

# FRANCE (EN/FR): The proposed law on separatisms should not target religion – Le projet de loi sur les séparatismes ne devrait pas s'en prendre à la religion

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EN

The European Times (21.10.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2TbjBPV> – The proposed 'law on separatisms' announced by the President of the Republic and the Minister of the Interior should not target Islam as a religion, but should instead tackle political Islam, in particular Salafism, and its organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its satellite associations.

Consequently, the fight against radical Islamism should only be waged where it is active and solely against individuals who preach or publicly support it, including on social media.

The proposed law plans to implement Chapter V (articles 25-36) of the 9 December 1905 Law On the Separation Between Churches and State titled *Police des cultes* and intended "to protect places of worship from the spreading of ideas and statements as well as from acts hostile to the laws of the Republic." However, it's not 'mosques' that disseminate extremist ideas, but rather the individuals in leadership roles who

instrumentalize religious teachings for political purposes. Certain imams and preachers, who have been identified by the authorities for a very long time, behave as political militants instead of providing faith-building to their communities. The proposed law must combat them, not the religious community they belong to. The announced news of the involvement of the *police des cultes* sets the fight against Islamism at the religious level when it should be carried out at the political one instead. Other religious or spiritual communities and other categories of believers have nothing to do with this political militant activism. The problem to be solved is political, not religious.

The proposed law also includes obligatory school education being introduced earlier, at the age of three, to facilitate children's socialisation and integration into French society. Although it is laudable, prohibiting home education as a strategy against Islamism does not make sense. Up until now, there has not been a case where a child who was educated at home then became an Islamist or a terrorist. In these difficult times, it is senseless to upset families of believers across all faiths, including Catholics, by measures intended to fulfil objectives that are political and not religious. In fact, many Muslim families in France have suffered from the experience of one of their children running away from home to fight in Syria. Those parents are not responsible for the decision of their minor or young adult children as they never taught them this political Islamism, but they are the victims of it.

The French government's plan is to present the proposed law to the Council of Ministers on the symbolic date of 9 December, perhaps even earlier, and then to update it in the meantime. The reason is that the timing of this legislative process

coincides with the recent horrific beheading of a teacher who gave a lesson about civic education, specifically on freedom of expression, that included respectful debate about caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed.

An update of this proposed law should include revisions that centre around the main focus of its objective: the fight against a terrorist political ideology that is segregationist and discriminatory, and that fractures and fragments society with the intent of inciting violent community-based confrontations.

## **FR**

HRWF (21.10.2020) – Le projet de loi sur les séparatismes annoncée par le président de la République et le ministre de l'Intérieur ne devrait pas s'en prendre à la religion musulmane mais devrait s'attaquer à l'Islam politique, en particulier le salafisme, et à ses organisations, telles les Frères Musulmans et leurs associations satellites.

En conséquence, la lutte contre l'islamisme ne devrait se dérouler que là où il s'exerce, contre les personnes qui le prêchent ou qui le soutiennent publiquement, y compris sur les réseaux sociaux.

Le projet de loi prévoit d'appliquer le Titre V (articles

25-36) de la Loi du 9 décembre 1905 sur la séparation des Eglises et de l'Etat intitulé *Police des cultes* « pour préserver les lieux de culte d'agissement et de diffusion d'idées et de propos hostiles aux lois de la République ». Or, ce ne sont pas 'les mosquées' qui véhiculent des idées extrémistes mais ce sont les hommes qui les dirigent et manipulent l'enseignement religieux à des fins politiques. Ce sont certains imams et prédicateurs bien identifiés depuis très longtemps qui, au lieu de faire de l'édification religieuse, se conduisent en militants politiques. Ce sont eux que le projet de loi doit combattre. Le recours annoncé à la police des cultes place le combat sur le champ religieux alors qu'il doit s'exercer sur le plan politique. Les autres communautés religieuses ou spirituelles et autres catégories de croyants n'ont rien à voir avec ce militantisme politique. Le problème à résoudre est politique et pas religieux.

