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France and Catholicism from Monarchical Hegemony to Secular Competition: A Turbulent Story

Blandine Chelini-Pont

A useful image to illustrate the Catholic history of France is the expansion and contraction of an accordion. Between the sixth and eighteenth centuries, it seemed that there was an ever-expanding period of Catholic hegemony protected by an unbroken monarchical power. The result was a profound catholicization of the societies and territories under the rule of the French crown. A second, much shorter period of contraction followed, between the late eighteenth century and the late 1960s, which began after the French Revolution and the disruption it caused. Post-revolution France set in motion the progressive disentanglement of the state from the Catholic establishment, transitioning from a restricted system of state-financed religions to the implementation of *laïcité*. The nationwide transition to *laïcité*, however, was not easily accomplished and was strongly opposed by reluctant Catholics during the twentieth century.

Beginning in the 1960s, the de-catholicization (both institutional and cultural) of French society was accelerated by declining religious practice. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, just as *laïcité* seemed finally to be gaining some stability, a new religious pluralism appeared, resulting from immigration and new converts. The system of *laïcité*, though at times conflictual, was generally successful in its attempts to open a market in religion. That said, French society today seems less tolerant and more divided, with some social classes and minority communities feeling under attack (Fourquet, 2019). The fragmentation of Islam, a growing tendency toward radicalization, as well as the threat of international terrorism have provoked both political polarization and populist reactions.

This paper covers the various stages in this turbulent story.

Catholic hegemony in pre-revolutionary France (sixth to eighteenth centuries)

At the time of the Barbarian invasions, the Latin-speaking Gauls were mostly Roman Christians. Already present in Roman *Gallia Belgica*, were pagan Frankish tribes, united under King Clovis (481-511), who conquered the pagan Alaman and Arian Visigoth territories. Clovis absorbed the Burgundian kingdom through his marriage to Princess Clotilda and converted to Catholicism. He was baptized by Saint Remigius, the Gallo-Roman Bishop of Reims along with 3,000 Franks. From this moment onwards, the link between the Catholic clergy and Frankish power endured for centuries. The Jews who lived in the kingdom were expelled in 533 and 633. In the early eighth century, Charles de Herstal, also called Charles Martel (717-741), duke of the Franks, was successful in quelling the Arab-Moroccan raids in the duchy of Aquitaine and won the battle of Poitiers in 732. Martel's son, Pippin the Short (751-768),

became king of the Franks and continued his father's campaigns to impede Muslim settlement in the south. He was the first Catholic king to be ritually crowned and anointed with holy oil. Pippin's son, Charles I (768-814), continued to expand the Frankish kingdom beyond the Rhine and the Alps, converting by force the still-pagan eastern Germanic tribes. Three centuries after the collapse of the western Roman Empire, Charles negotiated his imperial coronation, in Rome itself, by Pope Leo III (795-816), who was indebted to him after Frankish military forces had defeated the Arian Lombards in Italy (800).

Emperor Charles, or Charlemagne, organized his rather scattered Empire within an entirely Catholic framework (Chelini, 2010). In 843, his territory was broken into three separate kingdoms and shared between his grandsons: western Francia became the Kingdom of France in the late tenth century, when Hugues Capet (987-996), then Duke of the Franks, was crowned as successor to the last Carolingian king. Eastern Francia became Germany when its king was crowned by the pope as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Middle Francia did not last long and fell apart into three smaller kingdoms in 855: Lothringia, Provence, and Italy. Unlike his German counterpart, the French king never contested papal sovereignty over the princes. And from the tenth to the twelfth centuries the Church itself became financially without equal; under French feudalism its substantial revenues were generated from church tax, estates, and fiefdoms.

A remarkable monastic expansion began during the tenth century. The abbey at Cluny, founded in 910, became the centre of 1,400 monasteries, both inside and outside France (logna-Prat, 2013). Cîteaux, founded at the end of the eleventh century, controlled 2,000 monasteries, reawakening the Benedictine tradition, and competing with the Cluniac order (Pacaud, 1993). Cistercian monks spread the Gregorian Reforms and focused on reclaiming the Church's lands from secular feudal lords. Cistercian architecture, moreover, was soon adapted for use in churches and cathedrals, becoming known as 'romanesque'. And it was the Cistercian Abbot of Clairvaux, Bernard de Fontaine, who called for the Second Crusade in 1145 at the behest of Pope Eugene III (1145-1153).

By the thirteenth century, France was a close ally of the papacy, permitting the free establishment of the first universities and building dozens of cathedrals, in an original French style, termed 'gothic' by the Renaissance painter Raphael. Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) called Philip Augustus (1180-1223) his 'favourite son'. Louis IX (1226-1270), the archetype par excellence of the good king was sainted by Boniface VIII a few years after his death (1294-1303). This rather-too-close relationship also displayed a darker side. As the military arm of the Church, the French king obeyed the papal call to 'crusade' against the heretics in his own kingdom. Waldensians in Languedoc, Cathars in the vicinity of Toulouse and Albi, were hunted down by the forces of the king and the Inquisition, led by the Abbot of Cîteaux Arnaud Amaury. Those who refused to repent were burned at the stake. The prosperous Languedoc Jews, until then had been left in peace unlike their co-religionists in the French

northern territories, faced Inquisitorial suspicion, book burnings, and sporadic massacres (Iancu-Agou, 2014: 155-168). They would be expelled anew, from the north in 1256 and 1306, and from the south in 1322.

