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SECULARISM

A topical issue:

The recent tragic events highlighted tensions, misunderstandings and crises which cross through the social fabric certainly with regard to religious matters, but also cultural and identity issues, which endanger our peaceful coexistence. Facing these challenges, the role of those carrying the responsibilities of the State and particularly the elected representatives is essential, because they have, as you have, to carry forth the values and principles of the Republic.

Secularism, today more than ever, is the heart of the issue, because, faced with the societal transformations, it is the principle by which the diversity of convictions and identities can be integrated in the world we share.

An issue which meets MIVILUDES' substantive work:

Last year, MIVILUDES were asked by the Inter-ministerial Centre of Prevention against Delinquency (CIPD - Centre Interministériel de Prévention de la Délinquance) in charge of the preventive component of the government scheme, to tackle violent radicalisation and terrorist organisations. Thus MIVILUDES participates in the training scheme of the State's actors on issues of undue influence and, on a larger scale, brings its expertise to the government on the matter of deviances linked to religious expression.

Introducing the Mission:

The **MIVILUDES** is an inter-ministerial mission established under the responsibility of the Prime minister by the 28th of November 2002 decree. It has three main missions:

To **observe** and analyse the cult phenomenon with respect of its prejudicial acts to human rights, to fundamental freedoms and other reprehensible activities.

To **coordinate** the public authorities preventative and repressive action against cult-related abuse, and participate in the **training** and information of public agents.

To **inform** the public of the risks and dangers threatening it and to implement action to help victims of cult-related abuse.

Mission Objectives:

Secularism is a central concept in MIVILUDES' work¹. Following the Order of the Solar Temple (OTS) tragedies, the struggle against cult-related abuse was born from the obligation that the State forged for itself to prevent the harm done to individuals or to public order due to undue influence by a group on behalf of an ideology. **By instituting this mission, the State aimed to ensure the defense of Republican principles when rights are attacked "in the name of" and often "on behalf of" religious, spiritual or philosophical beliefs.** In other words: our goal is to ensure that behind claims of freedom of conscience there is no attack against the law, and especially to protect individuals from undue influence by a group.

MIVILUDES may intervene within the strict framework provided by secularism: to defend individual freedoms while ensuring state neutrality. That is the reason why **cult-related deviance cannot, under any circumstances, be assimilated with religious-related deviance:** in the course of its work the mission never places itself in the field of convictions, or of ideological or religious doctrines.

The concept of cult-related abuse we have forged is an **operating and pragmatic concept**, which finds its legitimacy in reports and observations collected by the MILS² then the MIVILUDES: cult-related abuse is characterised by the implementation, by an organised group or by an individual, whatever their nature or activity, of pressures or techniques aiming to create, maintain or exploit a state of psychological or physical submission in a person, depriving him of part of his free will, with prejudicial consequences for him, his relatives or for society.

Thus, no matter what the doctrinal foundations of the group or the movement at the origin of the abuse may be: as soon as a certain number of criteria exist, the first of which is submission, the repressive action of the State has to be implemented.

The line of action of the mission is this red line: identify who is threatened and who threatens us. (Quoting Prefect N'Gahane).

What the mission can observe:

The watch dog work of the mission is to warn public opinion about the acts of groups but also to attract attention to the various fields which favour cult-related abuse.

¹ The reflection about Sects and Secularism is so important to the action of the State that the MIVILUDES organised an academic seminar in partnership with the Practical school of High Studies which has been set from October 2003 to June 2004, the works of this seminar has been published by La documentation française.

² Mission Interministérielle de Lutte contre les Sectes

A marginal phenomenon...

The phenomenon of radicalisation and the temptation of communitarianism or cultism have two common points at least. First, a belief modality characterised by a **radical adherence to a radical idea**: to concur unconditionally with an ideology which refuses any compromise with common sense. Then, a **totalitarian and totalizing** ideology which subjects every area of life to a norm exceeding positive law. Such forms of beliefs threaten peaceful coexistence and, even though they are fortunately extremely marginal, they still are the extreme and deviant tip of a substantive movement presently existing throughout society in its cultural, identitarian and religious components.

Who Falls within the contemporary religious landscape.