Le projet de loi prévoit également que l'éducation scolaire obligatoire soit avancée à l'âge de trois ans pour faciliter la socialisation et l'intégration dans la société française. Bien que cela soit louable, interdire l'éducation à domicile n'a aucun sens. Jusqu'à présent, il n'est pas apparu qu'un enfant éduqué à domicile soit devenu un islamiste ou un terroriste. Dans ces temps difficiles, il est inutile d'irriter inutilement des familles croyantes de toutes confessions, y compris catholiques, par des moyens inefficaces pour atteindre des objectifs qui sont politiques et non religieux. Bien des familles musulmanes ont été frappées en France par la désertion d'un de leurs enfants vers la Syrie. Ces parents ne sont pas responsables de la décision de leur enfant, mineur ou adulte, qu'ils n'ont jamais éduqué dans cet islamisme politique mais elles en sont les victimes.

Le gouvernement a prévu de présenter le projet de loi en

conseil des ministres à la date symbolique du 9 décembre, voire même plus tôt et à la suite d'une remise à jour, suite à la décapitation sur la voie publique d'un professeur ayant fait une leçon d'éducation civique sur la liberté d'expression comprenant un débat respectueux à partir des caricatures de Mahomet.

Dans le cadre d'une mise à jour de ce projet de loi, il serait bon de revoir son intitulé et de resserrer son titre sur l'essentiel de son objectif : la lutte contre une idéologie politique mortifère, ségrégationniste, discriminatoire, fracturant et fragmentant la société pour déboucher sur des confrontations communautaristes violentes.

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## **French government unveils national plan to combat hatred against LGBT people**

*The French government has unveiled a national plan to combat hatred and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (LGBT), which emphasises the importance of inclusive education in stamping out homophobia.*

By Christina Okello

RFI (14.10.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2HnSCxW> – The three-year plan unveiled on Wednesday, aims to make members of the LGBT

community “citizens in their own right”, French Junior Minister of Gender Equality Elisabeth Moreno told reporters.

It comprises over 40 objectives designed to tackle homophobia or transphobia in the home, school, university, work, healthcare or sport.

The 42 measures, some of which have already been implemented, will be “amplified” between now and 2023, notably plans to facilitate adoption for LGBT homes, Moreno said.

She also insisted on the importance of education.

“Because discrimination and inequality are rooted in childhood, they can also be corrected, by putting in resources (...) The school must therefore be the first place of awareness and prevention to participate in deconstructing stubborn stereotypes “.

### ***Inclusive education***

The gender equality minister has pledged to work with her counterpart at the Education ministry, Jean-Michel Blanquer, to “amplify” training for teachers serving LGBT students.

A website called “Educating against LGBTphobia” is to be set up in order to “give teachers the weapons to fight homophobia

and transphobia, and allow the proper inclusion of LGBT students”, Moreno added.

The national plan also aims to act against conversion therapy, “abject and medieval practices” according to the minister, which try to change the sexual orientation of LGBT people. “We want to ban them outright,” Moreno said.

Same sex families have not been left out either. Administrative forms will continue to be adapted to include them, the minister insisted.

### ***Grim figures***

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people continue to face discrimination in France.

In 2019, 1,870 people were victim of homophobic and transphobic acts, according to the interior ministry.

In addition, 55 percent of LGBT people have experienced anti-LGBT acts in their lifetime, the minister said, before adding that gay and bisexual people are four times more likely to commit suicide than the rest of the population. This figure is nearly double when it comes to trans people.

“This situation is unacceptable in the France of 2020”, Moreno

said.

