

1905 – The Law of the Separation of Church and State

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Napoleonic Concordat of 1801 still governed the links between the Catholic Church of Rome and the French State, and allowed, for example, members of the clergy to be paid by the State. However, the Republican government made secularism one of the fundamental values of the new regime, which caused tensions with the papacy and part of the French population. It is in this context that the government prepared a law on the separation of churches and the state, which was subject to much debate and opposition.

Document 1: Anti-clerical caricature



The Pope is shown attached to Marianne, while a drunken monk sleeps in the lower right of the picture. Guided by Voltaire, Emile Combes, president of the Council since 1902 and leader of the anticlerical policy, is preparing to cut the link which unites the Church and the Republic.

Document 2: Speech of a republican deputy

Ferdinand Buisson was a radical-socialist deputy and Director of Primary Education from 1879 to 1896

The first duty of a Republic is to make Republicans; and you do not make a republican like you do a Catholic. To make a Catholic, it is enough to impose a ready made truth. The master has spoken, the faithful repeats. It has been said a Catholic; but one could just as well say a Protestant or any other believer [...]. All clerical education leads to this behavior: to believe and obey, blind faith and passive obedience [...]. To make a republican, it is necessary to

take the human being so small and so humble that he is (a child, a teenager, the most uneducated man, the worker most overwhelmed by the excess of work) and to give him the idea that he can think for himself, that he owes neither faith nor obedience to anyone, that it is up to him to seek the truth and not to receive it ready-made from a master, from director, of any leader, temporal or spiritual.

Ferdinand Buisson, speech given to the Radical Party Congress, 1903

Document 3: Speech in opposition to the law

This deeply disturbing act touches the beliefs and traditions of the country, and universal suffrage has never been clearly consulted. In the difficult times we are going through, the loyal, far-sighted and firm practice of a concordatory system could give the Republic the freedom of mind, the inner calm and the moral unity it needs. If you have to give birth to new divisions, to open an era of turmoil of which no one can foresee the consequences, we refuse to take responsibility with you. Those, gentlemen, are the reasons why my friends and I will vote against [...] the bill as a whole.

Joseph Thierry, deputy for Bouches-du-Rhône, speech to the Chamber of Deputies,
3rd July 1905.

Document 4: Adoption of the law, 1905

The law was promulgated on December 9th 1905, after being adopted by 341 votes and 233 against, and after 320 amendments.

Art. 1. The Republic guarantees freedom of conscience. It guarantees the free exercise of cults under only restrictions enacted below in the interest of public order.

Art. 2. The Republic does not recognize, pay or subsidize any religion. Consequently, from 1st January following the promulgation of this law, all the expenses relating to the exercise of religion will be abolished from the budgets of the State, the departments and the communes.

However, the costs relating to chaplaincy services and intended to ensure the free exercise of worship in public institutions such as high schools, colleges, schools, hospices, asylums and prisons may be included in the said budgets.

Document 5: The inventories of Church goods



Some Catholics accepted this law which allowed financial independence of the Church from the State.

The inventories made it possible to transmit the goods of the Church to the cultural associations.

Some parishioners opposed the taking of these inventories because they interpreted them as acts of sacrilege, which sometimes gave rise to violence.

illustrated supplement of the *Petit Journal* , 18th March 1906.

Exercises

1. Explain what features of this document mean that it is anti-clerical in nature (Doc.1).
2. Identify the republican values and ideas justifying the law of the separation of Church and State (Doc. 1,2,4,5)
3. Show that the adoption of this law was contentious (Doc.2,3,4).