

## The French Identity Crisis: **Debate Intensifies after the Attacks**

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What makes France French, and does French national identity have a future? What can and should be the role of religion in French society? And does France need new rules for peaceful coexistence within the community? These are the three fundamental questions shaping the discussion on collective identity and social cohesion, which was reignited by the January 2015 attacks on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher supermarket in Paris.

Collective identity and social cohesion are hot political topics; in France, the attacks in Paris on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher supermarket this January have reignited discussion on these questions. Ten years after violent unrest erupted in French suburbs, public attention is once more focused on French integration policy, on the resilience of the much invoked “republican model,” and on the place of Islam in France.<sup>1</sup> As a result, many politicians and intellectuals are invoking such classic republican concepts as the principle of *laïcité* – the French term for state secularism and the separation of church and state. But even if many of the answers are not new, the January attacks have led to an increased collective awareness and to profound reflection.

In the months after millions of citizens responded to the attacks by taking part in the “march against terror” on January 11, 2015, numerous experts, politicians, and representatives of civil society have been involved in a debate in France that is as lively as it is controversial. Topics under discussion include the danger that young Muslim men and women are being radicalized, the fight against discrimination of all kinds, and the need for new forms of social participation. The outcome of the debate is open; it is possible that it will be rejected, but in “giving release to the unspoken,”<sup>2</sup> it also opens up the opportunity for a more honest and more topical definition of community life in France.

This analysis examines the three fundamental questions that have shaped discussion since the attacks: What makes France French – and does French national identity have a future? What can and should be the role of religion in French society? And does France need new rules for peaceful community coexistence?

### **What Makes France French – and Does French National Identity Have a Future?**

French society has been dealing with the question of national identity for years. The French identity crisis is nothing new. Certainly by the mid-1980s at the latest, when the first delegates from the radical right party Front National (FN) were elected to the *Assemblée nationale*, it became clear that large swathes of French society felt threatened by the immigration issue. The admission to the country of the dependents of immigrants following the recruitment ban in the 1970s triggered feelings of insecurity, and the FN was able to take advantage of such fears in the population. In response, the popular parties, too, felt compelled to raise questions of collective identity, although in the early years the focus was on the national-

ity law (*code de la nationalité*). The FN has been building its success on the French identity crisis ever since.

Twenty years later, questions of identity continued to play a major role in French politics, as was evident in the 2007 presidential election campaign, when discussion raged over Islam and halal meat in school canteens. During the campaign, the conservative candidate Nicolas Sarkozy caused quite a stir with his electoral promise to establish a ministry of national identity – a promise that he implemented after his election by establishing a ministry of immigration, integration, and national identity. The often desperate quest for specific “French” characteristics reflects the disorientation felt by people who have lost their traditional points of reference in the course of European integration (national borders and currency, the role of central government, and the prominence of the French language). Beyond the European horizon, that quest is an expression of the insecurity that accompanies globalization, and of the fear of a homogenous world in which France no longer enjoys special status.

In 2011, Renaud Camus, a writer with FN sympathies, provided one incendiary explanation of many of the fears circulating in France and set the tone for the national identity debate in the years that followed.<sup>3</sup> His concept of the “*grand remplacement*” (great replacement) contends that the French population is gradually being replaced by Maghrebis and Africans – and that this process will lead to the eventual disappearance of the European elements of the population. For Camus, this organized *remplacement* is only possible because globalization eliminates all national, cultural, and ethnic characteristics, and that people are replaceable as a result. This theory has been the subject of much controversy and is not shared by all Front National politicians. (Party leader, Marine Le Pen, for example, dissociated herself from Camus’s theory by refuting the organized aspect of the process that he describes.) Nevertheless, his core theory of “replacement” resonates in some parts of French society and politics, even outside of radical right-wing circles – within the conservative party, for instance. The sense of looming threat causes many to overlook the fact that there has never been such a thing as a fixed French identity and that national identity in France has changed many times over the years, among other things as a result of various phases of immigration.