*Photo: French Junior Minister of Gender Equality Elisabeth Moreno poses in front of her ministry where the LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) flags hang prior to the presentation of a national action plan for equal rights against hate and discrimination in Paris on October 14, 2020. AFP – LUDOVIC MARIN.*

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## **COVID-19: A church of the St Pius X Society in Paris faces 'fake news' and stigmatisation**

**By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers***

HRWF (29.05.2020) – The Church of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet does not have a good reputation in France and the Vatican. Since 27 February 1977, when it was forcibly occupied by people affiliated with the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), which it unofficially depends on, this church is the main place of worship for the traditionalist Catholic movement in Paris. Expulsion orders have been issued by courts, but they have never been implemented. The mass is said in Latin and the new modernising adaptations by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Vatican II (1962-1965) are banned.

COVID-19 provided an ideal opportunity for some media outlets



to discredit this controversial church by using questionable methods and arguments. It all started on Easter Sunday.

### **Media snowball effect and escalation**

**Sunday 12 April 2020 (Easter), AFP-La Croix/ Covid 19 : a clandestine Easter mass in the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church (<https://bit.ly/2ZDwSVT>)**

Under the title of this AFP press release, which the daily paper La Croix published without any comment or verification, was the subtitle: "A clandestine Easter mass has taken place in the Saturday-Sunday night in the traditionalist Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church in Paris. Church members participated and the priest was fined for breaching the confinement regulations."

According to this release,

- a few dozen people participated in a mass at this church in the 5<sup>th</sup> arrondissement (district) in Paris, which continues to celebrate the mass in Latin, despite Vatican II
- on Saturday evening, local residents alerted the police after having heard music coming from the church
- at midnight, members exited the church and told the police that there had been about forty people inside
- police officers contacted the priest, who was fined, according to an unidentified police source
- a video broadcasting on YouTube showed around thirty clerics and children serving the mass, without any masks and without respecting social distancing rules
- the video broadcast on YouTube showed about 30 clerics

and children serving the mass, all of them without a mask and no social distancing

- the eucharist was distributed from hand to mouth to a dozen participants
- there were no attendees in the church

### **Sunday 12 April 2020, Police station/ Twitter**

On that day, the Twitter account of the police station read: "this night in #Paris05, a religious service took place in a church despite the confinement measures. When the police came to control it, all doors were closed. After the mass they fined the ecclesiastical authority that led the mass." Where and when a priest would have been fined was not mentioned in the tweet.

Strange message from the police: A mass celebration may take place despite the confinement measures, but only if people do not participate and it happens behind closed doors, which was the case with the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church. In all cathedrals in France, Easter masses were celebrated by bishops behind closed doors. Moreover, it is not in the habits of the French police to crackdown on a Catholic church, a Protestant temple, a mosque or a synagogue.

### **Sunday 12 April 2020, Le Point/ Clandestine Easter mass (<https://bit.ly/2ZGff7R>)**

Le Point additionally declared that a 135 EUR fine had been imposed on a priest.

One must wonder how any police action was possible if the doors were shut and how the police imposed a fine on a priest in a closed church.

Moreover, Le Point posted a video showing a church full of people inside. However, this was an archived picture and not the alleged clandestine evening mass of 11 April. Moreover, it was not a screen shot either.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the charismatic leader of a left-wing political movement, used his interview on the prime-time RTL-TV programme « Le Grand Jury » to decry Catholics.

Two days later, Christophe Castaner, the Minister of the Interior, declared on France-Inter: "I was shocked by the celebration of this mass. It is irresponsible for a priest to hold it." Despite basing this statement on fake news, this minister was not reproached by anyone. One must wonder whether he would have reacted in the same way, without any preliminary investigation into the story, if it had been about another religious community.

**Tuesday 14 April 2020, Le Progrès/ Clandestine mass, a fine imposed on traditionalists (<https://bit.ly/3es37eW>)**

This article reported that when the police arrived, the doors of the church were shut and the participants had slipped away. Therefore no one was fined.