The pope and king's 'mystical alliance' ended in the early fourteenth century. Taxes, conflicts, and Inquisitorial abuses by the king (among them the destruction of the powerful Templars to seize their lands) as well as a renewed desire for independent sovereignty contributed to the disunity. One century later, during the Western Schism, Charles VII (1422-1461) aligned with the Council of Basel, which sought to re-establish conciliar authority over the Church – itself increasingly overshadowed by growing papal authority. The royal edict entitled *Pragmatic Sanction* established the Gallican Church's autonomy in 1438 under the king's supervision. In 1516, the young King François I (1515-1547), obtained from Pope Leo X (1513-1521), the privilege of nominating bishops in his kingdom (enshrined by the Concordat of Bologna), after his military victory at the battle of Marignano against Swiss troops allied with the papacy.

In the early sixteenth century, Italian Humanist ideas penetrated the country, particularly in Paris, in large part due to well-known and respected scholars such as Erasmus and Lefèvre d'Étaples. Lefèvre, who translated the Bible into French, tried out the new 'evangelical' form of lay piety (originating in the Germanic Swiss territories) which incorporated group bible reading and discussion. His friend, Mgr. Guillaume Briçonnet, Bishop of Meaux, set up one such group in his diocese called the *Cénacle de Meaux*. The *Cénacle* was soon accused of Lutheran heresy, as in the meantime, the Reformation had made its way into French universities. Lutheran books had been immediately condemned and banned. The *Cénacle de Meaux* was forced to disband. Despite the ban, the Lutheran influence, coming from Switzerland, continued to grow until 1534 when a poster criticizing the Catholic mass was affixed to the door of the royal chamber itself, provoking immediate and ruthless repression. A decade later, the members of the *Cénacle de Meaux* were burned at the stake. Under Henry II (1547-1559), persecution would continue relentlessly.

Lutheranism had virtually disappeared when the Calvinist Reformation came to prominence in France, via Geneva, where a former *Cénacle* member, Jean Calvin, having fled royal repression, was successful in imposing his ecclesiastical ordinances in 1541. The Calvinist Reformation touched all social classes in the areas of Normandy, Poitou, Languedoc as well as eastern and northern cities. Spreading to the nobility and the royal cousins in the 1560s, the Reformation's success provoked two opposing clans competing for the crown: one Catholic and one Protestant. Civil war broke out, replete with barbaric violence and several fragile peace edicts, during which Protestants were granted the right to worship as well as the protection of a few sanctuary cities. In August 1572, a royal wedding at *Notre-Dame de Paris* between the Protestant heir of Navarre and the king's daughter turned into a bloodbath, a comprehensive massacre of the city's Protestants. In total, 4,000 people

perished on Saint Bartholomew's Day. After twenty years of unrelenting war, Henry, King of Navarre, became the sole heir of the French throne. Spain supported the Catholic faction refusing Henry's dynastic legitimacy. But Henry renounced his Protestant faith and was crowned as Henry IV (1594-1610) with resumed Catholic pomp and ceremony. In 1598, Henry IV promulgated an edict of religious toleration known as the Edict of Nantes. A remarkable hiatus in what had otherwise been systemic and very French intolerance, this edict allowed French Protestants to live peacefully under the protection of the law, in stark contrast to the expulsion of the last Jews from the south, when Provence was passed on the French king at the end of the fifteenth century, almost one hundred years earlier.

The Edict of Nantes, however, was repealed in 1685 by Henry IV's grandson, the great Louis XIV (1654-1715). Banned from worshipping under the penalty of imprisonment, forced labour in the galleys, or death, Protestants were forced to convert or risk the confiscation of their property and the loss of their children's legal legitimacy. French Protestants fled the Kingdom en masse, despite the prohibition to do so: 250,000 took refuge abroad (Baubérot and Carbonnier-Burkard, 2016). Their fate after 1685 was the mark of a renewed symbiosis between the French monarchy and the Catholic Church. The New Bourbon dynasty established a Christ-like mysticism, helping to create new religious orders and supervising the compulsory evangelization of both free and enslaved colonial populations. Movements of devotional piety flourished, such as the *'humanisme dévôt'* with its ideal of the *'honnête homme'* and the quietist movement especially popular among bourgeois women. This flattering picture was soon disrupted by the rigorous dissent of the Jansenism movement, inspired by Jansenius, Rector of Louvain University. Jansenism was so vigorous at the turn of the eighteenth century, that the king endorsed the papal condemnation, which had not been permitted for nearly two centuries, in order to stop it. The major Jansenist threat had barely been neutralized when it was replaced by the challenges of the Enlightenment which used satire, brochures, and clandestine tracts to shape the first-ever articulation of French public opinion, asserting that political tyranny worked together with the oppression of conscience to impede human progress (McManners, 1998). The battle for the freedom of thought began in the middle of the eighteenth century, following the censoring of both the publishers and authors of the first volumes of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. Conflict between the Church, the censorship of the state, and the Enlightenment thinkers reached a crisis point in the 1760s. Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*, which compiled and summarized a list of objections formulated against Christianity and religion in general, was subsequently condemned by the parliament.

