



REPRESENTATION PERMANENTE DE LA FRANCE
AUPRES DE L'O.S.C.E

Translated from the French

**Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
(Working Sessions 6 and 7-Thursday, 26 September 2013)
French Delegation's statement**

1) France is highly committed to respect for freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, at both national and international level. This key human rights principle, recalled in Article 10 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, is fully guaranteed by our Constitution. It is intrinsically linked and complementary to freedom of opinion and expression. It implies the freedom to follow, change or renounce a religion or a belief or to have none.

2) At national level, implementation of this principle is reflected in strict respect of religious freedom and of secularism

The State, through the Interior Ministry, which is responsible for relations with religions, ensures that all citizens may freely practise the religion of their choice. Religious organisations are not required to register but merely to declare their existence; they benefit from tax breaks. Where necessary, the State can ensure the security of places of worship. The State also gives consideration to religious obligations while reconciling them with food safety requirements.

By guaranteeing religious freedom, the State is careful to neither support nor disadvantage any religion, under the terms of the 1905 Act separating church and state. As the President of the Republic emphasised on 8 April 2013 on the creation of the Observatory of Secularism, the principle of secularism "has sometimes been the subject of debate. Some have tried to undermine or misuse it. Others have used it for fallacious arguments", but it is "above all a principle of liberty and cohesion". This was one of the first conclusions of the French Observatory of Secularism: "Over the last twenty years or so, secularism has too often seemed to be a basis for prohibitions and restrictions of freedom. It isn't. It is the assertion of freedom of conscience and of republican equality, insofar as it sets no opinion above any other, whether those opinions have their origin in religious belief, agnosticism, free-thinking or atheism."

Implementing this principle of secularism requires, in particular, strict neutrality on the part of public agents and public schools, which must not favour any religion over another. This does not mean that secularism is hostile to religion. On the contrary, it provides a shared

framework for the coexistence of different forms of religious expression, or their absence, in accordance with the private convictions of each citizen.

3) The French authorities are aware of the difficulty of ensuring respect of religious freedom and secularism in a context of economic and social crisis which too often leads to identity-related tensions. That is why, in the framework of the national Observatory of Secularism, they have embarked on a wide-ranging process of reflection with the private and the public sector, religious organisations, civil society and the education sector in order to better explain and implement secularism without anyone feeling excluded, discriminated against or stigmatised.

4) At international level, France defends the universal scope of freedom of religion or belief and freedom of opinion and expression. It recalls that human rights aim to protect individuals and not thought systems such as religions and their symbols, which are not subjects of law. It is particularly attentive to the situation of persons belonging to religious minorities.

France is also committed to combating all forms of extremism and intolerance, which is the natural corollary of freedom of opinion and expression. Since 24 June, the EU has itself introduced guidelines to promote and protect freedom of religion and conviction around the world, an initiative in which France will take an active part.

We believe it essential that in its work the ODIHR should be able to continue to promote freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief; it must also be vigilant in the combat against all forms of extremism which undermine the community./.