Far from being a resurgence from the past, these forms of beliefs are profoundly modern: they fall within a globalised world where cultural exchanges increase, where the religious scene has become plural and complex, and where, with the development of New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT), the whole world, with its diversity of proposals and spiritual and religious lobbies, has broken into what used to be intimate. They also fall in a world where the individual affirms himself and claims his autonomy in every sphere of his life, including the spiritual one. Secularisation of our societies does not imply less belief. Today, anyone can do his shopping with a plethora of spiritual offers: therapeutic, professional, educational, personal development, self-realisation, etc. Sociologists speak of "Spiritual Do it yourself (D.I.Y)." to characterise this quest that the individual pursues alone, finding in various traditions what makes sense to him, leaving behind him familiar religious institutions: in general individuals no longer feel at home as easily in churches and traditional interlocutors of the State, and new religious actors manifest themselves in small evangelical groups, various branches of Islam, internal tendencies of Catholicism, new religious movements, etc.

Individuality in belief does not exclude the need for community:

Indeed, individualism in the approach does not exclude the need for the community, on the contrary: the aim is to validate beliefs to concur within relationship to others, and this is accomplished by exchange, experience sharing, creation of little groups, of social networks with shared interests...

The possible path to abuse:

The cult phenomenon appears when this community reassurance takes an extreme form: the group establishes itself against society, loses touch with reality and radicalises itself around a leader or an idea. Cult movements that the mission knows well express their rejection of society and mistrust in institutions, media, common knowledge, and by adopting alternative beliefs which find their roots in a well developed conspiracy theory (about vaccines, medicine, school, food). Most of the time, violence is turned inwards toward themselves or their families. In the radicalisation phenomenon, distrust and opposition to society are linked to an extreme claim of identity that can lead from word to deed, to violence toward the outside world.

Facing these new tensions, secularism should be reaffirmed:

I repeat, these extreme phenomena are rare, but it is up to us to make sure they are forestalled, and to prevent communities from closing upon themselves, to prevent distrust and hatred toward society, and to prevent any kind of coercion by an ideology or a group. **The tools to success are the law, and the legitimacy provided by the political framework that underpins it, that is secularism.**

Genesis of secularism

Postulation of secularism in France was born of our specific history, the French Revolution, where politics tear themselves away from the influence of the clergy, where a system of Republican schools is established, where education is based on reason and rejects any reference to dogma, and finally, where the institutional struggles for power made it necessary to bring about separation between the different forms of power.

Thus, secularism comes from the necessary differentiation between two orders, the political order and the religious one, and consequently leads to the separation of the public and private spheres: **the State does not intervene in the citizen's religion, and religion does not intervene in the functioning of the State.** The legal framework in which the regime of separation between the political and the religious orders was progressively elaborated through the 1905 law on the Separation of the Churches and the State, whose first article states that , *"The Republic ensures the freedom of conscience. It guarantees the free practise of religion subject only to restrictions imposed in the interests of public order"*, while the 2nd article of the 1905 law specifies: *"The Republic does not recognise, employ or fund any religion"*; and through the **1946 Constitution and the repetition of its preamble in the 1958 Constitution** which states that *"France is an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It ensures the equality before the law of all the citizens without distinctions of origin, race or religion. It respects every belief (...)"*

New challenges:

But today the issue has shifted: **the question of conciliating everyone's convictions in their relation to the State is less problematic than their relation to the whole of civil society, as it is not about the regulation of relations between the State and the Roman Catholic Church but, in the heart of society, to regulate a plurality of religious minorities** among which a few - i.e. some particular evangelist groups - have a vision of religion very farfetched from the distinction between private and public, claiming that "the whole religion in the whole life" to quote Danièle Hervieu-Léger³.

Facing this observation, allow me to make this point: I want to see in the plurality of religious expression today, as the sign of the good health of secularism in France. But for this plurality to live, along with the values that made it possible, we must guarantee good quality coexistence and protect the individuals against some community tendencies that either directly harm individual rights (and, on the first hand, the rights of children) or threaten peaceful coexistence by rejecting common norms. Faced with this new kind of issue, we have to go back to the basis of secularism, to return to its spirit in order to guide political action: today as yesterday secularism has to be understood as the statement of two requirements - the guarantee of everyone's freedoms and the refusal of discrimination between citizens.