**Tuesday 14 April 2020, Valeurs Actuelles/ Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, « fake news » and coronavirus : the media in bad faith crisis (<https://bit.ly/3grxDqN>)**

Father Danzic, a columnist at Valeurs Actuelles, declared that:

- since the beginning of the confinement, it has been posted on the church website that church members could not participate in religious services and that they would be celebrated live on YouTube
- the Easter Vigil was not « clandestine », instead it was celebrated at 10.30pm in the church and aired live on YouTube (26,000 views as of 14 April).

**Wednesday 15 April 2020, Le Point/ Clandestine mass in Paris: the police told to leave (<https://bit.ly/2M1WzY5>)**

Three days later, Le Point countered with an article titled: "Clandestine mass in Paris: the police told to leave". This gave the impression that the police had been driven out of the church, when in fact it was closed. In the article, it was said that the officers went back to the police station on their superiors' orders, which, according to the journalist, was an incomprehensible gesture of indulgence.

Without any serious evidence, the journalist continued with more accusations, which strengthened the stigmatising effect

of his article:

- the presence of outside participants during the religious service, which is false
- statements made by alleged participants to the police officers at the exit, another lie as there were no participants for the police to speak to
- the “incomprehensible” indulgence, according to the journalist, towards the attendees, as if the hierarchy of the police was lax in this situation
- the police station saying to the Minister of the Interior that “the participants left the church through other exits” and had therefore eluded them, which is a non-established fact and an assumption without any evidence.

Worse still, the journalist described the video posted on the website of Le Point as « staggering » evidence of violations of the confinement rules, even though he knew that it was not the video of the Easter religious service.

### **What are the facts?**

The pictures distributed by the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet speak for themselves:

<https://twitter.com/MichelJanva/status/1249449549661450250>

[https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/une-messe-denoncee-par-des-voisins](https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/une-messe-denoncee-par-des-voisins/)  
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Moreover, the official church's comment reveals the name of the priest – Petrucci – and asserts that he was never fined.

On Saturday evening, local residents near the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church heard some music coming from inside the place of worship and alerted the police. Police officers were sent to the church, but the doors were shut. As there was nothing amiss, they informed the police station which then ordered them to return. Inside the church, there had been an Easter vigil celebration only with the clerics, which was broadcast live on YouTube for people to watch from their homes.

Prominent French media outlets did not hesitate to attack a Catholic community, without clear and undisputable evidence, because it is traditionalist and not mainstream. These are, of course, not valid reasons for accusing a church of imaginary offences. Moreover, as this community poses a challenge to the Roman Catholic Church, it is unsurprising that Catholic media did not establish the truth.

These French newspapers:

- re-published an AFP press release and a biased article of Le Point, without any investigation or verification
- failed to contact a spokesperson from the Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet church to hear their version of the story
- failed to interview abbot Petrucci, who is in charge of the church
- used stigmatising vocabulary to describe unfounded facts

such as: clandestine mass, a church full of participants, incomprehensible indulgence by the police, staggering video, etc.

- circulated a fake video of the Easter vigil mass allegedly held in that church on Easter eve
- ignored and disregarded screen shots posted online by the accused church community which demonstrated that the confinement measures specific to religious celebrations had been respected
- never questioned the authenticity of the said screen shots.

In a previous article, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF) denounced the same problematic disregard toward journalistic ethics in a case where an Evangelical community in Mulhouse (France) was scapegoated for the pandemic. See <https://hrwf.eu/france-covid-19-scapegoating-an-evangelical-church-in-mulhouse/>.

