

Table of Contents

- ***Church sex abuse: Thousands of paedophiles in French Church, inquiry says***
- ***Protestant church set on fire in France***
- ***An evangelical church attacked in France***
- ***Jehovah's Witnesses in the French MIVILUDES Report: Five mistakes***
- ***The new MIVILUDES report: bad methodology, unreliable results***
- ***A Catholic priest murdered by suspected cathedral arsonist in Nantes***
- ***FECRIS denounced at the United Nations' Human Rights Council***
- ***Bivolaru and Moldovan v. France: A new challenge for mutual trust in the European Union?***
- ***Paris Commune, still alive and kicking: A Catholic procession was attacked***
- ***Jehovah's Witnesses' submission to the UN Human Rights Committee (28 June – 23 July 2021)***
- ***"All the world envies us for the MIVILUDES"***
- ***Macron's party pulls support from woman in Muslim headscarf***
- ***A French Inquisition: France's Crackdown on Muslim Life in the Name of Public Order***
- ***French minister: Muslims are the main victims of radical Islam***
- ***The persecution of Christians who were Muslims***
- ***Des fonds supplémentaires pour la MIVILUDES: la "police des esprits" est de retour***
- ***More money to MIVILUDES: The French "mind police" is back***
- ***MIVILUDES' Report of February 2021***
- ***A new Circular to increase repression based on denunciations***
- ***Seeking more prosecutions***
- ***The mind police***
- ***French row over mosque isn't simply about state financing – it runs deep into Islamophobia and French secularism***
- ***City Council of Strasbourg rejects the IHRA definition of antisemitism***
- ***The persecution of Christians who were Muslims***
- ***Muslims, Christians critic of the French law on "Separatism"***
- ***French Law on "Separatism": Amendment Battles in the Senate***
- ***French minister warns of 'foreign meddling' in Strasbourg mosque funding row***
- ***Prohibition of homeschooling canceled in Commission at the Senate***
- ***Anti-Cultism in France: Old/New Risks for Religious Liberty?***

- ***The Calvary of Plorec-sur-Arguenon will not be destroyed***
- ***Only 25% "cultic deviations" are related to religious beliefs, according to the MIVILUDES***
- ***25% seulement des "dérives sectaires" sont de nature religieuse, selon la MIVILUDES***
- ***Iranian converts have to prove their faith to obtain asylum***
- ***Minister of Interior apologise for "unfortunate" remarks against evangelicals***
- ***'French Muslims will suffer' under separatism rules, critics say***
- ***How taxes may be misused to persecute spiritual minorities***
- ***New French law on religion goes to the Parliament— Minister offends "Evangelicals"***
- ***Three Muslim groups in France snub anti-extremism charter***
- ***French Muslim groups at odds over Macron's anti-extremism charter***
- ***A White Paper on the bill confirming respect for the principles of the Republic***
- ***Livre blanc sur le projet de Loi confortant le respect des principes de la République***
- ***French archbishop, others protest draft law against religious extremism***

Church sex abuse: Thousands of paedophiles in French Church, inquiry says

BBC News (04.10.2021) - <https://bbc.in/2YlkNWE> - Thousands of paedophiles have operated within the French Catholic Church since 1950, the head of a panel investigating abuses by church members says.

Jean-Marc Sauvé told French media that the commission had found evidence of 2,900 to 3,200 abusers - out of a total of 115,000 priests and other clerics.

"That is a minimal estimate," he added.

The commission is to release a lengthy report on Tuesday. It is based on church, court and police archives, as well as interviews with victims.

The inquiry was commissioned by the French Catholic Church in 2018, following a number of scandals in other countries.

Mr Sauvé, a senior civil servant, told France's Le Monde newspaper that the panel had handed over evidence to prosecutors in 22 cases where criminal action could still be launched.

He added that bishops and other senior church officials had been told of other allegations against people who were still alive.

Commission members included doctors, historians, sociologists and theologians. More than 6,500 victims and witnesses were contacted over two and a half years. The final report is 2,500 pages long.

Christopher Lamb, of the Roman Catholic publication The Tablet, told the BBC that abuse scandals had plunged the Church into "its greatest crisis in... 500 years".

Earlier this year Pope Francis [changed the Catholic Church's laws to explicitly criminalise sexual abuse](#), in its biggest overhaul of the criminal code for decades.

The new rules make sex abuse, grooming minors, possessing child pornography and covering up abuse an offence under Canon Law.

RELATED NEWS

[French Catholic Church inquiry finds 216,000 paedophilia cases since 1950](#)

[Pope Francis expresses 'shame' over French Church sex abuse scandal](#)

[French Catholic Church: Clergy have abused 216,000 children since 1950, says inquiry](#)

[French report: 330,000 children victims of church sex abuse](#)

Photo : Getty Images

Protestant church set on fire in France

Unknown vandals attacked a temple in Behren-lès-Forbach, in the French region of Moselle.

By Daniela Bovolenta

Bitter Winter (14.09.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3tUCNTH> - Vandalism of Christian churches continues in France. While perpetrators are rarely identified, or their motives ascertained, the number of incidents indicates an epidemic of such attacks, whose growth is alarming.

On August 27, unknown vandals set fire to the basement room of the Protestant church of Behren-lès-Forbach, in the northeastern French region of the Moselle. Happily, firefighters intervened on time and the fire was contained, although the room can no longer be used for parish activities.

The Protestant temple of Behren-lès-Forbach was built in the 1960s to serve the local miners. After the mines were closed at the end of the 20th century, the Protestant community declined, and during the COVID crisis regular services were no longer held, although the community still met occasionally.

Vandals might have believed that the temple was disaffected, although in fact it wasn't.

French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin denounced the attack in a tweet, and promised effective action to identify the perpetrators. As in other similar cases they may, however, never be discovered.

Gérald Darmanin (Tweet)

Je condamne fermement les dégradations et l'incendie volontaires de l'église protestante de Behren-lès-Forbach. Tout est mis en œuvre pour retrouver les auteurs de cet acte insupportable. Soutien aux protestants de France.

I firmly condemn the criminal damage and the arson of the Protestant church of Behren-lès-Forbach. Everything is done to find the perpetrators of this unbearable action. Support to the Protestants of France

RELATED ARTICLES

[Un temple protestant incendié à Behren-lès-Forbach](#)

[Dégradations et incendie volontaire à l'église protestante de Behren-lès-Forbach](#)

Photo : *The Protestant temple of Behren-lès-Forbach* ([credits](#)).

An evangelical church attacked in France

The marquee that the Life and Light evangelical church in Marseille used for worship services was destroyed and all the Bibles burned.

Evangelical Focus (11.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3ALFpp5> - The Vie et Lumière (Life and Light) evangelical church in Marseille, [France](#), which is a member of the Evangelical Mission of the Romani of France, was recently vandalised.

The **canvas** of the marquee the church used for worship and prayer meetings **was torn, the furniture overturned and all the [Bibles](#) burned.**

A member of the church who lives right next to the land rented by the congregation from the Marseille city council, discovered the extent of the damage.

"It happened to us like a storm in the middle of summer. They called me to tell me that the marquee was down. It had rained a lot in the last few days, so I thought the ground had softened. The damage was probably done the day before. We don't know who could have done this and we don't understand", said François Santiago, pastor of the church.

The **marquee was erected at the beginning of the summer, mainly for sanitary reasons**, in order to have more physical distance than in the adjoining hard church building, but it is now unusable.

"It's a circus tent, we've had it for 30 years. Seeing burned Bibles is not nice. It's [vandalism](#), **everything is broken**", pointed out Laurent Castagna, the church treasurer.

Photo: The marquee that the evangelical church in Marseille used for worship services was destroyed and all the Bibles burned./ Vie et Lumière church.

Jehovah's Witnesses in the French MIVILUDES Report: Five mistakes

Not surprisingly, the methodology of the MIVILUDES leads to systematic mistakes

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (11.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3ACIFCS> - In a [previous article](#) reviewing the recently published [report for the years 2018–2020](#) of the French MIVILUDES, the French Inter-ministerial mission for monitoring and combating cultic deviances (*dérives sectaires*), I noted how it suffers from a fundamental methodological problem.

The report is a building built using as bricks the *saisines*, i.e., the complaints against a religious movement that everybody can send to the MIVILUDES by letter or by using an online form. For pages and pages, the report summarizes and quotes the *saisines*. There is no indication that the *saisines* have been verified by confronting them with the existing scholarly literature on the accused religious movements, or by interviewing members in good standing of the religious organizations, who may have a totally different point of view.

Today, I examine a massive example of the use, or misuse, of the *saisines*, i.e., the part of the report concerning the Jehovah's Witnesses, which is based on 62 *saisines* the MIVILUDES received in 2020, in addition to those received in the previous years. They do not seem to be many, considering that there are currently 136,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in France. I also discussed in my previous article how the system of the *saisines* may be easily manipulated by the concerted efforts of organized opponents, who may all send *saisines* to the MIVILUDES, giving the false impression that a widespread popular protest exists against a certain religion.

First, the Jehovah's Witnesses are classified among the "closed religious movements of Christian inspiration." The main feature of a "closed religious movement," the report says, is the "indoctrination and control [embrigadement] of children." That this is the main feature of these groups, once again, is a conclusion the MIVILUDES derives from the *saisines* it has

received. This notion of a “closed religious movement,” however, does not correspond to any scholarly definition, and does not apply to the Jehovah’s Witnesses. They send their children to public schools, which is hardly compatible with the idea of a strict control conveyed by the French word “embrigadement.”

More generally, most Jehovah’s Witnesses have a job outside of the congregation and regularly interact with non-members. Jehovah’s Witnesses are conservative believers who live quietly but are very much part of the “outside world,” unlike the real, typical “closed” religious communities who live communally in isolated farms. That the Jehovah’s Witnesses are a “closed religious community” was argued by a study by scholars from the University of Utrecht for the Dutch government. Also in that case, which however did not focus on the “regimentation” of children, I and my colleagues J. Gordon Melton and Holly Folk [objected](#) that the notion of “closed religious community” applied to the Witnesses did not correspond to the more common use of the word in social scientific literature.

The MIVILUDES objects that “participation in the life of the city (elections, representation) is forbidden, which can contravene the right to education in democratic values.” The Jehovah’s Witnesses do not vote or offers themselves as candidates in political elections for theological reasons. This is part of their religious liberty, and a form of “conscientious objection” most democratic countries in the world have recognized as legitimate, just as they have recognized the rights of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to conscientious objection with respect to military service.

From the theory of the “closed religious movement” comes the strange comment that Jehovah’s Witnesses practice a “‘brutal’ isolation” of certain members of their community, including “people with disabilities” and “the elderly.” This may have been reported in some malicious *saisine*, but those who are familiar with the Jehovah’s Witnesses know it is both untrue and offensive. I can personally testify that the elderly and those with disabilities are taken care of with love and patience by the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who regard this as part of their Christian duties.

Governments [have even given awards](#) to the Jehovah’s Witnesses for their care of the persons with disabilities, noting that the congregation “takes into consideration not just the physical access to their buildings, through facilities for those with special assistance needs; it also facilitates communication and access to technology by holding meetings for worship and other activities in sign language (American Sign Language) and by providing Braille publications and sign-language videos.” Perhaps even more importantly, the Jehovah’s Witnesses give hope to the elderly and

persons with disabilities by telling them that [disabilities and the problems connected with old age are not forever](#). They will disappear in the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus Christ in which the Jehovah's Witnesses firmly believe.

Second, Jehovah's Witnesses are blamed for their "very active proselytizing," which during the COVID-19 crisis was mostly through letters and phone calls. It is not specifically alleged that the Jehovah's Witnesses breached any French law about unwanted phone calls. In one of the *saisines*, somebody complained that a letter was sent to him by the Jehovah's Witnesses 15 days after he (or she, the gender of the complainant not having been specified) returned home after a short period of hospitalization. The MIVILUDES believes that, since the letter mentioned illness and healing, it is evidence that the Jehovah's Witnesses have "precise... objective for evangelization, especially during the health crisis." Again, of what the Jehovah's Witnesses are precisely accused is unclear. The implication seems to be that the Jehovah's Witnesses fraudulently obtained lists of people who had been hospitalized, and wrote to them when they returned home. What likely happened is that the complainant received a general letter, and it is not strange that in a time of pandemic the letter would mention health problems. There are no laws against sending letters, and presumably the complainant receives in the family mailbox publicity of all kind. Regarding only a letter sent by the Jehovah's Witnesses as objectionable comes dangerously close to judging the *content* of the letter, and singling out a religious group for its doctrines. It seems that France has problems in accepting that not all religions engage in "very active proselytizing," but some do, and proselytizing is part of the religious liberty protected by both the Universal and European Declarations of Human Rights.

Read the full article in [Bitter Winter](#)

Photo : Permanent exhibition « Le nom divin et la Bible en français » (The Divine Name and the Bible in French) at the French Jehovah's Witnesses' headquarters in Louviers.
Source: [jw.org](#).

The new MIVILUDES report: bad methodology, unreliable results

Privileging the saisines (i.e., reports by those who write to denounce a "cultic deviance") may only lead to biased conclusions.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (09.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3AtqqzY> - The [MIVILUDES](#), the French Inter-ministerial mission for monitoring and combating cultic deviances (*dérives sectaires*), which is now part of the Ministry of the Interior, published last week [its report for the years 2018–2020](#).

Like Diogenes wandering with his lantern in search of an honest man, the MIVILUDES wanders around France with the anti-cult ideology as its lantern looking for dishonest “cultic deviances.” *Dérives sectaires* is a quintessentially French formula and invention, of which MIVILUDES is no less proud than of the Tour Eiffel. It comes out handy to find “cultic” dangers even where no “cult” (which should be translated into French with the corresponding derogatory word, *secte*) exists.

The report does include some informative parts, mostly found in the pages devoted by researcher Bilel Ainine to the Muslim folk therapeutic practices of *roqya* and *hiyama*, although even here the use of an anti-cult and police jargon makes an otherwise interesting text both less readable and less persuasive.

Several cases in the report may illustrate how the system works. I recently devoted a [long article](#) and an [encyclopedia entry](#) to La Famille, a movement of remote Jansenist origins “discovered” by anti-cultists after more than one century of peaceful existence in France. The MIVILUDES has to admit that this group has nothing to do with the usual description of a “cult” (*secte*) by French anti-cultists, which focuses on a leader (called “guru” even when operating outside the Eastern religious traditions) who brainwashes the followers and takes their money. Nothing remotely similar is at work in La Famille.

Yet, the MIVILUDES finds something to criticize. Since it is now fashionable to denounce some groups as “separatist,” i.e., separated from the rest of the society, the MIVILUDES claims that in La Famille an “invisible barrier” exists dividing members from the other citizens “based on a religious quest for purity,” just as it happens with “the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Plymouth Brethren, and the Mormons.” Lumping together the Jehovah’s Witness and the Plymouth Brethren, who don’t vote in the elections, with the Latter-day Saints, aka the “Mormons,” who at one stage counted among their members the U.S. congressional leaders of both main political parties and the Republican candidate for President shows that whoever wrote the report is not very familiar with the “Mormons.” Mitt Romney was a former “Mormon” bishop and stake president, well-known as such, who got 47% of the American popular vote in 2012, not exactly an example of “separatism” and lack of interest by the “Mormons” for the affairs of the larger society.

As for La Famille, the MIVILUDES finds there “risks for the minors,” calls it a *secte* (after having admitted that the typical features of its notion of *dérives sectaires* are not there), and vows to remain ready to “reevaluate the serious risks generated by its activities.”

If somebody somewhere sometimes mentioned that a group may include “cultic deviances,” the group gets caught in the report’s spider web. It is the case of Anthroposophy and Soka Gakkai, which “raise questions” not better identified, and even of the highly esteemed Plum Village (Village des Pruniers) near Bordeaux, founded by Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh, who received in 2015 the *Pacem in Terris* Peace and Freedom Award, one of the highest honors awarded by Catholic institutions in the United States.

Perhaps the best example that the MIVILUDES would take seriously *any* report about “cultic deviances” is a paragraph devoted to the possible Satanist origins of incidents of cattle mutilations. This has been for decades a part of the Satanism scare, and virtually all scholarly books studying it describe the Satanistic interpretations of cattle mutilation (which is mostly produced by animal predators) as the typical product of a moral panic. The MIVILUDES is aware that Satanistic theories of cattle mutilation have been ridiculed by scholars, and is somewhat more cautious than usual. Yet, it calls the Satanistic theory “sometimes worth being considered.” It notes that “the first four cases [of cattle mutilation in France in 2020] may correspond, according to the dates, to neo-pagan celebrations colored with witchcraft, or coincide with the Celtic feast of Beltane, connected with the celebration of nature.” A quick look at the studies of Satanistic panics elsewhere would have persuaded the MIVILUDES that, precisely because they celebrate nature, neo-pagans and followers of Wicca certainly do not go around mutilating cattle, and no such incident has ever been reported.

There is also a part about Scientology that one might take as humorous if it would not involve the risk of perpetuating discrimination. We read that there are *less and less* French citizens complaining about Scientology, from 220 in 2015 to a mere 26 in 2020. A normal observer would conclude that Scientology is now largely accepted by French society, and there are no “cultic deviances” there. However, the astute observers of the MIVILUDES are not easily fooled, and may consider even the lack of complaints as evidence that there should be complaints. The report states that now “MIVILUDES receives few testimonies about Scientology,” but Scientologists “manage businesses,” and the authors of the reports even noticed that during the COVID-19 pandemic Scientology volunteers “decontaminated continuously and deeply apartments, buses, and even air conditioning systems.” Normally, one would conclude from this that Scientologists are good citizens well integrated in the society. Not the MIVILUDES, which sees in these activities something sinister, and implicitly calls for discrimination against business operated by Scientologists.

