

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Below is a declaration on laicity which was initiated by 3 leading academics from 3 different countries. As the declaration contains the diverse views and opinions of different academic participants, complete consensus amongst all the contributors and readers is not possible. The declaration attempts to discuss different pragmatic approaches to laicity while at the same time providing a clear recommendation on how laicity should be viewed.

The declaration's main objective is to raise a debate about laicity and its implications; it proposes new ways of thinking about the subject while disassociating itself clearly from the French and the Western systems.

Though our success will be measured on the number of signatories, a signature doesn't mean agreement with the conclusions but rather an agreement of the text's driving philosophy and the will to find a consensus encompassing the different views and cultures of the world's different continents.

Your signature doesn't mean you endorse the guidelines; your comments, when added to the Annexe, will only enrich and strengthen the document.

Please send these and your signature to the following email address: declarationlaicite@hotmail.fr.

This year is the centenary in France of the separation between Church and State and we want to use this occasion and the declaration as starting points for promoting a critical approach to laicity, and an international debate on the subject.

Your views and contributions are important to us and to the future success of this declaration, so please make sure that you make these known to us.

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To be circulated among members for signature

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION ON LAICITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Introduction

There is considerable religious and moral diversity in today's modern civilization and recognition that the challenge of creating a harmonious society amongst all individuals must be met. We need to consider how to respect the diversity of the different religious and philosophical beliefs (such as atheism and agnosticism) and to ensure that a non violent and democratic dialogue is undertaken at all times. People today are far more aware of their fundamental rights; the State must therefore ensure that the individuals' rights and beliefs are respected especially when it is trying to integrate all citizens to live and work together.

For this reason, we, academics and citizen of the world, have written the following declaration which we hope will raise a public debate on how this challenge can be accomplished.

The declaration is divided into four key sections.

1. Fundamental principles

Article 1: Every human being regardless of sex, race, colour or creed has a right to free speech and freedom of conscience both as an individual and within a group and the right to practice a religion or other philosophical beliefs (such as atheism or agnosticism) of his own choice. As a democratic institution the State must respect and honour these rights.

Article 2: The state when creating legislature must remain neutral and must not favour one religious belief over another; it must at all times honour the right of the different groups to participate in this debate. The autonomy of the State implies that civil law should be separated from religious beliefs. Religious groups can freely participate in the debate: however they should not in any way try and impose on society their particular doctrines or behavioural codes.

Article 3: This equality must not be a theoretical, conceptual requirement but rather one which is vigorously practised and enforced in daily political life. Individuals must have their civil rights respected regardless of their philosophical and religious beliefs. When circumstances are found where this is not the case, appropriate remedial action ('reasonable adjustments') between major national traditions and minorities should be undertaken to correct the situation.

2. Laicity as a fundamental principle of the State

Article 4: The Universal Declaration defines laicity as the harmonization amongst individuals originating from diverse geographical and cultural areas of the 3 above principles:

- Respect of the fundamental right to free speech and worship individually or within a group
- Separation of the State and the Institutions from religious and philosophical beliefs
- Non discrimination (direct or indirect) towards human beings

Article 5: Laicity will naturally emerge when a State or country separates itself from any type of religious thought and allows citizens to exercise their fundamental political rights through freely debating the subject. Any modern state which respects its citizens' diverse social, moral and religious beliefs can easily integrate this process allowing laicity to flourish.

Article 6 : Laicity plays an essential role in the promotion of democracy. By virtue of its political and legal framework laicity contributes to the recognition of fundamental human rights and to the integration of diversity within social and political systems.

Article 7: The term 'laicity' does not belong to any particular culture, nation or continent. It can exist in any culture where the term has not been previously used. A form or process of laicity can take place or may already exist amongst nations or civilizations in everything but name.

3. Debates about Laicity

Article 8: Common practices such as the religious calendar, official ceremonial funerals, civil memorials, which reflect an historical heritage, should not be seen as rigid and unmoveable activities, especially in a multicultural society. They should be the focus of any pacific debate on laicity.

Article 9: The freedom of rights which underlie laicity should not be restricted to just religion and politics but also apply to other social areas such as sexuality, life and death, women's rights, children's education, mixed marriages, religious or non religious minorities, atheists and critics of religion.

Article 10: A balance between the three principles of laicity will lead to a debate on how people can freely exercise their religious and philosophical beliefs. The debate will also discuss the practice of the attempts made by followers of one religion to convert another to their own beliefs, the impact of religion on daily life and how people adapt themselves to these requirements.

Article 11: Debates on these subjects will lead to questions on how the State functions, its identity, public health laws and potential conflicts between civil law and freedom of choice. An absolute laicity process cannot exist in any country and more importantly the process of laicity will be applied differently according to the country.

4. Laicity and the challenges of the 21st century

Article 12: The representation of fundamental human rights has evolved greatly since they were first created at the end of the 18th Century. Laicity questions the significance between fundamental human rights, such as equality, and human dignity. However, laicity is faced today with problems linked with its specific legal status, with differences of opinion between the law and religious beliefs, of compatibility between parents' rights and what international conventions call 'children's rights' as well as the right to 'blasphemy'.

Article 13: In some democratic countries where a process of laicity has already arrived for many of its citizens, any questioning of what changes are necessary to the approach they are already familiar with will lead to fear. The longer the original laicity process took the deeper will be the resistance to change. Social transformation is taking place and laicity must adapt itself to these changes and all interested parties must approach this with an open rather than closed mind.

Article 14: Wherever it occurred, laicization corresponded historically to a time when strong religious traditions played a fundamental role on social life. The success of this process has given way to an individualization of religious beliefs linked with personal choice. Contrary to what some may fear, laicity does not mean the abolition of religion but freedom in choosing one's belief. Whenever necessary, it implies the separation of the religious context from social and political system.

Article 15: Religious and philosophical beliefs are viewed as cultural resources. Laicity in the 21st century must allow a harmony between cultural diversity and between social and political unity, just as historically laicization of societies had to reconcile religious diversities and the State. New emerging forms of religious beliefs, whether it is a "make your own" of tradition, of religious and non religious belief, of new expressions and to an extent of radical religious expressions must be analysed. In a context of individualization of religion, it is important to understand the difficulty to confine the idea of religion to worship itself and why laicity can offer a general frame for a harmonious living.

Article 16: The belief that only scientific and technical progress could lead to moral and social progress has now declined. This has made the future even more uncertain leading to unclear political and social debates having an unfocused agenda. We risk today being too closely attached to the principles of the past. We must be creative in our way of identifying new political and social processes to help build a laicity process together.

Article 17: The various processes of laicization corresponded to the different stages of the State's development which varied according to whether it was a federal or a centralized state. The creation of the "all powerful" state and the separation from the legal system has given way to a new perspective. The State has undergone a change rather than a decline: it is losing its role of 'Etat Providence' which many countries used to have. It is now interfering in areas which until recently were considered as "off limits" and is more involved in security needs among which some of them can threaten liberties. We therefore have to create new links between laicity and social justice which guarantee and amplify individual and collective liberties.

Article 18: We should be careful to ensure that laicity does not itself fall victim of its own process and becomes a "secular" religion. Learning its principles can help create peace amongst citizens. Laicity should not be viewed as an anti religious nor an intangible response to religion. Instead it must be seen as a dynamic and inventive approach which will bring a democratic answer to the questions of the 21st century, as well as a fundamental approach on how diversity must be viewed as a treasure rather than as a threat.

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