# Laïcité and atheism in France

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**Author biography**

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**Abstract**

Atheists were among the most militant supporters of *laïcité* in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They saw it as a means for curtailing the traditional power of the Catholic Church in French society. However, in recent years, the main religious groupings have come to the defence of *laïcité* as a protection for religious freedom. This article traces the changing relationship between atheism and *laïcité* in its different forms. It identifies the main groups that advocate both principles, and examines the work of recent secular thinkers who seek to offer an alternative ethical position and even an alternative spirituality. It argues that while some atheist groups still see *laïcité* as a crucial weapon in the battle against religious power, the leading atheist intellectuals are focusing instead on the personal beliefs and values of citizens, and are offering new perspectives on religion and secularism.

**Keywords**

Atheism, laïcité, secular thought, freemasonry, Catholicism

## The changing face of laïcité

*Laïcité* has been a hotly debated topic in France for the last twenty years. It is often presented as a reassertion of the 1905 principles for defining the place of religion in society, but increasingly, it has provided a means of claiming historical legitimacy for a wide range of contemporary political and ideological positions. The legal basis for *laïcité* lies in the *loi concernant la séparation des Églises et de l'État* of 9 December 1905. It was passed in the heated atmosphere of the Dreyfus Affair and in the struggles between secular Republicans and the conservative nationalists who saw the Catholic Church as their bulwark. The parliamentary debates around this legislation have been analysed in detail in many of the books and articles published to mark the centenary of the 1905 Act. (Pena Ruiz 2003, Baubérot 2004, Baubérot and Wieviorka 2005, Maugendre 2005, Rémond 2005, Cabanel 2007) For the most part, the debates revolved around the relationship of religious organisations to the institutions of the state, rather than matters of belief or non-belief. The most prominent of the state institutions concerned was the national education system, which was one of the defining achievements of the Third Republic. But the movement of secularisation extended to every part of public life, including national and local government, health services, social services and the registration of births, marriages and deaths. Separation was in part aimed at limiting or eliminating the power and influence of the Catholic Church in public life. Its most visible impact was in its symbolic dimensions, centring on issues such as the removal of crucifixes from schools or the elimination of prayers from public events. But Separation was also aimed at giving the Church a defined role in French society, sheltered from intrusive state intervention.

After the 1905 law was put into effect, the separation of Church and State became a matter of constant vigilance on both sides of the debate. Some Catholic activists were always keen to reverse the measure. This was demonstrated in the short-lived attempt by Jacques Chevalier as Minister for Public Instruction under the Vichy regime in 1940-41 to reinstate the Church’s former role in French schools. And wider Catholic public opinion has generally been alert to any further inroads by the state into religious institutions. This was shown by the successful demonstrations against the attempt by Alain Savary in 1984 to bring private Catholic schools fully into the state school system. Conversely, the militant secularists remained keen to reduce Church influence in public matters. For example, the *Ligue de l'Enseignement* was always alert to the potential ‘noyautage’ (infliltration) of public education by Catholics, exemplified in its campaign against the ‘Davidées’ group of Catholic primary school teachers in the 1930s and in numerous other interventions. (George 2003).

Despite or because of these skirmishes, the principle of *laïcité* was applied with considerable pragmatism for most of the 20th century. For example, some parts of France were not governed by the 1905 law, notably the part of Alsace-Lorraine that had been under German administration. Certain overseas departments and territories that are formally part of France (including Guyane, Mayotte, Nouvelle Calédonie, St-Pierre-et-Miquelon etc) are also not governed by the Separation. They continue under the 1939 ‘Mandel decrees’ designed to support Catholic missionary activities in French colonies. Successive governments have mainly been content to leave these anomalies well alone.

In the last 20 years, the secular principle has re-emerged as a focus of concern around the public visibility of France’s growing population of North African descent, most of whom are sociologically Muslim, whether or not they subscribe to the beliefs or practices of Islam. Controversies surrounding headscarves emerged in the 1980s, leading to the *loi sur les signes religieux dans les écoles publiques françaises* of 15 March 2004. The issue continues to be a focus of attention and items of dress, food and religious symbols have been central to contemporary arguments about *laïcité*, whether in the public or private contexts.[[1]](#endnote-1)

