

**Global Partners France Regional Alliance Mini-Grant
Project Report
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Background:

France has recently been in the news for enacting a controversial law banning the overt display of religious symbolism (the “conspicuous” symbols of faith, as the bill states) in places of public service such as schools. This is the logical extension of the French articulation of “laicite” or secularism that strictly enforces a religious anonymity in all walks of public life. India, on the other hand, equally committed to secularism in public life, has approached its actual practice somewhat differently, choosing to allow a full representation of religious symbols and dress in every arena.

My project attempted a comparative examination of the two cases and the implications thereof for public policy, human rights and the future of multi-religious societies. The Global Partners grant assisted in the conducting of field research for the France case; field research for the Indian case was supported in part by a Spelman College grant.

In France, interviews were conducted during one week in June 2005 in Paris and Marseilles, selected in recognition of their being home to significant numbers of France's Muslim citizens.

Project Description:

Secularism as state policy - the state's strict avoidance of endorsing any religion and the separation of religion from politics - has been enshrined in the constitutions of many liberal democracies from the United States to India, and some dictatorships such as Singapore. However, states appear to interpret secularism, what it entails, what it allows and what it prohibits, in different ways. France's interpretation appears to disallow the expression of religion and religious symbolism in public life – their recent controversial legislation banning such expression as the wearing in schools of headscarves, turbans or large crosses among other symbols, bears witness to this interpretation. It also avers that secularism is promoted best when religious minorities are fully assimilated into the majority culture of the state. On the other hand, countries such as India believe that at the heart of secularism lies the free use and expression of religious symbols and attire – kirpans for Sikhs, hijab for Muslim women – everywhere and an atmosphere where religio-cultural pluralism reigns.

What are the larger consequences of either policy? How do the people they affect - the different religious groups in the country and particularly religious minorities -- feel about what the policies represent and about how secularism is expressed in their country? Does either policy better advance the cause that it espouses in the first place, the separation of religion from the state and thereby the protection of religious minorities?

In France, are there sub-group breakdowns in terms of which populations support the government's policy and which don't? Is there evidence that the policy has served to reinforce secularism or rather to make religion more problematic within the state and does it promote unity or widen divisions in society?

Initial Findings:

I conducted some basic interviews with Muslim as well as non-Muslim citizens in Paris and Marseilles in June, 2005. I was not successful in getting access to French Sikh citizens during this time. Further, because my French is very elementary, I was only successful with those interviewees who also spoke some English. Although I had taken some formally written questions with me, I found that I had to quickly abandon that format to ask short but relevant questions in the time interviewees allowed me, often minutes in a café or store.

In brief, I found that most French Muslims emphatically oppose the “headscarf law” as an intrusion into their religious freedom. Even those that did not employ hijab or cover still reiterated the necessity of allowing individual Muslims to decide. On the other hand, the majority of non-Muslim French supported the law with remarks such as it “made all citizens equal” and reinforced the essence of French secularism. Some stated that the religion itself was demeaning women by requiring them to employ cover. A few opposed the law and supported the right of individuals to decide.

With reference to what my findings tell us about secularism as a policy, what appears to work and what doesn’t and how a policy whose basic intent is to protect people of all faiths should be fashioned and interpreted, the answers are not as clear cut. Although there appears to be a significant level of resentment among the Muslim community in Paris and Marseilles with regard to the new law, there also appears to be some understanding of why the French state has legislated in the way that it has and an acceptance that significant freedom of religion does exist for religious minorities in France in all walks of life.

Finally, how are human rights of individuals best protected – which policy appears more in line with international human rights norms and practice? For this, again there is not a facile conclusion. For India, the answer is very clear, its avowed policy of allowing religious symbols in public life works very well for its society and indeed any change would be disastrous. France’s long tradition of secularism and indeed its particular interpretation of it may also serve to assimilate minority religious groups into the French mainstream. If anything, the research trip underscored the need to place each policy into its own historical and social context and not advocate a “one size fits all” solution.

Timeline:

I need to sift through data and write up the case study of the two countries as mentioned in the project proposal. I intend to do this during this academic year so that the case-study can be employed in my Human Rights and Conflict Resolution class next fall and presented at appropriate conferences during the year.