Theoretically, the MIVILUDES should not pass judgment on doctrines. But indirectly it does. For instance, it tells us that the so-called “prosperity theology,” popular among Pentecostals, is “a wrong interpretation of the Scriptures” according to the National Council of French Evangelicals, and that some Buddhist groups are not connected with the “traditional structure of the Buddhist movement.” Apart from the Napoleon-like attempt to imagine a “Buddhist church” (just as Napoleon tried to invent a “Jewish church” to control the French Jews: more about Napoleon later), which would then decide who is or is not Buddhist, whether a Buddhist or Evangelical theology is traditional or innovative, approved or not approved by some religious body or federation, should be totally irrelevant for the governmental institutions of a secular state.

It is also questionable that the MIVILUDES finds a clue of “cultic deviances” in “a backward vision of society” evidenced *inter alia* by “a rejection of abortion.” The majority of French citizens, according to polls, is in favor of abortion. But one wonders what the MIVILUDES would make of a religious group whose leader publicly stated that “Abortion is not a ‘lesser evil.’ It is a crime. It is wiping out one to save another. That is what the mafia does. It is a crime, it is absolutely evil.” These are words by Pope Francis, [officially published](#) in the Web site of the Vatican—in [French as well](#), should the MIVILUDES prefer to read it in its language. The problem is not whether the Pope is right or wrong, it is whether a religious judgment implying “a rejection of abortion” is protected by religious liberty in France or regarded as a “cultic deviance.”

The problem of this, and of previous, MIVILUDES reports is its method. It hypostatizes as an almost sacred object the “saisine.” As evidenced by the uncertainties of the

dictionaries, this French word is not easy to translate. In practice, a "saisine" is a report or complaint received by the MIVILUDES about a group that, according to its accusers, exhibits "cultic deviances." The MIVILUDES receives the "saisines," classifies and discusses them, and elaborates statistics and conclusions on their basis. In 2020, 85.6% of the "saisines" came from private citizens (a minority came from associations, administrative bodies, politicians, businesses, or the media).

This method would not be regarded as admissible for the serious study of any social phenomenon. The sample is obviously self-selected and negatively biased. Only those who do not like a certain movement report it to the MIVILUDES. Nobody writes to the MIVILUDES to report how happy they are in a new religious movement (perhaps they should). There is no evidence in the report that denunciations are assessed by interviewing members of the relevant groups, or scholars who have a neutral attitude to new religious movements. Rather, the denunciations find their way to the report.

For example, in the section on "Evangelical Churches" The Church of Almighty God (CAG) is mentioned because the MIVILUDES has received three (3) "disturbing" "saisines" on this movement. Apart from the well-known fact that Chinese propaganda often sends to European public and private institutions [fake and defamatory reports](#) on CAG refugees, what is "disturbing" is that the CAG is classified among the "Evangelical Churches," a mistake the MIVILUDES would have avoided had it read some scholarly literature on the movement rather than relying on the "saisines" only.

The MIVILUDES insists with its cult of the "saisines" even if it knows that they are rarely reliable, as evidenced by the fact that out of more than 3,000 "saisines" received in 2020, only 16 were forwarded to prosecutors for possible legal intervention (which does not mean that the prosecutors really acted on their basis).

A good example is Thích Nhất Hạnh's Plum Village, a community many would not regard as "cultic" or controversial. It has a certain prominence in the report, based on 12 "saisines" received by the MIVILUDES in three years (on average, 4 per year). The report includes the complaint by somebody who wrote that after one week at the Plum village "my sister makes astonishing remarks and she is no longer the same person." Another complainant wrote to MIVILUDES that the Plum Village "causes enormous damages to the persons by indoctrinating them."

Again, there is no evidence that the Plum Village has been allowed to defend itself, or scholars familiar with Thích Nhất Hạnh and the Village have been consulted for a comment. This is not only bad methodology, it is a road leading infallibly to slander and defamation. Based on a few hostile witnesses, a whole community is pilloried and publicly exposed as deviant.

Now, finally, back to Napoleon. I had finished this review when an American correspondent, who is happily protected in her country by the First Amendment from any consequence she may incur in France for poking fun at governmental institutions, wrote to me that, in the interest of better understanding the system, she sent a "saisine" herself to the MIVILUDES. She discovered that, while in the United States before being allowed to interact with most governmental and even private Web sites on serious matters your identity or at least your email is verified, nothing similar occurs when you send a "saisine" to MIVILUDES. In fact, she managed to go through with an (admittedly well-written and historically accurate) "saisine" written by Napoleon Bonaparte from St. Helena, complaining that due to the wrong predictions of his fortune-teller, Marie-Anne Lenormand, he "lost his job, his home, and even an empire."

Presumably, the MIVILUDES will recognize this particular "saisine" as a prank, but it found no electronic obstacles and was regularly delivered. One may suspect that, if somebody wants to slander a religious movement, it may be enough to send to the MIVILUDES half a dozen of "saisines" signed by real people with real emails, and the "cultic deviances" of the group will be publicly exposed next year.

A Catholic priest murdered by suspected cathedral arsonist in Nantes

HRWF (10.08.2021) - French prosecutors opened an investigation into "voluntary manslaughter" after a Catholic priest, Fr Olivier Maire, was murdered in the western region of Vendée.

The priest, aged 61, was killed in the town of Saint-Laurent-sur-Sevre at the Montfort Missionaries (Company of Mary) where he lived and where the suspect had also been given shelter. He was the French provincial superior of the religious community and he had been hosting the suspect for "several months.

The suspect, Emmanuel Abayisenga (40), was already under investigation for setting a fire to the Cathedral of Nantes where he worked as a volunteer last year. He had then been placed in detention before being released under judicial supervision.

Abayisenga had been refused political asylum in France after living in the country since 2012.

He handed himself in to police after the murder. He was placed in a psychiatric institution.

President Macron, Prime Minister Castex and Minister of the Interior Darmanin expressed their support to the Catholics in France.

Several opposition politicians slammed the government's alleged "failure" after the tragedy.

Far-right leader Marine Le Pen tweeted: "So in France, it's possible to be an illegal immigrant, to set fire to the cathedral of Nantes, never to be expelled, and to re-offend by murdering a priest."

Darmanin said the suspect was not deportable while he was still under judicial supervision and accused Le Pen of "arguing without knowing the facts."

Who is the suspect?

Abayisenga met with Pope Francis on 11 November 2016 during an audience with socially excluded people in the Vatican, according to French Catholic media.

The event was organized by the French organization Fratello, as part of the Catholic Church's year-long Jubilee of Mercy. Around 3,600 people attended, including many from France, Poland, and Rome.

According to La Croix, Abayisenga traveled to Rome with a group from Nantes.

Abayisenga is also prosecuted in an arson attack on the 15th century Cathedral of St. Peter and St Paul in Nantes on 18 July 2020. The cathedral had survived the French Revolution, WWII bombings and a devastating fire in 1972 which damaged the 17th-century organ and stained glass windows. The renovation was only completed in 2013.

More than 100 firefighters were deployed to combat the fire. See pictures [here](#).

After the fire, the man was held in custody but released on bail on 31 May last under a number of release conditions such as reporting to the police twice a month and accepting a psychological treatment.

President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Jean Castex then expressed their support to firefighters "who take great risk to save this gothic gem in the city of the Dukes".

Photo: *A French gendarme stands at the entrance of the place where a French catholic priest, aged 60, has been murdered in Saint-Laurent-sur-Sevres, Western France, on August 9, 2021* - Euronews

FECRIS denounced at the United Nations' Human Rights Council

CAP-LC filed a written statement detailing the defamation cases FECRIS and its affiliated organizations lost, and asking France to stop supporting them.

by Massimo Introvigne



Palais des Nations in Geneva, where the UN Human Rights Council meets (credits).

Bitter Winter (28.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3Agkafp> - Readers of *Bitter Winter* are familiar with FECRIS (European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects), an umbrella organization created in 1994 to put together anti-cult associations in several European (and some non-European) countries. We criticized FECRIS inter alia for supporting China's horrific persecution of Falun Gong and other religious movements. FECRIS promotes the anti-cult ideology, recognized in 2020 by a USCIRF (U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom) document as a major threat for freedom of religion or belief.

CAP-LC (Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience), an NGO with special consultative status at the United Nations' ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council), the same status enjoyed by FECRIS, has now filed a written statement to the 47th Session of the United Nations' Human Rights Council, which was published on 21 June, and asks France to stop its support of FECRIS.

CAP-LC is concerned with the reorganization of the French governmental anti-cult mission MIVILUDES, now under the supervision of the Minister Delegate for Citizenship at the Ministry of the Interior, Marlène Schiappa. She has increased MIVILUDES' present budget ten-fold, to euro 1 million euro per year, CAP-LC reports, and has announced "that this million will be allocated to initiatives that would be run by anti-cult associations, namely CCMM and UNADFI," both FECRIS affiliates.

CAP-LC notes that CCMM and UNADFI refer to themselves as NGOs but are in fact GONGOs (Governmental Non-Government Associations), since 90% of their funding comes from the French government. Representatives of both FECRIS affiliates have been included in the newly appointed Orientation Committee of the MIVILUDES. FECRIS is registered in France and is also directly funded by the French government. (...)

Read full article of Bitter Winter [here](#)

Read the full submission of CAP-LC to the U.N. [here](#)

Bivolaru and Moldovan v. France: A new challenge for mutual trust in the European Union?

By William Julié, founding partner of William Julié Law Office and international criminal law officer at the International Bar Association, **and Juliette Fauvarque**, trainee lawyer at William Julié Law Office.

Strasbourg Observers (22.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3gZftxE> - In the recent *Bivolaru and Moldovan v. France* case, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) handed a landmark judgment in relation to the execution of European arrest warrants (EAWs) between Member States of the European Union (EU) and the equivalent protection doctrine. For the first time, the ECtHR decided that the execution of an EAW violated Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which prohibits torture, inhumane and degrading treatment. As we shall see, this case sends a clear warning to all European judges – national or supranational – that the execution of EAWs is subject to the ECtHR's jurisdiction.

Under the doctrine of equivalent protection, also known as the 'Bosphorus' presumption (by reference to the case in which it was first established by the Court), States Parties to the ECHR are presumed to have abided by their obligations under the Convention when applying EU law. This presumption was established by the ECtHR in consideration of the fact that the EU, as an international organization, offers substantive guarantees in the protection of fundamental rights under the Charter of Fundamental Rights, general principles of EU law and the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).

Two applications were joined in this case. Both concerned French decisions granting the execution of EAWs issued by the Romanian authorities against Romanian nationals for the purpose of serving a custodial sentence. The joinder of these two cases nevertheless resulted in different verdicts, as the Court found a violation of Article 3 in respect of one of the applicants, and no violation in respect of the other.

Facts

The first applicant, Mr. Codrut Moldovan, was convicted by a Romanian court to seven years and six months imprisonment for crimes of human trafficking committed in France and Romania. A European arrest warrant was subsequently issued by the Romanian authorities. With references to the case law of the CJEU and the ECtHR, Mr. Moldovan argued that his surrender to Romania would lead him to endure conditions of detention contrary to Article 3 of the ECHR. The Romanian issuing authority assured the French executing authority that Mr. Moldovan would be detained in conditions compatible with Article 3. These assurances were found sufficient by the Court of Appeal of Riom, which granted execution of the EAW. This decision was then upheld by the French Court of Cassation.

The second applicant, Mr. Gregorian Bivolaru, was convicted *in absentia* by a Romanian court in 2013 to a term of six years imprisonment on counts of sexual offences against a minor. During investigations, the defendant had fled to Sweden and been the subject of first extradition proceedings for the purpose of being tried in Romania. The Swedish Supreme Court denied his extradition on the ground that he would face persecution in Romania based on his religious beliefs and his activities as

leader of the 'movement for spiritual integration into the absolute'. The Swedish authorities subsequently granted Mr. Bivolaru the status of refugee under the Geneva Convention. After his conviction, the applicant was arrested in France pursuant to a Romanian EAW issued for the purpose of serving his sentence. He argued before the Paris Court of Appeal that his refugee status barred his surrender to Romania. He also claimed that he would be subject to inhuman and degrading detention conditions in Romania. The Paris Court of Appeal, having sought further information from Swedish authorities, concluded that the applicant's refugee status did not constitute an obstacle to the execution of the EAW, as Romania had, since then, acceded to the EU. Besides, this argument fell outside the grounds of non-execution of EAWs, which are exhaustively listed in the EAW Framework Decision. Furthermore, the allegations made by the applicant were considered too vague to create a grave risk that he would be subject to inhuman conditions of detention if surrendered. Consequently, the French Court of Appeal granted the execution of the EAW, and that decision was upheld by the Court of Cassation.

Mr. Moldovan and Mr. Bivolaru decided to challenge the decisions against them before the ECtHR on the ground that their surrender to Romania would violate the prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment under Article 3. In substance, the applicants were alleging that the execution by a Member State of its obligations under the law of the EU constituted a violation of the ECHR – a situation likely to create a conflict of norms between EU law and the ECHR.

Read the FULL article at <https://strasbourgobservers.com/category/by-topic/article-3/>

HRWF Comment

In 2013, HRWF investigated the Bivolaru case in Romania itself and interviewed his alleged minor victim of sexual abuse in the presence of her husband. The concerned minor told HRWF that she was interrogated for 13 hours without the help of a lawyer and outside the presence of her parents. She was forced to write a statement that was afterwards misused to give her the status of injured party – first without her knowledge and afterwards against her will - and to incriminate Gregorian Bivolaru. Despite the fact that with the help of a lawyer she retracted her statement the next morning, the case was channelled through irreversible judicial proceedings. Later on, Gregorian Bivolaru was accused of alleged illegal border crossing attempt.

See HRWF Report [here](https://bit.ly/2SpK53q): <https://bit.ly/2SpK53q>

See as well HRWF's judicial monitoring of the Bivolaru case in the framework of HRWF research on the implementation of the European Arrest Warrant between Romania and other EU countries: <https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Romania.pdf>

Photo: European Court in Strasbourg

Paris Commune, still alive and kicking: A Catholic procession was attacked

Last weekend, "anti-fascists" assaulted participants in an official Catholic event honoring the ten priests and the others killed by the Communards.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (02.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3yZgNZG> - On May 26, 1871, the Paris Commune, the Socialist insurrection that came to control France's capital, was about to be crushed. The Communards decided to kill their opponents they had jailed and were keeping as hostages. 50 were executed in Paris' Rue Haxo: ten priests, detained because of the Commune's anticlericalism, 36 police officers, and four revolutionary militants suspected of being spies.

150 years thereafter, the Vatican is about to beatify five of the priests (the final approval by a consultative commission came on May 11). A parish church, Our Lady of the Hostages, was built where the victims were killed. It was among the organizers of a procession to commemorate the martyrs and other events between May 26 and 30. In turn, those who still cherish the memory of the Commune were celebrating the victims killed during the bloody repression that followed its fall.

The procession and the other events were by no means organized by marginal or arch-conservative Catholics. They were an official event of Paris' Catholic Church, with the participation of the Auxiliary Bishop, Mgr. Denis Jachiet. The Archbishop of Paris, Mgr. Michel Aupetit, concluded the events by celebrating the Mass on May 30 at Our Lady of the Hostages. Pope Francis himself had granted a plenary indulgence to participants.

By then, he had to start his sermon by condemning the "hate action" against the procession of May 29.

The pro-Commune manifestation had ended several hours before, and it was not near the procession's route. Yet, in Boulevard de Ménilmontant, the Catholic procession was attacked by "anti-fascist" militants who threw stones and tried to physically stop the Catholics from reaching Our Lady of the Hostages. In this, they succeeded. The number of police officers present was not enough. They succeeded in avoiding worse violence, but Bishop Jachiet agreed that the procession had to be disbanded to prevent further violence. See <https://twitter.com/i/status/1398699250129805315>

The "antifas" insisted in their press release that this was a manifestation of "archconservative Catholics" (catholiques intégristes). It would not have been a good excuse for violence, but the designation was wrong. It was a mainline Catholic activity, sponsored by the Archdiocese, with the presence of the Auxiliary Bishop, within the context of events concluded by the Archbishop.

The Catholic Church had clarified that celebrating the martyrs had not a political meaning and was not even a statement “against the Commune.” The Church just wanted to honor good, charitable priests, who were killed just for being priests.

The mild reaction by Paris’ authorities against a clear instance of a violent attack on religious liberty is perhaps the most interesting feature of the whole incident. It confirms that these are not good days for religion in general in France.

Photo: A participant in the procession wounded by the “antifas” assisted by Order of Malta volunteers. From Twitter.

“Read more in [La Croix Int'l](#)” (31 May) and [La Croix Int'l](#) (2 June).

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ submission to the UN Human Rights Committee (28 June – 23 July 2021)

Full submission available [here](#)

EAJW (27.05.2021) – On 3 May, the European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses – France filed a 13-page submission to the 132rd session of the UN Human Rights Committee prior to the adoption of the List of Issues. We present you the introduction of their submission focusing on the role of the MIVILUDES followed by the table of contents of the document.