There are many shades of opinion in these arguments. Most recently, the leading specialist on the topic, Jean Baubérot, has identified seven varieties of *laïcité* (Baubérot 2015). Arising from the debates of 1905, two varieties aim explicitly to reduce the scope of religious freedom: an ‘antireligious’ tendency that sees religion as socially damaging and ultimately to be eliminated, and a ‘Gallican’ tendency that would like to see stronger state intervention in religious practices. He points out that neither of these views prevailed in 1905. The law of Separation was carried by two liberal varieties of *laïcité*: the ‘strict separatists’, who saw religion as an exclusively individual matter, and the ‘inclusive separatists’ who wished to recognise the collective aspect of religion. Since that time, Baubérot suggests that three further varieties of *laïcité* have emerged. A *laïcité ouverte*, which he himself espouses, attempts to be more open to the religious and spiritual aspirations of French citizens, whether or not they adhere to a particular faith. An identity-based variety (*laïcité identitaire*), espoused by the right wing politically, distinguishes between religions that have formed the French identity and religions that have been imported (notably Islam). A third new variety (*laïcité concordataire*) builds on the experience of the Concordat in Alsace-Moselle and elsewhere, and argues for an arrangement that gives state recognition to particular faiths.

The seven varieties cover most of the French social and political landscape, and it would be tempting to argue that the concept of *laïcité* has become so broad as to be meaningless, were it not for the intense passion that French people invest in it. The series of violent incidents in 2015 and 2016 have intensified that passion, and have in effect reinforced the different varieties, with the result that *laïcité* has become a political battleground. The focus continues to be on practices and symbols but the ideological or doctrinal context has substantially changed. Issues of religious belief were a significant part of the context in 1905, but the law dealt primarily with practices. More recently, France has moved in the secular direction of many industrial societies. Religious convictions are increasingly regarded as a matter of personal choice, and are no longer so influential in the social and political life of the country. This evolution has had an effect on the atheist perspectives that formed a significant momentum behind the debates on the law of Separation.

## Campaigning for laïcité and atheism

A large number of organisations are active in campaigning on behalf of maintaining or extending the secular principle. When in March 2011, Nicolas Sarkozy, as President of the Republic, called for a debate on *laïcité,* some 26 associations responded by signing a ‘Manifeste des Associations et Organisations Laïques’, rejecting the need for a debate and calling simply for the full application of the 1905 law.[[2]](#endnote-2) These associations vary greatly in scale and scope, but reflect the social and political footprint of traditional *laicité.* The list contains several militant secularist organisations, a range of pro-feminist and anti-racist groups and the leading human rights lobby group. Perhaps most striking is the number of masonic lodges represented. Freemasons were among the most energetic campaigners for the original law of Separation, and are regarded by some commentators as the originators of *laïcité*. (Cortès 2014: 239) Much of the initial momentum of *laïcité* came from the campaigning organisation for secular education, *la Ligue de l'Enseignement*, whch was founded in 1864 by freemasons, led by the educator and politician Jean Macé. The organisation is still led by active freemasons. Many of the Third Republic’s grandees were members of lodges, including Gambetta, Ferry, Pelletan, Bourgeois, Bert and Combes. (Ligou 2006) More than half of the Ministers in the government that secured the law of Separation were lodge members.

Even in 1905, however, there were differences of view among freemasons on issues of belief, particularly between the deist and atheist tendencies. (Delahaye 2006) The international tradition of freemasonry was firmly deist. However, in France atheists gained ground in the movement during the 19th century. In 1877, France became the only country in which freemasons were not obliged to recognise a ‘Grand Architecte de l’Univers’ (GADLU). Atheism was an important factor in the campaigns against the privileged position of the Catholic Church. However, a strong current of Enlightenment deism remained, which assisted Aristide Briand in his attempts to temper the radical anticlerical components of separation with a degree of protection for religious belief and practice. His careful balancing of interests enabled the Separation to survive the Catholic backlash and become an integral part of the life of the French Republic. Freemasons have continued to be among the strongest defenders of *laïcité*. For example, the largest of the French lodges, the Grand Orient, hosted a series of debates on the issue with some of the candidates in the 2012 Presidential election. (Koch 2012) Of the candidates, Jean-Luc Mélenchon was the only confirmed freemason. More recently, the Grand Orient gave financial support to the day nursery, *Baby-loup*, which was at the centre of a long-running legal battle to secure the right to dismiss an employee who insisted on wearing an Islamic headscarf at work. (AFP 2014)

