**Type of Contribution: PAPER**

**Title of Extended Abstract The renewed role of libraries in a disenchanted *laïcité***

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1. **Introduction: *laïcité,* or French secularism**

In France, the issues of access, diversity, and inclusion are more important than ever, as examples of breaches in the social contract seem to increase (including disrespect for common goods, intolerance, and discrimination –for instance national origin, skin colour and religion). As we as a society search for the root causes of these breaches, criticism of French models of education and culture is growing more widespread. Libraries, amongst other institutions, have been pressed to renew their visions and policies.

This paper will provide insights on this push for renewal, and will focus mainly on the following themes:

* Libraries and other informational institutions as hosts of civic discourse
* Diverse cultural contexts, religious, political and value systems
* Development of collections in support of diversity and inclusion

In France, all three topics are closely related to the concept of *laïcité[[1]](#footnote-0)* (the French concept of secularism), one of the core values of the French republic along with *Liberté*, *Egalité*,  *Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity) -which is the French republican motto.

For more than a decade, France’s *laïcité* has been called into question, and the link with liberty, equality, and fraternity seems less obvious.

Thus, the first section of this paper will provide some clues to *laïcité*, a notion which pervades French society, and more specifically France’s educational and cultural sectors.

The second section will explore the policies and actions of libraries to impart fundamental values in a changing and increasingly complex world.

To conclude, we will explore the ways *laïcité* could evolve, and how it might be considered a step ahead in the debates.

**Laïcité and its strong connection to knowledge**

*Laïcité and law*

Although it forms a fundamental basis of the French republic, *laïcité* does not have one unique and singular definition. In addition, French secularism has a rich history of conflicts and crises starting as early as the French Revolution of 1789.

The concept is very challenging to research, which may explain the large number of recent publications on the topic from different fields of the social sciences; there are far too many to list here.

However, one surefire way to approach French secularism is through the law, according to Professor of law, Maurice Barbier (Barbier 2005). In this respect, two documents made history: the French Constitution of 1958 and the law of separation of state and religion of 1905, both of which followed the laws concerning schools and secularism in 1881,1882, and 1886.

The aim of this section is not to explore the complexity and nuances of law in this matter, which is not my area of expertise, but rather to paint a better picture of what French secularism is. Using a formula, we can distinguish between two main aspects of French secularism: one which could be called “secularism-separation” and the other “secularism-neutrality” (Barbier 2005).

*Laïcité and knowledge*

Using the same logic, Historian Jean Bauberot (Bauberot 2012) assigns law a clear role in determining the principles of secularism: separation, neutrality, freedom of conscience, and the equality of citizens, whatever their convictions and religions. Though these precepts belong to the values of many countries, Jean Bauberot points out one specific characteristic of French secularism:

This conflict [*of the two France, that is to say the clerical partisans against the anticlerical ones*] created strong ties between the secular Republic and scientific knowledge, the idea that knowledge favors freedom of thought and the critique of all dogmas, including the anticlerical ones. (Bauberot, 2012).

Hence public schooling, obligatory education, and secularism were able to fuel the spread of science and knowledge over many generations, of all social classes, and with various origins and different beliefs, all over the country.

Science, knowledge and democracy are naturally of utmost concern for libraries. We cannot forget that French public libraries are historically grounded in the French Revolution, during which libraries were confiscated from clerical authorities (decree of 19 & 21 December 1789 and decree of 8 March 1793) and fleeing aristocrats (decree of 9 February 1792).

It was a long road with many challenges to overcome for French libraries to succeed in building a network of institutions across the country, from big cities to isolated rural areas, and to broadcast culture, science and knowledge, conveying positive impacts on culture, economics and society.

*The crisis of French secularism and the libraries’ mission*

Obviously secularism is again at stake today, or so the passionate and frenzied debates presented in French media might lead one to feel. Unsurprisingly, this earthquake is shaking the system of culture and knowledge institutions, with universities, libraries, and schools on the front lines.