*HRWF does not consider the merits of religions or beliefs, nor align itself with any specific religion, theology or worldview. HRWF does not defend any specific religion or belief system, but instead defends the right of a person to have the beliefs of his/her choice as it is guaranteed by Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 6 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981).*

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# **Covid-19: Une église de la Fraternité de St Pie X à Paris face aux 'fake news' et à la stigmatisation**

**Par Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers***

HRWF (29.05.2020) – L'Église de Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet n'est pas en odeur de sainteté en France et au Vatican. Depuis le 27 février 1977, date de son occupation par la force par des proches de la Fraternité sacerdotale Saint-Pie-X, dont elle dépend officieusement depuis lors, cette église constitue le principal lieu de culte parisien du mouvement catholique traditionnaliste, aussi appelé intégriste. Des arrêtés d'expulsion ont été publiés mais jamais appliqués. La messe y est encore dite en latin et les nouvelles orientations de modernisation adoptées par l'Église catholique romaine lors du Concile Vatican II (1962-1965) y sont bannies.

Le Covid-19 a offert une occasion idéale à certains médias de discréditer cette église controversée mais leurs méthodes et leurs arguments posent question. Tout a commencé le dimanche de Pâques.

**Effet boule de neige et surenchère médiatique**

**Dimanche 12 avril (Pâques), AFP-La Croix/ Covid 19 : une messe**



## **pascale clandestine en l'église Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet (<https://bit.ly/2ZDwSVT>)**

L'agence de presse AFP, reprise sans commentaire ou vérification, par le quotidien catholique La Croix, annonce sous ce titre: « Une messe pascale clandestine s'est tenue dans la nuit de samedi à dimanche à l'église traditionaliste Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet à Paris, en présence de fidèles, et le prêtre a été verbalisé pour non-respect du confinement. »

Selon la dépêche,

- quelques dizaines de personnes auraient participé à une messe dans cette église du 5<sup>e</sup> arrondissement de Paris, traditionaliste et continuant à célébrer la messe en latin, malgré Vatican II
- samedi soir, des riverains auraient alerté la police et les agents auraient entendu de la musique venant de l'église
- à minuit, une personne serait sortie de l'église et aurait déclaré à la police qu'il y avait une quarantaine de participants à l'intérieur
- les policiers ont pris contact avec le prêtre, qui aurait été verbalisé, selon une source policière non identifiée
- la retransmission video sur YouTube montrait une trentaine d'ecclésiastiques et des enfants de chœur, tous sans masque et sans respecter la distanciation sociale
- l'eucharistie aurait été distribuée de la main à la bouche à une dizaine de participants

- aucun fidèle n'était présent dans l'église

### **Dimanche 12 avril, Préfecture de police/ Twitter**

Ce jour-là, le compte Twitter de la Préfecture de police notifiait « cette nuit à #Paris05, un office s'est tenu dans une église malgré les mesures de confinement. Les policiers ont trouvé portes closes au moment du contrôle mais ont verbalisé l'autorité ecclésiastique ayant officié, après la messe ». Où et quand un prêtre aurait été verbalisé n'est pas indiqué dans le tweet.

Curieux message : Les célébrations, malgré les mesures de confinement, peuvent tout à fait se tenir dans les églises, à condition que les fidèles ne puissent y assister et donc... que les portes restent closes, ce qui était le cas à Saint-Nicolas-le-Chardonnet. Dans les cathédrales de toute la France, les offices de Pâques y ont été célébrés par les évêques portes fermées. De plus, il n'est pas dans les habitudes de la police française de faire une descente dans une église catholique, un temple protestant, une mosquée ou une synagogue.

### **Dimanche 12 avril, Le Point/ Messe pascale et clandestine (<https://bit.ly/2ZGff7R>)**

Le Point reprenait les informations de la dépêche et déclarait en outre qu'une amende de 135 EUR avait été infligée à un prêtre.

On peut se demander comment une intervention policière pourrait être possible si les portes étaient fermées et comment la police peut infliger une amende à un prêtre non identifié à l'intérieur d'une église fermée.

De plus, Le Point affichait une vidéo de l'intérieur de l'église bondée de fidèles qui était une photo d'archives et non pas la messe soi-disant clandestine du 11 avril au soir. De plus, ça n'était pas non plus une capture d'écran de YouTube.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader charismatique d'un mouvement politique d'extrême-gauche, profitait de son passage à l'émission de RTL-TV de grande écoute « Le Grand Jury » pour crier haro sur les cathos.

