patchy access to the mass media. F3 is the only one of France's six terrestrially-based television channels to have been created with a regional structure. Much of its programming is in fact national, and very few of its regional broadcasts are in languages other than French. In regions such as Alsace, Brittany and Corsica, there are now short daily news bulletins in the regional language and somewhat longer programmes at the weekend. This is still a minimalist approach compared with that of S4C in Wales, where Britain's fourth television channel devotes most of its prime-time broadcasts to Welsh-language programmes.

Regional languages have fared somewhat better on radio, particularly since the liberalization of the airwaves in the early 1980s brought a huge expansion in the number of local radio stations. In most areas where regional languages are spoken, listeners now have access to local stations

broadcasting at least some of their programmes in the regional language. Examples include Radio Bretagne Ouest and Radio Corsa Frequenza Mora. There are varying amounts of literary production in most regional languages, which are also used in a range of magazines and newssheets, but none of these languages is spoken sufficiently widely to sustain a full-scale daily press.

Looking to the future, French governments of both the left and the right initially refused to sign the Council of Europe's 1992 Charter on Regional and Minority Languages, which would require increased support to be given to languages other than French. Then in 1996, centre-right President Jacques Chirac spoke in favour of signing the Charter, comparing the plight of regional languages with that of French in the face of the international domination of English. Two years later, Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin made a similar commitment. The Charter was eventually signed in May 1999, but shortly afterwards, France's Constitutional Council ruled that it was incompatible with the French Constitution, which would therefore have to be amended if the Charter were to be ratified and implemented. In support of its ruling, the Constitutional Council pointed to Article 1 of the Constitution, proclaiming the 'indivisibility' of the French Republic and to Article 2, where French alone is enshrined as the language of the republic. Weakened in the 1999 European elections by the strong showing of parties on both the left and the right opposed to any dilution of national sovereignty, President Chirac reneged on his commitment to the Charter by refusing to propose the necessary constitutional amendment. Ratification and implementation were thus effectively blocked for the time being.

The moral panic surrounding the Charter rested on grossly exaggerated interpretations of the provisions to which France had signed up. Many important details – including the list of minority languages to which official recognition would be accorded and the nature of the support which they would receive— had been left vague. While recognized regional languages would probably have improved access to the media and other rights, French would undoubtedly have remained the sole official language for most if not all administrative purposes, and minority languages which are not regionally based appeared likely to be excluded from this process altogether (Jérôme 1999).

These other minority tongues are sometimes referred to as 'non-territorial' or 'immigrant' languages. Most were introduced into France by peoples originating in relatively distant countries, and they tend to be fairly dispersed rather than concentrated in a single region. Some of these languages are regarded with considerable suspicion by political elites who fear they may threaten the cultural integration of immigrants and their families. The main languages to suffer in this way are Arabic and Berber, which are spoken by minorities originating in the Maghreb (i.e. the former French colonies of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). Far more politically sensitive than the language issue, however, are the religious differences associated

with Maghrebi immigrants, the vast majority of whom are Muslims. In recent years, the status of Muslims has become by far the most controversial issue in the negotiation of religious differences within France.

Religious differences

At the end of the sixth century, the Frankish King Clovis became the first monarch in the area now known as France to convert to Christianity. Today, despite the official separation of Church and state (1905), Clovis's baptism remains widely regarded as the founding act of the French nation-state. Significantly, in 1996 President Chirac personally welcomed the Pope to France on the occasion of ceremonies marking the 1500th anniversary of Clovis's baptism. In so doing, Chirac reminded his compatriots of the long tradition of Christian, and more especially Catholic, belief shared by the majority of the nation's population.

In the past, bloody wars were sometimes fought between rival Christian sects, with regional concentrations playing a significant role. The so-called Albigensian heresy, which led to the Cathars of southern France being savagely repressed by northern barons acting on the orders of the Pope during the early thirteenth century, is now no more than a dim historical memory. The sixteenth century saw a long series of wars between Catholics and Protestants, at the end of which the latter gained official toleration, though this was withdrawn a century later and not fully restored until the French Revolution. During the Revolution, the Catholic Church was branded as an enemy of republicanism, a reputation strengthened by its support for the counter-revolutionary insurrection which took place in the western region known as the Vendée. Today, Catholicism remains relatively strong in certain rural areas where regional movements have gained momentum. But the Catholic faith still retains at least the loose adherence of most of the national population, and is seldom a major rallying point for regionally-based cultural movements. Surveys regularly report that as many as 80 per cent of the national population say they are Catholic – attending baptisms, church weddings and funerals for instance – though only about 10 per cent are regular church-goers (*Etat de la France* 1995, 202–5). The cultural tradition of Catholicism has thus formed a context for much French literature in the past.