The reasons for the upheaval are multiple, intricate, and incremental:

* misunderstanding of the terms and spirit of the laws
* bending of the laws
* simple ignorance
* new aspirations of different groups of people

These biases seem to pervade all levels of society.

In this context, French authorities took a wide range of measures with the aim of clarifying concepts and ideas, building sound arguments, and reconciling theory and practice.

Symbols of freedom of conscience, freedom of publication, freedom to meet and share information, debate and dialogue, and guardians of memory and diversity of ideas, libraries were prompted to strengthen their efforts and increase their audiences.

**Libraries and the transmission of *laicité and liberté, égalité, fraternité***

First, we will explore collection development for diversity and inclusion; second, the issue of cultural matters; and finally, civic discourse.

*Collection development for diversity and inclusion*

Building collections is not simple, and building them for diversity and inclusion is even less so. Problems arise as to neutrality, plurality, censorship, and self-censorship.

This subsection will address these issues.

*Diverse cultural contexts, religious, political, and value systems*

Answering the needs of patrons from diverse cultural contexts, religions, and political and value systems is a challenge for various reasons (including educative and mediation skills, and the sociology of patrons and that of librarians). This subsection will explore this dimension.

*Libraries and other information institutions for hosting civic discourse*

Furthermore, the issue is not only to meet the needs of library patrons but also to share the values at the core of our social contract and make them meaningful.

This third and last subsection will cover this topic.

To do this, libraries, like museums, have changed their patterns of communication. Formerly collection-oriented, they are now patron-oriented. Since the just post-World War II era of Minister of Culture Andre Malraux (who wanted to bring culture to citizens), works of art and books were considered the best intermediary to knowledge, for example. However, for more than two decades, the staff of museums and libraries have developed public knowledge, mediation, and education skills to better disseminate culture and common values.

**Conclusion: the disenchantment with *laïcité***

The turmoil around *laïcité* demonstrates the extent to which the value is enshrined in the common fabric of French society.

*Laïcité* is one of the foundations of the ideal of the French Republic, along with “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”.

So it is all the more shocking to perceive that the foundation itself is in jeopardy. Cohesion of society seems ruined, integration seems to be a plain failure, and discrimination seems to be at the highest level. The media is full of debates and fights over the question.

This turmoil started more than 20 years ago and has been increasing since.

The questions we should ask are, do we still want *laïcité*? Do we still want it the same way it was before the crisis I described exploded?

Some cast doubts about the relevance of *laïcité*.

One criticism is that *laïcité* would not be open enough regarding freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, and freedom of thought, and thus is the enemy of religions, and beyond that, the enemy of plurality and diversity.

In contrast, another criticism is that *laïcité* would be too open to freedom and then hand too much power to religions, whatever religion it might be.

An additional criticism is that *laïcité*, albeit claiming the absence of government involvement in religious affairs, would imply a de facto advantage for the Catholic religion because France is a country dominated by Catholic culture, of which monuments, arts, holidays, and even food are evidence.

Still another criticism is that the absence of government involvement in religious affairs might weaken *laïcité* and let some religions impose their rules, in this case the Islamic religion.

Beyond invocations and lamentations, Historian Pierre Kahn[[2]](#footnote-1) provides some perspectives on the subject. This will be the conclusion of this paper.

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1. *Laïcité* (noun) and *laïque* (adjective) come from the Greek adjective *laïkos*, derived from the Greek noun *laos*, which means “people” or “nation”, hence “popular”, “common”, or “national”. The term was used within the first Christian communities when clerical authorities appeared. The words “clergy” and “clerical” come from the Greek adjective *Klêrikos.* This word in turn was derived from the Greek noun *Klêros,* which means “lot” or “part” to name those who were “apart” or “chosen”: first the Christians versus the Gentiles, and later priests versus those who were not priests. http://www.inrp.fr/edition-electronique/lodel/dictionnaire-ferdinand-buisson/document.php?id=3005. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Pierre Kahn, “La laïcité dans la formation des maîtres: de Jules Ferry aux ESPE”, (lecture, ESPE, Ajaccio, 6 December 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)