Recent scholarship has uncovered laïcité’s Protestant sources by focusing attention on its late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advocates. This article argues that the intellectual sources of laïcité stretch further back than this, namely to the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Benjamin Constant (1767-1830). These two thinkers are rarely seen as allies. However, an examination of their views on religion reveals a surprising complicity, attributable in large part to their liberal Protestant sympathies. Benjamin Constant was well placed to understand and appreciate Rousseau’s "Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar" and his chapter "On Civil Religion" in the Social Contract. Moreover, Constant had observed firsthand the distortion of Rousseau's views by the French revolutionaries. This essay shows that Constant's writings on religion were those of a disciple of Rousseau, who wished to clarify and disseminate ideas that would prove foundational for the modern notion of laïcité.
in religious affairs and the degree of which religions intervene in affairs of public institutions. 15. The foundation of many modern Nation-State is closely linked to some religions which now effectively enjoy some privileged status legally, politically and socially. Moreover, this relationship is closely linked to the financial support to religions. 21. To conclude, European Union generally remains secular. Recent debates about spirituality, popular religion and official religion have kept alive issues that confronted both Weber and Durkheim. The second and related issue concerns the vexed issue about secularization, ‘re-sacralization’ and ‘public religions’ and the question of ‘American exceptionalism’ (Torpey, 2010). In France, where secularism or laïcité as the dominant tradition has been enforced by the state, the sociology of religion has not thrived. There is a considerable body of research on Islam looking at the debates about veiling and gender equality. This notion had its origin in Rousseau’s political and educational theories. An enduring source of the French pride is that their ideas and historical experiences have decisively shaped the values of other nations. One of the modern French words for an intellectual is clerc (a member of the clergy), and the positions held by intellectuals have been consistently defined through concepts such as faith, commitment, heresy and deliverance. This explains why French public debate is invariably structured around a small number of recurring binaries. Thus the principle of laïcité (secularism) has been deployed not to protect the religious freedom of the Maghrebi minorities, as would follow from a strict interpretation of the 1905 law of separation of churches from the state, but to question their Frenchness.