The spirit of secularism: autonomy and non-discrimination

Secularism is a principle of societal organisation which seeks to conciliate the expression of religious convictions and preserve public order by stating two principles: the first one is to base politics out of any religious vision of the world, it is the neutrality of the State through **non-discrimination** which confirms the citizen's equality before the law. The second one, through the recognition of freedom of conscience, is the affirmation of the autonomy of the citizen, without any institutional or community membership, and in this case the assertion of the right for everyone to have or not to have a religion, or to change religion.

Ensure religious plurality

This neutrality of the State is not to be understood as a passive indifference to religion: secularism is not the refusal to recognise the religious identity of its citizens and it is even less an atheism of State. On the contrary, it is the only guarantee of the practice of the law, of all the rights, among which is included the right to practice a religion, the only limit to the expression of the freedom of religion being defined by public order. Secularism is the token for an open society in which each one keeps their own convictions on the condition that they share the core of values on which it stands. To preserve this freedom, and to guarantee the optimal conditions for it to flourish, leads every day to new challenges.

³ Well known French Sociologist

Rather, it guarantees the rights, all the rights, including that of the exercise of worship, the only limit of the expression of religious freedom is defined by the protection of public order. **Secularism is the guarantee of an open society where everyone has his own convictions, provided he shares the basic values on which it is founded.** To preserve this freedom and ensure the maximum conditions is a new challenge each day.

The elected representative's role

Today the social transformations in society moved the cursor from the political organisation of powers to the regulation of various forces inside society, and it is often up to the elected representative to decide. It is a delicate exercise as the law leaves room for interpretation, and they have to evaluate each situation independently and to maintain public order so that everybody may practice their own freedoms. The approach respects the spirit of secularism: facing a conflict of values or norms, the fundamental principles of the Republic have to be respected. It is not about defying religions or denying their existence and importance in some citizens' lives, but it is about ensuring the practice of this religion while ensuring the respect of the two principles of autonomy and non-discrimination.

MIVILUDES expertise: affirming freedom is ensuring the conditions of its real practice

Taking the equality of subjects before the law into account, it is accounting for the differences between rhetorical rights, formally applicable to anyone, and practical rights, those anyone is effectively able to use. That is the meaning of the first article of the 1905 law: to affirm freedom of conscience and to guarantee the practice of religion, is to demand that the political power find the optimal conditions for the practice of a right.

It is on this matter in particular that the MIVILUDES can share its expertise: the objective of the mission is to detect and prevent situations of psychological subjection, that is, situations where in relations between individuals a very special bond of power is instituted, a relation of dependency is created, forbidding the weaker to use a freedom which is statutorily theirs. It is specifically in the intimate realm, where the freedom of choice and decision is most protected, when an individual has to judge alone the issues of spirituality, self-development or even issues regarding their health, that phenomena of control and psychological manipulation are developed today. What legitimises the action of the State against the intrusions of cults, is the idea that, in a State of law, **the State has to ensure the possibility for everyone to practice their freedoms: at the heart of the intimate realm fundamental rights have to be guaranteed too.**

Conclusion

The MIVILUDES' action shows the specificity of the French legal and political system: this system ensures the protection of the weakest and promotes a "social concept of freedom" where freedom is not conceived without good coexistence and where, conversely, forming a society cannot be done without the guarantee of the effectiveness of everybody's right.

End of conclusion n°1

The only way to prevent cult temptations of any kind is, as Henri Pena-Ruiz reminds us, "that each individual is effectively in possession of all the rights the secular Republic gives them, and that they experiment the authenticity of these rights at the heart of the economic and social life."⁴

End of conclusion n°2

The issue that the actors of the State have to face is a variation of this famous tolerance's paradox formulated by Karl Popper in "The open society and its enemies": "Unlimited tolerance, he says, must lead to the extinction of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to the intolerants, if we are not ready to defend a tolerant society against the impact of intolerance, then the tolerant will be destroyed and tolerance with him." The issue is raised in the same way here: secularism cannot be thought of as the State's unlimited indifference because, for secularism to live, it is necessary that the State fights those who use the freedoms of speech, of religion and of association to harm the very fundamentals of these freedoms.

⁴ Henri Pena-Ruiz, What is secularism, Gallimard 2003. p.200