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The State and Religion: Rethinking *Laïcité*

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**Introduction**

The French state owes much of its development and many of its principal characteristics to its relations with organized religion. Three religions – Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism – are historically important from this point of view. A fourth, Islam, appeared on the scene some thirty years ago. Of the first three, only Catholicism has had fundamentally problematical relations with the state. These touched on the nature of the state and the place of the Catholic church within it. Was the Catholic church in post-revolutionary France to lose the political influence and administrative privileges it enjoyed in the *ancien régime*? This question dominated a long period of conflict between Catholics or Catholicism and the state which started with the French Revolution of 1789 and found its institutional solution with the Law of Separation of church and state in 1905.

The 1905 separation law is a landmark in modern French history, the culmination of a long process of secularization leading to a body of doctrine which today functions as the ethos of the republican state. It is by reference to this secularist doctrine that Islam in France now, and the behaviour of Moslems in French society, are frequently condemned on the assumption that they constitute a danger to the integrity of that society. To a great extent, therefore, Islam at present occupies a position vis-à-vis the state not so long vacated by Catholicism.

The case of Protestantism and of Judaism offers a contrast to that of Catholicism and Islam. Neither Protestants nor Jews who embraced secularism wholeheartedly have experienced the same
incompatibility between their religion and the state as most Catholics in the past and as some Moslems today. However, as opposed to Protestants who suffered no serious consequences as a result of their commitment to a secular republic, Jews have frequently been victims of oppression conducted in the assumed higher interests of the French state or of the French nation. The two great examples are the Dreyfus affair in the 1890s and Jewish persecution and betrayal by the Vichy régime under Marshal Pétain in occupied France during the Second World War. Both examples demonstrate the existence of a sometimes virulent antisemitism in the past which is now in decline. Even so, a certain insensitivity still remains about Jewish feelings and Jewish contributions to the construction of the modern French state. They were much in evidence between 1988 and 1992 in President Mitterrand's habit of laying a wreath every year on Marshall Pétain's tomb, a practice which, faced with criticism, he subsequently abandoned.

The Jewish example illustrates the difficulties of separating cultural and social from political considerations when looking at the relationship between religion and the state. This is especially true in the case of Islam, where racism plays perhaps an important part, in addition to problems which have to do with the social integration of a community that has developed out of recent immigration into France. Catholics, of course, were never faced with the same problems as Jews and Moslems in this respect. Theirs was always, from 1789, a problem to do with acceptance of, and adaptation to, a model of governance which threatened to alter the balance between religion and politics in favour of the latter. But as this model began to take shape within a new legal-institutional framework which seemed permanent, it became clear to Catholics that participation in the newly created political process was an imperative. Another imperative, not unrelated to the first, was control of the education system, subsequently to develop into the idea that the church should have its own parallel system. Both education and political participation were directed towards maintaining the influence of Catholicism in society against the competing claims of a state which even before 1905 seemed launched on the path to supremacy over the church. Both, through solving a number of problems to do with the place of the Catholic church in the modern world, led to the full integration of Catholics and of Catholicism into the modern republican polity. It was a difficult process which, as will be seen later with Islam, set the terms for the future accommodation of other religions with the state.