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Conférence Internationale du 30 juin au 3 juillet 2013 à Aix-en-Provence  
International Conference from June 30 – July 3, 2013 in Aix-en-Provence

**La Laïcité: une chance ou un défi pour les religions?  
En France et dans le monde**

**Secularity: Opportunity or Peril for Religions,  
The French Experience and Global Perspectives**

**Sunday, June 30, 2013**

**Opening speech**

By Dr Deborah Weissman, ICCJ President

In a slightly-less-annoying accent, I will continue in English. This is my first conference without Ruth Weyl, of blessed memory. On a completely different note, this is also Dick Pruikma's last conference as General Secretary. I will begin with sincere thanks to the people who have made this conference possible. Please hold your applause until the end of the list: First, the chair of this conference, Liliane Apotheker; the committee, including Rosine Voisin, Edouard Robberechts and Bruno Charmet. Thanks also to our French member organization, the Amitié Juivo-Christienne de France (AJCF) and its President, Revd. Florence Taubmann; and to the ICCJ staff from Heppenheim, esp. Revd. Dick Pruiksma, Ute Knorr and Petra Grönewald-Stangl.

I would like to express very deep gratitude to the many sponsors of the conference, who are listed in the program booklet, and to all of you for coming.

I want to take this opportunity to greet and welcome two 2 special guests: Rev. Detlev Knoche, of the church of Hessen and Nassau, who have been among our most generous supporters; and Monsieur Yves Chevalier, the director of *Sens*, the monthly publication of the Amitie.

I have visited Paris at least six times, but this is my first visit to France outside of that great city. Through the good graces of my friend Claude Lhussier, I got to be in Angers and the beautiful Loire Valley.

We are here in Aix to honor the memory of Jules Isaac. Several years before Vatican II, he met with Pope John 23 and was one of the important catalytic figures in the rapprochement between the Church and the Jewish people. Both of those remarkable gentlemen passed away in 1963, 50 years ago, not seeing the ultimate fruits of their work.

I would like to quote from my predecessor, Madame Claire Huchet Bishop. We are, so far, the only two women who have headed the ICCJ. A French Catholic author and scholar, Mme. Bishop was an ardent devotee of the work of Jules Isaac. I am indebted to our dear friend and colleague Judy Banki for the following information and insights: It was Bishop who was largely responsible for the publication of his books in the United States, and thus, indirectly, for familiarity with the expression, “the teaching of contempt” on the North American continent. She urged the American Jewish Committee to become involved, insofar as possible, in the forthcoming Vatican council, to engage in a vigorous initiative for the repudiation “at the highest level of the Church” of that anti-Jewish and antisemitic tradition of teaching and preaching whereby Jews had been segregated, degraded, charged with wicked crimes, and valued only as potential converts. Ecumenical councils are few and far between, she said, and this is a historic opportunity. “Seize it.”

As we say, “the rest is history;” we shall delve into it, God willing, at our 2015 conference in Rome. Let me now say just a few words about this particular conference and its challenging theme of laicite. I want to point out that there are many different models of the relations between church & state. We are not here to critique the French model; we’re here to raise

some questions and to learn from the French experience. Those of us who aren't French are clearly outsiders to this experience. We may not always "get it." But sometimes, outsiders can bring fresh eyes and new perspectives that can be helpful even to the insiders.

We will look at the benefit the models provide for the state, for society, for the religious communities, and for individuals. We will also consider some of the dangers and potential problems. I won't say more about this now, because I am speaking as a respondent at the plenary session on Tuesday morning, and I wouldn't want to be repetitious.

Let me just indicate that France is a wonderful place to raise these questions. This is the country of Voltaire, who said, "I do not agree with what say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it." It is the country of Moliere, who warned of the dangers of religious hypocrisy, in *Tartuffe*. It is also the country of Pascal, a remarkable figure of faith, and Pascal's wager. France has led the world in defining and developing human rights, from the Enlightenment to Rene Cassin.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish scholar known as the *Rashbam*, who was *Rashi's* grandson, engaged in common study of Biblical texts with Christians at the St. Victor Abbey in Paris. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Provence was the home of the great rabbi, Menchem HaMeiri, who advanced the Jewish approach towards adherents of other religions, specifically, Christians and Muslims, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Paris was the home of the great philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, who taught us to see God in the face of the Other.

Having mentioned Rashi, I will conclude with a quotation from his classic commentary on the Torah. The verse he was commenting on we read yesterday in the Torah Portion of the Week, *Pinhas*. It is Numbers, chapter 27, verse 16. The context is Moses asking God for someone to replace him. He says in this verse, "Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation..." *Rashi*, adapting an earlier *Midrash*, says, "Why is it written, "...God of the spirits...?" Moses said before Him, 'Ruler of the World, it is revealed before You that, just as the faces of people are different, so, too, their opinions are different; appoint over them a leader who will tolerate each one of them according to his opinion.'"

Those of you who know Hebrew may be aware of the fact that the root for the word "to tolerate" is also "to suffer." It is the same root as in the word for patience. When we encounter

views that are different from our own, provided they are not incitement to violence, we must tolerate them, although they may be “insufferable.” May we have a productive and stimulating conference infused with a spirit of patience, tolerance and respect.

*Merci.*