During the twentieth century, new forms of religious difference have come to the fore, though since no census data are collected on religious beliefs (an example of official state blindness towards cultural differences, seen as belonging to the private sphere), the number of adherents to different faiths cannot be accurately determined. There is no doubt, however, that while Catholicism remains by far the main faith, Islam is now the second largest religion in France. Most estimates put the number of Muslims at around four million or more. There are generally estimated to be about 800 000

Protestants, 600 000 Jews and 400 000 Buddhists (*Hommes et migrations* 1993; *Etat de la France* 1994; Boyer 1999).

In practice, some publicly-regulated aspects of everyday life in France continue to favour Christian traditions over other faiths. Many of the main public holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, Whitsun and All Saints' Day (la Toussaint) have their origins in Christian festivals. There are no comparable public holidays on days of special significance to other faiths. Sunday, the main official day of rest, is convenient for Christian church-goers, but less so for orthodox Jews, for whom Saturday is the main day of rest and of worship, or practising Muslims, for whom Friday has similar significance. The officially-sanctioned practice of closing state schools on Wednesday afternoons was introduced to permit children to attend catechism classes run by the Catholic Church. In such schools, the 'lost' half-day is traditionally made up on Saturday mornings. While convenient for Catholics, this arrangement can pose problems for children brought up in orthodox Jewish families (see below).

The educational system is in fact crucial to the long-term future of different religious traditions, since it plays a key role in transmitting knowledge, values and beliefs to the younger generation. Although religious organizations are banned from exercising any official role within the French state, the system of *laïcité* does not prevent the state subsidising religious schools, provided they teach the national curriculum while making religious classes technically optional. Some two million children attend state-supported Catholic schools, and there are around 10 000 pupils in subsidised Jewish schools, but so far not a single Islamic school has been awarded public support (Morin 1994). The dice are loaded against religions that are relatively new to France, particularly Islam, since new schools have to operate successfully on their own resources for at least five years before they are eligible to be considered for state support. This is not easy for ethnic groups which are relatively poor.

Non-Christian religions:

Judaism

The longest established non-Christian religion in France is Judaism. As in many other predominantly Christian countries, France's small Jewish minority was subject to residence and other restrictions before the 1789 Revolution. During the Revolution, Jews were granted full citizenship, but were regarded with suspicion by much of the population. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Dreyfus Affair revealed widespread anti-semitism (cf. chapter 3). During this period, France's Jewish population was expanding with the arrival of Jewish immigrants fleeing persecution in Russia and eastern Europe. At the same time, a tense international climate and increased economic insecurity resulting from a slow-down in industrial growth led to

heightened suspicion of those perceived as 'foreign' elements within France, prominent amongst whom were Jews. A similar combination of factors helped to provoke fresh outbreaks of anti-semitism during the economic slump of the 1930s, when tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany sought asylum in France. During World War II, the collaborationist Vichy regime passed anti-Jewish laws and helped to round up Jewish residents for deportation by the Nazis, at whose hands six million of Europe's Jews were to die. After the war, when the horrors of the Holocaust became widely known, antisemitism became very largely discredited in France, though it is still present in a submerged form and is regularly played upon, for example, by the extreme right-wing Front National (FN).

Just as the small historical core of long-established Jews was outnumbered during the first half of the twentieth century by newcomers from Eastern Europe, so these in turn were subsequently overtaken by Jews originating in former French North Africa, who settled in France with the advent of decolonization in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Today, the Jewish population in France – at 600 000 the largest in any west European country – is traversed by many internal differences. While French is the main language in dealings with non-Jews, there are internal speech differences separating Ashkenaze Jews, who brought Yiddish with them from Eastern Europe, from Sephardic Jews originating in North Africa, among whom a number of Arabic dialects are spoken. There are also growing differences between secular and non-practising Jews and those who favour the more orthodox observance of religious practices. In addition, political divergences may arise over Israel and its relations with Palestinians and the wider Arab world (Becker and Wieviorka 1998).

Until recently, Jews generally adhered punctiliously to the French system of *laïcité*, confining their religious practices to the private sphere and avoiding any challenge to established public conventions. The influx of Sephardic Jews has helped to strengthen the hand of those who favour greater religious orthodoxy. This has been especially visible in the field of education, with a rapid expansion in the number of Jewish schools, greater emphasis on religious teachings within such schools, and an (unsuccessful) court case seeking exemption from Saturday morning classes for Jewish children attending state schools. In 1994 the Chief Rabbi of France, Joseph Sitruk, created a stir when he asked for Jews to be allowed to vote in French cantonal elections on a different date from the rest of the population because polling day clashed with a Jewish religious festival. When this was refused, Sitruk took the unprecedented step of calling on Jews not to vote (Tincq 1994).