Introduction

1. The European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses (EAJW) is a charity registered in the United Kingdom. It provides support to Jehovah’s Witnesses facing fundamental human rights violations in various parts of the world.
2. The activities of Jehovah’s Witnesses in France go back to the end of the 19th century. The first local religious association was legally registered in 1906. In 1929, a national office was opened in Paris. Close to 300,000 people currently attend their meetings for worship.
3. Nonetheless, over the past three decades, various governmental agencies have consistently and egregiously labelled Jehovah’s Witnesses as a “sect” (French, *secte* – a seriously pejorative term in French). These agencies^[1], principally the MIVILUDES at present, are leading a campaign of harassment and misrepresentation against Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Parliament established four parliamentary commissions on sectarian aberrations (1995, 1999, 2006 and 2012), all of which referred to Jehovah’s Witnesses. At the time, State authorities alleged

^[1] The Observatoire interministériel sur les sectes (Interministerial Observatory of Sects) was created on 9 May 1996 and was renamed Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sectes, or MILS (Interministerial Mission on the Fight Against Sects), in October 1998. In November 2002, the French authorities established by presidential decree the Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires, or MIVILUDES (Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat Against Sectarian Aberrations).

that so-called sects engaged in “mental destabilisation, exorbitant financial demands, inducing people to sever ties with their home environment, bodily harm, indoctrination of children, more or less antisocial views prejudicing public order, numerous lawsuits, possible misuse of traditional financial channels and attempts to infiltrate public authorities.”^[2]

4. On 22 December 1995, the State’s anti-sect commission released its first report, entitled “Sects in France”, which listed 173 so-called sects. Jehovah’s Witnesses were the largest group named in the report. On 17 June 1999, the State’s anti-sect commission released its second report, entitled “Sects and Money,” which once again included numerous discriminatory, defamatory and false accusations about Jehovah’s Witnesses. Jehovah’s Witnesses in France contacted State officials, objecting to the inclusion of Jehovah’s Witnesses in both anti-sect reports. They also filed an application to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), challenging the legality of both reports. In a decision dated 6 November 2001, the ECHR held that the reports were protected from challenge by parliamentary immunity but went on to observe that such reports have “no legal effect and cannot serve as the basis for any criminal or administrative proceedings.”^[3] Subsequently, in a related 2011 judgment, the ECHR ruled in favour of Jehovah’s Witnesses (in the context of discriminatory taxation imposed on Jehovah’s Witnesses as a result of the anti-sect reports), concluding that “Jehovah’s Witnesses’ free exercise of freedom of religion is protected by Article 9 of the Convention”.^[4]
5. Despite both rulings of the ECHR, and the fact that the anti-sect reports “have no legal effect”, such reports continue to be cited by some State officials as justification for religious discrimination and human rights violations against Jehovah’s Witnesses. The primary source of that religious discrimination is the State agency MIVILUDES, which has consistently maligned Jehovah’s Witnesses for more than 25 years, tarnishing their reputation and presenting them as a dangerous sect. This has created a climate of severe religious intolerance and hostility against Jehovah’s Witnesses. Official discrimination by national and local authorities has occurred, along with countless instances of hate speech and hate crime. The present submission will provide examples of the insidious and damaging effects that such stigmatisation has had on law-abiding citizens (Part II).
6. On 25 February 2021, the French authorities released a report prepared and endorsed by the MIVILUDES, the National Police and the Gendarmerie. The report comments on “sectarian aberrations” and once again pejoratively refers to Jehovah’s Witnesses as a “sect”.
7. Furthermore, on 5 April 2021, *Le Monde*, one of the most respected and widely read national newspapers in France, published an article quoting Ms. Marlène Schiappa, Minister Delegate in Charge of Citizenship, attached to the Minister of the Interior, who has recently reinforced the MIVILUDES. She makes direct reference to Jehovah’s Witnesses as one of the major sects still active, along with The Order of the Solar Temple. The latter was notorious for a series of violent actions, murders and mass suicides in multiple countries in the 1980’s. This

^[2] *Fédération Chrétienne des Témoins de Jéhovah de France v. France*, no. 53430/09, 6 November 2001 (Dec).

^[3] *Fédération Chrétienne des Témoins de Jéhovah de France v. France*, no. 53430/09, 6 November 2001 (Dec).

^[4] *Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah v. France*, no. 8916/05, 30 June 2011, paras. 9-10, 50-51.

slandrous misrepresentation not only affronts the religious feelings of almost 9 million Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide but also casts shame on our confession, which has been present and perfectly integrated into the religious landscape in France for over a century, and stigmatises tens of thousands of respectable citizens.

8. The EAJW objects in the strongest terms to the recent and continued misrepresentation of Jehovah's Witnesses by the MIVILUDES. Such actions by the authorities will undeniably continue to generate further discrimination and religious intolerance.
9. These recent developments are all the more shocking because during the past 30 years, the senior French administrative courts, including the Conseil d'État (Supreme Court for Administrative Justice), have systematically reaffirmed and reinforced the religious status of Jehovah's Witnesses in France. Moreover, the ECHR has repeatedly confirmed that Jehovah's Witnesses are a "known religion"^[5] with "an active presence in many countries world-wide, including all European States".^[6] The ECHR, in its decision *Association les Témoins de Jéhovah v. France*^[7], condemned the French authorities for violating Article 9 of the European Convention, which guarantees freedom of religion or belief. That decision ended a 16-year-long legal battle against targeted discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses.

Footnotes

^[1] The Observatoire interministériel sur les sectes (Interministerial Observatory of Sects) was created on 9 May 1996 and was renamed Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les sectes, or MILS (Interministerial Mission on the Fight Against Sects), in October 1998. In November 2002, the French authorities established by presidential decree the Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires, or MIVILUDES (Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat Against Sectarian Aberrations).

2 *Fédération Chrétienne des Témoins de Jéhovah de France v. France*, no. 53430/09, 6 November 2001 (Dec).

3 *Fédération Chrétienne des Témoins de Jéhovah de France v. France*, no. 53430/09, 6 November 2001 (Dec).

4 *Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah v. France*, no. 8916/05, 30 June 2011, paras. 9-10, 50-51.

⁵ *Manoussakis and Others v. Greece*, no. 18748/91, 26 September 1996, para 40.

6 *Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow and Others v. Russia*, no. 302/02, 10 June 2010, para 155.

7. *Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah v. France*, no. 8916/05, 30 June 2011 and 5 July 2012.

Table of contents

SUMMARY OF THE SUBMISSION. 2

I. INTRODUCTION. 3

^[5] *Manoussakis and Others v. Greece*, no. 18748/91, 26 September 1996, para 40.

^[6] *Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow and Others v. Russia*, no. 302/02, 10 June 2010, para 155.

^[7] *Association Les Témoins de Jéhovah v. France*, no. 8916/05, 30 June 2011 and 5 July 2012.

II. Violations of the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – Articles 18, 19, 21, 22, 26 and 27. 4

A. DIRECT ATTEMPT TO RESTRICT THE RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES BY THE NATIONAL AUTHORITIES 5

B. OPPOSITION TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL PLACES OF WORSHIP. 6

C. VANDALISM OF PLACES OF WORSHIP. 7

D. TAX EXEMPTION FOR PLACES OF WORSHIP, LEGAL CAPACITY TO RECEIVE DONATIONS 7

E. REFUSAL TO RENT MUNICIPAL HALLS AND FACILITIES 7

F. REFUSAL TO ALLOW MINISTERS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES TO REGISTER WITH THE SOCIAL SECURITY SCHEME FOR RELIGIOUS ORDERS (CAVIMAC) 7

G. DENIAL OF INMATES' RIGHT TO RECEIVE VISITS OF MINISTERS OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES 7

H. DISCRIMINATION AT THE WORKPLACE AND IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.. 8

I. CHILD CUSTODY AND CHILD ADOPTION REFUSALS 9

J. PHYSICAL ASSAULTS 10

III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS. 11

“All the world envies us for the MIVILUDES”

The revamped anti-cult mission tries again to export its defamation of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious organizations internationally

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (26.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3oSRHae> - Considering how the French governmental mission against “cultic deviances” is routinely denounced by leading NGOs specialized in religious liberty and by governments, including the United States', which publish reports on international freedom of religion or belief, the claim by its former president and member of its new Guidance Council, Georges Fenech, in an interview of May 20, that “all the world envies us [France] for the MIVILUDES” may appear just as an exercise in typical French dark humor.

MIVILUDES, the Inter-ministerial mission for monitoring and combating cultic deviances (*dérives sectaires*), established in 2002, is the successor of the Inter-ministerial Observatory of Cults (*sectes*, 1996–98) and the MILS, Inter-ministerial mission for combating cults (*sectes*, 1998–2002). The French word “secte” serves the same derogatory function of the English word “cult,” and is translated by most scholars as “cult” rather than “sect.” It has been recently revamped and re-financed thanks to the effort of Marlène Schiappa, a politician who has decided to jump on the anti-cult

bandwagon for her own reasons. Since July 2020, Schiappa serves as Minister Delegate in charge of Citizenship, attached to the Minister of the Interior, i.e., in the position dealing inter alia with “cults.”

As American scholar Stuart Wright [recently wrote](#), France has an “extraordinary government policy of religious intolerance” against new religious movements: “To say this approach was unique in international policy would be an understatement.” Fenech himself in the same interview called the MIVILUDES “a French exception.”

Yet, for 25 years MIVILUDES and its predecessors have tried to export the French model of the “war on cults” to other countries—normally without much success, but there are exceptions.

The MIVILUDES itself [explains on its website](#) that it is part of its mission to inform other countries, through a cooperation with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, of “its activities of monitoring and combating cultic deviances.” But it does more. It believes it should “promote at the European level [and beyond] an attitude of fighting cultic deviances.” The [yearly reports](#) of the MIVILUDES detail how MIVILUDES officers travel every year to different countries, participate in international meetings, attend and support anti-cult conferences to promote the “French model,” spread (negative) information about groups targeted as “cults” in France, and react to criticism of the French anti-cult politics by scholars, NGOs, and governments.

What result did these massive efforts achieve? Only rarely does MIVILUDES report about its contacts with Russia and China, two countries where the repression of religious minorities labeled as “cults,” including the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia and dozens of groups in China, is carried out through arbitrary detention, torture, and even extra-judicial killings. A cooperation exists, and the main Russian and Chinese anti-cult Web sites regularly advertise the MIVILUDES activities and translate some of its statements, including against the Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, the harsh repression of religious minorities in China and Russia is not a result of French efforts. It existed before the MIVILUDES and is a product of a fight against religious pluralism inherent in the nature of the local regimes. Yet, any support by democratic countries to practices of persecution and repression in Russia and China can only be qualified as shameful.

There was certainly considerable agitation to export the MIVILUDES to Australia, particularly [through former anti-cult Senator Nick Xenophon](#). He called for the establishment of an Australian MIVILUDES to “monitor and control the activities of cults in Australia.” Xenophon was also instrumental in [organizing](#) the meeting of Fenech, when he was president of the MIVILUDES, with a senior Australian prosecutor in Canberra. However, Xenophon’s efforts failed. He eventually left politics and decided to work [for defending Chinese company Huawei](#) against accusations that it may represent a security risk in Australia because of his ties with the Chinese Communist Party.

MIVILUDES [states](#) that France “is unique with Belgium and, to a lesser extent, Germany and Austria, in having adopted a system both legal and administrative of monitoring and combating cultic deviances.” In Germany and Austria, campaigns against “cults” were joined by governmental institutions, but their origins lie in the work of the anti-cult commissioners (*Sektenbeauftragten*) appointed by the Protestant and Catholic churches. Again, they existed before the MIVILUDES, and the logic is different from France, where the anti-cult campaigns are aimed at protecting the peculiar French notion of secularism (*laïcité*) rather than the dominant position of the majority churches. This does not

prevent MIVILUDES from supplying derogatory information on minority religions to German and Austrian institutions.

Belgium, particularly in its French-speaking part, has old and deep ties with France, and in 1998 it created the CIAOSN, Centre for information and advice on harmful cultic organizations. It is similar to MIVILUDES and its predecessors, although with less powers. CIAOSN does not intervene directly in "combating" "cults," but forwards its advice and recommendations to other branches of the government.

There is little doubt that CIAOSN is deeply influenced by the MIVILUDES, and [Fenech himself boasted](#) about the French institution's influence in Belgium. A case in point is the 2018 report published by CIAOSN about the Jehovah's Witnesses' reaction to cases of sexual abuse among their members. Apart from its [factual mistakes](#) on the specific issue of sexual abuse, the report opened with a general criticism of the Jehovah's Witnesses clearly inspired by MIVILUDES propaganda.

It would be, however, a mistake to assess the international role of MIVILUDES only by examining its direct contacts with foreign institutions. In fact, the MIVILUDES exerts a larger influence through its symbiotic relation with FECRIS, the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sects, which is an umbrella organization for anti-cult movements in Europe and beyond. The MIVILUDES's Web site calls FECRIS one of its two "associations-partners." The other is the Australian Cult Information and Family Support (CISF), which has ties with ex-Senator Xenophon. CISF, discussing Xenophon's criticism of Jehovah's Witnesses and others, once [reported approvingly](#) about a definition of the Jehovah's Witnesses as "a cruel religion with no soul."

In its [yearly report for 2008](#), which focused particularly on its international activities, the MIVILUDES detailed its close and continuous cooperation with FECRIS and FECRIS affiliates in different European countries, while criticizing CESNUR (the parent organization of *Bitter Winter*), the British INFORM, and centers cooperating with them in other countries for using the expression "new religious movements" rather than "cults" and for studying rather than "combating" them.

In countless events, MIVILUDES and FECRIS have introduced themselves as partners, with a division of labour where MIVILUDES helps FECRIS to receive French taxpayers' money, and spreads domestically and internationally derogatory material on "cults" prepared by FECRIS. This year, the MIVILUDES announced that it will finance projects against "cults" with the unprecedented sum of [one million euros](#). It is easy to predict that most of this money will go to FECRIS-affiliated organizations.

FECRIS [has been identified](#) by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) as a main international threat to religious liberty. It has recently been found guilty of spreading false and libelous information about the Jehovah's Witnesses by the District Court of Hamburg in Germany. This should have sounded familiar to the MIVILUDES and Fenech, as they have been involved in several similar cases in France. In 2019, Fenech had been found [guilty by the Justice Court of Caen](#), in a civil case, of having violated the presumption of innocence of the Church of Scientology in an interview where he took for granted that the Church was guilty of wrongdoings for which it was being investigated, but nobody had been incriminated.

In Caen, the judges said that Fenech spoke “as former president of the MIVILUDES,” trying to elicit the impression in his audience that, since he had represented the government in this field, what he said was presumably true—which was not the case.

The same dynamic is at work in the international activities of the MIVILUDES exporting its slander against the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other organizations. It tries to elicit the impression that since a government agency diffuses this information (largely coming from FECRIS and its affiliated organizations), then it should be true.

In 2020, USCIRF [asked the United States government](#) to “counter propaganda against new religious movements by the European Federation of Research and Information Centers on Sectarianism (FECRIS) at the annual OSCE Human Dimensions Conference with information about the ongoing involvement of individuals and entities within the anti-cult movement in the suppression of religious freedom.”

The activities by anti-cult entities aimed at suppressing religious freedom go beyond the OSCE. The MIVILUDES is both a governmental agency and an “entity within the anti-cult movement,” and due to its symbiotic relationship with FECRIS, it should also be targeted by a counterpropaganda denouncing its activities slandering religious movements and endangering religious freedom.

Photo : The revamping of MIVILUDES (May 20, 2021): Fenech and Schiappa. From Facebook.

Macron’s party pulls support from woman in Muslim headscarf

APNews (12.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3eEycPk> - France’s long-standing debate over the Muslim headscarf has landed in a local political race, giving it a national message, with a decision by President Emmanuel Macron’s centrist party to withdraw its backing for a candidate because she was pictured in a poster with her head covered.

“I’m frankly pained by the decision,” Mahfoud Benali, the lead candidate on the list for a district in the southern city of Montpellier, said Wednesday of the move by Macron’s party to refuse support for Sara Zemmahi, a quality engineer, from his list.

Zemmahi is shown in a campaign poster with a white headscarf before the June elections. She was on a work trip and not immediately available to comment, Benali said on a TV talk show on Channel 8.

While France bans Muslim headscarves in classrooms, they aren’t forbidden in the public space or on campaign posters.

However, Stanislas Guerini, head of Macron’s LREM party, told radio station RTL Tuesday that, nevertheless, the party wouldn’t back Zemmahi, one of four people in the poster.

“We consider that ostentatious religious signs don’t have their place on posters, whatever the religion,” Guerini said.

The poster for the June 20 and 27 local elections shows two men and two female candidates, including Zemmahi, under the sign "Different But United For You." On the bottom, it notes the candidates stand for the "presidential majority."

The decision, which drew criticism from some members of Macron's own party, underscored the divisiveness of France's long-standing debate on headscarves, and secularism, and how it may play out in politics before next year's presidential vote. Macron is expected to try to renew his mandate, and, if so, could find himself in a repeat of the 2017 race, facing off against far-right leader Marine Le Pen.

It was a tweet of the poster by the No.2 official in Le Pen's National Rally party, Jordan Bardella, that brought the issue into the public eye, along with his remark: "That's the fight against separatism," a reference to Macron's priority effort to rid France of political Islam and extremists.

In a later tweet, Bardella said the Muslim headscarf is "contrary to all our values" and his National Rally party "will forbid it in public." He was clearly making a reference to an eventual victory of Le Pen in next year's presidential race.

A French Inquisition: France's Crackdown on Muslim Life in the Name of Public Order

What are the real reasons the French government is monitoring Muslim charities, mosques, and imams?

By Kirsten Wesselhoeft

The Revealer (06.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3tGUCDN> - Over the past six months, the French government has gone on a multi-pronged offensive against Muslim collective life. State agencies unilaterally closed a number of mosques and Muslim charities. The government forced the French Collective Against Islamophobia (CCIF), the most prominent civil rights organization that combats anti-Muslim discrimination, to reincorporate outside of France, as they too were targeted for closure. Government officials developed sweeping new laws to regulate Muslim religious life, including a proposal to bar minors from wearing the headscarf. State actors have also been especially suspicious of links between French Muslims and decolonial thought and anti-racism organizing, calling for the investigation of critical race theory in academic contexts. These moves extend the surveillance of Muslim communities to include political organizing by communities of color more broadly.

