

The French and the American republics share a common background. They were both influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason. Both countries recognized the existence of a « Supreme Being » or a « Creator », and yet they also chose to separate Church from State. This separation was more radical in France than in the United States, but its effect was in many ways the same: it led to the creation of the modern secular state. As expressed in the First Amendment of the US Constitution, such a state could not support an established religion of any sort. The state was to be « neutral », but it was also expected not to discriminate against any existing faith, however idiosyncratic.

The main objective of the conference is to examine the changing nature of Church/State relations in France, the United States and other Western democracies as well as other countries from around the Mediterranean. The conference participants – historians, lawyers, political scientists and philosophers – will be asked to discuss critically the notions of *secularism* and *freedom of religion* and to highlight the tensions which may arise between the two principles. The topics to be discussed will include: banning prayers in public schools, prohibiting crèches and crosses in the public space, banning Islamic veils in schools, State support for faith-based activities.

The conference, it is hoped, will bring new answers to the increasingly important political question: What does it mean to be “secular” or to belong to a secular state in a world of committed believers and increasing religious diversity?