From revolution to the implementation of *laïcité* (eighteenth to twentieth centuries)

In 1789, the symbiotic relationship between Catholicism and the monarchy did not appear to be under threat when the king summoned the *Etats généraux* (Estates General) to avoid bankruptcy. But divorce quickly ensued when the *Etats généraux* renamed itself the *Assemblée nationale*, effectively igniting the Revolution. During the night of 4 August, the self-proclaimed deputies voted to abolish tax privileges for the Church and the nobility. Reflecting the deist affinities of many of the deputies, the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, published on 26 August 1789, did not refer to God in the Preamble, referring instead to a 'Supreme Being'. Article 10 introduced the principle of freedom of opinion, including religious opinion. Because of this article and that on civil equality, Protestants, and Jews of the newly acquired Alsace and Lorraine territories, became French citizens in December 1789.

The nationalization of the Church's property in September 1789 was supposed to discharge the state from bankruptcy by selling off the Church's patrimony. In exchange, the deputies committed the state to accept the financial burden of clergy salaries as well as religious charities and schooling. In order to organize this public funding, the newly founded Assembly voted to pass the law on the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* in November 1790, ending the thousand-year organizational autonomy of the Church in France. New dioceses and civil elections for priests and bishops were established. Now considered as public servants, each priest had to take an oath to uphold the national constitution. The enforcement of the law was tumultuous but uneven. Certain territories refused even to organize the local clergy elections. And most of the clergy refused to be elected and to swear allegiance to the new regime. In the end, only the elected priests, referred to as *jureurs*, remained in their parishes. The resistant priests, *non-jureurs*, were forced into exile or became clandestine. After several amendments to the law, *non-jureur* priests who were caught were executed. In the long term, the areas that hid *non-jureur* priests would eventually correspond to those areas exhibiting sustained Catholic religious practice and right-wing voting patterns from the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century (Tackett, 1988).

In the autumn of 1793, the Jacobin députés took over the National Convention imposing the Reign of Terror through the new leadership of the Committee of Public Safety which served as an emergency provisional government. The Gregorian calendar was replaced with a new Republican calendar in which the year 1789 was replaced by the Republican year 1, Christian festivals were replaced by substitute holidays, the Latin organization of week and month was replaced by three ten-day weeks per month. Municipalities renamed their streets, children received new revolutionary names, while places of worship and religious symbols were partially destroyed, and the great men of the past were ceremonially reburied at the deconsecrated Pantheon in Paris (Vovelle, 1988). Dechristianization policies also took on the clergy directly, encouraging priests to resign and then marry. Some 3,000 *non-jureur*

priests were guillotined. The revolutionary army, moreover, ensured that dechristianization spread from Paris towards the east, the centre, and the Rhône valley (Tackett, 2017).

On coming to power in November 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte inherited a confused and painful religious situation. He sought to restore civil peace by immediately favouring the reopening of churches and the return of *non-jureur* priests. Then, he re-opened negotiations with the pope in order to reunite the state-sanctioned and clandestine churches and to restore Catholic worship, culminating in the *Concordat of Paris* on 15 July, 1801. Napoleon unilaterally added the 'Organic articles' governing worship, which impeded direct papal control over the French Church and sanctioned two Protestant churches, the Lutherans and the Reformed. The *loi d'avril 1802* established the French system of state-sanctioned churches, which would later expand to include the Jews in 1808; this arrangement lasted right through the nineteenth century to 1905 (Chantin, 2010).

At the end of the Napoleonic Empire in 1814, what became known as the '*restauration*' did not reconstitute an absolute Catholic monarchy. It was true that Article 5 asserted Catholicism as the state religion, but Article 6 affirmed religious freedom and did not challenge the system of state-sanctioned churches. It further encouraged the flourishing of Catholic missions both domestically and throughout the colonial territories led by specialized missionary societies. Under Charles X (1824-1830), clerical pressure increased in schools and universities with the reestablishment of religious orders such as the Jesuits. And unlike his predecessor, Charles X opted to be crowned at Reims, reviving traditionalist ritual – a gesture that provoked widespread criticism, inspiring in turn opposition to the regime (Brejon de Lavergnée, 2012).

