



REPRESENTATION PERMANENTE DE LA FRANCE
AUPRES DE L'O.S.C.E

Working Session 15 (Wednesday, 30 September 2015) - Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief – Statement from the French delegation

I fully subscribe to the EU statement and wish to add a few remarks in a national capacity on the subject of secularism, which is too often misunderstood in international forums.

1) Secularism is a founding principle of our Republic. Born of our history, it is an essential tool for ensuring that our society, with its wealth of diversity, is a community where people of all religions and those without a religion are able to live together. It consists of implementing the principles of the motto of the French Republic in the field of conscience and religion: Liberty (freedom of religion or belief, that is, freedom to practise the religion of one's choice, to have no religion, or to change religion); Equality (all faiths and beliefs are treated in the same way); and Fraternity (community life is protected, regardless of citizens' origins and affiliations).

As a founding component of our national pact, secularism does not mean, as is sometimes thought, that the State is unaware of religions or indifferent towards them. Although the Republic does not recognize any religion (in the sense that it neither subsidizes nor pays salaries linked to them), it knows about them. It maintains a constant dialogue of confidence with them, not only on practical issues relating to worship (for example, on the conditions required for religious slaughter), but also on major social issues. This dialogue involves meetings between public and religious authorities, efforts made by the Ministry of the Interior to secure places of worship, and the existence of a Central Office for Religions at the Ministry of the Interior and a Religious Affairs Adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development.

While guaranteeing freedom of religion, the State makes sure neither to support any religion, nor to penalize any religion, in compliance with the 1905 act on the separation of church and State. Implementing this principle of secularism requires strict neutrality on the part of public officials and State schools, which must not favour any religion over another. That does not mean that secularism implies hostility towards religions. On the contrary, it provides a shared framework for the coexistence, or absence, of different forms of religious expression, which respects the private convictions of each individual. As the President of the French Republic emphasized on 8 April 2013 when the Secularism Monitoring Centre was set up, this principle of secularism is "first and foremost a principle of freedom and cohesion".

2) Our commitment to the principle of secularism as a principle of freedom and cohesion also guides our action at international level. Firstly, it means that we reject all exploitation of religion. Religion is too often used, whether surreptitiously or publicly, by

political forces pursuing goals that have nothing religious about them. Terrorist and mafia groups justify their crimes in the name of pseudo-religious considerations.

If religions can be exploited for the worst purposes, as we are seeing today with terrorist acts perpetrated in the name of Islam, they can also contribute to moderation and cohesion, if they are practised with a concern for the common good and in a spirit of tolerance.

That is why France supports interfaith dialogue. Although the State obviously cannot participate in interfaith dialogue, it can encourage such a process, which may contribute to civil peace and harmony among nations. France is particularly active in this field, with all religions participating in the process, as illustrated by the creation of the Conference of Religious Leaders in France (*Conférence des responsables de culte en France*, CRCF) and by the visit to Rome, on the very day of the attack on Charlie Hebdo, of Mgr Michel Dubost, chair of the commission for interfaith dialogue of the Conference of French Bishops (*Conférence des Évêques de France*, CEF), accompanied by a delegation of French imams committed to dialogue between Islam and Christianity.