



SPEECH BY JACQUES CHIRAC, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, ON RESPECTING THE PRINCIPLE OF SECULARISM IN THE REPUBLIC (EXCERPTS)

Paris, December 17, 2003

(...)

A land of ideas and principles, France is an open, hospitable and generous country. United around a unique heritage from which they derive strength and pride, the French people enjoy a rich diversity. A diversity which is accepted and is at the heart of our identity. (...)

Diversity of beliefs (...) diversity of regions (...).

And of course diversity of those women and men who, in each generation, have come to join the national community and for whom France was first an ideal before becoming a homeland.

(...)

Our flag, our language, our history: everything speaks to us of these values of tolerance and respect for the Other (...) of this diversity which gives France her greatness. We are proud of this France, who fights for peace, justice and human rights. We must defend her. Rather than calling her into question, each of us must acknowledge what she has brought us and ask ourselves what we can do for her.

In order that France may remain herself, we must today address the concerns and defuse the tensions in our society.

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The factors behind these tensions are known to everyone. While bringing new opportunities, globalization is worrying and destabilizing to individuals, sometimes driving them to withdrawal [from society].

At a time when the great ideologies are collapsing, obscurantism and fanaticism are gaining ground in the world. Each of us needs to find our bearings again as members of the French nation and the citizens' Europe we wish to bring about. At the same time, the persistence, even worsening, of inequalities and the gulf which is widening between troubled neighbourhoods and the rest of the country belie the principle of equal opportunities and threaten to splinter our republican pact.

One thing is certain: the answer to these concerns does not lie in the infinitesimally narrow solution of withdrawal into oneself or one's community.



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On the contrary, it lies in the affirmation of our wish to live together, bolstering the common [patriotic] fervour, in remaining true to our history and our values.

Faced with the uncertainties of the times and of the world, with a sense of impotence, of being at times in the grip of confusion, everyone is seeking more personal, more immediate points of reference: family, neighbourhood solidarities, community associations. And this aspiration is natural. It is even an asset. It shows the capacity of Frenchmen and women to mobilize, act and give free rein to their energies and their initiatives.

Yet this movement must find its limits in the upholding of respect for common values. The danger lies in the release of centrifugal forces, the exalting of divisive particularisms; in wanting to see rules governing sections of our society take priority over national law. The danger lies in divisiveness, discrimination and confrontation.

Let us look at what is happening elsewhere. Societies structured around communities are frequently victims of unacceptable inequalities.

Splitting society into communities cannot be the choice for France. It would be contrary to our history, traditions and culture. It would be contrary to our humanist principles, our faith in social advancement solely on the strength of ability and merit, and to our commitment to equality and fraternity among all French people.

This is why I refuse to commit France to that path. It would sacrifice her heritage; it would compromise her future; it would result in the loss of her soul.

That is also why we have a compelling duty to act. The way to reinvent a new common destiny is not through immobilism or nostalgia; it is through being clear-sighted, imaginative and remaining true to what we are. (...)

All the children of France, whatever their background, whatever their origin, whatever their beliefs, are daughters and sons of the Republic. They must be recognized as such, in law, but above all in fact. By respecting this requirement, overhauling our policy of integration and our ability to ensure equal opportunities at the practical level, we will restore full vitality to our nation's cohesion.

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We will also do this by keeping alive the principle of secularism, which is a pillar of our Constitution. It expresses our resolve to live together in mutual respect, dialogue and tolerance.

Secularism guarantees freedom of conscience. It protects the freedom to believe or not to believe. It guarantees everyone the possibility of expressing and



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practising their faith, peacefully and freely, without the threat of the imposition of other convictions or beliefs. It allows men and women from all corners of the globe, from all cultures, to be protected in their beliefs by the Republic and its institutions. Open and generous, the Republic is the place of choice for meetings and exchanges where everyone can give of their best to the national community. It is the neutrality of the public arena which permits the various religions to coexist harmoniously.

Like all freedoms, freedom of expression of religious beliefs can be limited only by the freedom of the Other and observance of the rules of life in society. Religious freedom, which our country respects and protects, cannot be hijacked. It cannot undermine the common rule. It cannot impinge on the freedom of conviction of others. It is this subtle, precious and fragile balance, patiently built up over decades, which respect for the principle of secularism ensures. And this principle is an opportunity for France. This is why it is set down in Article 1 of our Constitution. This is why it is not negotiable!

(...)

However, despite the weight of this republican achievement, and as, *inter alia*, the work of the Commission headed by M. Bernard Stasi has shown, (...) the application of the secular principle in our society is today under debate. Admittedly, it is rarely challenged. Indeed, many identify with it. But its practical implementation is encountering new, growing difficulties in the workplace, in the public services especially schools and hospitals.

There can be no toleration, under the guise of religious freedom, of people contesting the Republic's laws and principles. Secularity is one of the Republic's great conquests. It is a crucial component of social peace and national cohesion. We cannot allow it to weaken. We must work to consolidate it.

For this, we must concretely ensure the same respect for all the great spiritual families. In this respect, Islam, the religion which has arrived most recently in France, has its full place among the great religions present on our soil. Thanks to the creation of the Conseil français du Culte musulman, relations between the State and the Islam of France can now be organized. Muslims must have in France the possibility of having places of worship allowing them to practise their religion in dignity and tranquillity. Despite the recent progress, we have to recognize that much remains to be done in this sphere. A new milestone will also be reached when French imams can be trained in France, allowing the assertion of the identity of a French-based Islam.