Certainly, Camus’s arguments are expressed by a minority. At the same time they constitute the tip of the iceberg. In public debate, a range of vague fears can be perceived – fears that are deeply anchored in society and that the FN has been systematically and successfully playing on for years. Up until now, France’s other parties have

remained reticent in their treatment of such topics. Moreover, they have left the now taboo concept of “nation” to the FN and replaced it with that of “republic.” There is general consensus on the word *république*. This spring Nicolas Sarkozy was able to change the name of the old UMP party to Les Républicains – the Republicans. At the same time, however, the term has come to stand for both everything and nothing.<sup>4</sup>

The political scientist Laurent Bouvet ascribes the success of the FN to the fact that it is the only party that dares to broach these taboo issues of national identity.<sup>5</sup> For Bouvet, it is not only social and economic problems, but also – and above all – feelings of insecurity concerning national identity that contribute to the malaise in French society. Under the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy, there were, it is true, some attempts at reappraisal in this area. For instance, his minister of immigration, integration, and national identity launched a *grand débat* (large public debate) on national identity. But the populist approach, which aimed, among other things, to win FN voters back to the conservative camp, was so blatant that it could not contribute to an objective discussion, and instead led to further tensions.

The attacks of January 2015 brought about a new awareness. Since then, civil society actors and intellectuals have demanded more honesty in the debate on coexistence within the community. The demonstrations of January 10–11, 2015, in which an estimated four million people took part all over France, are likewise the sign of a collective need for consolidation. Equally important is the need to share pride with other fellow citizens in being part of the French nation. From this perspective, the “republican march” has become a symbol of a new awareness of national belonging – an awareness, incidentally, that is not shared by everyone, as evidenced by the resonance of the counter-slogan “*Je ne suis pas Charlie*.”<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, what constitutes national identity is not always clearly defined. In a survey conducted in 2009, most respondents named the French language, the Republic, and the *tricolore* as very important aspects of French national identity (80, 64, and 63 percent respectively).<sup>7</sup> Religion was not mentioned in the study.

## What Can and Should be the Role of Religion in French Society?

Religion does not in general play a primary role in the identity debate in France. Although some of those who demonstrated against same-sex marriage in 2013 invoked Christian values in their opposition to the bill, the arguments advocated on the part of this “*manifest pour tous*”

were also – and, indeed, overwhelmingly – of a nonreligious character.<sup>8</sup> Unlike some European nations, France does not see itself as a Christian country and does not debate the issue of its “Christian roots.”

In French public schools, moreover, religion is not a subject on the curriculum, unlike philosophy, which is an obligatory subject in all lycées. Religious studies are only touched on peripherally within the history, literature, and art curricula – and only since 2005. This situation could change: although the Green senator Esther Benbassa and her European colleague Jean-René Lecerf met with substantial opposition when they advised introducing religious studies into the school timetable in 2014, their recommendation has – after the terrorist attacks of January – been taken up by public figures in science and politics.

For decades it was assumed that there was no future for religion in French society. Because of this, many have experienced the growing presence of Islam in the public sphere in the last twenty years as a “brutal challenge and a destabilizing shock”<sup>9</sup> – all the more so, as the influence of Christian values in France has not been emphasized during the Third Republic. As a result of the attacks, religion has become altogether more visible. The brouhaha surrounding the latest book by Emmanuel Todd, which exhorts the French to “take religion seriously,”<sup>10</sup> shows how much remains unspoken in the traditional self-perception of French society.

So far, however, it has more often been the secular principle that has been invoked in public debate on identity and community life; in the previously cited survey, it is, at 61 percent, the fourth most mentioned aspect of national identity,<sup>11</sup> and in a poll conducted in January 2015 soon after the attacks, *laïcité* was rated the most important of all republican principles – even above universal suffrage, and far above the association law.<sup>12</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that one of the first measures taken by the ministry of education after the attacks was to train teachers in questions of secularism and civic education so that they could pass on these values in class.