In July 1830, a short re-eruption of the revolution characterized by anti-Catholic violence brought the ransacking of *Notre-Dame* in Paris, the exiling of many bishops, and the renewed persecution of priests, but gave birth eventually to a liberal and constitutional monarchy. And though the 'July Monarchy' was by no means Catholic, it did allow a religious *modus vivendi*, permitting active Catholicism on the one hand, but eliminating state entanglement with Catholicism on the other.

The 1848 Revolution which established the Second Republic, was surprisingly free from anticlericalism. Priests agreed to bless the 'trees of liberty' that symbolized the new regime and encouraged parishioners to vote (the new Republic had granted universal male suffrage). In so doing, they ensured conservative success at the parliamentary elections of April 1848. Thus, the first French president ever elected, Prince Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (1848-1851), appeared almost king-like, even indeed as the saviour of the pope. In 1849, he sent the French army to reinstate Pius IX (1846-1878) in Rome, who had been driven out by an insurrectional and short-lived Roman Republic. French Catholics rallied around the Prince-President's coup d'état in December 1851. The resulting regime of the Second Empire,

proclaimed on 2 December 1852, relied heavily on the Catholic Church for official and military ceremonies, education, and social services and in return, dramatically increased the budgets for clergy and the construction of churches. *Notre-Dame* was entirely restored.

The new alliance started to deteriorate in 1859, when the self-proclaimed Emperor Napoléon III (1852-1870) allowed the seizure of the Papal States by the Kingdom of Piedmont, which sought Italian unification. French Catholics upheld the pope's protest and once again turned their attention to the idea of papal supremacy. This movement of papal support on the part of French Catholics is known as ultramontanism. It favoured reactionary Catholicism in a brief period of Catholic domination over French society during the nascent and uncertain *Third Republic*, following the Prussian defeat of the Second Empire (1870-1871), a moment when Catholic forces enjoyed the support of a series of very conservative Republican governments. The number of priests had never been so high, and the religious orders went through an extraordinary period of expansion, with the missionary orders in the growing empire attracting thousands of would-be missionaries (Prudhomme, 2004).

At the beginning of the 1880s, Catholicism was so dominant that the republicans mobilized all their potential supporters for the 1879 elections (from left-wing radicals to moderate centrists) behind the idea of separating the state and Church, in an effort to curtail Catholic control and make way for 'modern' values. It was at this point that the concept of *laïcité* began to emerge, which helped to facilitate republican unity. Republicans not only gained power but retained it until the First World War. They oriented their secular agenda primarily towards public education. In 1881, republican leader Jules Ferry, Minister of Education, created the public primary school system, which was free, compulsory, and very soon secular, meaning the exclusion of religious education and the retention of moral values. More secularizing measures followed during the next decade: the elimination of prayers at the opening of assemblies, the ending of military presence at religious processions, the establishment of public nursing in hospitals, the transfer of cemeteries from religious to municipal administration, the regulation of church bells and religious processions in urban areas, the possibility of civil divorce, and the end of clerical exemption from military service. Only the growing missionary orders escaped this attack on the Church's influence because they indirectly served the interest of French imperialism. Similarly, republicans favoured Catholic settlement in the colonies using the Concordat mechanism in French Algeria. The republicans also integrated Algerian Jews into this system, a move which gave Sephardi Jews French citizenship (1871). In contrast, French colonial expansion, which now included Muslim territories in north, Sahelian, and black Africa, (as well as millions of Buddhists in Indochina) implied the unilateral religious supervision of the state. In short France was policing its colonial religions (Vermeren, 2016).

Catholics lost any remaining political influence during the 1890s. They were too attached to the monarchical cause and too disdainful of the Republic's electoral system to

regain any advantage. In the 1889 elections, their reckless support of the vacuous General Boulanger, champion of all things anti-republican, failed dismally. And from that point on, Catholics mostly chose to support the false accusations of Dreyfus, simply because he was a Jewish officer. Catholic antisemitism, growing since the 1870s (Birnbaum, 1994), coincided with a new and strong nationalist fervour, which was previously a republican trait. Victorious in the June 1899 elections, the republicans were ready to end altogether the legal privileges of Catholics, as well as to abolish the 1801 Concordat (Baubérot, 2017).

In 1901, the new republican coalition adopted a definitive law which protected the freedom of religious *associations* but excluded Catholic orders from any associative status. The law obliged religious orders to ask for authorization, which would be granted on a case-by-case basis. In 1902, Prime Minister Émile Combes, forbade the submission of all applications from the orders. Following this decision, thousands of their members were exiled. The fight against the religious orders continued with the 1904 law prohibiting any religious congregation to teach (Sorrel, 2003). Again, thousands of male and female religious were exiled abroad or fled throughout the empire, where the law was not applied (Cabanel and Durand, 2005). Ending the Napoleonic Concordat was the next step pursued by both socialist and radical republicans. The radical Aristide Briand, supported by socialist leader Jean Jaurés, tried to ensure that the law was moderate and liberal, in part inspired by the American system (Bellon, 2016). Since the 1905 law of Separation, France has been a secular Republic.

