



Political Islam Online

Muslims in Secular Societies

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The 26th annual meeting of the UOIF [Union of Islamic Organizations of France]¹ took place this past weekend at Paris - Le Bourget. It is considered by far the largest annual meeting of Muslims in the West and over 150,000 Muslims living in France and other European countries attended this year.



PI Online reports on the lecture “The Theological Conditions for Laicism”² given by Professor Olivier Abel³, one of the many researchers who addressed the conference.

Professor Abel explained that, at a moment in history, Eastern and Western cultures came to the realization that they must co-exist. That moment followed the crusades, which Professor Abel states remain in the subconscious of certain communities, particularly the Catholics who, he says, still believe there will be more inter-religious wars in the future. From that moment on however, a common desire to cohabitate emerged among different religious communities. It was the beginning of “tolerance” of cultural and religious differences. From a theological perspective, Professor Abel explains, this complicity among believers gave birth to secularism. Secularism allows religious minorities to exist and to participate in society and the political process. Revisiting history, the lecturer also reminded his audience that during the time of Islamic expansion into northern Africa and Southern Europe, the Muslim empire was multicultural.

Professor Abel explains that the separation between politics and religion arises when these two aspects of life do not offer the same services – when religion must be separated from political power in order to avoid governing an entire population, including religious minorities, based on the dogma of a single religious majority. From that premise, emerges the principle that laws should only be a product of reason and science. Science, he notes, does not depend on religion although science and theology are interdependent.

In 1905 in Europe that religious minorities achieved victory; gaining equality through “laicism”. That secular movement translated into an openness towards other religions. Acceptance of the others became the basis for building a common foundation. Secularism offered a different path towards culture and the sciences, a path that religions authorities often rejected in the interest of self preservation.

¹ Source: <http://www.ramf-uoif.fr/content/view/56/60/lang.fr> - While originally considered an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe, the UOIF has evolved over the years, asserting its own philosophy on Islamo-Western values.

² The French term “laïcité” is “laicism” in English, although it is commonly translated as “secularism”. The term “laïcité” however became in 1905, a core concept of the French constitution by the enacting during the third republic of the law officially separating the church from the state. It is in that context, that the philosopher addresses the role of religions in France.

³ Olivier Abel is professor of Philosophy at the “Faculté Protestante de Paris”

In short, the lecturer explains, “laicism” is a concept that gives rise to the conditions for interreligious coexistence. He also adds that the principle of secularism must often be reaffirmed, however, as new religious minorities emerge.

Abel asserts that only a secular political power is capable of guaranteeing the rights of minorities, which is an attractive argument to his audience of Muslims who are generally a religious minority in the West. It remains to be seen, however, if such an argument can gain a foothold in countries where Muslims are in the majority.

[Synopsis of a lecture given by Professor Olivier Abel at the 26th annual meeting of the UOIF on April 11th, 2009]

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