



# NEW KNOWLEDGE about France

This briefing note highlights NEW KNOWLEDGE about France.  
We present here new knowledge and key messages for policy makers and civil society.

On-going project

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## ACCOMMODATING ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN FRANCE

France is one of the first nation states to establish the principles of fundamental human rights and universalistic citizenship. France has also been one of the oldest countries of immigration, with significant flows of immigrants diversifying its demographic composition particularly since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The French republican model has privileged the primacy of civic nationalism rooted in the 1789 Revolution and its aftermath. Thus, just as laïcité has become a cornerstone of French citizenship, so too the use of categories or statistical tools to take account of the country's ethnic and racial diversity has long been resisted.

In the ACCEPT PLURALISM project, we investigated how ethnic, religious and cultural diversity is accommodated in two very important areas: **education** and **political life**.

Through our empirical research, we focused on the concept of **laïcité** in addressing issues pertaining to tolerance to diversity in France, and more specifically religious diversity. Laïcité is the French understanding of secularism that strictly confines religious matters to the private sphere: religious activities are not to be financed by the state, nor are religious expressions supposed to be expressed by state agents or in state-funded institutions (such as public schools).

The adoption of what can be called, “the language of laïcité” to deal with religious diversity has several implications:

- First, the reference to laïcité is a way to recall the law and the necessity to confine religious expressions to the private sphere in the French context. This came as most obvious in the response to religious diversity in French schools. The 2004 law banning the conspicuous display of religious signs in schools reminds all students of the necessity to keep their religious faith outside of the education sphere (the law is limited to state-funded public schools and secondary education, though). **The confinement of religious expressions to the private sphere is understood as a necessary condition to foster tolerance and protect the freedom of belief or disbelief.** The interviews we conducted with **teachers, school staff and participant observation in the classroom demonstrated that individuals share this conviction.**
- Second, there is a tendency to use the term laïcité to discuss the place of Islam in France. In this context, we identified some **intolerant uses of the term laïcité**. When laïcité is used to restrict religious practices or the expression of religious beliefs that are not extending to the

public sphere, it goes beyond the limit of the law and impeaches the freedom of belief. Instances of religious discrimination may occur.

- Third, **laïcité can also serve as a ground for mobilization. Minority groups, which might be the target of religious discrimination, articulate their demands in terms of laïcité.** Through this discourse they can make themselves audible to the rest of the French society. Mainly, however, **it is a way to ask to be treated as equal citizen. Religious minorities are not asking for more room to express their religious affiliation but to be given as much space as majority religions in France.** It is a claim for equality and not specificity. One of the most contentious topics to emerge is the way Catholicism is framed as a cultural affiliation in France therefore legitimizing its presence in various institutions (school holidays in the academic calendar, for instance). Religious minorities ask that Catholicism be given as little room as other religious beliefs.

The language of laïcité has thus offered room to intolerant discourses and practices towards Islam in France. However, Muslim groups are reclaiming the concept of laïcité, in order to combat discrimination and ask to be treated equally.

#### Evaluation of discourses and practices of tolerance in our case studies:

	Institutional and legal framework	Practical situation	Public discourses
<b>Religious diversity in schools</b>	Tolerance through the implementation of laïcité	A two-tier laïcité: more room is allocated for the expression of the majority religion (Catholicism)	Suspicion towards Muslim claims (hallal meat, Ramadan and absence on the day of Aïd)
<b>Curriculum extension with inclusion of immigration history</b>	Acceptance	The recognition of immigration can lead to instances of ethnic ascription of pupils	The history curriculum should be more inclusive of diversity while remaining predominantly universalist & republican
<b>Political participation of Muslim people</b>	There is no recognition of religious minority in politics	Muslim organisations are mobilised to defend Muslim people against discrimination	Muslim organisations are accepted as long as they articulate their claim in terms of laïcité

## TOLERANCE IN FRENCH SCHOOLS & THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LAICITE

Empirical research reveals an important breach between the principles and the situation in the classroom.

- In principle, the philosophical objective of laïcité is to guarantee the neutrality of French public schools. This leads to the teaching of civic education classes in secondary and high schools, and is understood as guiding the 2004 law banning the conspicuous display of religious signs in schools. Interviews with teachers, school staff and participant observation in the classroom demonstrated that **individuals share a common belief in laïcité as a mean to foster tolerance among the school population.**
- In practice, **teachers and pupils contend that a disproportional room is allocated to Catholicism.** Teachers report questions or complaints from pupils that, albeit secular, French schools are closed on Catholic holidays.