Respect, tolerance, the spirit of dialogue will also be entrenched with the knowledge and understanding of the Other to which each of us must attach the greatest importance. This is why I think it essential to develop the teaching of the concept of religion at school.



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We must also, vigilantly and firmly, wage a ruthless battle against xenophobia, racism and particularly against anti-Semitism. Let us not tolerate the trivialization of insults! Let us not play down any gesture, any attitude, any comment! We must not leave anything unpunished! It's a matter of dignity.

We must forcefully reaffirm the neutrality and secularism of the public services. That of all public sector employees, serving the whole community and the general interest, who are forbidden to display publicly their own beliefs or opinions. For us, this is a rule of law, since no French citizens must be able to suspect a public official, because of his or her personal beliefs, of either according them special treatment or discriminating against them. Likewise, on no account must citizens be allowed to challenge a public sector employee on account of their beliefs.

We must also reaffirm secularism at school, because school must be completely protected.

School is first and foremost the place where the values bequeathed to us all are acquired and passed on. The instrument par excellence for entrenching the Republican Idea. The place where tomorrow's citizens are trained in the arts of criticism and dialogue and taught to prize freedom. Where they are given the keys to fulfil their potential and control their destiny. Where everyone broadens their horizons.

School is a republican sanctuary which we must defend to safeguard the equality of the acquisition of values and knowledge, equality between girls and boys, with all lessons, including games, taught to boys and girls together. To protect our children, so that our youngsters are not exposed to divisive ill winds, which drive people apart and set them against one another.

There is no question, of course, of making schools places of uniformity, anonymity with religious affiliation prohibited. The aim is to enable teachers and school heads, today in the front line and confronted with genuine problems, calmly to do their jobs, by laying down a clear rule. Until recently, in accordance with reasonable and spontaneously observed practices, no one has ever doubted that pupils, naturally free to live their faith, ought not, nevertheless, to come to school in clothes denoting their religious affiliation. The idea is not to invent new rules or move the boundaries of secularism. It is to set out with respect, but clearly and firmly, a rule we have practised for a very long time.

I have consulted. I have studied the Stasi Commission's report. I have considered the arguments of the National Assembly mission, political parties, religious authorities, and major representatives of the schools of thought.

In all conscience, I consider that the wearing of clothes or signs which conspicuously denote a religious affiliation must be prohibited at school.



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Discreet signs, for example a Cross, a Star of David or Hand of Fatima will of course remain allowed. On the other hand, conspicuous signs, i.e. those which stand out and immediately denote religious affiliation, must not be tolerated. These the Islamic veil, regardless of the name you give it, the Kippa or a Cross of a clearly excessive size, have no place in State schools. State schools will remain secular.

For this an Act is obviously necessary. I wish it to be adopted by Parliament and fully implemented from the beginning of the next school year. Right now, I am asking the government to pursue its dialogue, particularly with the religious authorities, and to embark on a campaign of explanation, mediation and education.

Our objective is to open hearts and minds. It is to make the young people involved understand what is at stake and protect them from influences and passions which, far from liberating them or allowing them to make free choices, constrain or threaten them.

In the application of this Act, dialogue and consultation will systematically have to be sought before any decision is taken.

On the other hand and the question has been raised I do not think it necessary to add new national holidays to the school calendar, which already has many. Moreover, that would create severe difficulties for parents who work on those days. Nevertheless, and as is already widespread custom, I want no pupils to have to apologize for absence justified by a major religious festival like Yom Kippur or Aid el Kebir, provided that their schools have been informed beforehand. It also goes without saying that no important tests or examinations must be held on those days. And the Minister of National Education will be giving instructions to this effect to chief education officers.

The elementary rules of living together also need restating. I am thinking of hospitals where there can be no justification for a patient refusing, on principle, treatment by a doctor of the opposite sex. The law must endorse this rule for all patients in public hospitals.

Similarly, the Minister of Labour will have to launch the necessary consultations and, if need be, submit to Parliament measures to allow heads of firms to rule on the wearing of religious signs, for compelling reasons to do with safety that goes without saying and dealing with clients.

Generally speaking, I believe it desirable for a "Secularism Code" to bring together all the principles and rules relating to secularism. This code will be distributed inter alia to all civil servants and public employees the day they take up their jobs.

Moreover, the Prime Minister will set up a Secularism Watchdog, attached to his office, tasked with alerting the French and the public authorities to the risks of abuses or infringements of this essential principle.



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Finally, our battle for the Republic's values must prompt us to commit ourselves resolutely to promoting the rights of women and their genuine equality with men. (...)

I very solemnly proclaim: the Republic will oppose everything which divides, everything which discourages participation, and everything which excludes! The rule is "everyone together" because this places everyone on an equal footing, because it refuses to distinguish on the grounds of sex, origin, colour or religion.

As far as women's rights are concerned, our society still has a huge amount of progress to make. The new frontier in equality is now gender parity in the workplace. Everyone must realize this and act accordingly. (...).

Source : Embassy of France in the United States - December 23, 2003 |