The French secular republic and the regime of *laïcité* (1905-2005)

The early twentieth century was a time of adaptation on the part of both state and Church as the transition to legal secularism, or *laïcité*, began to assert itself after nearly fourteen centuries of entanglement.

The first step in this transition was the implementation of the law, which was largely unproblematic for the Protestant and Jewish minorities, yet seemingly impossible for Catholics, who were hostile to the ending of the *Concordat* regime, patrimonial transfer, and to the new system of classifying religious organizations as *associations*. In February 1906, the inventory of church property, as required by the 1905 law, provoked monumental demonstrations in Paris and riots in rural France, with some casualties in Flanders. The papal encyclical *Vehementer Nos* denounced the principle of separation and the administrative label of religious *associations*. The new Assembly of the French bishops endorsed the papal condemnation but, in a gesture of accommodation, proposed to adapt the Catholic organizational structure to the legal framework of religious *associations*. This idea was immediately rejected by Rome. Aristide Briand, then Minister of Public Instruction and Worship, sought to calm tensions by ending inventories and allowing Catholic worship to continue in the churches. The laws of 1907 and 1908, reaffirmed the right to freedom of

worship. Briand confirmed, nevertheless, that the Catholic patrimony would remain state property if no Catholic *associations* were created to claim it (Portier, 2016).

As France entered World War I, appeasement transformed into a sacred union. Republicans and Catholics shared the same patriotism against Germany. Quarrels between the two ceased, exiled monks returned home to enlist, and the Minister of the Interior suspended the 1901 and 1904 laws against the Catholic orders. Despite false rumours that Pope Benedict XV favoured the German and Austrian empires, the proximity and spiritual support of the priests in the trenches, as well as outside them (with anxious families), encouraged reconciliation. Ardent and expressive patriotism, fostered by the Church, fuelled a widespread, albeit temporary, return to the pews. In the aftermath of the conflict, this sacred union appeared to continue; the 1919 elections marked a victory for the *Bloc national* coalition, which united the centre and moderate right wings. In the absence of radical republicans in the government, the Archbishop of Paris, known for his willingness to find common ground, gave support to *laïcité*, provided freedom of conscience was truly respected. The Church was actively involved in holding public services in honour of fallen soldiers. In 1920, Joan of Arc was declared a Saint – the second patron Saint of France after Mary. Throughout the 1920s, many beatifications and canonizations honoured French (and often female) citizens, such as Bernadette Soubirou and Thérèse de Lisieux, who were already immensely popular; at the same time veneration of Mary became more popular.

For his part, Aristide Briand, as the new Prime Minister, convinced the Chambre des députés and the Senate to restore diplomatic relations with the Holy See in 1921. As a sign of reciprocal goodwill, Rome agreed to inform the French state of its appointment choices for new bishops, who could in turn, articulate agreement, or objection. Pope Pius XI (1922-1939), through the papal encyclical *Maximam Gravissimamque* (1924), conceded that the creation of diocesan *associations* was a good solution, so long as they remained under the authority of the bishop. The French legal and executive body, the *Conseil d'Etat*, confirmed the legality of those *associations*. In clear contradiction to the 1905 law, Catholic churches built before 1905 were not returned to the *associations*, an agreement that still endures. Today, Catholic buildings built before 1905 are public property and are maintained by municipalities, departments, and the Ministry of Culture. When the temporarily German territories of Alsace and Moselle were legally returned to France, the standing Napoleonic Concordat was preserved, and is still applied today.

Open Catholic accommodation by the *Bloc national* provoked in turn a mobilization of the republican left which returned to power in 1924 (the *Cartel des gauches*). However, the much-expected crisis never happened. Despite its desire to do so, the left-wing government did not break off diplomatic relations with the Vatican; nor did it impose the 1905 law (i.e. *laïcité*) on Alsace-Moselle. At the end of the 1920s, the Pope moved to improve church-state relations in secular France to manage, as best as possible, the new freedom of the French

Church. Specifically, he opposed the strong national-royalist movement known as *Action française*, which claimed to represent the Catholic voice. This opposition undermined the dominant position of intransigent Catholics and facilitated, in the following years, a rapprochement between Catholics and the Republic. Christian-inspired democrats, intellectuals, and theologians theorized on the separation of church and state and the freedom of religion and worked to incorporate human rights and democracy into Catholic political culture. In 1936, the *Front populaire*, representing a decidedly secular coalition, did not stir up anticlerical hatred, despite the events that had taken place just two years prior by anti-Republican, openly antisemitic extreme right-wing groups. A radical republican and eventual prime minister, Édouard Daladier, sought the support of the episcopate in the anxious months leading up to the outbreak of World War II. He wanted once again to invoke a sense of national unity. This sort of 'gentleman's agreement' at the elite level of government did much to reconcile lingering differences surrounding the secularization of public education. *L'École laïque*, with its undeniable success, maintained its revolutionary and emancipatory culture against what it saw as the Catholic machine. Radical and socialist wings remained united because of their shared anticlericalism. Catholics, on their side, constantly demanded the financial support of their educational infrastructure, a favour which they never obtained.