In recent months, government agencies have placed the bank accounts of Muslim religious organizations, the schooling practices of Muslim families, and the research agendas of university faculty under more intense scrutiny. This surveillance, according to the French government, aims to identify a perceived Islamic "separatism" from French society that purportedly threatens "public order." Over the past five years, "public order" has become the most prominent watchword for justifying surveillance of Muslims, superseding the legal framework of secularism, or *laïcité*. Anglophone observers often understand the special nature of French secularism as the philosophical reason underlying anti-Muslim policies. But French elected officials increasingly admit that secularism is inadequate to justify the measures they would like to take against the visibility of Islam in France. For example, the 2016 Jouanno Report argued for a new "expansive understanding of public order" to go beyond secularism as a justification for bans on Muslim women's modest dress. The pretense of a uniquely French secularism

that justifies specific attitudes towards religion, long threadbare, is now coming apart at the seams.

The centrist government of President Emmanuel Macron has taken the lead on the current wave of policies, anticipating a showdown with the far right in the 2022 presidential elections. The right has critiqued Macron's policies as toothless, while the left has called them ineffectual. However, these critiques have not called into question the basic premise of the administration's crackdown.

French officials have justified their policing of Muslim religious life as a response to recent acts of violence. But the true anxiety at the heart of the anti-Muslim witch hunt is not about fringe violent actors. Instead, it is about Muslim "integration" into French society — the fact that more and more descendants of immigrants are breaking glass ceilings in every domain of professional and cultural life, from elite French universities to journalism to law, while still claiming their Muslim identities and practices. Further, they are drawing on French norms and traditions to critique discrimination and colonial relationships of power. As sociologist [Hichem Benaïssa put it](#), "Islam has progressively become a problem to the extent that it has become French." It is precisely the increasing "integration" of Muslim immigrants and their descendants in France, and the way they claim republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity on their own terms, that has provoked widespread concern from French elected officials and their supporters.

The recent wave of state action against "separatism" was prompted by a murder that horrified France. In October 2020, schoolteacher Samuel Paty was decapitated by Abdoullah Anzorov, an 18-year-old Russian who had come to France at the age of 6 as a refugee. Anzorov's violence came in response to Paty's decision to show caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in a class on freedom of speech, recalling the violent attacks in 2015 at the offices of satirical newsweekly *Charlie Hebdo*, which had initially published the caricatures. Anzorov's trajectory reveals an increasingly isolated individual. He sought online connections with fighters in Syria, but was not part of any network or organization. His family and peers reported that he had become reclusive in the months leading up to the murder. When an online campaign was started against Paty by a student's father, who [incorrectly believed](#) that Paty had asked Muslim students to leave class while he showed the caricatures, Anzorov latched onto the incident.

In stark contrast to the isolation of Anzorov and other violent actors, the government's measures have deliberately targeted spaces of Muslim collective life as well as Muslim ideals of community and solidarity. [As the government itself admitted](#), there is no relationship between the circumstances of the perpetrators of violence and the settings, people, or ideas that have become targets of state sanction. [In the words of Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin](#), the targeted communities and organizations were not necessarily linked with any act of violence, but were those "to whom we wanted to send a message." Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer [spoke of](#) so-called "Islamofascists" as "intellectually complicit" in Paty's murder, arguing that scholars and activists should be targets of state intervention alongside perpetrators of violence.

At the same time, the state has insisted that any expressions of anti-Muslim racism, discrimination, or violence are exclusively the work of individuals, and therefore no one should interpret these acts collectively in terms of structural racism or "state racism." To do so, they suggest in the new ["Charter of Principles for French Imams,"](#) would be, "like all victimizing postures," an act of "defamation against France" — that is, a punishable crime. Racists can only be lone actors, and therefore anti-racist organizing and critical race theory is framed as a "victimizing posture," creating divisions and threatening the very foundations of the Republic.

The perceived threat of fraternité

As with every other episode in France's long history of constructing and managing racial and religious difference, the current measures are animated by a paranoia over "communalist" identity politics and "separatism" from the national body. Most often associated with ethnic enclaves or identity politics, "communalism" and "separatism" increasingly apply to all ethnically and religiously specific organizations, and to patterns of socialization within ethnic and religious groups. However, these terms never apply to the exclusive enclaves of the white or wealthy. This is in spite of the fact that [research by demographer Patrick Simon has shown](#) that on the whole, immigrants and their descendants are considerably *more* likely than the white French population to have close relationships with people of other races and ethnicities — it is the white French who are most likely to socialize exclusively with members of their own race. Communalism and separatism are terms of moral panic that serve to stigmatize and criminalize any space of gathering or shared consciousness among France's non-white populations, Muslims in particular.

The idea of "communalism" presupposes a coherent "Muslim community" in France that competes with the national community for loyalty. As sociologists Marwan Mohamed and Julien Talpin put it, "Elected officials and state institutions bring 'communities' into existence in order to better control them." Politicians constantly invoke the idea of a coherent "Muslim community" as a social problem in order to justify policies that aim to repress solidarity among Muslims and other communities of color.

The state does not, of course, have a monopoly on the idea of Muslim community. Many Muslims seek to build robust communities on their own terms. These collectives, including charities and consciousness-raising organizations as well as mosques, draw on the moral inheritance of fraternity and solidarity that is prominent in both republican and Islamic ethical traditions. The state perceives them as a threat precisely because they offer dynamic and visible alternatives to the state's construction of "the Muslim community" as a homogenous and closed separatist movement. Community organizations like [Lallab](#) and Front de Mères highlight the intersection of gendered Islamophobia with other forms of discrimination, and they lead grassroots resistance efforts against the surveillance of Muslim, Arab, and Black people in France.

The civil society organizations that have been shut down over the past six months consistently articulated their work in terms of republican values: liberty, equality, and fraternity. For example, the French Collective Against Islamophobia (CCIF) gave free legal support to Muslims who were victims of violence and discrimination, defending civil liberties and equality before the law. The charity BarakaCity expressed the French value of fraternity through service to unhoused populations, refugees, and people in poverty around the world. Both were broad, multi-ethnic organizations that served populations in need regardless of their religious affiliation. The state perceived these organizations as threats to "republican principles" even though the organizations were motivated by these very principles. It was their success and their grassroots legitimacy, rather than any particular feature of their activities, that put CCIF and BarakaCity at the top of the list of places to which the state wanted to "send a message." While the CCIF is working to reestablish itself in Europe, its operations in France are severely curtailed.

[On February 16](#), 2021, the National Assembly passed a law "against separatism and for Republican principles," currently being amended by the Senate. The law is the centerpiece of the state's response to the murder of Samuel Paty. This impending law, widely known as the "separatism law," targets Muslims in the name of rooting out "withdrawal into one's community." The "separatism law" tightens the web of penalization around mosques, Islamic schools, charities, and community centers that are made up of or serve largely Muslim populations — the very institutions that enact the values of fraternity and solidarity on the local level.

The most publicized provisions of the law include those regulating homeschooling, banning “virginity tests,” and the amendment added by the Senate that would disallow minors from wearing the headscarf, although this particular measure is unlikely to pass the National Assembly. These provisions invoke longstanding fears about Muslim families that animate the law, implying that children in “separatist” Muslim contexts are miseducated at home, that Muslim parents overly police young girls’ sexuality, and that Muslim girls are forced to wear the headscarf against their will.

The more technical provisions of the law have received less media attention, and yet this is where the law may have its greatest impact, revising the laws of 1901 and 1905 that regulate cultural and religious associations, under the heading of [“Reinforcing the preservation of public order.”](#) These associations will be required to submit to a government review of their bank accounts, and must declare all donations from non-French individuals or organizations for government approval. Religious and cultural organizations can be closed, temporarily or permanently, if they are deemed to host “discourse, ideas, theories, or activities that provoke hate or violence, or justify or encourage hate or violence.” The bill does not name the breadth of what might fall under “ideas or theories that provoke, justify, or encourage hate.” People who gather together in spite of of such closures face a 7500 euro fine and 6 months in prison.

A “pact” for “public order”

On January 18, 2021, the French Council for the Muslim Religion (CFCM) presented a “Charter of Principles for French Islam” to President Macron. This charter, solicited by the state, is intended by Macron to be the foundational document for the planned National Council of Imams, a state-run certification body for religious professionals. The CFCM is itself the product of an earlier wave of efforts at state management of Muslim populations. Founded by then-Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy in 2003, the CFCM is the outcome of the French government’s desire to have an “official” Muslim interlocutor as a means of regulating religious practices and defining an authorized “French Islam.” This project [dates back at least to the 1980s](#), and continues the [colonial management of North African populations](#) through religion. The CFCM has little to no legitimacy among the majority of Muslims in France, whatever their relationship to religion. Most see it as an organ of the state, a bureaucratic arm for France’s “Muslim policies.”

The “Charter of Principles for French Islam” is [organized through a fundamental division](#) between the “national community” and the “Muslims of France.” [It claims that](#) “from a religious and ethical point of view, Muslims, whether citizens or foreign residents, are linked to France by a pact. This pact obliges them to respect national cohesion, public order, and the laws of the Republic.” The “pact” entails specific obligations on Muslims, and on Muslim clergy in particular, who are called to enter into this relationship with the state precisely “from a religious point of view,” [in flagrant violation of the principle of secularism](#). The charter binds its signatories to “commit not to use, nor to allow others to use, Islam or the concept of *umma* (community of believers) with a political lens, whether local, national, or in the interests of a political agenda dictated by a foreign power.”

Both the charter of principles itself and its language of a “pact” to “respect national cohesion and public order” echo the famous Clerical Oath of Revolutionary France. [In 1790](#), the government decreed that all members of the Catholic clergy swear a public loyalty oath to the Republic, establishing the primacy of their allegiance to the state before their religious convictions. This idea of a hierarchy of commitments, with one’s role as citizen always paramount, has been a hallmark of the French approach to religion since the Revolutionary era — long before the elaboration of state secularism at the dawn of the twentieth century. It has also been a persistent theme in France’s management of Islam and Muslims. The Charter of Principles for French Islam, as a prelude to Macron’s

planned “Council of Imams,” is a clerical oath for the 21st century, demanding that religious officials *as religious officials* publicly avow their loyalty to public order, which their vocation is presumed to threaten. In response, a few prominent French imams are [stepping down from their positions](#) in protest.

From “Islamofascism” to “Islamofleftism”

Some French intellectuals, though [not all](#), have challenged the government’s anti-Muslim measures. A range of academics and journalists, with and without personal ties to Islam and immigration, have drawn on the long tradition of francophone decolonial critique and anti-racist thought to historicize what [Jean Beaman has called](#) the “racial project of France.” Those on the left with the temerity to argue that [anti-Muslim discrimination](#) is a violation of the egalitarian principles of the Republic, or that France’s [violent colonial past](#) shapes its present, or that the nationalist [myth of a colorblind society](#) is just that — a myth — have found themselves targeted with a new epithet: “Islamofleftists.”

French Minister of Higher Education Dominique Vidal recently elicited a furor when she called for an investigation into so-called “radical or activist Islamofleftist ideas,” which she described as a “gangrene on society,” in order to “distinguish proper academic research from activism and opinion.” The response from France’s academic community was swift and overwhelmingly negative: the National Center for Scientific Research [issued a statement](#) flatly declaring that “Islamofleftism does not correspond to any social-scientific reality,” and over 600 university faculty [called for Vidal’s resignation](#).

And yet, Vidal is far from alone in advancing this rhetoric. President Macron asserted that “the academic world has been guilty. It has encouraged the ethnicization of social issues,” citing intersectionality in particular as a theory that threatened to “divide the Republic in two.” [The U.S. has become emblematic](#) in French political discourse of the flourishing of identity politics, anti-racism, and decolonial thought, all understood as posing a fundamental threat to the universalist republican model. This invocation of the trans-Atlantic threat links foreign ideas with foreign bodies, in a mirror image of [American political anxieties](#) over the cultural threat posed by “French theory.”

Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer warned: “There’s a battle to be waged against an intellectual framework coming from American universities, intersectional theses that want to essentialize communities and identities . . . It is the breeding ground for a fragmentation of societies that converges with the Islamic model.” Elected officials feel particularly threatened by forms of social analysis that center any form of identity other than citizenship.

The French paranoia about Islam is in continuity with the long history of European and American anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim sentiment. As historian Muriem Haleh Davis [has observed](#), “Islamofleftist” is eerily reminiscent of “Judeo-Bolshevism,” invoking earlier antisemitic ideas about a global leftist Jewish conspiracy. In this case, the foreign ties of Islamofleftism are not to Russia, as they were with “Judeo-Bolshevism,” but to the United States. The government’s insistence on statements of loyalty to national cohesion, obsession with forms of collectivism that stand outside the nation, and claims that some groups possess an immutable genealogical inheritability of difference, all resonate with the racializing ideology of antisemitism. In [Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition](#), David Nirenberg notes the operation of “judaizing” — the ascription of Jewishness to all sorts of unrelated and even opposing things and people — as part of a conspiracy theory that waxes and wanes throughout Western modernity, and certainly in France. A parallel “Islamizing” logic underpins the rhetoric of “Islamofleftism.” This rhetoric simultaneously construes Muslims as part of a left-wing conspiracy for cultural power, on the one hand, and attempts to taint leftist critique with the taboo of Muslimness, on the other.

In the face of this rampant stigmatization and surveillance, Muslim and decolonial activists are responding forcefully, with Muslim women at the forefront. The authoritarian measures being taken by the current administration have dire consequences for French communities of color. They betray the very republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity that they claim to defend, and they expose how political claims of universalism so often depend on the rejection of ideals and practices of community and collective belonging. The question that remains is whether a broad enough coalition will join those who are resisting the surveillance of Muslims to shift the direction of policy and public discourse in France.

French minister: Muslims are the main victims of radical Islam

By Lila Schoepf

Arab News (04.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3tOOVUA> - The first victims of radical Islam around the world are Muslims and this radical movement is an insult to French citizens of Muslim faith who observe their religion peacefully, according to Marlene Schiappa, French minister delegate in charge of citizenship.

Speaking to Arab News, she said: "Our objective will be to fight radical Islam by providing the locally elected with concrete tools to better control foreign funding and grants to associations, and thus counter hotbeds of separatism . . . we also need to prevent young people from enrolling into radical groups via social media, and falling prey to the Daesh propaganda."

On April 11, the walls of the Avicenna Islamic Cultural Center in Rennes were covered with offensive tags against Muslims. Asked for her reaction to such Islamophobic acts committed in France, she said: "As the interior minister said, this is an insult to the country. In France, in 2021, we cannot condone the act of offending millions of innocent citizens who have no problems with the country as such. This is not my vision of France. I strongly condemn these acts, and I was very shocked by these outrageous tags."

Talking about her visit to the Grand Mosque in Paris on April 12, she said: "I went to the mosque to meet the rector, Mr. Shems-Eddine Hafiz, on the eve of Ramadan. It was important for me to send a message of peace and solidarity to the French Muslim population, especially after the vile anti-Muslim tags that were inscribed on the site of a cultural center in Rennes."

She added: "I had the pleasure of meeting dedicated women who are working to fight domestic, gender-based and sexual violence, and are helping their fellow citizens during these challenging times. This is a tough period for everybody."

Explaining her position on the veil, she said: "I want to mention that a lot of incorrect things are already being said: No, the veil will not be banned in public spaces. It is false to say that the government is taking such a position, which only a few senators are in favor of. I am also aware of what's going around about this issue, especially on social media," she said.

"I am not in favor of banning the veil in the context of school trips, since I grew up in a city where most mothers wore the veil during these outings. If we prohibit the veil, we are effectively excluding a certain number of students' mothers who are part of this country. This is not my goal. The notion of secularism applies to the state and to public

services, but not to society per se, which is why secularism is a notion of neutrality intended for public services, and is a citizen's choice."

Asked about her assessment regarding the fight against radical Islam in France and the areas in which the government still has to work on, Schiappa said: "We have been working on the ground for three years, thanks to the action of the Cells for the Fight against Radical Islam and Community Withdrawal (CLIR). Since 2018, we have closed 559 institutions, and more than 22,000 inspections have been carried out throughout the territories as part of the CLIR. "

She added: "Not one euro of public money, or of the French people's money will go to the enemies of the republic. We must equip ourselves with tools on the ground to provide assistance specifically to the locally elected."

The "draft legislation against separatism," it is alleged, tends to scare the Muslim population living in France. Asked what she has to say to those who have reservations about this bill, she said: "We are working on this bill with Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin with the aim of ensuring peace for Muslims, for all the French population."

Asked how she views the progress of the female cause in the Arab world, she said: "I see the progress going in the right direction, equality between men and women being a fundamental value — moreover, protected in the charter of principles of Islam in France. We must carry on."

On the integration of French people of Arab descent into French society, she said: "It is reassuring to observe that the majority of young people feel well integrated into French society. This is what a republic should be. We must fight racism and prejudices, conveyed in particular by the extreme right movement in France, and we should always keep in mind that the republic stands for equality, freedom and fraternity for all citizens. Secularism is the freedom to choose to believe or not to believe, without having to be worried about it, and therefore it is what protects us."

Giving her Ramadan message to French Muslims, Schiappa said: "I would like to wish them a happy Ramadan. I also would like to convey the message that we are looking after them, the same way we do with all citizens living on French soil."

The persecution of Christians who were Muslims

ECLJ (30.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3uGTktU> - After several weeks of investigation, the ECLJ released [a report](#) and [a reportage](#) on the persecution suffered by people from a Muslim background in France following a conversion to Christianity.

This investigation highlights the fact that an overwhelming majority of people leaving Islam to join Christianity undergo family and community persecutions. Whether the convert be male or female, young or old, single or married, the infringement of religious freedom is evident in all cases. These Christians are prevented from living their faith freely, they have to live in secrecy and in fear, often leading a double life.

