

France Protecting its Culture from Islamists

In a by-election runoff on February 8, 2015 in the district of Le Doubs in Eastern France, the Socialist candidate won with 51.4% of the vote. The disquieting element of the vote was that the candidate of the National Front (FN) got only 800 votes less than the winner. Almost certainly, this near success resulted from support for the FN platform slogan of "Islamist peril." That peril had recently been made plain by the Islamist terrorist attacks in Paris on the *Charlie Hebdo* journal headquarters on January 9, 2015 and on the kosher supermarket on January 11 when four Jews were killed.

The election result showed the growing strength of the FN, which already had done well in the European Union election in 2014, and the increasing prominence of its leader Marine Le Pen, now considered a viable candidate for the presidential election in 2017. That strength largely stems from the FN's strong opposition to immigration, in reality Muslim immigration, into France. The party argues for the stopping of funding of Islamist groups and fundamentalism, and it rejects Muslim demands for different particular clothes to be worn in public, for special foods, and for demands for prayer rooms.

The FN is not on the verge of taking power, but the combination of its growth together with the Islamist massacres in Paris raises in an acute form the question of whether the majority of Muslims in France can be both French and Muslim, or whether their continuing behavior undermines French law and the enshrined Republican principle of *laïcité*.

France, like other European countries in the years after World War II, for different reasons adopted a policy of multiculturalism, one of tolerance of and equating different cultures and values. Political correctness, and a populist

obsession with immigration largely as a result of French guilt over its rule in Algeria and Morocco, allowed France to become a multicultural country.

In view of recent Islamist terrorist attacks, the threat of more to come, and the virulent anti-Semitism of many Muslims, the basic problem in France is whether the principle of multiculturalism is compatible with Muslim behavior and whether it in effect prevents rather than helps, Muslims from integrating into the national society.

Western leftists might be surprised to learn that it was Karl Marx who pointed out the general problem. In an article "Declaration of War," in the New York *Herald Tribune* on April 15, 1854, Marx wrote that "The Koran and the Muslim legislation emanating from it reduce the geography and ethnography of the various people to the simple and convenient distinction of two nations and of two countries: those of the Faithful and of the Infidels... Islamism proscribes the nation of the Infidels, constituting a state of permanent hostility between the Muslim and the unbeliever."

France is not alone in facing that possible condition of "permanent hostility."

Other European countries are troubled by the increasing Muslim immigration that was previously thought useful for their economies as well as desirable for humanitarian reasons. Continuing problems have led political groups to question the desirability of multiculturalism.

All of these groups share similar views: limits to immigration, in essence the increasing Islamization of Europe, and the difficulties in integrating these newcomers into society. European countries have sought to put more limitations on immigration of Muslims, and emphasized the need for those already there to learn the language and adhere to the cultural mores of their societies.

But can they be assimilated? For France that assimilation can only come on the basis of the principles of the Republic. These are spelled out in the French Constitution of 1958. In the English translation, Article 1 states, "France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic, and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race, or religion. It shall respect all beliefs." In French, Article 1 speaks of "*une République indivisible, laïque.*"

It is this "*laïcité*," not quite the same as "secular," that is central to French policy towards Muslims in France today. Two factors are important. The French state is legally forbidden to recognize a religion, but recognizes religious organizations. It is neutral towards religious beliefs, and takes no position on them, except when the practitioners of those religions affect the lives of citizens, act contrary to French law, or disrupt public order.

The other factor is the separation of religious and public spheres, in effect separation of church and state. Religion is thus separate from government. By the 1905 law, religious education at school is forbidden, no religion can be supported by the state either financially or politically, and no new religious symbols can be put in public places.

The dilemma for France with its population of many millions of Muslims, between 5 to 10% of the population, is potent. Muslims are largely identified, not as individuals, but rather by an ethnic or racial definition. They tend to see themselves more significantly as members of a group than as individuals. They may not be able to liberate themselves from their own religious and cultural traditions, and act with individual freedom.

France, and other Western countries, faces the problem and the existence of moral relativism, the idea of respect and equal dignity for cultural differences, since the thrust of the

concept is that there is no universal truth.

The essential issue in France is whether Muslim immigrants can become integrated into a single community, the national community, based on *laïcité*. To instill the principle of integration, the law of September 2004 prohibited the wearing in school of headscarves by Muslim girls, skullcaps by Jewish boys, and conspicuous crucifixes by Christians. To this law was added another in April 2011 that imposed a ban on the wearing by Muslim women of full-face veils, burkas, and niqabas, in public places. These, and other issues such as the outlawing of Muslim praying in public streets, the labeling of halal meats, the proving of halal food in state schools, are not to be considered intrusions or limitations of freedom or intolerant religious discrimination. They are essential as the basis of fidelity to the national society and its core values.

A more difficult issue is whether the principle of *laïcité* must apply to private institutions. The decision of the Court of Cassation in April 2013 that a worker in a private nursery had been unlawfully dismissed for wearing an Islamic scarf is in essence a qualification of the principle of *laïcité*. It is an unwise decision since it may well lead, where other private venues are concerned, to further qualifications of the general principle.

France is now a country in which Muslims will become a larger proportion of the population, since a high proportion of them are young people. Already some Muslims do have a public role: in the army, the police, the gendarmerie, in the law, and in education. But the majority has failed to become integrated into the society on the basis of *laïcité*. Notwithstanding the problems that Muslims face, especially that of high unemployment, it is essential that they do so, and give up the posture of victimhood. Otherwise, one can expect Republican France to become transformed into a different country, and above all to be the scene of more Muslim jihadist terrorist

acts.

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