As a result, there is a sense that a two-tier laïcité applies that is a threat to the Republican promise of equal treatment, regardless of pupils' origin or religion.

## TOLERANCE IN FRENCH SCHOOLS & THE INCLUSION OF IMMIGRATION IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

In 2008 it was decided that the French national history curriculum would include chapters on immigration. This was a pro-active measure to deal with the challenge of diversity and has been effective since 2011.

Empirical research has revealed an anxiety on how these new chapters may be taught:

- The concern was raised that this new addition to the curriculum should not only be taught to pupils of immigrant background for fear to assign them specific traits and undermining the Republican principle of equal treatment regardless of ethnic origin.
- Moreover, it was noted that the topic of immigration should not be associated in the way it is taught with current events but rather, **it should be approached as a regular topic of history** (In 1876, already 4% of the population were foreign-born).

## NEW KNOWLEDGEN ON TOLERANCE IN FRENCH POLITICAL LIFE

Although Muslims, in general, may be reluctant to adopt the notion of laïcité (perceived as anti-religious and used to restrict their practices), **Muslim activists have been increasingly identifying laïcité as a useful principle with which to protect their religious beliefs.**

**Claims of laïcité on the part of minority activists are actually claims for equality and against discrimination.** Central to their mobilisation is the idea that laïcité tends to be diverted from its legal meaning when it is used to discriminate against Muslims. As a result, organisations usually provide legal information about laïcité on their website and make it central to their mobilisation.

The initial reaction to the first headscarf affair of 1989 was essential in linking the topic of Islam with laïcité and feminism in France and with the growing stigmatisation of Islam and the systematic use of laïcité to pass laws restricting the practice of Islam. Some defenders of laïcité and feminist activists denounced an intolerant interpretation of laïcité. This gave more strength and legitimacy to the mobilisation of Muslim activists.

Mobilisation under the banner of laïcité for the defence of their interests, suggests the ability of Muslim activists to frame their political positions in accordance with the mainstream standards of French political life.

However, beyond the fight against discrimination and the reassessment of their commitment to laïcité, organisations are also negotiating their identity as Muslims in a post-migration society. The fact that they emphasise the egalitarian dimension of laïcité is evidence that the issue is not only about the protection of religious freedom but also about the acceptance of Muslim citizens in France. Therefore, **minority claims of laïcité are not only about toleration. They are claims for the acceptance of Muslims as equal citizens in France.**

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

We therefore argue that:

- At the national level, there is a need to reassess laïcité in view of its core principles, i.e. of equality and neutrality towards religious beliefs.
- At the local level, there is a need to acknowledge that some room is allocated to Catholic practices and a decision to either equalize downward (make less accommodation to Catholic practices) or equalize upward (make as much accommodation to Catholic practices, as Jewish, Protestant or Muslim practices).
- There should be an awareness of the necessity to recognize immigration history as a legitimate topic of historical inquiry.
- Teachers should be trained to incorporate pedagogical resources that are specific to immigration history.
- Policy makers should take legislative measures recognising the need to protect citizens from religious discrimination

## FURTHER READINGS

To read more on the research findings presented here, see:

### **Concepts and Practices of Tolerance in France**

By Riva Kastoryano and Angéline Escafré-Dublet (CERI Sciences Po', Paris)

Download your copy from:

<http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/23254>

Other relevant publications include:

### **2012/02.2. Handbook on Tolerance and Diversity in Europe**

Anna Triandafyllidou (EUI)

Download your copy from:

<http://www.accept-pluralism.eu/Research/ProjectReports/Handbook.aspx>

## PROJECT IDENTITY

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>ACCEPT PLURALISM</b>
<b>Title</b>	<b>Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe</b>
<b>Short Description</b>	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
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<b>Web site</b>	<a href="http://www.accept-pluralism.eu">www.accept-pluralism.eu</a>
<b>Duration</b>	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
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<b>EU contribution</b>	2,600,230 Euro
<b>Consortium</b>	17 partners (15 countries)
<b>Coordinator</b>	European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
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