Deux jours plus tard, Christophe Castaner, le ministre de l'Intérieur, déclarait sur les ondes de France Inter : « J'ai été choqué par la tenue de cette messe. Je trouve irresponsable le prêtre qui l'a organisée ». Grosse erreur d'un ministre désinformé par une fake news mais personne ne le lui a reproché. On peut se poser la question de savoir s'il aurait réagi de la même façon, sans enquête préalable, pour une communauté d'une autre religion.

**Mardi 14 avril, Le Progrès/ Messe clandestine, les intégristes à l'amende (<https://bit.ly/3es37eW>)**

Ce journal ajoutait que lors de l'arrivée de la police, à une heure non indiquée, les portes étaient fermées, les participants s'étaient éclipsés et n'avaient donc pas été verbalisés.

**Mardi 14 avril, Valeurs Actuelles/ Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet, « fake news » et coronavirus : les médias en pleine crise de mauvaise foi (<https://bit.ly/3grxDqN>)**

Le Père Danzic, chroniqueur à Valeurs Actuelles, déclarait que :

- sur le site paroissial de l'église, il était indiqué depuis le début du confinement que les fidèles n'ont plus accès aux offices et qu'ils seraient retransmis sur YouTube
- cette vigile de Pâques n'était pas « clandestine » mais a été célébrée à 22h30 dans l'église et retransmise sur YouTube (26,000 vues en date du 14 avril)

**Mercredi 15 avril, Le Point/ Messe clandestine à Paris : les policiers priés de repartir (<https://bit.ly/2M1WzY5>)**

Trois jours plus tard, Le Point revient à la charge avec un article au titre accrocheur « Les policiers priés de repartir », donnant l'impression que les policiers ont été chassés des lieux alors qu'ils n'avaient pas pénétré dans l'église. Dans l'article, il est quand même indiqué qu'ils sont rentrés au poste sur ordre de leur hiérarchie, la préfecture de police, un geste de mansuétude bien

incompréhensible à ses yeux. Un gros titre trompeur et avec une intention stigmatisante.

Sans preuves, l'auteur de l'article fait d'autres accusations et insinuations, qu'il est le seul à exprimer, renforçant la stigmatisation:

- la présence de fidèles pendant l'office, une contre-vérité puisqu'il n'y en avait pas
- des déclarations de fidèles faites à la sortie aux policiers, une autre contre-vérité puisque les agents n'ont pas parlé aux participants
- la mansuétude « inexplicable » à ses yeux de la police à l'égard de ces fidèles inexistantes, comme si la hiérarchie de la police était laxiste
- la préfecture de police affirmant au ministre de l'Intérieur que « les participants avaient quitté l'office par d'autres sorties » et avaient donc échappé à leur vigilance, un fait non avéré et une supposition sans preuve.

Plus grave, l'auteur de l'article revenait sur la vidéo affichée sur le site du Point qualifiée de « sidérante », comme preuve de la violation des règles de confinement, alors qu'il savait pertinemment bien que ce n'était pas une vidéo du culte de Pâques.

**Quels sont les faits ?**

Les vraies images diffusée par l'église de Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet parlent d'elles-mêmes

<https://twitter.com/MichelJanva/status/1249449549661450250>

<https://www.lesalonbeige.fr/une-messe-denoncee-par-des-voisins/>

De plus, le commentaire indique clairement que l'abbé Petrucci n'a pas été verbalisé.

Le samedi soir, des riverains de l'église de Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet ont entendu de la musique et des chants venant de l'intérieur du lieu de culte et ont alerté la police. Des agents se sont présentés mais les portes étaient closes. Comme il n'y avait rien à signaler, ils en ont informé la préfecture, qui les a rappelés. A l'intérieur de l'église avait lieu une célébration de de vigile de Pâques, uniquement avec des membres du clergé et sans fidèles, avec une diffusion en direct sur YouTube. R.A.S.