Beneath the surface of this apparent consensus, however, different groups have widely differing understandings of secularism, as the recent poll also shows:

- A first liberal interpretation – still held by a majority (51 percent), but beginning to lose ground and more likely to be found on the left – invokes the freedom of all citizens to practice their religion, or indeed not to belong to any religion at all. This interpretation is closely connected with the demand for tolerance and freedom of speech, which makes it acceptable to criticize religion in public. The atheist editorial team of Charlie Hebdo

is made up of typical representatives of this school of thought.

- A more restrictive interpretation (25 percent), which tends to meet with the approval of conservative voters – and even more so with that of voters on the radical right – understands the principle of secularism on the other hand as a ban on the expression of personal religious affiliation. According to this stance, all religious symbols should be banned from the public sphere, as is already the case with the headscarf in schools. In this second group, the case for secularism can be an expression of Islamophobia.
- A third position (14 percent), which has gained ground since the January attacks and is supported across various parties, is the rejection of any form of communitarianism – that is, the formation of segregated communities according to certain (especially cultural) criteria. This position reflects the fear of social fragmentation and of a threat to national unity. France is a nation that likes to present itself as an “indivisible republic,” and questions of identity such as religious affiliation, origin, or sexual orientation are widely regarded as private matters, irrelevant to an individual’s status as a citizen. Because cultural and religious differences are suspected to lead to the formation of segregated communities, they are often perceived as a threat to social cohesion. Such concerns are making themselves increasingly felt in public debate.

In this context, the place of Islam in France is a hotly discussed topic – and not just since the attacks. In a survey conducted in 2013, 63 percent of respondents stated that the values of Islam were irreconcilable with those of French society.<sup>13</sup> This opinion was overrepresented among supporters of the FN (91 percent) and the conservative UMP (84 percent), but a considerable number of Socialists (49 percent) and Greens (39 percent) also proved critical of Islam. Interestingly, January’s attacks did not strengthen this stance – on the contrary. By the end of January, “only” 51 percent of respondents believed in the irreconcilability of French and Muslim values. One possible reason for this shift was the clarity with which prominent representatives of Islam condemned the acts of violence. If, however, the overall appraisal within France of Islam remains unchanged, it risks resulting in the general stigmatization of Muslims, and could lead to a certain isolation among previously integrated Muslim citizens.

Over and above the question of “values” and whether or not they can be reconciled with the “republican model,” the danger of the radicalization of Muslim youth is also fiercely debated in France – not just in response to the attacks, but also, for instance, in response to the Syr-

ian conflict. There is general consensus that to prevent radicalization, it is necessary to create the conditions for an *islam de France* (a French Islam). A forum for dialogue between the state and representatives of Islam was established as early as 2003,<sup>14</sup> but the demand for a French Islam is more concerned with measures such as financing mosques and training imams and mullahs to provide pastoral care in prisons and in the military – training that, at the request of the government, is to take place in France and to contain modules on secularism and French law.

In addition, an investigating committee of the *Assemblée nationale* has addressed the issue of jihadi terrorism. In the report, which was presented in early June, committee members criticized significant shortcomings in the fight against the terrorist threat and posed ten recommendations to the government. They make an urgent plea for reinforcing administrative and legal structures in order, among other things, to combat radicalization in prisons more effectively. Since the political class feels a great sense of urgency on the matter, these recommendations were supported across parties. In late June a law was approved to facilitate the access of intelligence services to communication data.

### Does France Need New Rules for Peaceful Community Coexistence?

France has a long history of immigration dating back to the second half of the 19th century. Unlike in Germany, there has never been any question that France is a country of immigration; the only question has been what form immigration policy – and notably integration policy – should take. Of France's 65 million inhabitants, 3.9 million are foreigners, mainly from Africa or from EU countries (about 40 percent each), while 2.3 million are French people who have been naturalized or were born abroad.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, religious diversity is particularly marked in France; there are more citizens of Muslim faith living in France than in any other European country (6 million, of which a third are religious). There are also more citizens of Jewish faith (600,000).