Atheism was a strong undercurrent of many organisations in the Republican tradition, including venerable associations such as the *Ligue des droits de l’homme*, which was founded during the Dreyfus Affair and has campaigned for human rights up to the present day.[[3]](#endnote-3) Atheism remains an influential strand in several political organisations, particularly on the Left, though it is also present in centrist movements in the tradition of the old Radical Party, and in some parts of the Right. At the same time, atheism was most visibly promoted by a number of organisations devoted more specifically to arguing the case for non-belief and for its political expression in *laïcité*. A roll call of these associations signed a protest in 2012 against the resurgence of blasphemy laws in different countries. The French signatories, half of whom had signed the 2011 *Manifeste*, were:

 Fédération nationale de la Libre Pensée française  
 Ligue de l’Enseignement   
 Ligue des Droits de l’Homme  
 Union Rationaliste   
 Conseil National des Associations Familiales Laïques  
 Mouvement « Europe et Laïcité »  
 Union des Athées   
 Association « Laïcité-Liberté » (Conte 2012)

The oldest of these associations was the *Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée*, which was founded by Jules Simon in 1848 and supported by a galaxy of leading figures of the Third Republic, including Louise Michel, Georges Clémenceau, Aristide Briand and Victor Hugo. (Lalouette 2001). During the 20th century it gradually became a more specialist organisation, serving as the centre of a widely distributed network of organisations. In its current statutes the Federation remains aggressively anti-religious:

Elle regarde les religions comme les pires obstacles à l’émancipation de la pensée ; elle les juge erronées dans leurs principes et néfastes dans leur action. Elle leur reproche de diviser les hommes et de les détourner de leurs buts terrestres en développant dans leur esprit la superstition et la peur de l’au-delà, de dégénérer en cléricalisme, fanatisme, impérialisme et mercantilisme, d’aider les puissances de réaction à maintenir les masses dans l’ignorance et la servitude. [[4]](#endnote-4)

[The Federation considers religions as the worst obstacles to the emancipation of thought: it judges them to be wrong in their principles and harmful in their action. It reproaches them with dividing men and turning them away from their earthly purposes by developing in their minds superstition and the fear of the other world, with degenerating into clericalism, fanaticism, imperialism and mercantilism, with aiding the forces of reaction in maintaining the masses of the people in ignorance and servitude.]

It regards the apparent adoption by religions of the ideas of freedom, progress, science, social justice and peace as merely a clever manoeuvre to re-establish their grip on the hearts and minds of citizens. In practice, the Federation energetically patrols the boundary between religion and the state at national and local levels, whether campaigning for the abrogation of the ‘loi Debré’ of 1959, which provided for contracts between private schools and the state education system, or objecting to Christmas Nativity Crèches in *mairies* (town halls) and other public buildings.[[5]](#endnote-5)

A more intellectual approach to atheism and *laïcité* is taken by the *Union rationaliste.* Founded in 1930, it was led by the physicist Paul Langevin before and after the Second World War and followed by many distinguished scientists and philosophers that were members or fellow travellers of the French Communist Party. From the 1960s, it broadened its remit and in its most recent presentations, the Union aims to inject reason and scientific method into public debates and to attract freethinkers of all descriptions:

Elle est ouverte à tous les esprits indépendants qui ne se satisfont pas des idées toutes faites. Elle lutte pour que l'État demeure laïque, assume sa fonction de protection des jeunes contre toute forme d'endoctrinement, et garantisse à l'école publique son prestige et son entière indépendance à l'égard des idéologies.[[6]](#endnote-6)

[The association is open to all independent minds that are not satisfied with ready-made ideas. It fights for the State to remain secular, to carry out its function of protecting young people against all forms of indoctrination, and to guarantee that state schools retain their prestige and their complete independence with respect to ideologies.]

The association continues to lobby for the secular principle in all areas of public life, and particularly within education. Its hostility to indoctrination and ideologies covers a wide range of positions, but is clearly coded to designate first and foremost a vigorous opposition to religious views based on authority or revelation.