Conversion, implying apostasy from Islam, is systematically perceived by the whole Muslim community as a form of treason, justifying reprisals. This persecution of converts takes various forms and graduated intensities. These forms of persecution, listed by the ECLJ in [its report](#), were determined following

interviews with converts and association leaders. The most common forms of persecution are contempt, verbal or physical aggression, threats, and even harassment and rejection by the community to urge them to return to Islam.

This persecution is more important for women and girls, because of the dishonour and opprobrium they would inflict to their families. In fact, none of them wished to appear with their face and real name in our [video report](#), for fear of this "social death" or of a violent reaction from their family and their community. Although living in France, a significant proportion of the converted women are threatened with being forcibly married, sent to their parents' country of origin or sequestered as long as they do not return to Islam. In infrequent but increasingly rare cases, converts are lynched or even killed by Islamists. Faced with the threats that are very present in the Islamized suburbs and on social networks, moving or running away is often the only solution for the convert to escape the violence.

The leaders of French associations involved with ex-Muslims unfortunately note that most state and Christian authorities do not assume their responsibilities to help and welcome converts.

At present, France does not effectively guarantee the fundamental freedom to choose one's religion. According to the ECLJ, the proposed law against separatism is an opportunity to better guarantee religious freedom by strengthening the penalties for those who seek to obstruct a conversion. The Charter of Principles for Islam in France in its article 3, paragraph 2 condemns such actions. It is therefore high time to act to make the persecution of these ex-Muslim converts known, to improve their integration and to really fight against "communitarianism" and the development of Islamism.

The ECLJ, in connection with other associations, have created a **helpline ESPERE** (Listening and Support against Political-Religious Pressures): 06.17.94.23.22.

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Des fonds supplémentaires pour la MIVILUDES: la "police des esprits" est de retour

La mission gouvernementale de lutte antisectes que son ancien membre, le sociologue Olivier Bobineau, a qualifiée de « police des esprits » va recevoir un budget annuel d'un million d'euros.

De Patricia Duval

Le 9 avril 2021, la ministre déléguée auprès du ministre de l'Intérieur pour la citoyenneté, Marlène Schiappa, a été interviewée sur France Info. Elle a annoncé un retour en force de la MIVILUDES, la Mission interministérielle de lutte contre les dérives sectaires qui dépend maintenant du ministère de l'intérieur.

Après une disparition progressive de la Mission au cours de ces dernières années, en particulier depuis 2015 quand la priorité a été donnée à la lutte contre le terrorisme islamiste, Mme Schiappa a maintenant décidé de multiplier son budget par dix pour atteindre un montant annuel d'un million d'euros.

Cette annonce fait suite à la publication d'un rapport par la MIVILUDES en février 2021 et l'adoption d'une nouvelle Circulaire sur la lutte contre les dérives sectaires en mars dernier.

Le rapport de la MIVILUDES de février 2021

Le rapport contient principalement des généralités sur les dérives sectaires, la Mission ayant volontairement choisi de ne pas citer de noms d'individus ou de groupes soit en raison de procédures judiciaires en cours, soit pour éviter d'être accusée de stigmatisation.

Néanmoins, un état des lieux des « nouvelles tendances des dérives sectaires » est joint au rapport. Bien que celui-ci mentionne que 25% seulement des signalements en 2019 sont en lien avec des croyances religieuses, l'état des lieux contient un chapitre sur les « Mouvements religieux », dans lequel les Témoins de Jéhovah sont accusés d'avoir « profité de la crise sanitaire liée au Covid-19 pour faire du prosélytisme abusif auprès de la population, par courriers et courriels. »

Il mentionne également de nouvelles Eglises dites « évangélistes » qui « prônent des valeurs contraires à celles portées par la République française, comme la diabolisation de l'homosexualité ».

Une nouvelle circulaire pour renforcer la répression sur la base de dénonciations

Le 2 mars 2021, la ministre déléguée, Marlène Schiappa, a adopté une nouvelle circulaire adressée à tous les cadres de la police et de la gendarmerie concernant la « politique de lutte contre les dérives sectaires ».

Elle y donne des instructions concernant la détection des "situations à risques", sur la base des signalements reçus de « personnes en lien avec des personnes sous l'emprise des structures sectaires ou en voie de l'être qui peuvent s'inquiéter et transmettre leurs interrogations : famille, voisins, amis, enseignants ou collègues, professionnels de santé, personnels animant une action sociale, culturelle, sportive ou de loisir, etc. »

Le but de « signaler » quelqu'un est, selon la ministre, de « permettre, si besoin, sa protection et celle de la société ». Elle énonce que « Les règles du secret professionnel ne sont pas forcément incompatibles avec le signalement d'une situation problème identifiée. »

La ministre semble donc considérer que les professionnels peuvent s'affranchir du secret professionnel et procéder à des dénonciations, bien que sa violation soit passible de sanctions pénales.

Selon elle, cette politique basée sur les dénonciations s'inscrit dans la « lutte contre

toutes les formes de séparatisme ».

Les dérives sectaires sont donc considérées comme aussi dangereuses que les autres formes de séparatisme, comme l'extrémisme islamiste, que le projet de loi actuellement en cours d'examen au Parlement est destiné à combattre.

C'est la raison pour laquelle elle recommande l'application de l'article 212-1 du Code de la sécurité intérieure qui prévoit la dissolution par l'Exécutif des groupes de combat et milices privées.

Cet article a été amendé dans le nouveau projet de loi pour permettre la dissolution de groupes qui incitent à la haine ou la discrimination envers des personnes à raison de leur sexe ou orientation sexuelle. Comme les nouvelles Eglises évangéliques sont accusées d'homophobie par la MIVILUDES, il semblerait que l'application de cet article puisse être envisagée à leur encontre.

Pour une augmentation des poursuites

La Circulaire donne aussi instruction de transmettre systématiquement au Parquet les signalements de « premiers soupçons de pratiques déviantes ».

Elle recommande d'utiliser les fichiers de la MIVILUDES (constitués de dénonciations et d'articles de presse accusateurs) pour « enrichir les rapports transmis aux autorités judiciaires ».

Non seulement cette ingérence de l'Exécutif (MIVILUDES) dans le pouvoir Judiciaire porte atteinte aux droits fondamentaux, crée un déséquilibre entre l'accusation et la défense et porte atteinte au principe de la présomption d'innocence, mais l'instruction de poursuivre les « premiers soupçons » de « pratiques déviantes » pose un sérieux problème, au vu de l'imprécision et de l'arbitraire induit par cette notion.

Une dérive sectaire est définie dans la circulaire comme une activité visant à « porter atteinte à la liberté de pensée, d'opinion ou de religion, qui transgresse l'ordre public, les lois et règlements, les droits fondamentaux, la sécurité ou l'intégrité de la personne ». Ceci constitue en un mot une « emprise ».

Une dérive sectaire se caractérise, selon la MIVILUDES, par la mise en œuvre par un groupe organisé ou un individu isolé, quelle que soit leur nature ou leur activité, de « pressions ou de techniques visant à créer, maintenir ou exploiter un état de sujétion psychologique ou physique en privant les individus d'une partie de leur libre arbitre, avec des conséquences préjudiciables pour eux, leurs proches ou la société ».

Selon cette définition, toute communauté religieuse supposée avoir des croyances "déviantes" peut être accusée d'exercer une emprise et de créer un état de sujétion psychologique. Les nouveaux adeptes sont alors réputés avoir perdu leur libre arbitre quand ils adhèrent à de telles croyances.

La notion de perte du libre arbitre appliquée à des adultes en pleine possession de leurs facultés mentales qui ont choisi des croyances « non politiquement correctes » contredit les fondements mêmes de notre droit civil. Elle équivaut à une invalidation d'un choix librement consenti en matière religieuse ou spirituelle.

Le fait de considérer que les adeptes ont perdu leur libre arbitre conduit également à pouvoir poursuivre les activités de prosélytisme. A cet effet, l'Annexe 2 de la Circulaire liste les critères pouvant justifier un signalement au Parquet, parmi lesquels on trouve : « le prosélytisme: méthode de recrutement des adeptes, temps consacré, ciblage particulier, entrisme; site internet ».

Le prosélytisme des Témoins de Jéhovah peut alors être qualifié d' « abusif » par la MIVILUDES puisqu'elle considère qu'il constitue de l' « entrisme » et une « pratique déviante ».

Cette approche constitue une atteinte manifeste à la liberté de religion ou de conviction protégée par les traités relatifs aux droits de l'homme que la France s'est engagée à respecter.

Dans son arrêt *Kokkinakis c. Grèce*,¹ la Cour européenne des droits de l'homme n'a trouvé aucune violation lorsque les Témoins de Jéhovah ont sollicité leur voisine pour discuter de questions religieuses avec elle car cet acte, selon la Cour, relevait du « témoignage chrétien » et était donc protégé par l'Article 9 de la Convention européenne des droits de l'homme.

La police des esprits

La MIVILUDES semble vouloir jouer le rôle de police des esprits, en s'arrogeant le pouvoir de distinguer les croyances et pratiques « déviantes » des « non déviantes ».

Olivier Bobineau est sociologue des religions et maître de conférences à l'Institut Catholique et à l'Institut de sciences politiques (Sciences-Po) de Paris. Il a démissionné en 2005 de son poste de conseiller scientifique à la MIVILUDES et a été de janvier 2006 à janvier 2011 collaborateur scientifique du chef du Bureau central des cultes au Ministère de l'intérieur.

Fort de son expérience à la MIVILUDES, M. Bobineau pense que « La MIVILUDES joue le rôle d'une police administrative des esprits, qui recherche des boucs émissaires et stigmatise des groupuscules. » Lors d'une interview donnée le 8 juin 2009, il en a donné l'explication suivante² :

Journaliste : Il y a donc, selon vous, une stigmatisation de certains groupes ou mouvements ?

O. Bobineau : Oui, qui s'inscrit dans la tradition française d'une suspicion du spirituel, de l'opposition entre la liberté de pensée, politique et philosophique, et de la liberté de conscience, spirituelle.

Cette dernière est suspecte parce qu'elle a généré des passions religieuses dont la France ne s'est toujours pas bien remise : affrontements extrêmement violents entre catholiques et protestants, opposition entre l'Eglise et l'Etat républicain à la fin du XIXe siècle et au début du XXe...

Depuis, la liberté de conscience est suspecte, jugée irrationnelle. Au nom de la liberté de pensée, on veut la contrôler. La MIVILUDES joue le rôle d'une police administrative des esprits, qui recherche des boucs émissaires et stigmatise des groupuscules.

¹ *Kokkinakis c. Grèce*, Cour européenne des droits de l'homme, série A. No. 260-A, arrêt du 25 mai 1995.

² Voir <https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-nos-vies-connectees/20090608.RUE0793/lutte-contre-les-sectes-la-miviludes-police-des-esprits.html>.

La MIVILUDES est donc le bras armé de l'Etat pour décider ce qui est déviant ou ce qui ne l'est pas, et assigner l'étiquette « sectaire ». Mais en quoi l'éthique des Eglises qui prônent le mariage traditionnel entre un homme et une femme serait-elle plus « déviante » que les paroles de la ministre Marlène Schiappa, quand elle déclare au sujet de l'interdiction de la polygamie que les [« plans à trois »](#) pourront toujours être pratiqués ?

Le dogmatisme imposé par la MIVILUDES constitue en réalité une violation de la liberté de conscience et de croyance.

La renaissance de la MIVILUDES représente un sérieux retour en arrière.

Et la réintégration de Georges Fenech, ancien juge d'instruction et président de la MIVILUDES, qui était connu pour ses descentes coup de poing avec des journalistes dans de petites communautés religieuses inoffensives, en dehors de tout mandat ou procédure judiciaire, n'est pas un bon signal pour les libertés fondamentales dans un pays qui prétend pourtant être le chantre des droits de l'homme.

Photo : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zAXPHu5Eh4&t=11s>

More money to MIVILUDES: The French "mind police" is back

The governmental anti-cult mission that his former member, sociologist Olivier Bobineau, denounced as a "police des esprits" will receive € 1 million per year.

By Patricia Duval

Bitter Winter (19.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3sxIpAE> - On April 9, 2021, the French Minister Delegate for Citizenship at the Ministry of Interior, Marlène Schiappa, [was interviewed by France Info](#). She announced that MIVILUDES, the Inter-ministerial mission for monitoring and combating cultic deviances (dérives sectaires), which is now part of the Ministry of the Interior, will experience a revival of sort.

After MIVILUDES' gradual disappearance during the last few years, especially since 2015, when priority was given to combating Islamist terrorism, Schiappa has now decided to multiply its present budget by ten, to reach euro 1 million per year.

This announcement [followed the publication](#) of a report by MIVILUDES in February 2021, and the issuance of new Circular on the French anti-cult policy in March.

Table of Contents

- [MIVILUDES' Report of February 2021](#)
- [A new Circular to increase repression based on denunciations](#)
- [Seeking more prosecutions](#)
- [The mind police](#)

MIVILUDES' Report of February 2021

[The report](#) contains mainly generalities on the fight against cultic deviances, as the Mission did not want to cite specific names or groups, either due to pending judiciary procedures or to avoid being accused of stigmatization.

However, [an inventory](#) of the "new trends of cultic deviances" was attached to the report. Although the report mentions that only 25% of the complaints it received in 2019 were connected with religious beliefs, the inventory contains a section on "Religious Movements," where the Jehovah's Witnesses are accused of having taken advantage of the health crisis linked to Covid-19 to carry out "abusive proselytism" amongst the French population, through mails and emails.

It also mentions that new Evangelical Churches allegedly advocate "values contrary to those of the French Republic," including the demonization of homosexuality.

A new Circular to increase repression based on denunciations

On March 2, 2021, Schiappa, issued a new Circular to all police high officers on the French "policy to combat cultic deviance."

It gives instruction for the detection of "high risk situations," based on reports received from "persons linked to those subjected to the undue influence of cultic groups, or in the process of being subjected to it, who might be worried and report their concerns: family, neighbors, friends, teachers or colleagues, health professionals, social, cultural, sport or leisure workers, etc."

The purpose of "reporting" on someone is, according to the Minister, to "allow if needed for his/her protection and that of society." Schiappa states that "the rules of professional secrecy are not systematically incompatible with reporting a situation identified as problematic."

Apparently, the Minister believes that professionals should be exempted from the rules of professional secrecy and file these reports, although violation of professional secrecy is a criminal offense in France.

According to her, this policy based on denunciations is part of the "fight against all forms of separatism."

Cultic deviances are then considered as dangerous as the other forms of separatism, including "Islamist" extremism, that [the new law currently being voted by the Parliament](#) is intended to counter.

This is why she recommends applying against “cults” Article 212-1 of the Internal Security Code, which allows for the dissolution of armed groups and militias by the Executive.

This Article has been amended in the new Law proposal to allow for dissolution of groups inciting hatred or discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation. As the Evangelicals are accused of homophobia by MIVILUDES, this article may become applicable to them.

Seeking more prosecutions

The Circular also gives instructions to systematically refer to the Prosecutors reported cases of “mere suspicion of deviant practices.”

It recommends using MIVILUDES’ files (consisting of denunciations and derogatory press articles) to “enrich the reports sent to the judicial authorities.”

Not only does this interference of the Executive (MIVILUDES) on the Judiciary infringe fundamental rights, creates an imbalance between the prosecution and the defense, and violates the principle of presumption of innocence, but the instruction to prosecute “mere suspicions” of “cultic deviances” raises a serious problem, due to the vagueness and the arbitrary nature of this notion.

A “cultic deviance” is defined in the Circular as an action which may “undermine one’s freedom of thought, opinion, or religion, infringing on public order, laws and regulations, fundamental rights, or the security or integrity of the individual.” All this constitutes “undue influence.”

A “cultic deviance,” according to the MIVILUDES, is characterized by the implementation by an organized group or a single individual, whatever their nature or activity, of “pressures or techniques designed at creating, maintaining or exploiting a state of psychological or physical subjection, by depriving the individuals of part of their free will, with prejudicial consequences for them, their relatives, or society.”

Under this definition, any religious minority deemed to have “deviant” beliefs can be accused of undue influence, and of creating a state of psychological subjection. New followers can be deemed to have lost their free will when they adhere to these beliefs.

The notion of the loss of free will for adults with full mental capacity who have chosen beliefs that are “not politically correct” contradicts the basic fundamentals of civil law. It amounts to an invalidation of a choice freely made on religious or spiritual matters.

Considering that followers have lost their own free will also open the door to the criminalization of proselytism. To this end, Annex 2 to the Circular gives a list of criteria for reporting to the Prosecutor, amongst which is “Proselytism: the method of recruitment of followers, the time invested, the specific targeting, infiltration, the use of a website.”

Proselytism by the Jehovah’s Witnesses can then be labeled as “abusive” by MIVILUDES since they consider that it constitutes “infiltration” (entrisme) and a “deviant practice.”

This approach constitutes a blatant violation of freedom of religion or belief protected by the Human Rights treaties France has committed to.

In its 1995 decision *Kokkinakis v. Greece*, the European Court of Human Rights did not find any violation when some Greek Jehovah's Witnesses called on their neighbor to discuss religious issues with her since that act, in the Court's view, fell under "bearing Christian witness," and was therefore protected by article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The mind police

MIVILUDES appears to play the role of a mind police, through its power to distinguish between "deviant" or "non-deviant" beliefs and practices.

Olivier Bobineau is a sociologist of religion and lecturer at the Catholic Institute of Paris and the Institute of Political Sciences (Sciences-Po). He resigned in 2005 from his position as scientific advisor at MIVILUDES and has been from January 2006 to January 2011 a scientific associate of the Director of the Central Office for Religious Affairs (Bureau Central des Cultes) at the Ministry of Interior.

