

Table of Contents

- ***Court rules that MIVILUDES has defamed 'Tradition, Family and Property'***
 - ***France outcry over Muslim schoolgirl's skirt ban***
 - ***A French Muslim girl was kicked out of class because her skirt was too long***
 - ***Religious conflict on rise in French workplaces***
 - ***Quest for a "French Islam" goes to the classroom***
 - ***An administrative court recognizes the right for Jehovah's Witnesses in prison to be visited by their chaplains***
 - ***France to double number of Islamic university courses***
 - ***France debates ban on Muslim veils in universities***
 - ***Too many people have shrugged their shoulders at "just another anti-Semitic incident"...***
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Court rules that MIVILUDES has defamed 'Tradition, Family and Property'

HRWF (14.07.2015) - On 2nd July, the Court of Appeals in Paris upheld an earlier judgement that MIVILUDES be found guilty of defamation against the French Society for the Defence of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP). MIVILUDES is the acronym for the French government's inter-ministerial agency that monitors and reports on what it considers to be harmful religious movements and organisations.

'The case is on-going as the administrative judge still needs to determine damages and interests to be paid to TFP by the State,' announced the association. 'In fact, the Appeals Court had to consider whether Georges Fenech, the president of MIVILUDES at the time, was himself responsible for the defamation and could be given him the benefit of the doubt, The problem was in his operating MIVILUDES.'

The TFP is an international lay Catholic association that was founded in 1960 to defend 'traditional Christian values.' The association's lawyer, Gérard Ducrey, argued that the French government had acted like 'a new Inquisition' and 'a perversion of secularism that violates the spirit of the Republic.'

<http://www.coordiap.com/press2994-miviludes-diffame-tradition-famille-propriete.htm>

France outcry over Muslim schoolgirl's skirt ban

BBC News (29.04.2015) <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32510606> - France is facing a fresh backlash against its strict secular policy after it emerged a 15-year-old Muslim girl was sent home from school because she was wearing a long black skirt.

The student, named as Sarah, was twice blocked from classes because the principal said her skirt broke a ban on religious signs in schools.

The girl removed her headscarf but said the skirt was not a religious symbol.

The case has provoked angry reactions online.

The hashtag [#JePorteMaJupeCommeJeVeux](#), or "I wear my skirt how I want to" has had more than 45,000 tweets since Tuesday.

Extreme interpretations

The schoolgirl was sent home in Charleville-Mezieres in the northern Champagne-Ardenne region twice in April, according to reports.

Nicolas Cadene, an official advising the prime minister on secular issues, has said that wearing a long black skirt to school does not break the rules.

A ban on Muslim headscarves and other "conspicuous" religious symbols at state schools was introduced in 2004, and widely welcomed in a country where the separation of state and religion is enshrined in law.

"The 2004 law says that symbols and clothing worn to show religious affiliation are prohibited," Mr Cadene told [Buzzfeed France \(in French\)](#).

"We obviously think of the veil, the kippah, a large cross, a Sikh turban... A black skirt do not contravene the law."

But critics say some schools are increasingly imposing extreme interpretations of the ban.

Eight Muslim students were told to change by their school in Montpellier when they arrived in long skirts last month, local media say.

The Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) said they had recorded nearly 130 similar incidents in the country last year.

In 2011 France became the first European country to ban the full-face Islamic veil - the niqab - in public places.

Most of the population - including most Muslims - agree with the government when it describes the face-covering veil as an affront to society's values. Critics - many outside France - say it is a violation of individual liberties.

The European Court of Human Rights upheld the ban last July after it was challenged by a 24-year-old French woman, who argued that it violated her freedom of religion and expression.

France has about five million Muslims - the largest Muslim minority in Western Europe - but it is thought only about 2,000 women wear full veils.

A French Muslim girl was kicked out of class because her skirt was too long

The Washington Post (29.04.2015) - According to French media reports, a 15-year-old French Muslim girl was banned from her class twice for wearing a skirt that was too long, and therefore supposedly a conspicuous display of religion. France's state secularism has led to very strict laws prohibiting students from wearing overtly religious symbols in institutions of education.

The student, identified as Sarah, already apparently removed her headscarf before entering the school, in accordance with French law. But her long skirt was deemed a "provocation," and potential act of protest.

"The girl was not excluded, she was asked to come back with a neutral outfit," a local official in the northeastern French town of Charleville-Mezieres, near the border with Belgium, told the AFP.

The news sparked an outcry on social media, with commentators remarking on the hypocrisy and bigotry lurking beneath Sarah's treatment. On Twitter, the hashtag #JePorteMaJuppeCommeJeVeux ("I wear my skirt as I like") trended.