A more narrowly focused association, *l’Union des athées*, was founded in 1970 by Albert Beaughon, a mathematics teacher of the non-communist Left, from the Auvergne. With a less elite membership, ithas expressed truculent criticism of the role of religion in society, but has particularly focused on the question of beliefs:

L'Union des athées a pour but le regroupement de ceux qui considèrent ‘dieu’ comme un mythe, au même titre que toutes les créations de pure imagination, supposées sans existence matérielle permanente, comme fantômes, esprits, fées, dieux des religions polythéistes, diables, démons, etc…

La constatation de base est qu'il n'existe pas «d'esprit» sans matière vivante organisée et que la désorganisation, ou mort, fait cesser définitivement l'activité spirituelle qui caractérisait cette matière vivante.[[7]](#endnote-7)

[The Union of atheists aims to bring together those who consider ‘god’ as a myth, similar to all the creations of pure imagination that are supposed to lack any permanent material existence, such as ghosts, spirits, fairies, gods of polytheistic religions, devils, demons etc…

We share a basic recognition that there are no ‘spirits’ without organised living matter, and that disorganisation, or death, puts a final end to spiritual activity that may characterise this living matter.]

Of the other associations signatory to the protest against blasphemy laws, the Conseil national des associations familiales laïques promotes secular values in policies relating to the family; the Mouvement « Europe et Laïcité » is a Humanist association working with secular organisations to promote the principle of laïcité internationally; and the Association « Laïcité-Liberté » is a small group led by Ramiro Riera, a senior civil servant. For most of these smaller groupings, and others like them, their activity fluctuates considerably, according to the political and cultural climate, and according to the commitment of a small group of advocates. Taken together, they form a network of the most active advocates for atheism at the grass roots level, and they are the main constituency for the antireligious form of laïcité that sees religion as socially damaging.

In cultural terms, antireligious secularists have been a significant current within French politics. They have been most strongly represented on the anarchist wing of the revolutionary Left, who frequently take up Auguste Blanqui’s slogan, ‘Ni Dieu, Ni Maître’ to express their rejection of religious and political authority. It was memorably performed in a song of the same name by Léo Ferré, which concludes:

Ce cri qui n'a pas la rosette

Cette parole de prophète

Je la revendique et vous souhaite

Ni Dieu ni maître.[[8]](#endnote-8)

[This cry that has no rosette

This word of prophecy

I claim it and I wish you

Neither God nor master]

This and other similarly anti-religious slogans have been repeated frequently in the magazine *Charlie-Hebdo*, along with cartoons depicting satirical images of religious figures. [[9]](#endnote-9) The rejection of religious belief has been a stock-in-trade of the magazine, and was felt by many commentators to be a key factor in the shootings at the magazine’s premises in January 2015, when 12 people were killed. The widespread support for *Charlie Hebdo*’s continued publication was largely based on the principle of free speech. The magazine’s right to publish controversial and offensive content was defended by both supporters like Caroline Fourest, in her *Éloge du blasphème* (Fourest 2015), and by many who did not share its views, but defended its right to express them. Its militant atheism was emphasised again on the cover of the issue marking the first anniversary of the shootings. It featured a cartoon by Riss of a bearded and blood-spattered God, carrying a Kalashnikov rifle, with the caption ‘1 an après. L’assassin court toujours’ (‘A year later, the murderer is still on the run’), clearly blaming religion as the prime cause of bloodshed such as the 2015 shootings.[[10]](#endnote-10) The editorial by Riss (Laurent Sourisseau), the publication’s Director, included a polemical attack on religious critics of the magazine. The critique of religion is certainly an enduring feature of atheism, particularly in the kind of passionate rejection expressed by Léo Ferré and *Charlie Hebdo.*

Paradoxically, one of the most striking results of the 2015 shootings has been the rallying of all religious groupings to a defence of the Republic, under the banner of *laïcité*. Leaders of Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and other faith groups have on several occasions presented a united front against those responsible for the atrocities, frequently endorsed by senior politicians. For example, when President Hollande received the New Year wishes of the religious leaders in January 2016, he departed from tradition to pay a lengthy public tribute to the work of the different religious groups in promoting ‘le vivre-ensemble’ (social harmony) and defined the scope of *laïcité*:

La laïcité est un principe juridique de neutralité, qui s’impose à l’Etat et à ses représentants. Ce principe garantit à chacun le droit de croire ou de ne pas croire, ainsi que le droit d’exercer son culte dans des conditions dignes et paisibles. « La Laïcité, comme l’a dit Emile POULAT, c’est une société qui donne place à tous. » (Président de la République 2016)

[*Laïcité* is a judicial principle of neutrality, which is required of the State and its representatives. This principle guarantees everyone the right to believe or not believe, and the right to worship in dignified and peaceful conditions. As Emile Poulat said, ‘*Laïcité* is a society that makes room for everyone’.]

