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Stuck in a revolving door : secularism, assimilation and democratic pluralism

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Publication date
2006

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jansen, H. Y. M. (2006). *Stuck in a revolving door : secularism, assimilation and democratic pluralism*.

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In recent critiques of multiculturalism it has been proposed to reconsider the potential of assimilation, secularism, or both, for rethinking the place of religion and culture in the public sphere. This study traces the intertwined cultural and conceptual histories of these two notions and critically evaluates their merits for a theory of pluriform democracy. It interrogates contemporary proposals to reintroduce assimilation in sociology and political theory and assesses the debates in France on *laïcité*, or French secularism. It argues for the necessity of a self-reflexive, historical dimension in conceptualisations of cultural and religious diversity. To put this into practice, this study provides an in-depth reading of Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time*, which narrates, ironises, performs and criticises the oblique practical and discursive effects of the expectation that the Jews in nineteenth-century France would 'assimilate'. This study proposes to redefine multiculturalism as democratic relational pluralism instead of a return to assimilationist or secularist tendencies within liberalism.

Yolande Jansen teaches philosophy at the Universiteit van Amsterdam and wrote this study as her dissertation within the research school ASCA, the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis at the Faculty of Humanities. In the summer of 2006, she will start a post-doctoral project on *laïcité's* interactions among France, Algeria and Turkey.

ISBN 907383876-2



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