Based on his experience at MIVILUDES, Bobineau is of the opinion that "MIVILUDES plays the role of an administrative mind police, which searches for scapegoats and stigmatizes certain groups." In [an interview he gave](#) on 8 June 2009, he gave the following explanation:

"Reporter: Is there, according to you, a stigmatization of certain groups or movements?

O. Bobineau: Yes, it belongs to the French tradition of suspicion of the spiritual, of opposition of freedom of thought, political and philosophical, and freedom of conscience, spiritual. This latter is suspect as it has generated religious passions from which France has still not yet recovered: extremely violent confrontations between Catholics and Protestants, opposition between the Church and the Republican State at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century... Since then, freedom of conscience is suspect, deemed irrational. In the name of freedom of thought, people want to control it. MIVILUDES plays the role of an administrative mind police, which looks for scapegoats and stigmatizes small groups."

MIVILUDES is the State arm for deciding what is deviant or not, and assigning the "cultic" label. But why would the ethos of churches advocating traditional marriage between a man and a woman be more deviant than the words of Minister Marlène Schiappa, when she stated to the public, referring to the prohibition of polygamy, that ["three-partner sex" could still be practiced?](#)

The enforced dogmatism of MIVILUDES constitutes an actual violation of the freedom of conscience and belief.

The revival of MIVILUDES represents a serious step backwards.

And the reintegration of Georges Fenech, former investigating judge and MIVILUDES President, who was known for his brutal raids with journalists into small harmless

religious communities, out of any judicial mandate or procedure, is not a good signal for fundamental liberties in a country boasting to be the land of human rights.

Photo : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zAXPHu5Eh4&t=11s>

French row over mosque isn't simply about state financing – it runs deep into Islamophobia and French secularism

The Conversation (15.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3dun3jF> - Among the [anti-Muslim slogans](#) discovered sprayed across an Islamic community center in western France on the morning of April 11, 2021, was a reference to a mosque that hasn't even finished being built yet.

"EELV = Traitors" [read the graffitied message](#), alongside others including "No to Islamization" and references to the Crusades. It was spray painted on an Islamic center in Rennes, but its target was Strasbourg's leading Green (EELV) party, members of whom [voted on March 22](#) to subsidize the construction of the Eyyub Sultan mosque – also known as the Grand Mosque of Strasbourg – with a grant of 2.5 million euros (US\$3 million), or 10% of the total costs.

Construction of what is slated to be the [largest mosque in Europe](#) – and especially the state's role in its financing – has sparked controversy for many reasons. French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin has condemned Strasbourg's decision, citing the potential of "[foreign meddling](#)." His concerns relate to the future mosque's leadership – the French branch of the Turkish-based Milli Görüs Islamic Confederation, an Islamic political organization for the Turkish diaspora across Europe.

The vote and its backlash also come on the heels of a series of measures imposed in France under the guise of reinforcing secularism and stamping out radicalization – ones that critics say [unfairly target the country's Muslim population](#) and contribute to a climate of Islamophobia. This includes the French Republican principles bill that [was passed by the French Senate on April 12, 2021](#), with stricter regulations on Muslim dress and prayer locations added to the text.

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So where does the Strasbourg mosque controversy fit into all this? Is it motivated by geopolitical concerns and fears of an Islamist threat? Does it merely reflect confusion

over state funding for religion in France? Or is it simply an extension of broader debates over how Islam fits into French secularism?

My [research surrounding the politics of religion, secularism, Islam and pluralism in France](#) over the past 10 years suggests that it is most likely a mix of all of these factors.

Funding religious buildings

One contributing factor to the controversy over the Strasbourg mosque is the confusion over French laws restricting the funding of places of worship.

Notably, laws about the separation of church and state, or “laïcité laws,” [do not apply equally](#) to all French territories.

In 1905, when [church and state were officially separated](#), certain territories were exempted, such as Guyane, where the Catholic Church remains the only recognized religion. At that time, the now-French region of Alsace-Moselle – in which Strasbourg is situated – was part of Germany. When France recovered the territory in 1918, the region negotiated an exception to the 1905 law, instead choosing to remain [under the Concordat of 1802](#), which officially recognizes certain religions – though not Islam – and allows for direct state subsidizing of places of worship.

As such, officials in Strasbourg are well within their [rights to finance the mosque or any other house of worship](#), so long as they adhere to [local laws](#) that limit funding to 10% of construction costs.

But just because it’s legal doesn’t mean the move is popular.

In a 2021 [poll by the French Institute of Opinion and Marketing Studies \(IFOP\)](#), more than two-thirds of respondents said they opposed all public funding of religious buildings or ministries. That number rises to nearly 79% when it comes to Islamic centers. Specifically, 85% of the overall French population said they oppose state funding for the Strasbourg mosque, with 79% of Alsace-Moselle residents against the move.

Geopolitical fears

Such opposition hasn’t been formed in a vacuum – the mosque’s controversy comes amid broader political debates over foreign intervention and fostering an “[Islam of France](#)” that conforms with what is perceived as the national identity.

One of the main arguments against the mosque stems from its leaders’ affiliation with the Turkish-based Milli Görüs.

The French branch of Milli Görüs is one of the few Muslim organizations in France that refused to sign the recent state-imposed [charter of principles of Islam in France](#). The authors of the charter, the French Council of the Muslim Religion (CFCM), along with the French government that initiated its formulation, say that it serves as a reminder that [Republican principles must come before religious convictions](#). The charter strictly condemns political Islam and any foreign interference in mosque management.

But French Milli Görüs leaders have accused the state of [“interference with Muslim worship” and political manipulation of Islam](#).

They complain that they were not consulted at all in the charter’s drafting and that Milli Görüs is being unfairly accused of being “[less Republican](#)” than other Muslim organizations for their abstention from signing.

Those wary of Milli Görüs' leadership of the mosque also cite ties between the group [and Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling AKP](#). It has prompted concerns over the possibilities of [Turkish government meddling](#) in French sociopolitical affairs.

These fears of foreign intervention reflect [a major policy shift](#) in France over the past few decades over how it perceives foreign ties to French Muslim organizations. Before the 1990s, the French state encouraged such relationships in a bid, some have argued, to [keep Islam "foreign."](#) But this changed as the public presence of [Islam in France grew](#) and amid post-9/11 suspicions of foreign manipulation. By 2016, then-Prime Minister Manuel Valls was calling for a [ban on foreign funding for mosques](#).

This ethos has continued with provisions in [the recent French Republican principles bill](#) that require strict declarations of any foreign funding for religious organizations and give authorities the ability to ban any donations if there is sufficient evidence of a "serious threat affecting a fundamental interest of society."

From this standpoint, allocating state funds to subsidize a mosque with foreign ties seems to run counter to efforts to foster an "Islam of France" that's more integrated into secular French Republican values.

Mosques, moderation and Islamophobia

Of course there are those who just don't want more mosques in France no matter how they are funded, spurred by erroneous connotations between radicalization, Islamist separatism, and places of worship.

But research in the U.S. has shown that mosque attendance is often an [indicator of greater "social and political integration"](#) and civic engagement. Mosques are not just places of worship. They are gathering places, cultural centers, educational centers, community outreach hubs, interfaith facilitators, social resource centers and even sometimes places for non-Muslims to learn about Islam.

This is especially true for "grand mosques" such as the [Grand Mosque of Paris](#) or the [Grand Mosque of Lyon](#), where space is deliberately allocated for public visits, educational programs and community events. Having visited Milli Görüs centers in France and spoken with some of their members, directors and school officials, I believe these mosques seem to fit this same community and civic engagement profile.

Regardless, many French politicians and ordinary citizens believe that the secular principles that undergird French society need to be protected from a growing "Islamist threat."

Sentiment is riding particularly high in the long lead-up to the 2022 elections, in which President Macron may attempt to [appeal to anti-immigrant voters](#) to curb the power of the far right.

In such an environment, those looking for Islamist threats seem to find them everywhere. Such fearmongering has seen scholars studying Islam and Islamophobia accused of advancing an [Islamist-leftist agenda](#), the dissolution of the nation's [largest anti-Islamophobia organization](#), and [home-schooling parents](#) blamed for radicalizing Muslim youth.

The controversy surrounding the Strasbourg mosque has obvious geopolitical groundings and clearly fits into dominant political narratives of protecting France's secular principles. But it also fits into popular Islamophobic rhetoric of an omnipresent Islamist threat –

rhetoric that hinders French Muslim citizens from finding community and belonging in France, whether in mosques or elsewhere.

City Council of Strasbourg rejects the IHRA definition of antisemitism

By YOSSI LEMPKOWICZ

European Jewish Press (06.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3wNkWyW> - France's Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia "deeply" regretted the decision of the City Council of Strasbourg, France, to vote against adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, despite a surge of antisemitic incidents in the city over the last year.

At a meeting of the City Council on 22 March, the left-wing Green Europe Ecology Party (EELV), refused to endorse the IHRA working definition, which was adopted by France in 2019 at President Emmanuel Macron's initiative.

According to Strasbourg councillor Jean Werlen, the Council's objection to the IHRA definition stemmed from its inclusion of examples outlining how the demonization of Israel and Zionism can be antisemitic.

"First, there is a Strasbourg tradition of never importing foreign conflicts into local religious communities. Second, it is out of the question to deny citizens the right to criticise a state, even a foreign one. We must condemn antisemitism, but we must be able to criticise a state and this definition prohibits any criticism of the policy of the State of Israel," he declared.

The IHRA working definition of antisemitism clearly states that "criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic," while also recognising that manifestations of antisemitism "might include the targeting of the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collectivity. The definition has been adopted by dozens of governments and municipalities around the world, including Paris.

One Strasbourg Councillor who voted in favor of adopting the definition declared himself "dismayed" by the decision, emphasising that Strasbourg had been plagued by antisemitic outrages during the last year.

"The city of Strasbourg needs this definition because in recent months there have been several notorious antisemitic acts," said Pierre Jakubowicz, who is a member of the opposition Les Republicains party.

Among the incidents cited by Jakubowicz was an assault last August on a young Jewish graffiti artist who was jostled and showered with antisemitic abuse before the assailant grabbed one of his paint canisters and sprayed offensive slogans on the ground, including "forbidden to Jews" and "bitch."

He also recalled the scandal in January involving two drivers working for food delivery service Deliveroo in Strasbourg, who refused to serve Jewish customers.

He suggested that the real reason for the council's rejection of the IHRA definition was "the fact that some members of the city council majority openly support boycott campaigns against Israel."

Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia said "the European capital has knowingly decided to show neither heart nor common sense." Strasbourg is one of the two seats of the European Parliament.

Daniel Saada, Israel's Chargé d'Affaires in France, sent an open letter to Strasbourg Mayor Jeanne Barseghian in which he expressed his "deep concern".

"39 voices, including yours, Madam Mayor, have sent a message of moral bankruptcy, at a time when the urgency is to mobilize all democrats, a signal of renunciation while the manifestations of the revival of anti-Semitism in all its forms are multiplying every day," he wrote.

In an other letter to the Mayor, Shimon Samuels, International Director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center deplored that Strasbourg "is the only city to reject IHRA antisemitism definition on "anti-Zionist" grounds.

"Madame Mayor Jeanne Barseghian, In representing the Green Party (EELV), you must be sensitive to the environment. You would thus be aware of the Natzweiler-Struthof camp nearby, where in 1943, a gas chamber was built for 80 Jewish prisoners at the request of Strasbourg's University Institute of Anatomy. Their skeletons were to be used to prove "Jewish racial inferiority." This example of antisemitism should be sufficient evidence of historic environmental poisoning."

On Tuesday, 350 academics from around the world signed a letter of support of the IHRA definition. More than 15 Jewish groups from around the world will post the letter.

<https://adoptihra.com/supporting-ihra/>

Photo European Jewish Press :

"The city of Strasbourg needs this definition because in recent months there have been several notorious antisemitic acts," said Pierre Jakubowicz, a City Councillor who voted in favor of adopting the definition.

The persecution of Christians who were Muslims

See full report at <https://bit.ly/3uE8eRb>

ECLJ (30.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3fZtqp5> - After several weeks of investigation, the ECLJ is releasing this Tuesday, March 30, 2021, [a report](#) and [a reportage](#) on the persecution suffered by people from a Muslim background in France following a conversion to Christianity.

This investigation highlights the fact that an overwhelming majority of people leaving Islam to join Christianity undergo family and community persecutions. Whether the convert be male or female, young or old, single or married, the infringement of religious freedom is evident in all cases. These Christians are prevented from living their faith freely, they have to live in secrecy and in fear, often leading a double life.

Conversion, implying apostasy from Islam, is systematically perceived by the whole Muslim community as a form of treason, justifying reprisals. This persecution of converts takes various forms and graduated intensities. These forms of persecution, listed by the ECLJ in [its report](#), were determined following interviews with converts and association leaders. The most common forms of persecution are contempt, verbal or physical aggression, threats, and even harassment and rejection by the community to urge them to return to Islam.

This persecution is more important for women and girls, because of the dishonour and opprobrium they would inflict to their families. In fact, none of them wished to appear with their face and real name in our [video report](#), for fear of this "social death" or of a violent reaction from their family and their community. Although living in France, a significant proportion of the converted women are threatened with being forcibly married, sent to their parents' country of origin or sequestered as long as they do not return to Islam. In infrequent but increasingly rare cases, converts are lynched or even killed by Islamists. Faced with the threats that are very present in the Islamized suburbs and on social networks, moving or running away is often the only solution for the convert to escape the violence.

The leaders of French associations involved with ex-Muslims unfortunately note that most state and Christian authorities do not assume their responsibilities to help and welcome converts.

At present, France does not effectively guarantee the fundamental freedom to choose one's religion. According to the ECLJ, the proposed law against separatism is an opportunity to better guarantee religious freedom by strengthening the penalties for those who seek to obstruct a conversion. The Charter of Principles for Islam in France in its article 3, paragraph 2 condemns such actions. It is therefore high time to act to make known the persecution of these ex-Muslim converts, to improve their reception and to really fight against community withdrawal and the development of Islamism.

Photo : eclj.org

Muslims, Christians critic of the French law on "Separatism"

***Some amendments passed by the Senate raise serious religious liberty issues.
France's top Christian leaders officially join Muslims in criticizing the draft law.***

by Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (05.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3wpAoku> -The amendment battle about the French draft law on "separatism," which would reform after more than 100 years the French legislation on religion, has moved from [the Commission on Laws](#) to the Senate floor.

The good news is that some of the worst amendments we discussed [in a previous article](#) have been either rejected or withdrawn. The Senate has rejected [Amendment 178](#) by Senator Valérie Boyer, which tried to reintroduce the possibility of a swift administrative dissolution of associations, including religious associations, that violate “human dignity,” “freedom of conscience,” or use techniques of “psychological pressures,” after a similar provision, included in the original draft and obviously aimed at groups labelled as “cults” (*sectes*), had been eliminated by the government following the criticism by the Council of State.

Amendment 280 by Senator Jean-Yves Roux, which [wanted to introduce a new crime](#) of “cultic behavior” (*comportement sectaire*), has been withdrawn by his author.

However, the paradoxical Amendment 182, also by Senator Boyer, [has been amended](#) to include the signature of another 15 senators who support the proposal. Amendment 182 aims at creating the crime of “publicly declaring apostasy a crime.” This refers to a declaration that is *not* accompanied by a violence or incitement to violence (which would result in a 7-year imprisonment and a fine of Euro 70,000). When there is no incitement to violence, just a statement declaring apostasy “a crime” the penalty would be 5-year imprisonment and a Euro 50,000 fine. Ostensibly written against Muslims, who certainly regard apostasy as a crime, in fact the amendment would be immediately applicable against Roman Catholics, whose Code of Canon Law, canon 1364, clearly defines apostasy from the Catholic Church a crime (*delictum*), and would endanger several other religions. This amendment has not yet been voted.

Some other amendments passed by the Senate have been widely criticized by the French media.

[Amendment 146](#), which has been passed, forbids minors to wear religious symbols in public spaces, streets included. Symbols that “imply that women are inferior to men” are also forbidden. Obviously, this is a new episode in the decade-old French crusade against Islamic scarves, but a feminist may argue that skirts, and certainly the long skirts used by girls from some Evangelical communities, imply that “women are inferior to men.” And the ban on wearing Christian crosses, Jewish kippahs, or Sikh turbans seems hardly justified by the law’s stated aim of preventing “radicalization” and terrorism.

It is not only about minors. [Amendment 236](#), which has also been passed, compels public swimming pools to “respect the principle of *laïcité*.” To a non-French, this may seem strange: why swimming pools and not soccer fields or movie theaters? But the amendment explains that it targets the “burkini,” a fashionable modesty swimsuit for Muslim women, covering the whole body and the head. The amendment, now passed, is just another proof of how French legislators want to target one religion, Islam, but cannot create obviously unconstitutional laws explicitly discriminating the Muslims, and end up creating texts that would bother others as well. Orthodox Jewish women also use modesty swimsuits similar to the burkini, and it would seem bizarre, if a woman for whatever reason finds a similar swimsuit comfortable, to dispatch to the swimming pool a theologian accompanied by a police officer investigating whether she wears it for practical, moral, or religious reasons.

[Amendment 286](#) and [150](#) have also been approved, and require mothers (and fathers) who accompany children for a school outdoor trip or other extracurricular activities as volunteers to “behave according to the principle of *laïcité*.” This again means that a Sikh father cannot wear a turban (meaning he cannot accompany his children, since his

religion prevents him from taking the turban off), and a Muslim mother should take away her scarf.

Other similar amendments will be discussed this week. The fact that amendments are passed by the Senate does not mean they will be part of the final text of the law. After approval by the Senate, the draft law will go to a mixed committee (composed by senators and members of the Assembly, in equal numbers). If they will come to a consensus, the legislative process will be concluded. If not, the text will go back to the Assembly, then to the Senate, and finally to the Assembly again, which will have the last word.