The reference to the late Emile Poulat, a former priest and eminent sociologist of Catholicism, marked the inclusive character of the President’s view of the secular principle. This was confirmed in the President’s detailed recognition of the value of religions in combatting terrorism, defending the Republic, promoting social integration and working for climate change, among other good causes. Since this understanding of *laïcité* is now used to signal a rapprochement of the French State with institutional religions, some atheist intellectuals have intensified their critique of religion from a social perspective, while others have refocused their critique on intellectual and personal dimensions.

## Critique of religion

France has a long history of criticism of religion, dating back at least three hundred years. Many of the writings of the ‘philosophes’ of the Enlightenment have attained the status of classics and are widely circulated. The best known are by Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot, and in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings it was widely reported that sales of Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance* of 1763 were sharply increased. (Dugdale 2015) The leading ‘philosophes’ mainly wrote from a deist position, though atheist writers such as D’Holbach and Helvetius are also commonly reprinted. They originated a tradition that continued through the 19th and 20th centuries. The atheist philosopher Michel Onfray provided a convenient vade-mecum of the tradition in his best-known work, *Traité d’athéologie* (Onfray 2005), where he sharply distinguishes the relatively few genuine atheists from the many deists, pantheists, agnostics and others, who could not take the final step of disbelief. The book has become a manifesto for contemporary atheism, translated into several languages, including English. (Onfray 2011) It sets out the contemporary case against religion based on its social implications.

Onfray’s critique of religion begins by insisting that it is not an attack on believers, but on the systems of belief, the institutions and the people who gain money or power from them. He argues that God has been invoked to justify innumerable conflicts, cruelties and acts of destruction. He points to the enduring dominance of the Judeo-Christian way of seeing the world (épistémè), particularly in the fields of law and ethics, even among those who are not themselves believers. Applying this to Christianity, Judaism and Islam, he suggests, in a frequently quoted passage, that all three monotheistic religions are driven by a Death Wish:

Les trois monothéismes, animés par une même pulsion de mort généalogique, partagent une série de mépris identiques : haine de la raison et de l'intelligence ; haine de la liberté ; haine de tous les livres au nom d'un seul ; haine de la vie ; haine de la sexualité, des femmes et du plaisir ; haine du féminin ; haine des corps, des désirs, des pulsions. En lieu et place de tout cela, judaïsme, christianisme et islam défendent : la foi et la croyance, l'obéissance et la soumission, le goût de la mort et la passion pour l'au-delà, l'ange asexué et la chasteté, la virginité et la fidélité monogamique, l'épouse et la mère, l'âme et l'esprit. Autant dire la vie crucifiée et le néant célébré... (Onfray 2005: 103-4)

[The three monotheisms, moved by the same genealogical death drive, share a series of identical things they despise: they hate reason and intelligence; they hate freedom; they hate all books in the name of a single Book; they hate life; they hate bodies, desires and drives. Instead and in place of all that, Judaism, Christianity and Islam defend: faith and belief, obedience and submission, a taste for death and a passion for the after-life, sexless angels and chastity, virginity and monogamous fidelity, the wife and mother, the soul and spirit. In other words, life crucified and the void celebrated.]

The litany of ways in which the three monotheisms deny life is matched by the list of their beliefs in principles that restrict human freedoms and celebrate death and the afterlife. In Onfray’s view, they share a common hostility to intelligence, represented in the story of Adam and Eve, being punished for eating from the Tree of Knowledge that enabled them to distinguish between good and evil. The act of disobedience is largely ascribed to the woman, and all women continue to incur the blame. The three religions share a preoccupation with prohibitions and prescriptions, giving a particular prominence to obedience (the name ‘Islam’ means submission) and a privileged role to the priests who codify and enforce what is licit and illicit. This is linked to an obsession with purity that stigmatises the real, corporeal and diverse world in which people live.

Onfray argues that the three religions are similarly focused on a single Book or compendium of Scriptures, which have been carefully selected by the religious authorities and are often promoted by the prohibition or burning of other writings. They are hostile to science, except when it supports their existing beliefs and practices, and have consistently impeded a better understanding of the material world, for example in condemning Galileo’s heliocentrism, rejecting atomic physics and evolutionary biology, and in opposing medical research in genetics and other areas. As an alternative to this knowledge, they offer tales of superhuman angels and seraphim and rewards of luxury in Paradise for the faithful. They agree in their suspicion of women, except as wives and mothers, and in their practices of physical mutilation, even if circumcision was replaced by baptism and psychological mutilation in the Christian tradition.

