

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 119: FEBRUARY 25, 2016



PIERRE DE CHARENTENAY, S.J. holds the 2015-16 Gasson Chair at Boston College. He is the author of nine books, including *Les Nouvelles Frontières de Laïcité*. He spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** and undergraduate research assistant **Max Blaisdell** before his presentation on “What the Islamic Veil Reveals” at the Boisi Center.

BLAISDELL: Could you explain the difference between French secularism, known as *laïcité*, and the secularism that exists in the United States?

DE CHARENTENAY: There’s a big difference. The U.S. have a culture which is still religious in general. For example, the U.S. President swears on the Bible. This does not exist in France. The culture in France is more and more secularized, without any religion background.

Both countries have their own system of separation of church and state, which are different. In France the state can give money to private schools and Catholic schools, which is not possible here. In the past in France, the priests would do their military service (now there’s no required military service), which here they wouldn’t do. There are many such differences, but the main difference is the background of the culture.

HEVELONE: This issue of the Muslim veil is interesting because it’s controversial in France, but it has not been controversial in the United States. Why do you think that is the case?

DE CHARENTENAY: I think it’s because there are two systems of integration of migrants. In France we have a system of assimilation. Migrants from outside have to become French and show no differences of behavior, which means no veil.

There is a problem if Muslims put on the veil. While here in the States, it’s a whole different type of integration. We are in a system of multiculturalism and not assimilation. It’s the same in Great Britain. The immigrants can keep elements of



their own identity. France is a centralized and unified country and doesn’t accept those different behaviors.

HEVELONE: Is that what it means to be French stagnant?

DE CHARENTENAY: It does have a hard time in changing. It is slow, with no diversity of that type.

BLAISDELL: Why is the veil not seen in France as a protected form of freedom of expression or speech?

DE CHARENTENAY: It’s not seen that way because it’s seen as a public expression of religious identity. Wearing a veil goes against the idea that the public space should be free of religion – so people are asked to take off their scarf, because that’s a sign which is not acceptable to strict *laïcité*.

HEVELONE: Could you give us a little bit of background on veiling? Why is it important to some Muslim women, but not to all? Is it of special importance to women of the Muslim migrant diaspora?

DE CHARENTENAY: When the veil is used in a Western country, like France, it gives a message to that country. This is not the same as in Algeria or Tunisia, although even there it has a message also. But in France specifically, it is a way to say, “We are Muslim and we want to show it. We are now part of this country.” It says that the Muslim is now part of France. Some people say this scarf is not that important, so they just take the veil off. But for some other people, it’s part of their personal religious involvement, and they want to have it. They want people to know that they are practicing Muslims. It’s a form of religious expression in a

context without outward forms of religious expression.

BLAISDELL: To what degree is the debate on the veil in France a cover for larger issues between Muslim communities and moderate French society? What are the broader conditions like for Muslims living today in France?

DE CHARENTENAY: This debate hides many things. The refusal of the veil is actually the refusal of a foreign community into a unified and Christian country. The French would never contend that theirs is a Christian country, because the culture of *laïcité* prevents that. The principle of *laïcité* makes the French think that religions should just be a private matter and cannot change the public culture.

This debate reveals also the social problems of Muslims: many young Muslims live in the suburbs, where the government is not doing much about education, urban planning, or other matters. For some people, it's a way of attracting attention to their own social situation in the suburbs.

BLAISDELL: Could you give us an overview of Muslim immigration to France, and how that migrant community has been received historically?

DE CHARENTENAY: Immigration started in the 1960s when there was a big reconstruction effort after the war. There was a necessity to build new buildings, roads and to modernize the country. In order to fill the labor shortage, the French government asked for workers from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Workers came from these countries, but generally only men, because the expectation was that they would not be living in France long-term. Eventually though the families came – maybe 20 years later – or some of the workers got married in France.

Now we have whole families – men, women and children, and they are in France to stay. At the beginning, they were discreet about religious identity. They were working, and they were not

displaying their religion or their religious background. Now they do it because they are there to stay with the whole family. That's how it evolved.

The new generation of migrants is coming from sub-Saharan Africa like Niger. They are also Muslim, but the situation is more difficult for them than for people coming from the northern part of Africa. We have had a common background with North Africa, since Algeria had been French for 150 years. The separation in 1962, when Algeria became independent,

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was a dramatic situation. We can thank de Gaulle that he gave independence to Algeria. Immigrants came early '60s for the reconstruction. Now the new migrants come because they have no place to work and sometimes nothing to eat. They come also because they have family which is already in France.

To the north of Paris, near Saint-Denis, there is a whole community of people from Mali. They come because they have a member of the family there or some other relation. There is an African market near Saint-Denis, which is the burial site of many French kings. When you're there it's almost as if you are in a Malian city.

Now we also have the migrants coming from Syria, although France has mostly

refused them. France has only accepted 30,000 Syrian migrants so far. It's really been a minimal effort.

HEVELONE: Islam is a diverse religion, but some diaspora Muslims in Western countries are influenced by Salafist preachers and web materials coming out of Saudi Arabia. Do you think that's true of the migrants to France? Or how has that played out in France?