One Twitter user set Sarah's skirt against those worn by three other white public figures:

Others made gestures to the United States:

The user above quips that Michelle Obama's dress is "unworthy of the Republic."

Critics of France's secularist laws in schools say they often thinly conceal a widespread bias against Muslims and immigrants in French society. Studies have revealed how Muslims face systematic discrimination on the basis of their race, creed and culture.

Speaking to local newspaper L'Ardennais, Sarah said that her skirt was "nothing special, it's very simple, there's nothing conspicuous. There is no religious sign whatsoever."

Religious conflict on rise in French workplaces

France may officially be a secular country but the question of religion in the workplace is becoming more and more significant and it is increasingly the source of conflicts in offices, a new survey has found

The Local (24.04.2015) <http://www.thelocal.fr/20150424/religious-conflict-on-rise-in-french-workplace> - According to the study, published earlier this week by the Observatory for Religion in the Workplace and the Randstad Institute, the number of religious conflicts in the workplace has doubled in the past year.

Of those questioned, six percent said that religion had caused conflict in the workplace, compared with three percent in 2014, [Le Figaro reported](#).

Meanwhile, almost a quarter of managers (23 percent) said they were regularly confronted with religious issues in the workplace. This is almost double the figure from the previous year, at 12 percent.

Sources of religious conflict included the wearing of religious symbols (17 percent), demanding more flexible working hours (12 percent), requesting time off for religious holidays (19 percent) or refusing to work with a woman (in four percent of cases).

The natures of the conflicts themselves ranged from "accusations of racism and discrimination, the questioning of the legitimacy of the **company** or the manager to constrain religious practice and the refusal to talk," the report said.

According to the study the rise in religious conflicts is due to a change in employees' attitudes.

"Employees are less hesitant about making requests to their superiors in line with their beliefs and religious practices," the study said.

In 2010, the wearing of the full Muslim face veil, known as the niqab or buqa was banned in public places and back in 2004 a law was passed prohibiting the wearing or open display of religious symbols in all French schools.

The bans have been challenged in various courts over the years but have so far remained in place.

The issue of whether the ban should be extended to university students and indeed all work places regularly rears its head.

In November 2013 an appeal court in France upheld the decision by a Paris nursery school to sack an assistant who refused to take off her veil at work.

And in July last year the European Court of Human Rights ruled France's ban on the wearing of the full-face veil in public does not violate the human rights of Muslim women. Judges said the law was justified on the grounds of social cohesion.

Quest for a "French Islam" goes to the classroom

Reuters (18.03.2015) - In a classroom of the Catholic University of Paris, overlooking the dome of a 17th century church, three Muslim women from Algeria are poring over the origins of the word "secularism".

It is through weekly meetings in this unlikely setting and others that France – a strictly secular state with a Christian majority – hopes to train the nearly 2,000 imams and would-be Muslim chaplains, like these women, spreading the word to some 5 million Muslims, its largest minority.

Encouraging them towards a more moderate "French" Islam is an old idea that has again surfaced in the wake of the Paris attacks by Islamist militants that killed 17 people in January.

To combat radicalisation, the Socialist government of Francois Hollande hopes to try to guide the way Islam is taught – a tricky proposal in a country in which secularism is a cherished tradition and one in which Muslim issues, from the head scarf to halal food, are often controversial.

"It's an effort towards moderate Islam," said Kamel Kabtane, rector of Lyon's Grand Mosque, which hosts such a programme. "You can't deliver the same message here as in Kabul or Mali."

But complicating the task is the undefined nature of what a "French" Islam could be, given the myriad interpretations of Islam and cultures making up the fabric of Muslims in France.

Under the plan, courses on "Multiculturalism, Secularism and Religion" such as that taught at the Catholic University of Paris (ICP) and the University of Strasbourg will double from six to 12 throughout France.

They will eventually become compulsory for the country's 200-odd Muslim chaplains, who work in hospitals, prisons and the army, with the state partly paying for it.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls visited the Grand Mosque in Strasbourg this month, saying he wanted to attack "everything that holds back a French Islam".

"We need French chaplains and imams, French-speaking, who learn French, who love France. And who adhere to its values. And also French financing," Valls said, underlining that the government would not step into theological questions.

Law and customs

A French focus is key, given that only 25-30 percent of practicing imams in France are French nationals, with hundreds of others dispatched on assignments by Turkey, Algeria and Morocco, according to a government study published in July.

Many do not speak French and have no knowledge of French law or customs, obstacles that the training is geared to address.

About 200 people from all faiths, not just Muslims, have already participated in the government-sponsored programme that dates from 2008. Some 1,800 imams are practising in France in the approximately 2,500 mosques or prayer rooms.