Not all atheist intellectuals share Onfray’s social critique. Some of the most respected thinkers focus on approaches that integrate the best of religious thinking into a post-theological framework. This is common to philosophers as diverse as Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meilassoux, whose ‘difficult atheism’ has been analysed in depth by Christopher Watkin (Watkin 2011). It is forcefully articulated by André Comte-Sponville, whose widely circulated book on atheist spirituality argues that traditional atheist attacks on religion aim at the wrong target. (Comte-Sponville 2008) He has no taste for polemic and, while he recognises that many dreadful things have been done in the name of religion, he argues that they are the result of human vices such as fanaticism, intolerance and the struggle for power. Moreover, religious believers have also done many admirable things. The focus of his critique is philosophical rather than social. He presents the reasons for not believing in a God, beginning by reviewing the traditional proofs for the existence of God.

The ontological proof suggested that existence was one of God’s perfections, but has been thoroughly refuted by philosophers, most notably Kant. The cosmological proof suggested that there must be a first cause for the existence of the world, but the argument is a circular one, and even if true, would not demonstrate that the first cause was a personal God, rather than Nature as a whole. The physico-theological proof argued that the world is so beautiful and complex that it must have been designed by a great intelligence; but the analogy of the Great Watchmaker, beloved of Voltaire, takes no account of the modern scientific understanding of the universe, which provides ample explanations of natural phenomena without recourse to divine intervention.

Comte-Sponville suggests that other well-known proofs are variations on these three, and that none of them are convincing. He accepts that there is no conclusive proof that God does not exist, but that the burden of proof lies with the believer. He examines other general arguments put forward by believers. Some put forward a personal experience of God. Comte-Sponville has not had this experience and wonders why God is so difficult to find. He notes that some believers think that God hides Himself in order to protect human freedom, but regards this as a weak argument since it would make humans freer than God or the angels and prophets to whom he has revealed himself; since it would be a freedom based only on ignorance; and since it would be strange behaviour by a loving parent.

Comte-Sponville argues that the Problem of Evil remains a major argument against God. For believers it raises the question of why God permits evil if He is omniscient and benevolent. Some have responded by arguing for a Weak God, though it is difficult to see how a God would be strong enough to create the Universe but not strong enough to regulate it. Atheists, on the other hand, have no difficulty in recognising that evil things happen, and the problem for them is how to understand these things and act to reduce them. In a further argument, he suggests that a significant reason to question the existence of God is the very imperfect nature of human beings, which a Supreme Being could surely have improved upon. He also develops Freud’s criticism of the monotheisms: the fact that they hold out the hope that all of a person’s desires will be fulfilled in an afterlife suggests that they are offering an illusion. If it is too good to be true, then it is probably not true. The question then arises how religions based on illusory hopes came to have such an influential place in society.

The historical development of the major world religions has become an important focus of atheist writers. They draw on a growing body of work by scholars writing from the perspective of a non-believer. For example, Pascal Boyer presents an account of the origins of religion based on ethnographic universals, common to all societies, combining it with the insights of contemporary neuroscience. (Boyer 2001) Régis Debray’s biography of God traces the development of monotheism in Europe, from its formulation by Jews returning from Babylon in 552 BCE, assisted by nation-building, the invention of cuneiform alphabets and the dissemination of written texts. (Debray 2001) He traces its modification by Christians under the leadership of St Paul, its adoption by the Roman Empire, its spread throughout Medieval Europe and its extension to the colonial empires of Spain, France and Britain. He then charts the decline of belief in One God in Western societies, through a combination of the competition between God the Father and Jesus, within the Holy Trinity, the relative decline of fatherhood in society, and the perceived lack of a role for God in the lives of growing numbers of people. He supposes, however, that the human need for a something beyond the world of experience will leave a residual place for an imagined deity.

## Towards a post-religious world

Debray’s analysis links with that of Marcel Gauchet, whose secular classic, *Le désenchantement du monde* (Gauchet 1985) proposes a political history of religion. He suggests that in the earliest societies of which we are aware, religion emerged as a refusal of history, basing the origins of human life and society in imagined forces of the past, to which people in the present are constantly urged to be faithful. The insistence that explanations are external to human agency, that they are unchanging and that they place absolute obligations on present day society is a logic of dispossession, and has been a feature of religions throughout history. Gauchet suggests that it remains the driving force behind religions today, though the credibility of its logic has constantly been eroded as human being have increased their understanding of the natural and social worlds. In practical life, we have less and less need for ‘enchantment’, in the form of magical explanations or supernatural beings. He argues that Medieval Christianity was the apogee of religion in this sense, but also that it inspired the humanist revolutions that prepared for a social withdrawal from religion. He concludes that modern societies have little or no practical place for religion, though it remains a cultural heritage. It also offers one of several frameworks on which individuals may draw in order to understand their own everyday life and their struggles with being and nothingness.