Islam

The Muslim population in France is composed primarily of Maghrebis, people originally from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, together with smaller num-

bers of other ethnic groups, such as Turks and certain West Africans. It is only since the 1960s that immigration and permanent family settlement by these groups has become a significant feature of French society. Before then, most immigrants were Europeans. Now Maghrebis make up the largest single group of recent immigrant origin. Most Maghrebi immigrants received little formal education in their home countries. As the unskilled job vacancies which they filled in France were poorly paid, they and their families have generally had to manage with low incomes. That was an unpromising skills and resource base on which to build the infrastructure necessary to support the religious beliefs and practices of the Muslim minority in France (Boyer 1999).

Islam also has to battle against strong prejudices at both elite and popular levels among the majority ethnic population. These were seen in massive media coverage of the *affaire du foulard* (Islamic headscarf affair), which first erupted in 1989. The affair became widely regarded as emblematic of an unwillingness or incapacity on the part of the Muslim population in France to respect the rules of *laïcité*. This is however a very misleading interpretation. Seen in context, the headscarf affair actually demonstrates both the compliance of most Muslims with the code of *laïcité* and the discriminatory attitudes towards Islam found among many members of the majority ethnic population (Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995).

In the original headscarf affair, three girls – two of Moroccan origin, and one of Tunisian origin – were excluded from a *collège* in the town of Creil, 50 kilometres north of Paris, because they insisted on wearing headscarves for religious reasons while on school premises. The headmaster argued that the wearing of headscarves was incompatible with the laws governing *laïcité*. Asked to pronounce on the case, the Conseil d'Etat, France's highest administrative court, ruled that exactly the opposite was true. The girls were perfectly entitled to wear headscarves in state schools, just as it has long been commonplace for Catholics to wear crucifixes and for Jewish boys to wear yarmulkas, without any complaints from the authorities. The person judged to have broken the law was the headteacher in Creil, who had failed to respect the right of every individual to hold and express religious beliefs of their own choosing.

The Conseil d'Etat confirmed that it was illegal to proselytise (i.e. to preach or try to persuade others to accept particular religious beliefs) within state schools, but did not regard the wearing of religious insignia as an act of proselytism. Nevertheless, in 1994 the centre-right Education Minister, François Bayrou, tried to ban the headscarf by issuing a circular instructing schools to exclude any pupil wearing religious insignia judged to be 'ostentatious', on the grounds that this amounted to proselytism. According to Bayrou, Islamic headscarves were ostentatious and therefore illegal, whereas Catholic crucifixes and Jewish yarmulkas were unobtrusive and therefore acceptable. This distinction was both nonsensical and discriminatory, and numerous court rulings have since confirmed the right of Muslim girls to wear headscarves if they wish.

Opinion polls have however shown overwhelming public support among the majority ethnic population for Bayrou's anti-headscarf stance. Less widely appreciated is the fact that opinion surveys among Muslims show that a majority of them, too, support a ban on headscarves in state schools. Most Muslims in France clearly accept the principle of *laïcité* and, in opposing the wearing of headscarves at school, favour a stricter interpretation of this principle than is required by the law. Even at the height of the second headscarf affair, when Bayrou's circular appears to have provoked hundreds of girls into wearing headscarves as an act of defiance, the total number involved – 2000 at the very most – was insignificant when compared with the 350 000 Muslim girls attending state schools without wearing any such apparel.

Majority ethnic hostility towards Muslims has often been explained or justified on the grounds that Muslims do not want to integrate into French society. This is part of a wider argument advanced by opponents of multiculturalism, according to whom the so-called French model of integration, designed fully to incorporate immigrant minorities into mainstream society through the educational system and other institutions, has in recent years broken down in the face of resistance by minorities originating in the Islamic world. Yet the headscarf affair does not, in my view, justify such a belief. Schools and other institutions, including the mass media, are clearly functioning very effectively in transmitting to young members of Muslim families values and aspirations shared by majority ethnic youths.

Numerous surveys have shown that second-generation members of minorities originating in Islamic countries are far less religious than their immigrant parents. Rates of agnosticism and atheism among second-generation Maghrebis are in fact slightly higher than among young people from majority ethnic Catholic families. While most young people of Maghrebi origin continue to regard themselves as Muslims, this is in many cases a sentimental attachment bound up with feelings of loyalty to their parents rather than a whole-hearted commitment to Islamic doctrines. The proportion of the total nominally Muslim population who actively practise their religion by praying and going to the mosque is probably smaller than the proportion of church-goers among Catholics (Hargreaves and Stenhouse 1991; Cesari 1998; Boyer 1999).

How, in these circumstances, are we to explain the fears and hostility surrounding Muslims in France? At least three sets of factors are involved: the unhappy legacy of decolonization in North Africa, the heightened visibility of anti-western Islamic states in international politics, and feelings of personal insecurity linked to the processes of globalization and economic restructuring with which France and other industrial countries have been grappling since the 1970s.