After the collapse of the French military and armistice agreement with Germany in June 1940, the National Revolution came into being. The elderly and popular Marshal Pétain was vested with full constitutional powers by the last and quickly dissolved republican parliament. Also called the Vichy regime, this new and dictatorial government led a country half-occupied by German troops and under Gestapo supervision. It immediately challenged republican values and the French Revolutionary heritage, which was held responsible for the defeat. It abolished political parties and trade unions. In its early days, the Vichy regime enjoyed considerable public support, due to Marshal Pétain's reputation, particularly in the Catholic areas in eastern France. French bishops declared loyalty to the regime, committing to pray for the national recovery promised by the government. But popular and Catholic support declined as Vichy's open collaboration with the German occupation progressed. That said, the Vichy regime adopted measures that favoured the Catholic Church concerning the authorization of Catholic orders (reduced to simple registration by the *Conseil d'Etat*) and school vouchers for Catholic children. Mother's Day was declared a national holiday.

From July 1940 until its dissolution, the Vichy regime enacted discriminatory legislation against Jews: they were ousted from public office and banned from high-profile professions. Naturalized Jews lost their citizenship. Foreign Jews were locked up in internment camps and sent to Germany in French trains (1941). Vichy created a special Department for Jewish Affairs, which registered the entire Jewish population (October 1941). With these lists and the help of police and local officials (1942), Vichy developed a deportation policy designed to please the Germans, which would last until the Allied landings

(Paxton and Marrus, 1981). The Jewish population, which once before had been almost annihilated by royal decree in 1394, returned to France by way of the Germany after the Revolution. It began to grow with the incorporation of Sephardic Jews, who were granted French citizenship in 1871 and with Jewish immigration from eastern Europe and Germany from the late nineteenth century through to the 1930s. French Jews, with long-held or recently-granted citizenship, as well as foreign Jewish refugees from Germany would be decimated by the Vichy regime's complicity with the Nazi genocide: only 2,500 of the 75,700 Jews deported to concentration camps survived, the rest hid or managed to escape from France. In addition, 8,000 orphans – all children under 14 years old who were not deported – survived, having been entrusted to French families.

At the end of the war, a provisional government was set up led by General de Gaulle. The republican regime was *de facto* restored without further debate, and the favours given to Catholics by the Vichy regime failed to provoke anti-Catholic revenge. Despite the episcopate's declaration of loyalty at the beginning of Vichy, the bishops' commitment had been less than unanimous. Many clerics, such as the bishops of Toulouse, Lyon, and Paris, had denounced the regime's abuses and had protected the free press and underground resistance. Nevertheless, Rome agreed to replace the entire episcopate at General de Gaulle's request. More generally, Catholic resistance had equalled communist resistance in every way. Its commitment allowed Catholic leaders to assume positions of responsibility in the provisional government and its new administration, ensuring their undeniable legitimacy. The new secular-Catholic party, *Le Mouvement Républicain Populaire*, received 25 per cent of the post-war vote. It won power from the two other governing parties (the radical republicans and the socialists) at the beginning of the Fourth Republic (1946). The three parties agreed to proceed by removing communist and the (young) Gaullist parties from power – a gesture that challenged both the constitution and the Atlanticist choice of the French during the nascent cold war. Catholic leaders participated in the establishment of the welfare and social infrastructure of post-war France and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Robert Schuman, together with Jean Monnet, envisioned the first European coal and steel community. However, the *Mouvement républicain populaire* quickly declined when its alliance with the radicals and socialists once again collapsed; this time over the school issue, when it supported the 1951 *loi Barangé*, granting scholarships for children in Catholic schools. Thereafter, most of the Catholic electorate moved to the Gaullist party.

Although the school dispute remained unresolved (Prost, 2017), the Fourth Republic declared itself *laïque* in 1946 and was affirmed as such by a referendum. Article 1 of the new constitution stated: 'France is an indivisible, *laïque*, democratic and social Republic'. The same assertion would reappear in article 1 of the Fifth (and current) Republic's constitution (October 4, 1958). Following its rejection of all racial and religious discrimination, Article 2 of the 1958 constitution added a firm affirmation of republican respect for all beliefs. The Fifth Republic's first President, General de Gaulle, tried to definitively guarantee secular

equilibrium. He abandoned the project of a new concordat with the Holy See and decided, with his Prime Minister's help, to put an end to the school war. The law of December 1959 passed despite the discontent of both the Catholic and secular sides, granting the freedom of education outside the public-school system to all religious groups. The law proposed public funding for teachers in denominational schools and legal recognition of their religious purpose, as long as they legally agreed to uphold the state's educational mission, to welcome any child without consideration of his/her family's religion, and to accept that religious education was not compulsory. This 'French-style' deal continues to this day and maintains a delicate balance. Any attempt to change it in either direction incites immediate reactions. In 1984, a demonstration of one million people successfully defeated the Minister of Education's unifying project, leading to his resignation together with that of the Prime Minister. Ten years later, a draft law introduced by the centre-right attempting to set up municipal financing for denominational schools provoked vehement indignation among secularists and was subsequently abandoned.