Des médias français très connus n'ont pas hésité à mettre au pilori une communauté catholique, sans preuves claires et solides, parce qu'elle est traditionnaliste et dérangement. Ce n'est bien sûr pas une raison pour l'accuser de délits imaginaires. En outre, comme elle pose problème à l'Église catholique romaine, il ne fallait pas s'attendre à ce que les médias catholiques établissent les faits réels.

Ces médias français

- ont reproduit une dépêche AFP et un article biaisé de Le Point, sans enquête et sans vérification

- n'ont pas contacté un porte-parole de l'église de Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet pour avoir leur version des faits
- n'ont pas interviewé l'abbé Petrucci
- ont utilisé un vocabulaire stigmatisant concernant des faits non fondés : messe clandestine, une église bondée de fidèles, mansuétude inexplicable de la police, video sidérante, etc.
- ont fait circuler une fausse video de la messe de vigile de Pâques dans cette église
- ont ignoré ou passé sous silence les captures d'écran diffusées par la communauté incriminée prouvant le respect des mesures de confinement lors de célébrations religieuses
- n'ont jamais mis en doute l'authenticité des dites captures d'écran.

Dans un article antérieur, HRWF a souligné le même manque de respect de la déontologie journalistique concernant une communauté évangélique à Mulhouse qui fut traitée en bouc émissaire de la pandémie dans la région du nord-est de la France. Voir

<https://hrwf.eu/france-covid-19-scapegoating-an-evangelical-church-in-mulhouse/>

*HRWF ne défend pas des religions ou des philosophies particulières et n'a de position sur aucune théologie spécifique. HRWF défend le droit d'une personne à avoir les croyances de son choix ou de ne pas en avoir et de vivre ce choix tel que le garantissent l'Article 18 de la Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme (1948) et l'Article 6 de la Déclaration de l'ONU sur l'élimination de toute forme*

*d'intolérance et de discrimination basée sur la religion ou la conviction (1981).*

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# **FRANCE: Covid-19: Scapegoating an Evangelical church in Mulhouse**

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (19.05.2020) – Since the outbreak of the Covid-19, the pastor of an Evangelical church and his congregation in Mulhouse, a city in the north-east of France, have been scapegoated by some politicians and media. State authorities have been silent, in violation of France's legal and political obligations to defend religious freedom and promote tolerance.

***A law-abiding Evangelical church before the Covid-19 tsunami:  
a timeline***



Following its tradition, on 17-21 February 2020, the Evangelical church "La porte ouverte chrétienne" held its annual international gathering of fasting and prayer in Mulhouse. About 2000 Christians, including families with children, from France and neighboring countries, but also from French Guyana in South America, participated in the event, Pastor Peterschmitt told French television France 2. As he clarified in the 21 April interview with France 2, at that time all churches, bars and restaurants across the country were open, there were all sorts of sports events, including football matches, and there were no restrictive measures. Pastor Peterschmitt became aware that something serious was happening in his congregation when 23 members of his family got sick and 19 of them were tested positive. This was the first visible cluster in France, not far from the German border, but where was the virus coming from?

The cluster could have started anywhere else but it was never investigated how and when the virus reached our gathering, he said. The pastor and his son, a physician, and other parishioners tested positive. Twenty-nine people of the congregation died from the Covid-19, France 2 concluded at the end of the interview.

On 18 February, President Macron was at a public meeting in Mulhouse, getting a crowd bath and shaking hands with people, only 300 m from the Evangelical church.

On 21 February, doctors in France received a first official circular letter informing them that there were 12 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the country but there was no active chain of transmission in France.

On 22-29 February, the annual Agricultural Show in Paris, which President Macron and high-level politicians attended, took place as usual and just closed its doors one day earlier because of the possible threat of the virus.

On 29 February, the French government announced that it had decided to take some precautionary measures such as forbidding gatherings of more than 5000 people.