"There is no miracle cure (to radicalisation)," said ICP rector Philippe Bordeyne. "But the long-term work is to train religious leaders so they're more at ease in society ... capable of combating prejudices, helping to fight radicalisation."

The fact that Islam has no central authority as Catholicism does with the pope, together with the traditional reluctance of French officials to deal with religious matters, has led to rival versions of the faith by different imams.

Previous attempts to encourage a moderate Islam in France have been unsuccessful. In 2003, ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy, then interior minister, created the French Muslim Council to help address issues such as imam training, mosque building and regulating halal slaughter. But the council has proved ineffective due to divisions between rival mosque networks.

"Everyone does his own Islam his own way," the head of the council arm in Brittany, Mohamed Zaidouni, told parliament this month. Zaidouni called for a central theological unit, possibly within the council, to develop a theology adapted to France.

The government is expected to submit proposals by mid-June on how to overhaul the council to make it more effective.

Educators, such as sociologist and former ICP teacher Olivier Bobineau, question whether a university setting with its French-language requirement is the right forum to reach imams, many of whom work in poor suburbs inhabited by immigrants.

"Instead of making imams come, maybe we should go to them, to the heart of the mosques, to be welcomed and work with them."

An administrative court recognizes the right for Jehovah's Witnesses in prison to be visited by their chaplains

HRWF (18.03.2015) – On 5th March, the administrative court of Limoges condemned the French state to pay 3000 EUR to a Jehovah's Witness detained at the prison of Châteauroux. The applicant had complained that due to his detention conditions he had been deprived of the right to freely practice his religion. He had filed a complaint against the state because he had not been allowed to get the visit of a chaplain of his religion and to go to the visiting room with religious publications. According to him, his freedom of religion had been impeded by this prohibition.

In its decision, the court estimated that between 2006 and 2009, the plaintiff had been deprived of the right to be assisted by a certified chaplain (*) during his detention. He could be visited by a spiritual assistant but in his capacity of "friend" and not as a "religious minister", according to the decision of the court. At the hearing of 19th February, the representative of the Ministry of Justice argued that "no supra-national standard forces the prison administration to offer all detainees the possibility to have access to a representative of their religion."

The administrative court estimated that the request of the prisoner was to be related to the code of criminal procedure which says that « each detainee must be able to fulfill his religious, moral or spiritual needs », but also to the European Convention on Human Rights which states that "the freedom to manifest one's religion cannot be impeded by any restriction" as it is part of freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

(*) Jehovah's Witnesses chaplains are volunteers and have given up the privilege of their status to be paid by the state.

France to double number of Islamic university courses

France 24 (03.03.2015) - French Prime Minister Manuel Valls on Tuesday announced that the state would finance double the number of university courses on Islam in a bid to stop the influence of foreign funding of training of French imams.

In a speech in the eastern French city of Strasbourg, Valls said that improving home-grown Islamic education was essential to defeating the ignorance that makes "Islamist extremism and the far right feed off each other".

His speech follows January's Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks and comes amid concern about the influence of radical foreign imams on Muslims in France, which has Western Europe's biggest Muslim community.

The Socialist government is also worried about the increasing popularity of the anti-immigration and anti-Europe National Front party, which is coming top of the polls ahead of regional elections due to take place later this month.

"The rise of far-right populist politics, in Europe as well as in our own country, feeds directly off the rise of jihadism, terrorism and radical extremism," he said. "It is a situation that puts our democracy, our society and our capacity to live together in extreme jeopardy."

Valls said he wanted more imams and other religious figures, such as prison chaplains, who have been trained abroad to "undergo more training in France, to speak French fluently and to understand the concept of secularism" that is a core pillar of French Republican values.

There are currently six universities in France offering courses in Islamic studies and theology. Valls said he wanted to double that number to 12 and that the courses would be free.

"The only response to the dangers that we face is the French Republic," Valls said. "This means the acceptance of the secular state, improving education, universities, understanding and intelligence."

"But there will be no laws, decrees or government directives to define what Islam means," Valls said. "The French state will never attempt to take control of a religion."

France debates ban on Muslim veils in universities

France 24 (16.02.2015) - The debate over wearing veils at public universities has resurfaced after reports of professors singling out women for wearing hijabs. Both politicians and the public are struggling to find a balance between French secularism and religious tolerance.

The issue of whether to let women wear scarves at university came into the spotlight earlier this month when a professor at the Paris XIII university said that he did not support "religious symbols in public places", referring to a young woman wearing a hijab in his class. The professor was demoted for his comments.

In September, a professor at the Sorbonne asked a student if she would continue wearing "that thing" in class, indicating the young woman's headscarf. The president of the Sorbonne later apologised for the professor's comments.