Facing religious pluralism: Current French tensions

At the end of the twentieth century, *laïcité* was a key element of classic left-wing discourse, recalled before any election to keep voters straight in an ideological sense. Thirty years later, *laïcité* has been loudly reaffirmed as the 'cornerstone of the Republic' and is now as much an element of right-wing and extreme-right wing discourse as it is of the left. The constitutional principles that *laïcité* was supposed to promote, have been redefined as: the neutrality of the State and its services; respect for religious pluralism; defence of republican values; and even defence of *le vivre-ensemble* (living together). This shift is the result of three interrelated factors: 1. an accelerating pluralization of the French religious landscape; 2. new opinions on and political divisions about the growth and dangers of Islam; and 3. new public policies adopted by successive governments, which oscillate between protection, de-discrimination, and monitoring.

First, noticeable religious pluralization occurred at the same time as a marked secularization among Catholics and a significant increase in religious non-affiliation. The phenomenon of de-catholicization in France started at the time of the Revolution. It developed in the 1960s and accelerated at the end of the 1980s. Since then, the secularization of French society is accurately described as massive. Depending on the surveys and research under review, between 35 and 50 per cent of the present population report that they have no religion. In the early twentieth century, Catholics constituted 98 per cent of the population, but are now no longer the majority; currently only 38 to 50 per cent say that they are Catholic, among which only 4 to 5 per cent still practise). Younger generations have almost no knowledge of Catholicism except visual familiarity with the thousands of monasteries, churches, and cathedrals dotting the urban and rural landscape. This slide into oblivion has been defined by sociologists as 'Catholic ex-culturation' (Hervieu-Léger, 2003).

At the same time, the French population has become more religiously diverse, due to new trends in conversion to 'foreign' and evidently attractive religions or cults, but much more importantly due to the post-war, cold-war, de-colonial, then global migrations. In the three generations who have not yet reached the age of 60, 30 per cent of the French, came from abroad according to a 2011 INSEE Survey (Tribalat 2015). Demographically, Islam is the most significant religion brought to France by immigration, but it is not the only one.

Today, 3 to 5 per cent of the population say that they belong to alternative forms of Christianity such as evangelical Protestantism, which is on the rise. Historical Protestants are also present in their traditional enclaves. They are now in competition with Evangelical missionary churches which have been planted across the country along with American-Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic, and ethnic churches, brought by North American, Caribbean, South American, and African missionaries. They are particularly dynamic and active in the Île-de-France, contributing to what might be termed a Protestant 'creolization'. Orthodox Christians of Slavic, Romanian, and Armenian origins, Eastern Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of other small cults live in urbanized areas because of the specificities of their migration or conversion history.

Christian diversity is nevertheless only a small part of the new French diversity. After World War II, the Jewish community was restored by surviving refugees from all over Europe, then by North African Jewish in-migration, following decolonization. As already indicated, Algerian Jews had already become French citizens. Descendants of North African or Sephardi Jews now represent 70 per cent of the Jewish community in France. They are concentrated in Paris, specifically its inner suburbs, as well as in the Mediterranean area.

Islam, however, is the most widespread French religion, apart from the ever-declining Catholicism. The Muslim population is now estimated at 5 to 8 per cent (sometimes even 12 per cent) of the total population and is concentrated in predominantly secular or less Catholic areas, for example the Mediterranean, the Parisian suburbs, the metropolitan area of Lyon and the northeast. Since the Muslim population is noticeably heterogeneous in its religious practice, which differs according to generation, national origin, social status, and current trends in global Islam (Godard, 2015), it is one of the most pluralistic religions within French religious pluralism.

Figure 35: 1. Sources: Fourquet-Lebras (2014)

After epic and long-standing Catholic hegemony, France has at one and the same time become both religiously indifferent and religiously plural. Such a shift did not occur without pain, especially for the new and post-Christian movements which have endured public mistrust and strict administrative regulation. In 2001, the *Assemblée nationale* passed the controversial About-Picard law, which forbids the psychological abuse of populations deemed

vulnerable (either because of age, infirmity, or disability) by cultic organizations. In 2002, an inter-ministerial mission directed at sectarian abuse, and known by its acronym MIVILUDES,¹ was created by presidential decree. The agency, which is still active, is responsible for the observation and analysis of sectarian movements (cults) and for educating the public about potential threats. For years, Jehovah Witnesses were prevented from opening their Kingdom Halls (meeting places) because of public petitions and municipal roadblocks. They were subject to hundreds of tax audits and faced discrimination in employment and in divorce settlements. New evangelical churches have faced difficulties in obtaining building permits and are still stigmatized by the press.

