France is a secular country in which freedom of religion is a constitutional right. The French policy on religion is based on the concept of laïcité, a strict separation of church and state under which the government and public life are kept completely secular, detached from any religion. The region of Alsace and Moselle is an exception to the general French norm since the local law stipulates official status and state funding for Lutheranism, Catholicism, and Judaism.[267]

Catholicism has been the main religion in France for more than a millennium, and it was once the country's state religion.[268] Its role nowadays, however, has been greatly reduced, although, as of 2012, among the 47,000 religious buildings in France 94% are still Catholic churches.[269] After alternating between royal and secular republican governments during the 19th century, in 1905 France passed the 1905 law on the Separation of the Churches and the State, which established the aforementioned principle of laïcité.[270]

The government is prohibited from recognising specific rights to any religious community (with the exception of legacy statutes like those of military chaplains and the aforementioned local law in Alsace-Moselle). It recognises religious organisations according to formal legal criteria that do not address religious doctrine, and religious organisations are expected to refrain from intervening in policymaking.[271] Some religious groups, such as Scientology, the Children of God, the Unification Church, and the Order of the Solar Temple, are considered cults (sectes in French, which is considered a pejorative term[272]) and are not granted the same status as recognised religions.[273]

The French health care system is one of universal health care largely financed by government national health insurance. In its 2000 assessment of world health care systems, the World Health Organization found that France provided the "close to best overall health care" in the world.[275] The French health care system was ranked first worldwide by the World Health Organization in 1997.[276][277] In 2011, France spent 11.6% of its GDP on health care, or US$4,086 per capita,[278] a figure much higher than the average spent by countries in Europe. Approximately 77% of health expenditures are covered by government-funded agencies.[279]

Care is generally free for people affected by chronic diseases such as cancer, AIDS or cystic fibrosis. The life expectancy at birth is 78 years for men and 85 years for women.[280][281] There are 3.22 physicians for every 1000 inhabitants,[282] and average health care spending per capita was US$4,719 in 2008.[283] As of 2007[update], approximately 140,000 inhabitants (0.4%) of France are living with HIV/AIDS.[81]

In 1802, Napoleon created the lycée, the second and final stage of secondary education that prepares students for higher education studies or a profession.[285] Jules Ferry is considered the father of the French modern school, leading reforms in the late 19th century that established free, secular and compulsory education (currently mandatory until the age of 16).[286][287]

French education is centralised and divided into three stages: primary, secondary, and higher education. The Programme for International Student Assessment, coordinated by the OECD, ranked France's education as near the OECD average in 2018.[288][289] Schoolchildren in France reported greater concern about the disciplinary climate and behaviour in classrooms compared to other OECD countries.[289]

Higher education is divided between public universities and the prestigious and selective Grandes écoles, such as Sciences Po Paris for political studies, HEC Paris for economics, Polytechnique, the École des hautes études en sciences sociales for social studies and the École nationale supérieure des mines de Paris that produce high-profile engineers, or the École nationale d'administration for careers in the Grands Corps of the state. The Grandes écoles have been criticised for alleged elitism, producing many if not most of France's high-ranking civil servants, CEOs and politicians.[290]

The origins of French art were very much influenced by Flemish art and by Italian art at the time of the Renaissance. Jean Fouquet, the most famous medieval French painter, is said to have been the first to travel to Italy and experience the Early Renaissance firsthand. The Renaissance painting School of Fontainebleau was directly inspired by Italian painters such as Primaticcio and Rosso Fiorentino, who both worked in France. Two of the most famous French artists of the time of the Baroque era, Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain, lived in Italy.

French artists developed the rococo style in the 18th century, as a more intimate imitation of the old baroque style, the works of the court-endorsed artists Antoine Watteau, François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard being the most representative in the country. The French Revolution brought great changes, as Napoleon favoured artists of neoclassic style such as Jacques-Louis David and the highly influential Académie des Beaux-Arts defined the style known as Academism.

In the second part of the 19th century, France's influence over painting grew, with the development of new styles of painting such as Impressionism and Symbolism. The most famous impressionist painters of the period were Camille Pissarro, Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir.[291] The second generation of impressionist-style painters, Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec and Georges Seurat, were also at the avant-garde of artistic evolutions,[292] as well as the fauvist artists Henri Matisse, André Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck.[293][294]  
  
At the beginning of the 20th century, Cubism was developed by Georges Braque and the Spanish painter Pablo Picasso, living in Paris. Other foreign artists also settled and worked in or near Paris, such as Vincent van Gogh, Marc Chagall, Amedeo Modigliani and Wassily Kandinsky.