As in earlier periods of economic difficulty, when Jewish and other minorities were scape-goated by members of the majority ethnic population, so today the most visible minorities of recent immigrant origin – those orig-

inating in North Africa and other Islamic countries – are the prime targets of prejudice and discrimination. Maghrebis are particularly unpopular in some quarters because of the Algerian war of 1954–62, at the end of which France was forced to concede independence to nationalists who had highlighted the Islamic heritage of Algerians as an emblem of their national identity.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 brought a new prominence in international politics to anti-western Islamists, i.e. Muslims committed to maximizing the political role of Islam. Although very few Muslims in France have any connections with Iranian or other Islamists, this distinction has often been blurred in the mass media. During the 1990s, many atrocities were committed in Algeria in a guerrilla war between Islamist insurgents and the military-backed government. In 1995, a small number of terrorist attacks were also carried out in France by a handful of second-generation Maghrebis working in league with Islamists from Algeria. Again, media coverage of these events helped to create the widespread and unfounded belief that religious fanaticism was rife among Muslims in France.

Buddhism

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Islam has made relatively few converts in France. Only about 1 per cent of Muslims are converts, whereas about half of France's Buddhists are converts. Compared with Islam, Buddhism has a much more peace-loving image. While media coverage of Islam has tended to make it appear menacing, Buddhism is more often seen as a welcome antidote to the stresses of Western materialism. Most foreign-born Buddhists in France come from former French colonies in Indochina, where Buddhism mingles with Taoist beliefs drawn from neighbouring China. Although Indochina, like Algeria, was the scene of a bloody war of decolonization, the independence movement there was perceived in France primarily as communist rather than religious in nature. Following France's withdrawal in 1954, a renewed anti-communist war was waged by the United States in Vietnam, where Buddhists were often seen playing a prominent role in peace movements. Most Vietnamese living in France today fled Indochina following the communist victory in 1975 (the so-called 'boat people'), bringing with them Buddhist and Taoist beliefs that are relatively unmarked in French eyes by the kinds of antagonistic images sometimes associated with Islam.

Laïcité and multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is often regarded in France as a dangerous 'Anglo-Saxon' idea from which the French are mercifully protected by their system of *laïc-*

ité. This kind of reasoning rests in many ways on a faulty understanding of the situation in both Britain and the US, as well as on a failure to appreciate entirely the principles of *laïcité* itself (Hargreaves 1997). Although Britain and the US *are* in some respects more open than France to public expressions of cultural diversity, these differences should not be exaggerated. Meanwhile, far from systematically repressing minority religions, *laïcité* does in fact afford important elements of protection by requiring the state to maintain a neutral position in relation to different faiths – although as noted earlier, this obligation is not always fully observed.

The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which among French republicans enjoys a secular status equivalent to that of a sacred text, guarantees freedom of religious belief and expression to everyone in France. This freedom is unrestricted in the private sphere (including places of worship such as churches, temples or mosques), while in the public sphere it is limited only by the requirements of state neutrality and the maintenance of public order, in the interests of which religious groups are barred from preaching or other kinds of ostentatious behaviour in places such as public highways or state schools.

Although there are in practice many inequalities in the treatment of different religious faiths by the state as well as by private individuals and the mass media, it must be recognized that the French Constitution does guarantee basic rights to all believers. Court rulings in cases such as those thrown up by the Islamic headscarf affair have shown that these constitutional principles *can* be successfully invoked on behalf of religious minorities even in the face of marked hostility among the majority ethnic population. In the field of religious differences, as in relation to regional languages, public policy in France is often less than fully even-handed, yet the French legal and republican tradition does allow for a real and in some respects expanding space within which minorities of both kinds are able to assert their rights.

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Further reading

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A basic reference book on religion is G. Cholvy and Y.-M. Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine*, 3 vols (Toulouse: Privat, 1985–8). A very readable collection of short articles on religious diversity within France is available in a special issue of the magazine *L'Histoire*, 135, July–August 1990: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans en France. In English, see M. Larkin, 'The Catholic church and politics in twentieth-century France' in M. Alexander (ed.) *French history since Napoleon* (London: Arnold, 1999), 147–71. Semi-official thinking in relation to immigrant minorities is typified by the work of the Haut Conseil à l'Intégration, whose report on religious and linguistic issues was published as *Liens culturels et intégration*

(Paris: La Documentation française, 1995). The principles and practice of *laïcité* are discussed by J. Bauberot, Le débat sur la laïcité, *Regards sur l'actualité*, 209–10, March–April 1995, 51–62. Revealing insights into the Islamic headscarf affair are contained in F. Gaspard and F. Khosrokhavar, *Le Foulard et la République* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995).