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FRANCE: New law on religion goes to Parliament: Evangelicals feel offended

A member of the government claims that “Evangelical branches from the US” require a “certificate of virginity” from women before marriage.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (28.01.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3chDz6j> – 31 NGOs and religious bodies, including the European Baptist Federation and the entities representing the Sikhs in France and other countries, and several individual scholars and human rights activists, have written a letter to French MPs and senators expressing their opinion on the French anti-

separatism law, renamed the law for "Consolidating the Respect of the Principles of the Republic." Its discussion is now moving to the House, where it should be concluded by February 15. The law will then pass to the Senate for review.

Bitter Winter has covered the progress of the draft law, presented as targeting Islamic radicalism but in fact reforming the existing French laws with respect to all religions, and expressed concerns for religious liberty. These concerns were shared by the French Council of State, and led to an amended text proposed by the government. A White Paper, of which I was a co-author, also suggested that the law may offer the welcome opportunity to introduce a broader notion of "religion," with respect to the one still prevailing in French case law and based on the model of Jewish and Christian denominations.

The letter sent to the MPs and senators comes after hearings in the French Parliament, where representatives of several religions expressed their concern about the law, which can create a climate of general suspicion against religion and increase the State control on all religious groups. Freedom of religion, the letter says, cannot be sacrificed to achieve security.

"That is, the text states, why we urge you to make sure that the law fulfills its stated purpose: combat terrorism and violence and groups which engage in such activities or advocate the use of violence and hatred. For this you will also have to make sure the law does not create more restrictions and suspicion for the vast majority of religious groups of any nature and creed that are peaceful and not engaged in such activities."

On the other hand, the letter adds, "we believe that the discussed bill is an opportunity to modernize the law and adapt it to France's existing religious diversity. Any provision that will increase freedom of religion or belief,

and will also increase non-discrimination between beliefs and belief communities, will also increase security. France has here an opportunity to reach the highest standards in terms of freedom of religion or belief and become one of the countries that would be the most aligned with international standards as set by OSCE, the UN and the Council of Europe. It's up to you to take this opportunity and transform the concerns of believers and human rights advocates into legitimate progress."

"This bill, the letter concludes, is a major issue for France, and for the fate of all believers of France, and it is also an issue for the world, as the outcome of your work will be watched and evaluated internationally. Will the law target religions, and increase restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, or will it correctly target terrorists and violent components of the French society? We definitely hope it will be the second option, and we trust that you will hear that call."

The letter should be understood by considering the background of some 1,800 amendments to the draft law, which were submitted to the Special Commission preparing the text for the debate in the Parliament. Some aimed at re-introducing the provision the government had eliminated following the suggestions of the State Council, and some explicitly targeted groups labeled as "cults" (sectes) and independent Evangelical churches. Happily, the worst amendments were all rejected, but they can be filed again in the Parliament.

The discussion was also complicated by the attempt of certain politicians to use the law to increase the budget of the MIVILUDES, the controversial French institution combating "cults," and to crack down on independent Evangelical churches. The Minister Delegate in Charge of Citizenship, Marlène Schiappa, who is known for her radical anti-cult attitude, managed to offend the Evangelical community, which asked for an apology, when, while discussing the "certificates

of virginity” delivered to girls before marriage and used in certain fundamentalist Muslim groups, which will become illegal under the new law, stated that they are used by “Evangelical branches from the United States,” and that the MIVILUDES will be asked to prepare a report on “cults coming from the United States.”

Anti-Protestantism, anti-Americanism, and anti-cultism are very much part of a certain French political culture. They are based on a stereotyped understanding of complicated religious issues, based on information supplied by anti-cult movements and relayed by the media, which sometimes results in bizarre allegations. Evangelicals do not use “certificates of virginity,” but perhaps a certificate of religious literacy should be requested for politicians who want to comment publicly about religion.

Photo : Palais de Bourbon, home of the French National Assembly (House). Credits

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