This is currently creating certain tensions: according to a report by the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights, the number of anti-Semitic offenses in France almost doubled in the first half of 2014. Anti-Muslim offenses, of which 80 percent are targeted at women, also increased during the same period, as did homophobic crimes. The commissioner for human rights is not alone in expressing concern at the significant increase in "anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and homophobic crimes" in recent years;<sup>16</sup> the French executive, too, is aware of the problem.

Thus, early in 2015, president François Hollande declared the fight against racism and anti-Semitism a "matter of great national concern." Subsequently, in mid-April, prime minister Manuel Valls announced forty measures that included launching a communication campaign, creating a police unit to monitor hate speech on the Internet, and introducing swifter and harsher sanctions for racist and anti-Semitic offenses.

In the last ten years, anti-Semitism has been increasingly evident in France. Indeed, the number of French Jews emigrating to Israel because they feel unsafe in France has risen considerably: 7,000 citizens in 2014 – about three times as many as in 2004. There are reports in the press of young people from middle-class backgrounds concealing their Jewish identity for fear of being excluded by their schoolmates, or even attacked.<sup>17</sup> The French population does not, in fact, seem to be any more anti-Semitic than it was in previous years – on the contrary. But within French society, there are what the political scientist Dominique Reynié describes as "anti-Semitic nests."<sup>18</sup> These are to be found primarily among FN voters, who in this respect are engaging in conspicuously more radical discourse than their party leader, Le Pen. It should be noted that supporters of the radical left *Front de Gauche* are also more open to hate speech of this sort than the French mainstream.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, anti-Semitism has increased significantly in some neighborhoods, especially in banlieues with an above-average proportion of Muslims.<sup>20</sup> According to Reynié's study, Muslim respondents were two to three times more likely to hold anti-Jewish prejudices than the nationwide average; the more religious they are, the more marked these prejudices.<sup>21</sup> The Middle East conflict has contributed to this development since the onset of the Second Intifada; France provides a surface onto which the struggle can be projected. In the summer of 2014, in the course of Israel's military action in the Gaza Strip, more than 400 pro-Palestine demonstrations took place in France; anti-Jewish slogans could be heard, and violent anti-Semitic crimes were reported.

Not only anti-Semitism, but also other forms of discrimination are jeopardizing community life. A large proportion of foreigners and citizens with a migrant background complain of discrimination in day-to-day life, be it on the job market, in the search for an apartment, or when dealing with police and legal authorities. Studies that apply so-called "testing methodologies" confirm this. They frequently refer to discrimination against job applicants who have a foreign-sounding name or come from a socially disadvantaged neighborhood.<sup>22</sup> Among other things, discrimination hinders the economic integration

of the residents of socially disadvantaged suburbs. In 2012, the rate of unemployment among young people under the age of 25 from African families (including those from the Maghreb) attained 42 percent – 20 percentage points more than among young people from French or other European families. Similarly, in 2011, 44 percent of African immigrants were living below the poverty line (compared with 24.8 percent of European immigrants).<sup>23</sup>

Discrimination and Islamophobia can also lead to self-exclusion and to a retreat into traditional circles of identity that are conducive to ghettoization. According to the Islam expert Gilles Kepel, this explains the emergence of the “cultural re-Islamification” of the banlieues, which has been in evidence for about two decades.<sup>24</sup> On the basis of interviews with immigrant families in Clichy-sous-Bois and Montfermeil, Kepel concludes that an atmosphere of frustration and resignation has made it possible for Islamic proselytizing movements to gain influence and offer a collective substitute identity to residents with no sense of orientation; on the outskirts of Paris, new actors and values have gradually filled the vacuum left by the dwindling structures of the state and employment.