DE CHARENTENAY: There are few radical Muslims coming into France. The Muslim community in France is mostly moderate people, who for the most part have integrated well along the years. In fact, there are two female Muslim ministers, the minister of education, Mrs. Valaud-Belkacem, and the minister of labor, Mrs. El Khomri. No one has ever said anything opposing their appointments based on their Muslim background.

Most Muslims have been integrated well into French society. There are some migrants in the suburbs, with the mix of unemployment and social difficulties, who are a problem. There are few extremists, people who have tried to get others to commit terrorist acts, like Mohammed Merah. But this is a very tiny, small group.

BLAISDELL: France has borne the brunt of radical Islamic attacks in the past few years. How has this transformed the political and social dynamics in France? Why has France borne the brunt of these attacks rather than other European countries?

DE CHARENTENAY: That's a difficult question, because you have to parse out differences between countries. The British, for instance, are more welcoming to Muslims with their multiculturalism. They would not be the target. But France, with its *laïcité*, which is strict and anti-Muslim, becomes a target. Also France has a tradition of colonialism with Muslim countries and it is one of the big powers. All this multiplies the desire to attack France.

BLAISDELL: Do problems with religious minorities in France extend beyond a struggle with Muslims?

DE CHARENTENAY: Yes. Religious minorities have been in difficult situations throughout the history of France. The Protestants always felt like a minority, but now they are integrated. The Jews have been in many ways a target because they have taken a visible position as Jews. They have their neighborhood in Paris or in Strasbourg where they are concentrated. This also goes against the culture of *laïcité*, where religion is not a public activity. This has created an anti-Semitic feeling, which has been very old in France. In the nineteenth century, there was the famous Dreyfus affair, in which a Jewish officer was accused and condemned of treason only to be rehabilitated later. The specific problem of rising anti-Semitism in France is part and parcel of the general refusal to acknowledge any public presence of religions, outside of its Catholic cultural heritage.

HEVELONE: Could you tell us a little bit about your own scholarly history and why these issues have come to your attention?

DE CHARENTENAY: I've been very interested in *laïcité* throughout my career. I wrote a book on the subject already and I'm writing a second one on its transformation. One of the primary questions about *laïcité* is the capacity to accept other religions coming into France, and also to accept that religions would be part of the public debate. France has had problems with other religions than Catholicism, but also with Catholicism.

The French Revolution was explicitly against the Catholic church. Later the law of 1905 wanted a separation of Church and State. But more recently, *laïcité* became a way of getting rid of all public expression of religion. But it goes against human rights and religious freedom. But the more secular people don't want to hear about that. That's not their problem. *Laïcité*, which means no expression of religion, has become a real culture.



I've been very interested in the transformation of the French culture into a culture without any expression of religious faith or adherence, and how that culture is getting stronger and stronger. For example, the main TV station in France, TF1, suppressed the midnight mass that they had been showing every year. In 2010, they thought, "French people are not believers anymore. We can just get rid of the midnight mass." The bishops thought that this was too bad, but there was mass somewhere else. This is indicative of the cultural horizon of the French, which is without religion.

The same goes for religious symbols. They are starting to get rid of crucifixes or finding ways of obfuscating them. For instance, in Strasbourg, in the main room of the tribunal there's a huge crucifix, which is difficult to remove. The solution they arrived at was to put up a curtain when there's an official event.

BLAISDELL: Returning specifically to the Muslim community in France, how has the socialist government of François Hollande addressed the high unemployment figures for Muslim youth?

DE CHARENTENAY: That's a major problem, and the Hollande administration has done very little about that. He was elected on this issue of unemploy-

ment. He has spoken about combatting it for four years now, and yet the rate is just rising all the time. It's a general concern that the government does not put enough emphasis on that. Also it's not simply unemployment, but also urban planning.

The Ministry of Education is not putting the best school teachers where they have the most social problems. The suburb is the last place where a good teacher would be sent. Instead we send the least experienced of them. Social problems are piling up like this, and there is no solution in sight. It's one of the reasons there's been an explosion of youth protests against the government. In some cases, Muslim religion has in fact been used as a symbol to express its frustration.

BLAISDELL: Do you think things are going to get worse in France before they get better?

DE CHARENTENAY: I don't think it's getting better. One of the solutions has been to put more police forces in many places. The French government has tried different solutions. Could they use in France the "eldest brother" program, which means having older French Muslims mentor the youths? That is probably a good idea. I mean it would help the youths to behave, but it's not enough.

It doesn't give work to the youth. Young people, even the well-educated, have a hard time getting jobs. It's worse for those who are in the suburbs. Hollande said he would be a candidate only if the unemployment goes down, but it's just going up all the time. The conclusion is that he should not be a candidate again.

BLAISDELL: Do you think the Front National has a shot in the upcoming elections, that is unless the republicans and the socialists align against them?

DE CHARENTENAY: Yes. But this is an old story, in the sense that Marine Le Pen has been going up in a number of votes, local, regional, and national. But in the ultimate ballot, the elector votes for another candidate. That's why there are two runoff elections in the French system.

Some people vote for her in the first runoff, but would never vote for her in the second one. I don't think there is any danger of having Marine Le Pen as president. On the local level, some people

from Front National have been elected as mayors and some at the regional level. However, they have never won the presidency of a single region. If the government doesn't open its eyes to the reality of the social ailments in France, the Front National will get stronger and stronger through opposition and anger, similar to what's happening with Donald Trump in the U.S.

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