

Kierkegaard and French *Laïcité*
October, 9th 2024—October, 10th 2024

“*The French would never understand him,*” predicted Mrs. Regine Schlegel, Kierkegaard’s former fiancée, in an interview she gave a few years before her death. It is not clear why Mrs. Schlegel thought that the French would never understand Kierkegaard’s thought as she did not explain herself any further, but if she were right, a conference on Kierkegaard and French *laïcité* would be of little interest. She seems to have been mistaken though, as the French reception of his thought has been prolific, spurring a broad and intense debate about existence, individuals’ freedom of choice and religious phenomena. However, despite its diversity and richness, the reception of Kierkegaard has rarely discussed the relation between his work and the specific concept of French *laïcité*.

What is French *laïcité*? It is usually said that there are two conceptions of *laïcité*. The first one is *traditional* and has its roots in the 1905 law on the Separation of the Churches and the State. This law aimed to prevent any state persecution of religious minorities, as it had been the case during the Wars of Religion. It also hoped to constrain the political power of the Catholic Church. The second conception of *laïcité* is considered more *offensive* and appeared around twenty years ago. It requires religious neutrality from citizens working for the State and from pupils in public schools. In 2004, a law passed to ban conspicuous religious symbols in public schools. In fact, by having an education system that does not support any particular religious view, the State aims to fight proselytism, communitarian withdrawals and sectarianism. In that case, *l’école de la République* aspires to show pupils that religion is not determined by birth, but is something that individuals can freely choose or reject.

The common aim of both conceptions is to allow religious plurality and provide religious freedom as well as prevent misconduct from religious communities. In other words, French *laïcité* is supposed to be an answer to the historical process of secularization that, despite predictions, did not end up with the disappearance of beliefs in the West but with more varied beliefs that cohabit. *Laïcité* hopes to create a space of *vivre-ensemble*.

Nevertheless, French *laïcité* also has its *detractors*. It has, for example, been criticized for being an attempt to *suppress* religious phenomena, thus trying to create an atheistic State where religions would not be allowed any political voice. In that case, the goal would be to *erase* them from the public sphere, which would, by extent, mean that *laïcité* failed to provide religious freedom.

It is obvious that Kierkegaard does not address the concept of *laïcité* directly as the word itself is not present in his writings. One can nevertheless find ample resources to address and discuss the question that *laïcité* represents and the issues of religious life, religious pluralism, and freedom. Kierkegaard’s understanding of existence as *interiority* and choice, his late “Attack Upon Christendom,” his concept of the *crowd* and his desire to describe various ways of life, could all be relevant to the debate. Kierkegaard is a religious author who sees faith as an existential need, but at the same time he offers a harsh critique of institutionalized religion and of the Church.

This conference does not aim to talk about Kierkegaard’s own religious context, but hopes to give Kierkegaardian accounts—thus using Kierkegaardian concepts and theses—to discuss the contemporary issues that come with religious plurality and religious freedom in the private and public spheres.

Is French laïcité compatible with a Kierkegaardian conception of religiosity? Does laïcité provide a space for religious freedom and the expression of faith? Is the disappearance of a State Church synonymous to the end of its religion in a country? In a Kierkegaardian perspective, what

place should religions have in the public and political spheres and to what extent should the State be allowed to determine how individuals and communities express their religious beliefs?

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This Conference is organized by the French Institute of Denmark in collaboration with Cassandre Caballero (CURAPP-ESS, University of Picardie Jules Verne and Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, University of Copenhagen) and René Rosfort (Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, University of Copenhagen).



Program

October, 9th 2024

10:00-10:15. Words of Welcome.

Morning session (Chairperson: Aaron J. Goldman)

10:15-11:15. Sacha Sydoryk: “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About French *Laïcité* (But Were Afraid to Ask).”

11:15-11:30. Coffee Break

11:30-12:30. René Rosfort: “Becoming Human Through Faith: Kierkegaard’s Secularization of Religion.”

12:30-13:30. Lunch

Afternoon session (Chairperson: Anna Ravn Mortensen)

13:30-14:30. Cassandre Caballero: “‘*Why are the French so Afraid of the Religious?*’ A Kierkegaardian Answer to a Question I once got.”

14:30-14:45. Coffee Break

14:45-15:45. Armande Delage: “Kierkegaard, Education and Faith: Talking about Religion in classrooms within the Confines of *Laïcité*.”

October, 10th 2024

Morning session (Chairperson: Michael Au-Mullaney)

10:00-11:00. Méliissa Fox-Muraton: “Spaces of Everyday Existence: Kierkegaard, *Laïcité* and Public Policy.”

11:15-11:30. Coffee Break

11:30-12:30. Bjarke Mørkøre Stigel Hansen: “Radical Secularity: Reconsidering the Question of Faith in Derrida and Kierkegaard.”

12:30-13:30. Lunch

Afternoon session (Chairperson: Rebecca Cecilie Hoffman)

13:30-14:30. Oliver Norman: “Drag Queens, Icons, and Idols: Blasphemy in a Kierkegaardian Context?”

14:30-14:45. Coffee Break

14:45-15:45. Malwina A. Tkacz: “Exploring *Laïcité* Through Kierkegaard's Lens: Law, Ethics, and Secularization.”

15:45-16:00. Concluding Words.

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Location: Institut Français du Danemark, Rolighedsvej 37, 1958 Frederiksberg C and online.

If you wish to attend in person, please register here : https://billetto.dk/fr/e/kierkegaard-and-french-laicite-billetter-1082542?utm_campaign=copy_link&utm_content=2&utm_medium=share&utm_source=organiser

If you wish to attend online, please contact Méliissa Rahmouni (mr@institutfrancais.dk) or Axel Raphalen (ar@institutfrancais.dk) in order to receive the link.