

FRANCE: France has millions of Muslims. Why does it import imams?

State secularism works in funny ways.

By Kamel Daoud

The New York Times (28.01.2019) – <https://nyti.ms/2S6B5xZ> – What to do about Islam in France? Considering Islamist terrorist attacks, communalism and the international manipulation of Muslim communities, the matter is pressing. But it's contentious, because managing Islam seems to go against laïcité, France's staunch version of state secularism, and a 1905 law that mandates the separation of church and state.

Wouldn't revising that law be an admission that secularism is bowing to Islamism? On the other hand, if the law isn't revised, or if the French state cannot find other ways of monitoring and steering Islam, then Islam in France risks falling under the control of foreign states or the influence of radicals. That is already the case, actually: Since laïcité prohibits the French authorities from using public funds to build mosques or train imams, Algeria, Morocco, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have stepped in. According to the news magazine L'Express, 70 percent of imams practicing in France are not French.

In an attempt to overcome these paradoxes, President Emmanuel Macron recently convened at the Élysée Palace the country's various Muslim leaders and then representatives from all religions. The order of the day for the broader meeting, held on Jan. 10, was old emergencies: how to punish radicalism, control the financing of mosques and make Muslim authorities accountable. The news daily Le Monde, which obtained the note that the president handed to attendees, reported that the government was proposing to revise the 1905 law while "confirming" "its principles."

It was an attempt to square a circle, a malaise, so very French. And the narrower question of what to do about imams – their origins, their trainings, their salaries – summarizes it well.

Here is a first hurdle: It's virtually impossible to tally imams in France. No one really knows how many there are, partly because the collection of data based on ethnic or religious grounds is prohibited. The last available estimates from the interior ministry – which date back to 2012 – put the number of mosques in France at around 2,500. (A 2016 report by the Senate said it was closer to 3,000.) But those figures are as outdated today as they were imprecise in the first place: What even counts as a "mosque" when so many Muslim believers gather in the basements of low-income building complexes or other improvised prayer halls? And there being 2,500 mosques doesn't mean there are 2,500 imams: In Sunni Islam, the version of Islam most prevalent in France, anyone can declare oneself an imam and volunteer to lead prayers or the Friday Sermon.

There is no central authority overseeing Islam in France.

Anyway, how do you supervise the mosques you don't fund or imams you can't pay?

For the time being, France, for lack of its own theological schools, has favored filtered immigration: It brings in imams from abroad, mostly from the home countries of its main immigrant communities, either for long stretches or just for Ramadan. Paradoxically, one of the justifications for this policy – though rarely admitted publicly – is security: It seems less risky to rely on an official imam from Algeria than to let a self-proclaimed imam emerge in a Paris banlieue, or suburb.

For example, Algerian imams wishing to go to France must first undergo investigations. And as the Algerian government puts it, modestly, the “Algerian expertise” in internal security matters ensures quality vetting. The government has also offered its services to the United States, Belgium and Italy.

In 2018, Algeria sent approximately 100 imams to officiate in France. Morocco and Tunisia contributed about as many each. In 2017, L'Express ran the headline “Morocco, the factory of French imams,” with an article on imam-apprentices, some sent from France, whom the kingdom was training in how to dispense “middle-ground” Islam before dispatching them abroad. According to the news weekly Le Point, Turkish “consular structures” oversee more than 250 mosques and about 200 official imams seconded by Turkey to France.

The filtered import of foreign imams may look like a good practical solution; in fact, it's an ideological trap. These

imams, even if acting in good faith, can only reinforce communalism in France and work against integration, because they are not French. In the name of laïcité, France is dangerously delegating its Islam to other states.

Those states benefit. For the Algerian government, the export of imams seems to confirm the country's return to stability. Saudi Arabia sees proselytizing as a form of soft power. So does Turkey, which appears invested in maintaining a religious lobby abroad.

The stakes are high, apparently. When last year the Austrian government expelled about 60 Turkish preachers to counter, it said, the creation of "parallel societies" and "political Islam," Turkey called the move "racist" and "Islamophobic." When the French government said it wanted to create a distinct "Islam of France," Algeria – speaking indirectly, via an expert's op-ed in state media – accused it of "arrogance tinted with ignorance."

The import of imams, the foreign financing of mosques – these delegations of power by the French authorities are a dead end: They won't do enough to stem radicalism in France, and they will do even less to nurture the emergence of, precisely, an Islam of France.

The president's office seems to want to overcome all this. But some of the participants in that first meeting convened by Mr. Macron at the beginning of the year reacted with calculated anger before accepting the invitation. Members of the French Council of the Muslim Faith decried the "colonial

administration of Islam.” It’s a clever conflation: By invoking colonialism, they can leverage guilt as a bargaining chip while maintaining Islam’s communal valence. Why do that? For fear of losing power if France develops a sui generis form of Islam. Harping on Muslims’ status as a once-colonized group is a way of highlighting their ties to their countries of origin, over those to their host country.

Past attempts to create Muslim councils – the Great Mosque of Paris, the Federation of French Muslims, the Union of Islamic Organizations in France (also known as Muslims of France) – that could effectively represent France’s various Muslim communities have failed. One reason is the rivalry among the groups’ leaders, different confessional strands and foreign governments with ties to immigrant communities. Algeria competes with Morocco, and both of them compete with Turkey and Saudi Arabia: As the journalist Henri Tincq has pointed out on Slate.fr, the Paris Mosque is “loyal to Algeria,” the Federation of French Muslims has “ties to the Muslim World League and Morocco” and the Union of Islamic Organizations in France is “close to the Muslim Brotherhood.”

It’s difficult to separate Islam from its community and the community from its country of origin without being accused of interference. Whenever the French government tries to manage Islam in France, Algeria says it’s meddling, when in saying so, it is Algeria that is meddling in France’s affairs.

So what can be done? One solution has been put forward by Hakim El Karoui, an international consultant close to Mr. Macron and the author of the recent report “The Islamist Factory” and, in 2016, of “A French Islam Is Possible.”

First, he recommends strictly supervising external financing or informal funds collected in mosques, neighborhoods or local associations. He also suggests creating an independent fund for training imams by taxing halal businesses, money collected through the Muslim alms known as zakat and commerce around the pilgrimage to Mecca. Those are good ideas for trying to keep state and church, or cult, separate while integrating French Muslims into France.

But just what should be uniting is proving divisive: Mr. El Karoui's proposals are controversial, notably for the French Council of the Muslim Faith. One of the organization's vice-presidents called them an "insult" to Islam and accused Mr. El Karoui of conflating Islam and Islamism. That reaction sums up well the endless-seeming debate between those who want to maintain a monopoly over Islam in France and those who wish to develop an Islam of France.

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FRANCE/RUSSIA: FECRIS Russian branch behind the persecution of non-Orthodox minorities in Russia

For years, the French anti-sect umbrella organization has been funded – almost entirely – by the French government which, under the principle of laïcité, is supposed to be neutral in religious matters

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HRWF (12.06.2017) – “The persecution of non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin, or without a ‘historical’ presence in Russia, is based on the philosophy of ‘spiritual security’ which is promoted by the Kremlin, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian branch of the France-based European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS),” declared French attorney Patricia Duval at a conference on religious freedom in Russia co-organized by MEP Hannu Takkula (Finland, ALDE) and *Human*

Rights Without Frontiers on 6 June at the European Parliament in Brussels.

The concept of 'spiritual security'

In the 2000 *National Security Concept*, the Putin Administration stated:

“Assurance of the Russian Federation’s national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life, and preserving the cultural heritage of all Russia’s peoples. There must be a state policy to maintain the population’s spiritual and moral welfare, prohibit the use of airtime to promote violence or base instincts, and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries.”

This spiritual understanding of national security began with the adoption of the Russian federal law on security in March 1992. The law was a clear rejection of the old Soviet model of security. The first article of the law puts an emphasis on the importance of ‘spiritual values’, which in 1992 indicated the end of the Soviet militant atheism and the State persecution of religious believers.

However, the developments that ensued stifled the principles of liberalism established in the post-Soviet period and in the 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, and ultimately put to bed the brief period of religious freedom that Russia experienced following the 1990 law on Freedom of Worship. The 1997 law, as well as the ideological position and policy which were later adopted by the Russian authorities, were all inspired by the desire to ensure the ‘spiritual security’ of Russia through the purported role of the Russian Orthodox Church in safeguarding national values and security.

Once the 1990 law guaranteed freedom of conscience, large numbers of missionaries flooded into Russia, believing that the former Soviet Union was to be a vast missionary territory. [1]

In 1996, the Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad commented on the problem of proselytism facing the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). It was thought that proselytizing groups did not aid the ROC, but operated against it "like boxers in a ring with their pumped-up muscles, delivering blows." [2] This 'attack' was framed to be against the nation's national and religious values. In turn, the population developed and adopted the idea that 'non-Orthodox' can be defined as those who attempt to dismantle and destroy the spiritual unity of the people and the Orthodox faith, that the 'non-Orthodox' are "Spiritual colonizers who by fair means or foul try to tear the people away from their church" [3]

The leaders of the ROC believed that Russia's cultural identity as an Orthodox nation was crumbling. As Wallace Daniel and Christopher Marsh state, "Unless the government affirmed Russia's traditional faiths against the aggressive actions of other religious groups and sects, the patriarch [Alexey II] maintained, the renewal of Russia's own spiritual traditions stood little chance." [4]

Therefore, in this atmosphere, where the ROC believed itself as well as Russian culture to be under attack, Boris Yeltsin passed the 1997 Law, differentiating traditional and nontraditional religions in Russia. [5]

Since then, the concept of 'spiritual security' as part of national security has been instrumentalized by the political authorities and the judiciary to restrict the rights of non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin and to criminalize their beliefs, their teachings, their religious publications and peaceful activities. They erect such allegations on the basis of the 2002 law against extremism which in 2006 was purged of

its violence element.

Extremism without violence

The year 2006 was a turning point when the law countering violent extremism was amended, removing the necessity for violators to be associated with extremism, violence or calls to violence, Duval commented.

The amended law was criticized by the UN Human Rights Committee (28 April 2015), the PACE Monitoring Committee of the Council of Europe (14 September 2012), and the Venice Commission (1 June 2012) which called on Russia to correct the law so it requires an element of violence or hatred.

The amendment to the law opened the door to arbitrary and unrestrained interpretations of the concept of extremism, to the criminalization of freedom of thought, expression, worship, and assembly, to police raids, fabricated charges, arrests and sentences of members of peaceful groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, Tablighi Jamaat, and Said Nursi followers. Their movements and their publications were all victims of bans. Jehovah's Witnesses had their assets confiscated and were fully banned nation-wide by the Russian Supreme Court on 20 April.

The Russian Orthodox Church hailed the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses

The Russian Orthodox Church called Jehovah's Witnesses a dangerous, totalitarian and harmful sect and supported its ban in the Russian Federation.

"Their doctrine contains a multitude of false teachings. They distort the teaching of Christ and interpret the New Testament incorrectly. They do not believe in Jesus Christ as God and Savior, they do not acknowledge the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and therefore they cannot in any way be called Christian," the head of the synod's Department for External

Church Relations, Metropolitan of Volokolamsk Ilarion, declared on the program "Church and World" on the Rossiia-24 television channel.

High-level members of FECRIS and its Russian branch played a prominent role in the campaign against non-Orthodox minorities of foreign origin and the adoption of the repressive policy aiming at their eradication.

Aleksander Dvorkin, Vice-President of FECRIS, is also Russia's most prominent « anti-sect » activist. He was appointed in 2009 by Russia's Justice Minister to head the *Ministry's Expert Council for Conducting State Religious-Studies Expert Analysis* whose mandate is to investigate the activity, doctrines, leadership decisions, literature and worship of any registered religious organisation and recommend action to the Ministry.

A. Dvorkin is also Director of the St. Irenaeus of Lyons Religious Studies Research Centre, FECRIS' member association in Russia.

FECRIS member association in Russia: St. Irenaeus of Lyons Religious Studies Research Centre

The ***Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies***, which is FECRIS member association in Russia, was founded in 1993 with the blessing of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II. The Centre is also a missionary faculty department of St Tikhon's Orthodox University in Moscow the objective of which is "to spread credible information on doctrines and activities of totalitarian sects and destructive cults". For that purpose "employees of the Centre pursue research, advisory, lecturing and publishing activity and liaise with state structures and the media." Since then, A.L. Dvorkin has been the president of this Centre affiliated to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The ***Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies*** is

the head centre of the ***Russian Association of Centres for Religious and Sectarian Studies (RATsIRS)***. The president of RATsIRS is also A.L. Dvorkin; the vice-presidents are Archpriest Alexander Novopashin and Archpriest Alexander Shabanov; the executive secretary is priest Lev Semenov, Ph.D., associate professor.

Apart from the ***Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre***, there is a global network of so-called “parents’ initiatives” and other similar organizations in Russia and the CIS the majority of which have become members of RATsIRS in Russia (some are missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses) and created RATsIRS representative offices abroad.

FECRIS’ member association in Russia and its affiliates are all financed by the Russian Orthodox Church and engaged in the fight against Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Mormons, Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Falun Gong practitioners, Scientologists...

“Rehabilitating” followers of “non-traditional religions”

A number of the centres of the Russian Association of Centres headed by A. Dvorkin are “rehabilitation centres” for followers of “non-traditional religions”.

Under the pressure of families, followers are induced to go to these rehabilitation centres to be “enlightened” about the danger of sects, about how sects manipulate their minds, and to accept the Orthodox religion because, according to them, if one really believes in Christ he is protected from various sects.

Here follow a few of these centres:

– *Centre of rehabilitation of victims of non-traditional religions under the missionary department of Stavropolskaya and Vladikavkasskaya Eparchy.* Location: Russian, Novopavlovsk.

The Centre indicates on its website: “The basis of the

department is to help people in the acquisition of real, true Faith in God and the Church”.

– *Center of rehabilitation of victims of non-traditional religions under the Church of Our Lady “Joy of All Who Sorrow”*. Location: Moscow.

Rehabilitation” is done by two priests and one graduate of Saint Tikhon’s Orthodox University (where Alexander Dvorkin is teaching).

– *Rehabilitation Centre for sect victims under the Holy Trinity Monastery*. Location: Russia, Kursk.

Priests and psychologists work there to “rehabilitate” followers.

– *Rehabilitation Centre for victims of non-traditional religions in the name of St. Joseph of St. Volotsk*.

This Centre operates under the Orthodox Eparchy of Yekaterinburg city.

– As concerns the Saint Irenaeus of Lyons Centre for Religious Studies, FECRIS member association in Russia, in an article on their website they explain how to go with people “caught in sects”: The process of exit through an external influence involves a psychologist, relatives and a “sect-specialist”, to arouse critical thinking towards the “sect” and get rid of emotional dependency towards it. Then it involves connecting the person to the Orthodox catechist, preferably a priest offering the true religious and ideological alternatives.

This seems like a remake of the “deprogramming” technics used in the 1980s and outlawed in the US, which were used to remedy alleged “brainwashing” by religious communities. “Arising critical thinking” towards the sect is achieved through bombarding the followers with misinformation and twisted facts against the denomination they adhered to. After this phase, a

phase of “reprogramming” is then done in the Russian “rehabilitation centres” by Orthodox priests so that the followers of non-traditional religions whose creeds have been destabilized through the “critical thinking arising” are now persuaded to adhere to the “true” religion instead.

French laïcité betrayed

FECRIS was created in France and is financed by the French State, whose Constitution and laws provide a total separation of State and religions and the respect of all creeds. The FECRIS vice-President is currently Alexander Dvorkin, the leading Russian anti-cult crusader and key agitator responsible for popularising the term ‘totalitarian sects’, a term used by defenders of “spiritual security” to designate peaceful religious denominations considered as potential threats to the Orthodox Church.

FECRIS’ Russian member association headed by Alexander Dvorkin is an organ of the Orthodox Church and has been blessed by Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Alexy II. Key member organizations of FECRIS’ Russian member association are led by radical Orthodox priests and archpriests or are missionary departments of Orthodox dioceses. They refer followers of non-traditional religions to “rehabilitation centres” where they are re-educated to the “right” Orthodox religion.

The question is “How can FECRIS be financed by the French State and support such activities in Russia?”

Conclusion

The European Convention on Human Rights guarantees the right to freedom of religion or belief, which entails the duty for signatory States to hold neutrality in religious matters. Both the Russian Federation and France have committed to the Convention and are bound by its obligations.

In spite of these obligations, Russia’s motivation behind the

banning of a number of non-violent movements is narrowly linked to the spiritual security philosophy which encompasses the rejection of religious diversity for the benefit of religious homogeneity, the defence of the Orthodox Church against proselytizing new religious movements, and the protection of Russian values against the contamination by unwelcome foreign values.

Moscow's fight against foreign religious groups and against the foreign funding of Russian human rights NGOs administratively renamed 'foreign agents' are a source of deep concern in the international human rights community because all the legal – but undemocratic – tools have been put in place to clean up the religious landscape.

A community of 177,000 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses movement in Russia has been banned, its members are being jailed, their children taken away, and their security is no longer guaranteed. Some have started to emigrate to the European Union. Members of the Church of Scientology are also prosecuted and jailed, the police raid their Churches with machine guns, and initiate liquidation proceedings. Peaceful Muslim groups of foreign origin, such as Tablighi Jamaat and Said Nursi followers, have been banned and a number of their followers have been arrested and sentenced to several years in prison.

Is the European Union willing to receive all the religious refugees from Russia?

Is the Council of Europe really able to have its member states fulfill their obligations under the Convention?

[1] Witte, Bourdeaux, *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia*. Wipf and Stock Publishers. 1999. Page 73. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465916?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

[2] Payne, "Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Cooptation?". <http://bit.ly/2r9nmG1>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

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