It is a shared belief of most French atheists that the scope and impact of traditional forms of religion are continuing to decline, and that the major challenge is to protect society from the dying convulsions of religion. Gauchet’s perspective of ‘disenchantment’ suggests that contemporary Christianity might be a transitional form that holds the seeds for a successful departure or escape from religion. Abdennour Bidar offers an alternative approach in his programmatically titled book, *Comment sortir de la religion* (Bidar 2012). He argues that Christianity offers too narrow a conception to enable the human race to lay religion to rest. Drawing on his own Muslim cultural background, he looks forward to a generalised recognition of the infinite creativity and potential of human beings, which technological advances are beginning to bring within our grasp. If this can be managed wisely, he argues, then religion will be laid to rest in peace, as a framework that was valuable in human development but is now no longer needed.

In this perspective, the traditional atheist focus on attacking religion should give way to the more challenging task of developing a frame of reference that can replace religion, while retaining the ethical and spiritual advances that have emerged in a religious context. Gauchet and Comte-Sponville have been prominent in popularising this approach (Gauchet 2001, Comte-Sponville 2014), and perhaps the most sustained effort has been provided by Luc Ferry, who argues for a transcendental humanism that would combine the humanisation of God with a divinisation of man. (Ferry 1996). He makes the case for ‘une spiritualité laïque’ (secular spirituality) that will go beyond the humanism of the Enlightenment tradition, with its rational and juridical focus. (Ferry 2010) It begins with the familiar humanist approach to ethical issues, judging issues by reference to their effects on human beings individually and collectively. However, Ferry argues that humanism must now take account of the personal, passionate and transcendent dimensions of human life and replace an ethic of fraternity with an ethic of love. This corresponds to the recognition of love as the fundamental principle of individual life and increasingly as the principal criterion of value in social life.

Ferry recognises that what he calls the ‘Love Revolution’ brings a great deal of risk into ethical judgements because it depends on unpredictable subjective factors. But it provides a necessary counterweight to the fragmentation of communities and the growing individualism and competition in contemporary societies, which have introduced ‘une dimension incontestablement tragique dans la condition de l’homme moderne’ [an undeniably tragic dimension in the condition of modern man] (Ferry 2010: 366). Love also provides a bridge from ethical issues, rooted in relationships within human communities, towards spiritual issues, rooted in human finitude and the individual experience of life and death. He argues that love is the basis on which people can construct a sense of the meaning of their life and can come to terms with their own death and the death of others. For Ferry, this involves a secular wisdom that values life, values the uniqueness of each individual, and knows that love in all its forms gives meaning to life.

Ferry’s ‘secular spirituality’ is highly personal in nature and brings atheism into domains traditionally dominated by religious belief. Like Comte-Sponville and Gauchet, he disregards the traditional atheist impatience with the ‘supplément d’âme’ (a little extra soul), and offers a secular approach that can bring warmth, sensitivity and a sense of transcendence to human experience. This reflects the growth of what Grace Davie has called ‘believing without belonging’, where the importance of institutional affiliation is declining in Britain, France, and other European countries, at the same time as individuals are showing an ‘increasing tendency towards ‘”bricolage” – that is the building of individual packages (both religious and spiritual)’ (Davie 2015: 8). Atheism now offers additional forms of belief that are not attached to particular forms of belonging, and may more readily be adopted by individuals as part of their personal portfolio.

## Conclusion

The spirituality of these ‘new atheists’ stands in sharp contrast to the hostility of traditional atheists towards all things mystical or other-worldly. Their critique of religion shows a high degree of engagement with the major religions, recognition of their historical role and respect for the positive values they can embody. This is reflected in Régis Debray’s well-known advocacy of teaching about religions in school, as opposed to inculcating religious beliefs. (Debray 2015) To some extent, it expresses a new sense of confidence among these atheists, who no longer see themselves as an embattled minority in Catholic France. In today’s secular France, as in many Western countries, non-believers and non-religious people are now in a majority. The 2012 Gallup index of religiosity and atheism ranked France as the fourth most atheistic country in the world, with only 37% of the respondents declaring themselves as a religious person, against 29% of convinced atheists and a further 34% who were not religious. (WIN-Gallup International 2012). Conversely, the de facto secularisation of France poses a real question: if the majority no longer have religious beliefs or practices, why should they show an interest in an atheist programme, which defines itself by its opposition to religion? If indifference is the most subversive attitude to religion, does it also subvert atheism?