The issues of religion and immigration has become even more pertinent in France after a series of attacks last month carried out by Muslim immigrants to France. In the aftermath of the attacks, which left 20 dead including the attackers, the question of what it means to be a French Muslim or both French and Jewish is on many people's minds. In a recent speech at the Sorbonne, French President François Hollande called for a "secular teaching of religion" and said that France's official secularism – or *laïcité* – "does not mean forgetting religion, or indeed being in conflict with religion".

Last week, former French president Nicolas Sarkozy's political party, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), came out in support of even more restrictive measures on religious symbols in French public spaces, including an outright ban on veils in universities. This would be in addition to the ban already in place at public primary and secondary schools.

Some experts say that this is just a way for Sarkozy to appear more appealing to an electorate that may be increasingly wary of minority communities.

"This is political pandering to the electorate that might vote for the (far-right) National Front," said John Bowen, a professor of anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis, who specializes in the study of Islam.

New questions over integration

With the French presidential elections approaching and France still reeling after a series of attacks last month, new questions have arisen over how France integrates and assimilates its immigrant communities.

Party leader Marine le Pen's National Front, which uses the slogan "The French Come First", is becoming increasingly popular, and Sarkozy and the UMP are looking for ways to lure away some of her supporters.

Lydia Guirous, who is responsible for secular affairs at the UMP and author of the book "God is great and so is the Republic" ("Allah est Grand et la République aussi"), said in a press release that, "Secularism doesn't have to stop at the university doors."

"Like public schools, public universities need to be sanctified and need to be neutral," said Guirous.

Home to about five million Muslims, the largest community in continental Europe, France has a contentious history with the hijab, the head covering worn by some Muslim women. In 2004, the country passed a law banning the hijab in state schools and in 2005 it passed a law banning the full Muslim veil.

Many saw it as an attack against freedom of expression and religious tolerance, while others saw it as a move aimed at promoting gender equality.

Sarkozy has made clear in the past his support for more restrictive measures concerning hijabs. In 2009, he stated that the full Muslim face covering, or niqab, is "not welcome" in the country. More recently, he declared that the UMP would have a meeting to discuss Islam.

'Imbecilic proposal'

Bowen says that the republic's ideal of maintaining secularism is often misinterpreted and that the idea of a ban on veils at the university level is "insulting".

"This is another in a series of moves drawing symbolic boundaries, saying, 'You may be perfect citizens, but we'll never stop reminding you that you're not totally integrated'," said Bowen.

But Bowen says measures like this will only reinforce the idea that minorities should remain among their own kind, rather than assimilating into the larger French community.

"There is no Muslim community, really. They all have different lives. But they are made into a community when the government creates these laws," he said.

"The effect of these laws is to say to Muslims who are doing what they are supposed to be doing that, 'You're not real citizens'."

Michel Tubiana, a lawyer and former president of the French Human Rights League, says he is against the idea.

"It's an imbecilic proposal," he said, particularly because it deals with "adult students".

"Secularism doesn't apply to university students, rather to the [policies of] professors and the university itself," he said.

Too many people have shrugged their shoulders at "just another anti-Semitic incident"...

CEJI/ London Evening Standard (14.01.2015)

<http://www.standard.co.uk/comment/letters/letters-to-the-editor-main-parties-sums-dont-add-up-9976075.html> - The growing threat of anti-Semitism in France (and Belgium) is not news, but too many people have shrugged their shoulders at "just another anti-Semitic incident". The link between the attack on Charlie Hebdo and the kosher supermarket highlight that anti-Semitism is only one part of a war against the values of the Enlightenment. This is an opportunity to realise that the fate and security of all of Europe's peoples, minorities and majorities, are interdependent.

The threat which we all face is extremism leading to hate crime, violence and terrorism. Security measures are critical, but they are not offering solutions. To prevent and counteract the rise of extremisms we must address the roots which lie in radical ideologies and their propagation. European soil is fertile for planting and pollinating anger, frustration and fear amongst people. We see this in the rise of far-right ideologies as well as the intense recruitment of jihadists.

Rallying together under the banner of human rights is all well and good, but we must also take our collective responsibility for the long-term. Within and between communities, as well as in the wider society in which we live, we need a systemic approach to community cohesion and youth empowerment that prevents the spread of radical ideologies.

Here in the Francophone part of Europe, we can learn from our British counterparts who have developed multi-stakeholder task forces to deal with these issues. There are certainly still community tensions, but there are also leaders within Jewish and Muslim communities, among others, who readily take a public stand in solidarity against anti-Jewish or anti-Muslim incidents. We need more such cooperation on the Continent.

Robin Sclafani, director, CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe
