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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Scarves and Symbols

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With France on the verge of passing a law that would prevent Muslim girls from wearing their head scarves in class, Americans are asking why the French are so attached to secularism. I always want to respond to this question by asking another, a version of one asked by Montesquieu nearly three centuries ago: how can one be French? Our uneasiness about head scarves and other religious symbols in schools is a result of our long, often painful, history. If we bow to demands to allow the practice of religion in state institutions, we will put France's identity in peril.

The French word that is closest to secularism, *laïcité*, was invented in the late 19th century to express several ideas. *Laïcité* includes, foremost, tolerance. Tolerance had actually been around for a while. It was first instituted in 1598 under the Edict of Nantes — which allowed Protestants to practice their faith and ended our Wars of Religion. But the state and the Roman Catholic Church were so intertwined that tolerance wasn't enough. We had to take away the church's power to oppress minorities and make law.

For that, France had to go farther than other countries in separating matters of state and matters of religion. The most emphatic expression of this desire came in our Revolution of 1789. The French people didn't just depose a monarch — they also took aim at the Catholic Church's domination of society, stripping the church of its property and demanding that the clergy acknowledge the authority of the state.

In the century after the Revolution, however, the Catholic Church found ways to regain power. A concordat between the papacy and Napoleon in 1801 gave the church a privileged position as the majority religion of France. The church took control of education and provided priests as teachers. As monarchs, emperors and republics succeeded one another during the 1800's, the church inserted itself into politics by joining with forces that were enemies of the rights of man and the republican ideas of the Revolution.

The leaders of the Third Republic, in the 1880's, saw that for the republic to establish itself, it had to wrest control of the schools from the church. Prime Minister Jules Ferry founded the public school system, which barred priests as teachers and took over the job of transmitting common values and the sense of social unity — in short, forming the citizens of the republic — without reference to religion.

The next step, the ending of Napoleon's concordat, came in 1905. By separating church and state — instituting a republic that was neutral toward all religions, and without a national religion — France finally realized the aims of the Revolution. This is *laïcité*, and it has worked well.

But the *laïcité* of schools has been eroded by the intrusion of religious symbols, prompted by an excess of individualism, that philosophy so revered by Americans. The necessity of the law that Parliament will debate on Tuesday reveals the regrettable waning of this French tradition. More than ever, in this time of political-religious tensions, school secularism is for us the foundation for civil peace, and for the integration of people of all beliefs into the Republic. If the French hold *laïcité* so dearly, it is because that principle, as much as the republic and democracy, is essential for a cohesive society. Each nation has its bedrock principles. One could just as easily ask, what does it mean to be American?

Meanwhile, more and more, there is talk of a Europe-wide *laïcité*. More and more, European democracies are multi-religious. They no longer have a base of common religious tradition. Instead, they are constructing social guidelines built around ethical, universal values like justice and liberty of conscience.

The question that France is posing to the world is this: Can one progress toward true respect of these universal values without relying on some sort of "*laicity*"? To disarm fundamentalism, notably Islamic fundamentalism, can we give up *laïcité*, which builds a neutral space for all of us?

Guy Coq is the author of a book about secularism in France. This article was translated by The Times from the French.