We hope that in this process also the new Article 8 bis A, introduced by the Senate's Commission on Laws, and allowing religious associations to be dissolved by an administrative order when some of their members are accused of illegal or "immoral" activities, can be eliminated.

Meanwhile, the three highest Christian authorities in France, Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort, president of the French Conference of Catholic Bishops, Pastor François Clavairoly, president of the French Protestant Federation, and Metropolitan Emmanuel Adamakis, head of the French Orthodox Church (Ecumenical Patriarchate), have signed [a joint declaration](#) whose title already says it all, "Christians United Against the Law on Separatism." French Christian leaders state that the draft law, if passed, would make the situation of religious communities worse, not better, with respect to the existing law of 1905 on religious associations, would deny the legitimate right of those who want to live differently from the majority to organize themselves "separately," which is not a crime, and will return to the model of a strict control of all religions by the state dating back to Napoleon's time, and more suspicious and hostile to religion than the system introduced in 1905.

The Christian leaders have identified where the problem lies. Apart from what seems the obvious unconstitutionality of some articles, and their violation of basic principles of the European Convention on Human Rights, the law, through the various amendments, look more and more at religion as a "problem," rather than as a resource, for French society. Looking at religion as an enemy rarely promotes religious freedom and human rights.

Photo : Public enemy: an amendment has been passed that makes "burqini" illegal in French public swimming pools (credits).

French Law on "Separatism": Amendment Battles in the Senate

Positive and negative changes have been introduced, and some passed, at the Commission on Laws stage. The text will go to the Senate's floor on March 30.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (29.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/31uDdCD> - Until one month ago, articles on the draft French law against "separatism," rechristened "Law for the respect of Republican principles," were being published by mainline international media almost

daily. With some colleagues, I had published a first "White Paper" emphasizing problems for religious liberty in the original text, and a second one suggesting that the law may offer a positive opportunity to go beyond the restrictive definition of "religion" prevailing in French case law.

Eventually, the objections by French and international scholars, after the French State Council had made similar remarks, were heard by the government, which amended the text by eliminating the most controversial provisions. The law was then approved in first reading by the National Assembly and sent to the Senate, where it has been discussed by the Commission on Laws. It will go to the Senate floor on March 30, and the discussion is scheduled to continue until April 8.

After approval by the Senate, the draft law will go to a mixed committee (composed by senators and members of the Assembly, in equal numbers). If they will come to a consensus, the legislative process will be concluded. If not, the text will go back to the Assembly, then to the Senate, and finally to the Assembly again, which will have the last word. At each stage of this "navette," amendments may be introduced. Most of those to be examined in the Senate's discussion have already been filed.

The fact that international media, confronted with this long and complicated process, have somewhat lost patience and now rarely mention the French law, is not a positive development. International criticism, even if routinely rejected by some French politicians as an undue interference, probably played a role in having some positive amendments passed. For instance, the Commission of Laws eliminated the almost total ban on homeschooling, a provision often mentioned in the draft law's international criticism.

However, an amendment passed by the same Commission of Laws is cause for concern. In the text approved by Commission there is a new Article 8 bis A, which reads: "Article 3 of the law of July 1, 1901 relating to the association contract is amended as follows: 1. The first occurrence of the word 'or' is replaced by the sign: `,'; 2. After the word 'object,' the words 'or having an activity' are inserted." This is typical legislative jargon hardly understood by laypersons, but it hides a danger for freedom of association. Although the provision refers to the law of 1901, it also affects religious associations incorporated under the law of 1905. And at any rate, for reasons we explained in the second White Paper, a number of religious groups, however, decide to incorporate under the law of 1901.

Article 3 of the law of 1901 declares void *ex tunc* the incorporation of an association whose "purpose" is against the laws or morality. This nullity leads to a quasi-automatic dissolution. The amendment bans association that have "a purpose or activities" that are illegal or contrary to morality. The effect will be that associations occasionally accused of illegal or "immoral" activities, even if these are not part of their "purposes," could be dissolved. Considering the climate of hostility to religious minorities, particularly those labeled as "cults," prevailing in France, it would not be difficult to accuse unpopular religious group of (more or less occasional) illegal or "immoral" activities. The amendment also raises issues of constitutionality. Perhaps a counter-amendment will get rid of it.

Some really bad amendments will also be discussed in the Senate. Socialist Senator Jean-Yves Roux through Amendment 280 wants to introduce a new crime of "cultic behavior" (*comportement sectaire*), defined as "pursuing activities with the aim of undermining the fundamental principles of the Republic of freedom, equality, fraternity, and dignity of the human person, the symbols of the Republic within the meaning of the article 2 of the Constitution, or to call into question the secular character of the Republic." The new crime will be punished with one year in jail and a fine of Euro 15,000.

Roux explains that the amendment targets “extremism” and “separatism,” normally code words for radical Islam, but he says it does so by “working on the cults.” The text is so vague, and so obviously contrary to the principles underlined by the State Council in its opinion, that its chances of being passed should be minimal.

Amendment 178 by Senator Valérie Boyer, from the conservative The Republican party, is more dangerous. She tries to reintroduce the possibility of a swift administrative dissolution of associations, including religious associations, that violate “human dignity,” “freedom of conscience,” or use techniques of “psychological pressures.” This is standard anti-cult jargon, and these provisions were part of the original draft law before being eliminated by the government following the opinion of the State Council.

The same Valérie Boyer introduced another dangerous Amendment, 182, which aims at creating the crime of “publicly declaring apostasy a crime.” This refers to a declaration that is not accompanied by a violence or incitement to violence (which would result in a 7-year imprisonment and a fine of Euro 70,000). When there is no incitement to violence, just a statement declaring apostasy “a crime” the penalty would be 5-year imprisonment and a Euro 50,000 fine.

This is indeed the most dangerous amendment of them all. It runs a risk of becoming popular because it ostensibly targets Islam, and those Islamic radical schools calling for apostates to be beheaded. It has perhaps been influenced by recent controversies about the Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, Senator Boyer perhaps does not realize that the crime of “publicly declaring apostasy a crime” is committed daily by Roman Catholic professors who teach canon law in France, or distribute copies of the Code of Canon Law.

Canon 1364 clearly defines apostasy from the Catholic Church a crime (delictum). The crime of apostasy is dealt with by Canon criminal law. This declaration that apostasy is a crime is made very publicly, and even included in the Vatican’s official Web site. This is paradoxical, considering that Senator Boyer “publicly declares” her Catholicism, and is concerned about the anti-religious attacks to the freedom of Catholics in France. It seems she does not know her own Church, and there are similar provisions on apostasy in many other religions, making Amendment 182 a serious danger for religious liberty.

We would still like to believe that the Senate may use the discussion to broaden the definition of religion with respect to the present French case law, as we suggested in the second White Paper. However, there are amendments that go in the opposite direction.

Amendment 138 by Senator Nathalie Delattre, from the social-liberal Radical Movement, wants to define the religious association of the 1905 law as those that “have as their object the celebration of ceremonies organized for the accomplishment, by persons united by the same religious belief, of certain rites or practices.” Amendment 357 by Senator Sébastien Meurant of The Republicans, also wants to define religious associations as those devoted to “the celebration of ceremonies organized for the accomplishment, by persons united by the same religious belief, certain rites or practices.”

This is consistent with French case law, and follows literally an old opinion by the State Council dated October 24, 1997. However, this old case law is now at odds with the religious pluralism of the 21st century, which includes groups recognized by a vast majority of scholars as religious whose main aim is not “the celebration of ceremonies,” with Buddhist groups promoting individual meditation rather than collective rites as one obvious example. Amendments 138 and 357 will crystallize the existing situation, which follows an outdated model based on Christian churches. The historical opportunity of using the new law to introduce a more modern concept of religion will be once again missed.

French minister warns of 'foreign meddling' in Strasbourg mosque funding row

RFi (24.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2PAGxcK> - The construction of a mosque in Strasbourg has led to a row with the French Interior Minister, who accuses the Strasbourg municipal authorities of using public money to fund foreign meddling on French soil.

The planned Eyyub Sultan mosque in the eastern French city has found itself in the government's crosshairs because it is backed by a controversial Turkish Muslim group.

In most of France, under the country's strict rules separating state and religion, the government is not allowed to help fund religious practice. However for historical reasons, the rules are different in the Strasbourg region.

On Monday, municipal officials in Strasbourg, which is run by Green mayor Jeanne Barseghian, approved a grant of 2.5 million euros to the Milli Gorus Islamic Confederation, (MGIC), a pan-European movement for the Turkish diaspora.

But the MGIC is one of three Muslim confederations in France that have refused to sign a new anti-extremism charter championed by President Emmanuel Macron.

Macron wants the groups to commit in writing to renouncing "political Islam" and to respecting French law, in a bid to combat radical Islam, which he sees as a threat to the country's secular system.

Separately, the government has also drafted legislation which would force religious groups to declare major foreign funding and would give the state increased powers to shut down speech judged to spread hate or violence.

'Meddling' on French soil

Speaking on French television station BFMTV on Tuesday, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin expressed the government's view that the MGIC's refusal to sign the charter meant it could no longer be counted as a group representing Islam in France.

He went on to criticise the local authority saying the ministry believed that it "should not be financing foreign meddling on our soil."

Darmanin said he had asked the government's top representative in the Strasbourg region to file an administrative court complaint to stop the subsidy.

Strasbourg Mayor Jeanne Barseghian has said the mosque project has been in the works since 2017, before she was elected. But she insisted the funds are contingent on Milli Gorus presenting both a solid financing plan and "a reaffirmation of the values of the Republic."

An MGIC official, Eyup Sahin, told AFP news agency his association was refusing to sign the charter because it had not been allowed fully to participate in its elaboration.

There are longstanding divisions between the different groupings within the French Council of the Muslim Faith.

Prohibition of homeschooling canceled in Commission at the Senate

The Education and Culture Commission of the Senate has canceled the prohibition of homeschooling based on philosophical or religious convictions.

By Patricia Duval, lawyer, for *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (duval.patricia@gmail.com)

HRWF (22.03.2021) - The Bill on "reinforcing abidance with the Principles of the Republic", which intends to eliminate the root causes of extremist Islamism in France, contained a general prohibition of homeschooling with special and limited exemptions, e.g. based on the child's health. It specifically provided that no authorization could be granted for philosophical or religious reasons.

Not only did this provision miss its target as none of the Islamist terrorists could be traced to have followed a homeschooling cursus (which is not usually accessible to poor families with immigrant background) but it also ran contrary to the international human rights commitments of France, such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The prohibition of the choice of homeschooling for philosophical or religious reasons was actually part of the French policy to counter the alleged undue influence of family or community on the children's religious beliefs.

Since the enactment of the 2004 law prohibiting the wearing of conspicuous religious signs in the public schools, France has followed a dangerous trend of unduly restricting the sphere of freedom of religion or belief. Secularism ("Laïcité") shifted from imposing religious neutrality to State agents, delivering a public service, i.e. the teachers, to being binding also on public service users, namely pupils at school.

This was followed by the adoption of a Charter of Secularism in 2013 posted in all public schools, to which the pupils had to commit. According to the Charter, Secularism protected them "from any proselytizing and pressure which would prevent them from making their own choices" in order to raise their critical mind through "scientific and educational questioning".

In an interview given to the media at the time, the Minister of Education Vincent Peillon explained that in order to give the pupils freedom of choice, the State had to be able to "snatch them out of any and all determinism", which included family religious background.

Prohibiting family homeschooling based on religious motives is in line with this derailing of the State's understanding of its role, which shifted from being neutral in religious matters to somehow "deprogramming" the children of their religious background.

It cannot be the State's role to go against the parents' choices in matters of religious education. The State has not only a duty of neutrality but also a duty to ensure that parents can educate their children in accordance with their own beliefs.

Article 2 of the 1st Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights provides:

No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.

In an article published in Le Figaro on February 9, 2021, the Catholic Families Association (AFC) re-asserted very clearly that **"No, children do not first belong to the Republic"**.

AFC President stated that the bill on "reinforcing abidance with the Principles of the Republic" negates the primacy of the educational role of the parents, in spite of the fact that it is a fundamental right protected by the international treaties France has committed to. The interview provided:

"We have seen for several years a questioning of the parents' primary role as educators to the benefit of the State which tends more and more to orient the child's education. Even though we are well aware of the urgency of combating fanaticism and extinguishing the hotbeds of terrorism, we should avoid that all the parents suffer from collateral damages of this policy.

Some years ago, didn't a Minister of Education state to be willing to snatch the children from their "family determinism", to rely on the youth to make the society evolve and that the children belonged to the Republic and not to the families? The denial of Homeschooling is clearly an infringement of freedom of education which is a right of the families."

"Children belong first to the Republic, before belonging to their parents" was underlying the plan submitted in 1793 by Robespierre, the French Revolution dictator. Those revolutionaries wanted the children to be raised by the State and not by their parents. This time is long past and may we be protected from dictatorship.

The prohibition of homeschooling had nothing to do in the draft Law on reinforcing abidance with the Principles of the Republic. It was rightly erased by the Senate Commission on 16 March on the basis of Freedom of Education, a principle with constitutional value.

Let's hope that it does not get reintroduced during the debates at the Senate which start on March 30th or at the National Assembly when it goes for second review there.

L'interdiction de l'instruction en famille annulée par une Commission du Sénat

La commission de l'Éducation et de la Culture de la Haute assemblée a annulé l'interdiction de l'instruction à domicile motivée par des convictions philosophiques ou religieuses.

Patricia Duval, avocate, pour Human Rights Without Frontiers (duval.patricia@gmail.com)

HRWF (22.03.2021) – Le projet de loi confortant le respect des principes de la République, qui vise à éliminer les racines de l'extrémisme islamiste en France, contenait une interdiction générale de l'instruction en famille avec la possibilité d'octroi d'autorisations spécifiques et limitées, par exemple pour des raisons liées à la santé de l'enfant. Il prévoyait expressément qu'aucune autorisation ne pourrait être délivrée pour des raisons philosophiques ou religieuses.

Ces dispositions non seulement manquaient leur cible car aucun lien n'a pu être établi entre les auteurs d'actes terroristes et un quelconque cursus d'instruction à la maison (qu'en règle générale les familles pauvres issues de l'immigration ne peuvent se permettre) mais elles étaient également contraires aux engagements internationaux de

la France en matière de droits de l'homme, tels que la Convention européenne des droits de l'homme et la Convention internationale des droits de l'enfant.

L'interdiction du choix de l'instruction à la maison pour des raisons philosophiques ou religieuses était en réalité partie intégrante de la politique française visant à contrecarrer l'influence supposément induite de la famille ou de la communauté sur les croyances religieuses des enfants.

Depuis l'adoption de la loi de 2004 sur le port des signes religieux ostentatoires dans les écoles publiques, la France a suivi une pente dangereuse en restreignant indûment la sphère de la liberté de conscience ou de religion. La Laïcité est passée d'une obligation de neutralité incombant aux agents de l'Etat, dispensant un service public, à savoir les enseignants, à une obligation s'imposant aux usagers du service public, à savoir les élèves des écoles.

Cette évolution a été suivie par l'adoption d'une Charte de la Laïcité en 2013 qui a été affichée dans toutes les écoles et à laquelle les élèves devaient prêter allégeance. Aux termes de la Charte, la laïcité « les protège de tout prosélytisme et de toute pression qui les empêcheraient de faire leurs propres choix » afin de forger leur esprit critique au moyen de « questionnement scientifique et pédagogique ».

Dans une interview relayée dans les médias à l'époque, le Ministre de l'éducation Vincent Peillon expliquait qu'afin de lui donner la liberté de choix, l'Etat devait être capable « d'arracher l'élève à tous les déterminismes », y compris le déterminisme familial en matière religieuse.

L'interdiction de l'instruction en famille motivée par des raisons religieuses est en droite ligne avec cette dérive de la conception de l'Etat de son propre rôle, qui est passée d'être neutre dans les questions religieuses à en quelque sorte « déprogrammer » les enfants de leur contexte familial religieux.

Il ne peut être le rôle de l'Etat de s'opposer aux choix des parents en matière d'éducation religieuse. L'Etat a non seulement une obligation de neutralité mais également le devoir de s'assurer que les parents peuvent éduquer leurs enfants conformément à leurs propres croyances.

L'article 2 du protocole additionnel à la Convention européenne de sauvegarde des droits de l'homme et des libertés fondamentales prévoit :

Nul ne peut se voir refuser le droit à l'instruction. L'Etat, dans l'exercice des fonctions qu'il assumera dans le domaine de l'éducation et de l'enseignement, respectera le droit des parents d'assurer cette éducation et cet enseignement conformément à leurs convictions religieuses et philosophiques.

Dans un article publié dans Le Figaro le 9 février 2021, la présidente des associations familiales catholiques (AFC) affirmait très clairement « **Non, les enfants n'appartiennent pas d'abord à la République** ».

Elle a ensuite déclaré que le projet de loi « confortant le respect des principes de la République » remettait en cause la primauté éducative des parents, alors qu'il s'agit d'un droit fondamental, garanti par les engagements internationaux de la France. Elle a en particulier expliqué :

Nous assistons depuis plusieurs années à une remise en cause de la place des parents en tant que premiers éducateurs au profit d'un Etat qui veut de plus en plus orienter l'éducation des enfants. Même si nous sommes bien conscients de

l'urgence de combattre le fanatisme et d'éteindre les foyers du terrorisme, il ne faudrait pas non plus que l'ensemble des parents essuient des dommages collatéraux de cette politique.