This situation has sparked a discussion about empowerment and civic involvement in societies and associations, but also in academic circles. The point of departure is the realization that top-down urban policy as traditionally practiced by the central government in France has a disintegrative effect. Forms of codetermination are necessary to encourage residents of the banlieues to take a more active part in their own community life – that is, to take on responsibility for themselves as individuals but also as a collective body. The association Alliance citoyenne (citizen alliance) in Grenoble has, for example, set itself the goal of bringing together citizens, cultural organizations, trade unions, and other civic actors in the city to influence public decisions on a local level.<sup>25</sup> “Voice and power to voiceless citizens” is the slogan of the advocates of this empowerment, who see it as an important step toward more democracy, civic involvement, and, ultimately, an escape from marginalization.<sup>26</sup> So far, the political reaction has been to express an interest in such initiatives but to remain guarded when it comes to implementation.

The debate about civic participation and democratic representation has, however, also evolved outside of the banlieues. France is experiencing a crisis of confidence in the representative system: members of the political elite, public institutions, and mainstream media wield less and less legitimizing power. Many citizens feel that they are no longer being heard, and this feeling is intensified by the lack of alternatives in economic and fiscal policy, especially when it comes to restructuring the budget. It is,

therefore, no coincidence that this sense of helplessness is particularly marked in “peripheral France” – the name given by geographer Christophe Guilly to those parts of the country removed from economic dynamics, whether peripheral suburbs, small or medium-sized towns, or rural areas.<sup>27</sup> Among such losers in the globalization game are a fair number of FN voters, who turn away from the established parties, because they do not find what they want on the political market.

## The Debate Goes On

In the near future, collective identity and social cohesion will continue to be the subject of controversy. Certainly, they are very likely to be key topics in the 2017 presidential election campaign. Because of the way FN dominates these issues, however, it will be difficult for moderate parties to know where to position themselves. The debate is too often encircled in taboos.

The first priority of Manuel Valls’s government is to back equal opportunity in the education system. To this purpose, the minister of education introduced reforms to collèges (middle schools) in the spring of 2015, which jeopardize such so-called “elite” aspects of education as bilingual classes (e.g. French-German), Latin, and ancient Greek. Such reforms overlook the fact that the achievement principle in the public school system is a traditional cornerstone of the Republic, which allows talented students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds to work their way up. In spite of much criticism of the “downward-leveling” effect of the reforms, the Socialist Party is giving them its full backing.

It remains unclear how the newly founded Républicains will position themselves on the issue. Party leader Sarkozy has favored a law-and-order approach, recently calling into question, for example, the *jus soli* (automatic citizenship for those born on French soil), although as president and minister of the interior he had always rejected such a move. The party might be tempted to take up the topics of nation and religion. The fact that Islam was the topic of the new party’s first closed conference in June 2015 suggests that this is indeed the case, even if the initiative itself was heavily criticized within the party’s own ranks. Much depends on the way in which this debate evolves – not just for France itself, but also for the country’s European partners. For only a France that is not overwhelmingly self-absorbed can be committed to European integration.