All that said, no religious minority raises more suspicion than Islam. The collective narrative is replete with secular but also religious and colonial prejudice, which is largely linked to the legacy of the Algerian war of independence; it portrays Islam as alien to and incompatible with modern France. While at least three generations of French Muslims have established this religion as part of France, a large section of the public incriminates Islam responsible, not only for the social exclusion which affects diverse sections of the Muslim population but also for the radical awakening and Jihad of the younger generation. At the same time, an orthodox approach toward rituals, practices, and dress code as well as an open and conspicuous pride in their faith has grown within Salafist and Islamist cells in the cities. These phenomena provoke fear within and incite hatred from the wider society.

Conversely, for the last two decades legislative, judicial, and administrative institutions have pushed for an increase in the number of mosques. Nearly 2,000 have been opened. Public authorities have approved legal accommodations facilitating Muslim practice, such as granting extra days off for feasts and holy days, supervising public slaughter sites for the celebration of *Eid al-Adha*, and creating plots in French cemeteries to conform with Muslim burial customs. Several times the state has attempted to organize the national and regional representation of Muslim associations, first in 1988, then in 1993, 1999 and 2001. In 2003, the *Conseil français du culte musulman* was created under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior. The state has also tried to support the financing of mosques and Islamic activities, first in 2005, through the *Fondation des œuvres de l'Islam de France*, then in 2016 by the *Fondation de l'Islam de France*. The French education system has incorporated new modules on religions (2003), and morality and civics (2015) into its curriculum, in order to promote mutual tolerance and understanding in light of republican values and the new motto: *le vivre-ensemble*.

All these accommodations, undertaken to favour and to further religious pluralism and the freedom of religious minorities, are the result of a new policy which has established

¹ MIVILUDES stands for Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires (Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Sectarian Aberrations)

regular meetings between religious leaders and the Prime Minister and/or the President since the early 2000s. The President regularly receives or visits Catholic, Jewish, Protestant and Muslim representatives. This new intimacy has been much criticized by supporters of *laïcité*, who now include the right and extreme right. These pro-secular advocates denounce the state's lack of firmness towards religion and the growing visibility of Muslim (and Catholic) activities, not to mention the underlying reasons for such visibility, keeping in mind recruitment by extremist groups and the terrorist attacks in Toulouse (2013), in Paris (2015), and Nice (2016) (Kepel-Jardin, 2017).

Security policies of recent administrations, including that of Emmanuel Macron, have deployed curfews, the military surveillance of public places, renewed anti-terrorist laws, the surveillance of preachers, closures of mosques, closures of propaganda websites and a free phone number for reporting radical behaviour (Stop-Jihadism). These policies continue to be condemned by the political opposition as insufficient. A new dispute has erupted over the wearing of the Islamic headscarf. The first headscarf affair took place in a public school in 1989; it was the catalyst for a revival of *laïcité* that occurred at the beginning of the twenty-first century. By means of the law banning the headscarf at school (2004) and the burqa in public space (2011), *laïcité* has not only been reaffirmed but rearticulated to include gender equality. Cases involving the burkini, which was banned from French beaches in 2016, have led in turn to concerns about mothers volunteering during school outings: should they too be prohibited from wearing the veil (2019)? Taken together these episodes attest to the political and media frenzy which occurs at the slightest hint of Islam and women in the French public square.

Conclusion

French religious history has been always been tumultuous, and in many ways it still is. After a long period of Catholic and monarchical domination, followed by a short and only partly successful revolution, it took time to separate the state from the Church, a process that ended in 1905. It would take almost another century before most of the French population fully accepted the implications of *laïcité* and bit by bit separated themselves from Catholicism. In the meantime, the French Republic has experienced a marked pluralization of religion in which Islam has become the largest minority. Allegedly positive, open, and quiet, *laïcité* has come to terms with its inadequate management of new religious movements and a widespread hostility towards Islam. In the new millennium, French *laïcité* has mobilized political energies against Islamic activities, to the extent that they have changed the rules of the game.

The old divide, well-rooted since the Revolution, between the Catholic right and the secular and non-religious left is still evidenced on electoral maps of votes cast for and against European Union treaties. In contrast, since the years 2000, in most other elections, including

presidential ballots, a 'transfer' seems to have taken place. The formerly Catholic and somewhat right-wing regions have drawn closer to the left as religious practice has waned, whilst the traditionally de-Christianized regions have slid to the right. This shift has been less perceptible when a significant Muslim population was present because the far-right *Front National* would prompt a reconciliation between at least some left wing de-Christianized regions and some right wing secularized Catholic areas. In 2017, for example, centre-moderates supporting Emmanuel Macron faced-off against the dissenting, Islamophobic, and extreme-right, supporting Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential elections. Thus, the new 'two Frances' confronted each other face to face. The election results were striking when electoral maps were compared to maps showing high Muslim population areas: the greater the concentration of Muslims, the more Marine Le Pen won votes. Macron's France corresponded to areas with a less significant Muslim presence and greater pluralization, where practising Catholics live side-by-side with a highly secularized population. (Fourquet-Lebras, 2014). In such ways, France remains intricately linked to its history: religion matters in politics.

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