France was then unaware that it was on the eve of an unprecedented health catastrophe which still acutely persists at the time of writing this paper (15 May).

On 1 March, the Regional Health Agency (ARS) contacted Pastor Samuel Peterschmitt and told him that one of his faithful and her two children had been tested positive. The mother had not attended the mass gathering but her children had taken part in side activities. The ARS asked for the list of the 295 children who had participated in the recreational activities of the church at the mid-February gathering. The pastor did it without delay and posted a message on the website of his church telling his parishioners that they should contact the ARS. His parishioners followed his recommendation.

### ***Political and media stigmatization***

On 15 March, Ms. Josiane Chevalier, the recently appointed *préfet* (regional high representative of the state) of the

*Grand Est* and *Bas-Rhin* region, announced the governmental decision to close non-essential shops and malls but clearly stressed that it was not a confinement.

On 17 March, she declared on France-Inter radio station that *“the pandemic started from an Evangelical gathering which took place in the Haut-Rhin, with more than 3000 people and no respect for the restrictive measures. In short, everything that cannot be done and we pay a high price for this disrespect of basic measures.”* **But this accusation, scapegoating the Evangelical event, was baseless.**

Again and again in her contacts with the media, she stigmatized the Evangelical Church as THE cluster that had infected the whole region, saturating for months all the intensive care units of the region to such an extent that many people needing hospitalization had to be transported to available medical facilities in Germany and other regions of France.

French media reproduced her declarations without checking the facts and hereby further stigmatized the Evangelical church.

On 5 April, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the charismatic leader of a left-wing political movement and a member of the national assembly, incriminated the Evangelical church at the RTL Grand Jury, a prime time political show.

On 6 March, the leading national newspaper *Le Figaro* dramatically amplified the wave of stigmatization by writing:

“This issue sheds a harsh light on the community « Porte ouverte chrétienne » (Christian Open Doors) created on the model of Pentecostal megachurches and headed by Samuel Peterschmitt, who is surrounded by a team of ‘pastors’ and about 20 employees.” And the newspaper quoted an unnamed elected person in an unidentified state institution as saying that the pastor had not managed “to be get the recognition of the official Protestant Federation of France (FPF).”

Further suspicions about the church were sowed with references to proselytism (sharing one’s faith with others), laying on hands, warm hugs, tears, emotions, a special focus on healing by faith and miracles, fasting, and so on.

Such connotations are not insignificant in France. They echo state-driven campaigns warning against so-called cults and the defamation activities of anti-cult associations over the last three decades. The article of *Le Figaro* purposefully characterizes the Evangelical church as a manipulative and rich cult, pastor Peterschmitt as a guru exploiting his faithful, and the other pastors as alleged pastors, apparently because such hysteria boosts the newspaper’s sales. All these clichés are well-known by scholars in religious studies and religious freedom defenders. Stigmatization of law-abiding religious groups largely sponsored by the state in France has been repeatedly denounced at the UN and the OSCE for many years.

It must not be forgotten that 29 members of the Evangelical church died from Covid-19 and that many others were tested positive and hospitalized. Moreover, the scapegoating campaign of some media and some politicians resulted in insults and anonymous threats addressed to the leaders of the church and some parishioners. Someone even received a message that his

house would be burnt down if he did not move out. The church building had to be protected for some time by the police.

### ***Deaf and mute authorities about the stigmatization***

On 25 March, the Evangelical church requested a meeting with the local state authorities but there was never any answer. The National Council of the Evangelical Churches in France (CNEF) asked to meet President Macron who happened to be again in Mulhouse on 25 March to meet the health staff, but again there was no answer.

There was no public word of compassion for believers who were victimized twice, first by the Covid-19 and second by the public stigmatization and scapegoating.

The prejudice and opportunism on display in this tragic incident are shameful, and show that freedom of religion is on very shaky ground in France.