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## Notes

- 1 For three weeks in the fall of 2005, there were street battles between police and youths in the banlieues across the nation – triggered by the deaths of two young men while fleeing police in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois. Hundreds of public buildings were destroyed in the process. The government declared a state of emergency.
- 2 Pierre Nora, “Retour sur un événement monstre,” *Le Débat* (May–August 2015), pp. 4–10; here p. 10.
- 3 See Renaud Camus, *Le grand remplacement* (Paris, 2011).
- 4 See Shmuel Trigano, *La démission de la République: Juifs et Musulmans en France* (Paris, 2003).
- 5 Laurent Bouvet, *L'insécurité culturelle* (Paris, 2015).
- 6 In many schools, most of which were in socially disadvantaged banlieues, children and youths refused to hold a minute of silence. But it was not just in the banlieues; in Catholic circles, too, many citizens could not identify with the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons.
- 7 See the CSA survey for the newspapers *Le Parisien* and *Aujourd'hui en France*, “Les Français et l'identité nationale” (October 2009), p. 6. <[www.csa.eu/multimedia/data/sondages/data2009/opi20091029-les-francais-et-l-identite-nationale.pdf](http://www.csa.eu/multimedia/data/sondages/data2009/opi20091029-les-francais-et-l-identite-nationale.pdf)> (accessed June 12, 2015).
- 8 A wide range of interest groups took part in the mass demonstrations against same-sex marriage. The name “*Manif pour tous*” (March for Everyone) is a play on the slogan “*Mariage pour tous*” (Marriage for Everyone).
- 9 Nora, “Retour sur un événement monstre,” p. 6.
- 10 See Emmanuel Todd, *Qui est Charlie? Sociologie d'une crise religieuse* (Paris, 2015). Todd sees January's demonstrators as representatives of an educated, Catholic-leaning milieu who are out to defend their privileges and their power. The religious vacuum that is the result of the Catholic crisis leads, in his opinion, to tensions in the ruling classes and, notably, to an obsession with Islam. Prime Minister Manuel Valls responded harshly and denounced Todd's “imposture” (*Le Monde*, May 7, 2015).
- 11 See CSA survey, p. 6.
- 12 See Ifop survey for newspaper *Sud Ouest Dimanche*, “Les Français et la laïcité,” February 2015 <[www.ifop.com/media/poll/2929-1-study\\_file.pdf](http://www.ifop.com/media/poll/2929-1-study_file.pdf)> (accessed June 12, 2015).
- 13 See Harris Interactive Survey for the Institut Montaigne: “Le regard des Français sur la religion musulmane,” April 2013 <<http://personal.crocodoc.com/3gdhnQs>> (accessed June 12, 2015).
- 14 The Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM) was founded under President Nicolas Sarkozy and is regarded as the government's point of contact for specific questions concerning the Muslim religion. The umbrella organization is often criticized for not adequately representing French Muslims.
- 15 French national census 2011 <[www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg\\_id=0&ref\\_id=etrangersnat](http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=etrangersnat)> (accessed June 12, 2015).
- 16 See Council of Europe, “Report by Nils Muižnieks, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, following his Visit to France from September 22 to 26, 2014,” CommDH (2015)1, February 17, 2015 <<http://bit.ly/1FmkGZ9>> (accessed June 12, 2015).
- 17 Marion Van Renterghem, “Juif, d'Auschwitz à Charlie,” *Le Monde*, February 16, 2015.
- 18 Cf. Dominique Reynié, *L'antisémitisme dans l'opinion publique française: nouveaux éclairages*, November 2014 <[www.fondapol.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/CONF2press-Antisemitisme-DOC-6-web11h51.pdf](http://www.fondapol.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/CONF2press-Antisemitisme-DOC-6-web11h51.pdf)> (accessed June 12, 2015).
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Dominique Schnapper, “Pourquoi cette haine?” *Commentaire* 38, no. 149 (Spring 2015).
- 21 Reynié, *L'antisémitisme dans l'opinion publique française*.
- 22 Mehdi Thomas Allal, *Les discriminations* (Paris, 2015).
- 23 Pierre-Yves Cusset et al., “Jeunes issus de l'immigration: quels obstacles à leur insertion économique?” *France Stratégie*, March 2015 <[www.strategie.gouv.fr/publications/jeunes-issus-de-limmigration-obstacles-insertion-economique](http://www.strategie.gouv.fr/publications/jeunes-issus-de-limmigration-obstacles-insertion-economique)> (accessed June 12, 2015).
- 24 See Gilles Kepel, *Banlieue de la République* (Paris, 2011).
- 25 L'Alliance Citoyenne Grenobloise <<http://www.alliancecitoyenne-38.fr/1898-2>> (accessed June 12, 2015).
- 26 See Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Carole Biewener, *L'Empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice* (Paris, 2013).
- 27 Christophe Guilluy, *La France périphérique* (Paris, 2014).