The response of atheists like Onfray, Ferry, Gauchet and Sponville is to propose positive forms of secular belief that address the issues of ethics, values and personal life that were previously the stronghold of religion. It is not therefore surprising that some of them should wish to discover the humanistic dimensions of the major religions, and rework them in secular terms. In order to achieve this, they require a space within the legal and institutional framework of the state that gives them freedom to express their views. Some form of *laïcité* is clearly essential to this. Some of Baubérot’s seven forms do not sit easily with secular spirituality. The antireligious and Gallican varieties would potentially undermine freedom of belief, as might the versions built on identities and Concordats. The traditional liberal varieties of *laïcité* would be less constraining, and a new *laïcité ouverte* might well provide the best option. This appears to be the perspective of the *Observoire de la laïcité*, within the Prime Minister’s office, which asserts that ‘La laïcité n'est pas une opinion parmi d'autres mais la liberté d'en avoir une’ [Laïcité is not an opinion among other, it is the freedom to have an opinion].[[11]](#endnote-11)

*Laïcité* is already prominent in campaign preparations for the presidential elections of 2017, and different interpretations are in contention. The future shape of *laïcité* is likely to be determined by political rather than intellectual movements, and the position of different atheist intellectuals is likely to reflect their political commitments. Between Ferry, a former centre Right government minister, and Onfray, a far Left firebrand, for example, there are wide political differences. It remains to be seen whether they will find sufficient common ground in a future *laïcité* to articulate a shared conception of atheism.

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1. There has been abundant discussion of this in the English-speaking world, for example (Altglas 2010, Heine 2009, Barras 2014, Fernando 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See <http://www.comite-valmy.org/spip.php?article1337> (accessed 17 June 2016). The signatory associations included: Arab Women’s Solidarity Association France, Association EGALE, Association Laïcité-Liberté, Association Le Chevalier de la Barre, Association Libres MarianneS, Association des Libres Penseurs de France, Centre d’Action Européenne Démocratique et Laïque, Comité Laïcité République, Comité Valmy, Conseil National des Associations Familiales Laïques, Fédération française de l’Ordre Mixte International « Le Droit Humain », Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée, Grand Orient de France, Grande Loge Féminine de France, Grande Loge Féminine de Memphis Misraïm, Grande Loge Mixte de France, Grande Loge Mixte Universelle, Les Comités 1905, Ligue des Droits de l’Homme, Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l’Antisémitisme, Loge Nationale Française, Observatoire International de la Laïcité Contre les Dérives Communautaires, Regards de Femmes, Solidarité Laïque, SOS Racisme, Union des Familles Laïques [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See <http://www.ldh-france.org/> (accessed 17 June 2016) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Statuts de la Fédération nationale de la libre pensée’, adopted 25 August 2006: <http://www.fnlp.fr/news/10/17/STATUTS-DE-LA-FEDERATION-NATIONALE-DE-LA-LIBRE-PENSEE.html> (accessed 17 June 2016). The translation of this and all other passages is by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The Fédération organized a demonstration calling for the abrogation of the ‘loi Debré’ on 5 December 2015. See <http://www.fnlp.fr/news/160/17/Ils-seront-a-la-manifestation-du-5-decembre.html> (accessed 17 June 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See ‘Qui sommes-nous?’, <http://www.union-rationaliste.org/index.php/qui-sommes-nous> (accessed 17 June 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See ‘Manifeste’, <http://atunion.free.fr/present.html> (accessed 13 November 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See (Calvet 2013). Several recordings are available online, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ei-WsxN3snk> (accessed 17 June 2016). This performance concludes with a visceral roar that confirms Ferré’s passionate commitment to the sentiment. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For example, all of these features are presented in the special issue following the shootings of January 2015: *Charlie Hebdo*, 14 janvier 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Charlie Hebdo*, 6 janvier 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. ‘Qu’est-ce que la laïcité ?’, on the Website of the *Observoire de la laïcité*, <http://www.gouvernement.fr/qu-est-ce-que-la-laicite> (accessed 17 June 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)