Il y a quelques années, un ministre de l'Éducation ne déclarait-il pas vouloir arracher les enfants aux «*déterminismes familiaux*» et s'appuyer sur la jeunesse pour faire évoluer la société et que les enfants appartenaient à la République et non aux familles? La remise en cause de l'Enseignement en Famille est clairement une atteinte à la liberté d'éducation qui est un droit des familles.

« Les enfants appartiennent à la République avant d'appartenir à leurs parents », cette déclaration sous-tendait le plan soumis en 1793 par Robespierre, le dictateur issu de la révolution française. Ces révolutionnaires voulaient que les enfants soient d'abord éduqués par l'État, et non par les parents.

Cette époque est depuis longtemps révolue et puissions-nous être protégés de la dictature.

L'interdiction de l'instruction en famille n'avait rien à faire dans le projet de loi confortant le respect des principes de la République. Elle a été à juste titre retirée le 16 mars par la Commission du Sénat, en invoquant la liberté d'enseignement, reconnue comme principe à valeur constitutionnelle.

Espérons qu'elle ne soit pas réintroduite durant les débats au Sénat qui commenceront le 30 mars ou à l'Assemblée lorsque le projet de loi y retournera.

Anti-Cultism in France: Old/New Risks for Religious Liberty?

The COVID pandemic, QAnon, and debates on "separatism" have revitalized the French anti-cult structure MIVILUDES. Folk statistics may lead to bad choices.

By Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (19.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/30I1eFS> - France has a tradition of governmental activism against "cults" (called *sectes* in French). Groups labeled as "cults" tend to organize themselves somewhat differently with respect to mainline society, which the French tradition of *laïcité* perceives as part of "separatism," i.e., a "separation" from the general consensus around what French call "Republican values." The new law against "separatism" originally included provisions targeting "cults" in addition to Islamic radicalism, although these provisions, of dubious constitutionality, were later eliminated by the government.

However, the national debates on the law against separatism have been one of the factors leading to a revitalization of the MIVILUDES, the Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Cultic Deviances, created by the French government in 2002 as a successor of MILS (Interministerial Mission of Fight Against Cults). French media noticed a decline of MIVILUDES since 2015, as more resources were devoted to the fight against radical Islam. When in 2019 the MIVILUDES was reorganized as a part of the Interministerial Committee to Prevent Delinquency and Radicalization (CIPDR), anti-cultists lamented that the MIVILUDES was about to disappear.

Now, however, the MIVILUDES has been revamped and reinforced. The discussion about "separatism" has been a factor, together with concerns about the activities in France of

"cults" promoting alternative medicines during the COVID-19 pandemic, and of "political cults" such as QAnon in the wake of the American Presidential elections of 2020. A role has been played by the fact that Ms. Marlène Schiappa, a politician who has decided to jump on the anti-cult bandwagon for her own reasons, since July 2020 serves as Minister Delegate in charge of Citizenship, attached to the Minister of the Interior, i.e., in the position dealing inter alia with "cults."

The MIVILUDES, together with several police bodies, has recently published both what seems to be its new yearly report on "cults," and a note "provided as requested by Ms. Schiappa" on "the new trends of cultic deviances." Although the second documents was presented as a summary of the first, this is not really the case. The "new trends" note includes names, and discusses incidents, that are not mentioned in the report.

The report admits that the first French approach, leading to the publication in 1996 a list of "cults" that immediately became very controversial, was wrong. Groups were included in the list "not on the basis of objective criteria, but on the level of social acceptance at that particular time." This is a very important admission, because the MIVILUDES is recognizing here that the scholars who criticized the list—who were criminalized as "cult apologists"—were right, and authorities were wrong, and that religious movements were "stigmatized" and harassed just because they were unpopular.

Recognizing the mistake, the report explains, led to focus not on "cults" but on "cultic deviances," a new notion "unknown to the fields of religion, sociology, and law" created ad hoc by the French government. Apart from the emphasis presenting "cultic deviances" as almost the greatest French invention since the champagne and the camembert, what is claimed here is both important and alarming. "The State, the report says, has thus transformed the presence of cults, a social fact, into a question of public order, in which the criterion of dangerousness takes precedence. For the State, cultic deviances are considered to be dangerous not because they threaten traditional religious boundaries, but because they challenge standards the State has established in strategic areas. The problem comes from the possibility that a group of believers may form a closed community in which education, health care, nutrition, and social life are organized according to patterns that are beyond the control of the State."

Perhaps one needs to read twice to understand what is really claimed here, i.e., that the French State does not tolerate "separatism" in broad "strategic areas" that include "social life" and "nutrition." You should either "organize according to patterns under the control of the State" or be called a "closed community" and a "cult." Whether this widespread "control of the State" is compatible with a democratic concept of individual and religious liberty is a different question.

However, even by applying this expansive notion of "cultic deviances," it seems that it is not a major problem in France. Scholars know that moral panics about the "cults" are usually promoted through folk statistics. Commenting the MIVILUDES documents, French media have reported that "cultic" fasting is a serious problem in France. Yet, the MIVILUDES reports that it has found just three cases of "extreme practices" connected with food in twelve months.

We also read that MIVILUDES in one year found 500 cases of problems involving minors. Ms. Schiappa translated it in a press release introducing the MIVILUDES documents into "90,000 minors in danger," an excellent example of the use of folk statistics to artificially create social alarm. The report states that MIVILUDES and the police working on "cults"

do not have reliable statistics, yet Ms. Schiappa understands inflated numbers are very much liked by journalists.

Interestingly, we read that around some 3,000 cases of “cultic deviances” noticed by the MIVILUDES, only 16 have been forwarded to prosecutors under Article 40 of the Criminal Proceedings Code, which makes it mandatory for a public servant who becomes aware of a crime to denounce it to a prosecutor. In other words, in 2,984 cases out of 3,000 the MIVILUDES itself recognized there was no crime to be prosecuted. And we do not know how many of the 16 cases forwarded to prosecutors were in fact prosecuted and led to convictions.

To its credit, MIVILUDES is now repudiating the strategy of the 1990s that led to the publication of lists of “cults,” and causes years of suffering to the members of the groups so labeled and “stigmatized.” But as long as accusation of “cultic deviances” are liberally applied to cases where, as the MIVILUDES itself admits, there is no crime in more than 99% of the incidents it has considered, an attitude of general suspicion against all groups perceived as “different” or “alternatives” will be perpetuated. And this is a problem for religious liberty and democracy.

The Calvary of Plorec-sur-Arguenon will not be destroyed

A court ordered its destruction in the name of French laïcité. Local authorities found a solution. An emblematic story.

by PierLuigi Zoccatelli



A winter image of the Calvary of Plorec-sur-Arguenon (from Facebook).

Bitter Winter (10.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3c0oIBY> - On January 5, 2021, *Bitter Winter* reported that in the French village of Plorec-sur-Arguenon, Brittany, a court had ordered the destruction of the local Calvary (i.e., the monumental crucifix reminding the passers-by of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, a common monument in Northern France). It was a typical application of the French principle of *laïcité*, very much in the news in these days because of the debates on the new law on "separatist" religion.

Laïcité forbids to erect religious monuments on public land. But when the Calvary was erected, in 1946, the relevant land was private. It was acquired by the Department of Côtes-d'Armor when the Calvary was already there.

The secular humanist Federation of Free Thought (Fédération nationale de la libre pensée) filed a suit with the Administrative Court of Rennes, which on November 18, 2020 found in its favor and ordered the destruction of the Calvary as its remaining on public land violated the principle of *laïcité*.

It did not really help the cause of the Calvary that a small political party called Debout la France (France Arise) politicized the issue and tried to gain visibility by demonstrating (COVID-19 notwithstanding) in Plorec-sur-Arguenon.

However, cooler tempers happily prevailed, and the desire of local villagers to preserve a historical landmark was considered by the Department's authorities, together with the need to comply with the decision by the Administrative Court of Rennes.

By a unanimous vote, the Council of the Department voted the sale of the plot of land where the Calvary stands to the Association pour la Conservation du Patrimoine de Plorec-sur-Arguenon, i.e., to the group of private citizens that in 2017 had restored the Calvary at its own expenses.

All is well that ends well, and *Bitter Winter* is pleased to have helped by making the issue known outside France. It remains that local politicians exhibited more common sense than an administrative court, and the latter confirmed that too often, when in doubt, the principle of *laïcité* is interpreted against religion in France.

PierLuigi Zoccatelli

PierLuigi Zoccatelli teaches Sociology of Religions at [Pontifical Salesian University](#), Torino, Italy, and is deputy director of [CESNUR](#), the Center for Studies on New Religions. He is the author of several books and articles in the field of new religious movements and Western esotericism, and co-author of the widely reviewed [Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy](#).

Only 25% "cultic deviations" are related to religious beliefs, according to the MIVILUDES

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (15.03.2021) - In its latest report titled ["Lutte contre les dérives sectaires"](#) (Fight against cultic deviations), the MIVILUDES (Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and

Combat against Cultic Deviances) acknowledges that in 2020 only 25% “cultic deviations” are related to religious beliefs, according to its own definition of this homemade concept which has no legal equivalent in the world. The remaining 75% concern other sectors of society.

An analysis of some statistics

“Cult deviances”: The MIVILUDES’ statistics about the notifications of “cultic deviations” unrelated to religious beliefs:

- health and well-being: 40%
- youth: 23%
- imminent security issues: 20%
- economic activities, labor, employment or professional training: 17%

Interestingly as well, the report mentions that 3,008 notifications of “cultic deviances” have been received, 686 (almost 30%) have been considered serious but only 16 (0.5%) have been forwarded to prosecutors under Article 40 of the Criminal Proceedings Code, which makes it mandatory for a public servant who becomes aware of a crime to denounce it to a prosecutor. In other words, the MIVILUDES itself recognized there was no crime to be prosecuted in 99.5% of the cases. It is not said in the report if the 16 cases forwarded to the judiciary were really prosecuted and if any led to a conviction. Such information is important and also needs to be made public.

Minors at risks: Concerning the alleged exposition of minors to alleged “cultic deviations”, the MIVILUDES’ report mentions 500 referral files. However, the figure of 90,000 minors at risks – an undefined term - was published by Marlène Schiappa, Minister Delegate in charge of Citizenship, attached to the Minister of the Interior, i.e., in the position dealing inter alia with “cults,” in a [press release](#) dated 24 February 2021. This figure is probably related to the Report of the Inquiry Commission of the National Assembly (2006) which then put the figure at 100,000 but the MIVILUDES says in its report that it cannot confirm it. Another figure has also circulated in documents of the [Senate](#). In fact, all these statistics are not based on any scientific study.

Change of paradigm: hope for the future?

For more than two decades, scholars in religious studies and human rights defenders have strongly criticized France’s “cult-hunting policy” as infringing on international standards on freedom of religion or belief. The MIVILUDES has now decided to take into consideration UN and OSCE standards and reports as well as the jurisprudence of the European Court. It has opted for a new policy: to replace “the fight against cults” by “the fight against cultic deviances.”

Will this change of paradigm lead to a different policy and good practices? This remains to be seen.

Dr Massimo Introvigne, Former OSCE Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions”, has scrutinized the MIVILUDES’ report in a paper titled [“Anti-cultism in France: Old/ New Risks for Religious Liberty?”](#) published in Bitter Winter on 13 March 2021. Among many other things, he stresses:

“The report admits that the first French approach, leading to the publication in 1996 of a list of “cults” that immediately became very controversial, was wrong. (...)

Recognizing the mistake, the report explains, led to focus not on 'cults' but on 'cultic deviances,' a new notion "unknown to the fields of religion, sociology, and law" created ad hoc by the French government. (...)

To its credit, MIVILUDES is now repudiating the strategy of the 1990s that led to the publication of lists of 'cults,' and caused years of suffering to the members of the groups so labeled and 'stigmatized.' But as long as accusation of 'cultic deviances' are liberally applied to cases where, as the MIVILUDES itself admits, there is no crime in more than 99% of the incidents it has considered, an attitude of general suspicion against all groups perceived as 'different' or 'alternatives' will be perpetuated. And this is a problem for religious liberty and democracy."

In addition, the change of paradigm will not have any influence on the understanding of the issue in public opinion as the word "cult" (*secte* in French) has always been exclusively related to religious or spiritual groups with a negative connotation. This feeling will remain unchanged with the word cultic (*sectaire* in French) associated to another negative word "deviation" (*dérive* in French). For the media consumer, any information about "cultic deviations" will be understood as exclusively related to a religious cult, and not otherwise.

In conclusion, criminal activities, whatever they are, need to be detected in due time and prosecuted but transparency in the use of tax-payers' money is also necessary if one wants it to be efficiently used.

The MIVILUDES' official budget of last year was about [500,000 EUR](#) but researchers have been unable to check how this money is used. They were told that it was included in the budget of the Prime Minister. More transparency is also to be introduced in this regard.

25% seulement des "dérives sectaires" sont de nature religieuse, selon la MIVILUDES

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (15.03.2021) – Dans son dernier rapport intitulé "[Lutte contre les dérives sectaires](#)", la MIVILUDES (Mission interministérielle de vigilance et de lutte contre les dérives sectaires) reconnaît qu'en 2020, seulement 25% des "dérives sectaires" étaient de nature religieuse, d'après sa propre définition de ce concept fait maison qui n'a pas d'équivalent légal dans le monde. Les 75% restants concernent d'autres secteurs de la société.

Analyse de quelques statistiques

"Dérives sectaires: Statistiques de la MIVILUDES concernant les signalements de "dérives sectaires" n'ayant aucun rapport avec la religion:

- Santé et bien-être: 40%
- Jeunesse: 23%
- Enjeux de sécurité immédiate: 20%
- Affaires économiques, travail, emploi ou formation professionnelle: 17%

A ce propos, il est intéressant de souligner les points suivants: le rapport fait état de 3008 signalements de "dérives sectaires", dont 686 considérés comme sérieux (presque

30%) mais 16 seulement (0,5%) ont été adressés aux autorités judiciaires. L'obligation de saisir le parquet s'impose en vertu de l'Article 40 du code de procédure pénale quand un agent public a connaissance d'une infraction.

En d'autres termes, la MIVILUDES elle-même a reconnu qu'il n'y avait eu aucune infraction dans 99,5% des cas. Le rapport ne mentionne pas si les 16 cas adressés aux procureurs ont vraiment fait l'objet de poursuites et si certains ont abouti à une condamnation. Ce genre d'information est important et se doit d'être porté à la connaissance du public.

Mineurs d'âge à risques: Concernant des mineurs d'âge exposés à de prétendues "dérives sectaires", le rapport de la MIVILUDES signale 500 saisines. Toutefois, le nombre de 90 000 mineurs à risques – un terme non défini – a été publié par Marlène Schiappa, ministre déléguée auprès du ministre de l'Intérieur en charge notamment des "sectes", dans un [communiqué de presse](#) daté du 24 février 2021. Ce chiffre fait probablement écho au rapport de la commission d'enquête de l'assemblée nationale (2006), qui avançait alors le chiffre de 100 000, mais la MIVILUDES dit dans son rapport qu'elle ne peut le confirmer. Un autre chiffre très différent a également circulé dans des documents du [sénat](#). En fait, toutes ces statistiques ne sont basées sur aucune étude scientifique.

Changement de paradigme: Espoir pour l'avenir?

Pendant plus de deux décennies, des experts en matière d'études religieuses et des défenseurs des droits humains ont fortement critiqué la politique de "chasse aux sectes" pratiquée par la France pour enfreindre les normes internationales relatives à la liberté de religion ou de conviction. La MIVILUDES a maintenant décidé de prendre en compte les standards et les rapports de l'ONU et de l'OSCE ainsi que la jurisprudence de la Cour européenne. Elle a opté pour une nouvelle politique: remplacer "la lutte contre les sectes" par "la lutte contre les dérives sectaires".

Ce changement de paradigme conduira-t-il à une politique différente et de bonnes pratiques?

Le Dr Massimo Introvigne, ancien "Représentant de l'OSCE dans la lutte contre le racisme, la xénophobie et la discrimination, en particulier la discrimination à l'égard des chrétiens et des membres d'autres religions", a minutieusement examiné le rapport de la MIVILUDES dans un article intitulé "[Anti-cultism in France: Old/ New Risks for Religious Liberty?](#)" (Anti-cultisme en France: anciens et nouveaux risques pour la liberté religieuse?) publié dans Bitter Winter le 13 mars 2021. Entre autres choses, il souligne:

"Le rapport admet que la première approche de la France conduisant à la publication en 1996 d'une liste de 'sectes', très rapidement controversée, était une erreur. (...)

La reconnaissance de cette erreur, explique le rapport, a conduit à l'abandon de la notion de 'secte' au profit de la notion de 'dérives sectaires', un nouveau concept 'étranger aux domaines de la religion, la sociologie et le droit', une création ad hoc par le gouvernement français. (...)

A son crédit, la MIVILUDES répudie désormais la stratégie des années 1990 qui a conduit à la publication de listes de 'sectes' et causé des années de souffrance à des membres de groupes ainsi nommés et stigmatisés. Mais aussi longtemps que l'accusation de 'dérives sectaires' sera appliquée à des cas où, comme la MIVILUDES l'admet elle-même, il n'y a pas d'infraction dans 99% des incidents

étudiés, une attitude de suspicion générale à l'encontre de tous les groupes perçus comme 'différents' ou 'alternatifs' se perpétuera. Et cela est un problème pour la liberté religieuse et la démocratie."

En outre, le changement de paradigme n'aura aucune influence sur la compréhension de la thématique dans l'opinion publique puisque le mot *secte* a toujours été exclusivement associé à des groupes religieux ou spirituels avec une connotation négative. Ce sentiment restera inchangé avec le mot *sectaire* accolé à un autre terme négatif, *dérive*. Pour le consommateur de médias, toute info relative aux "dérives sectaires" sera comprise comme uniquement liée à une secte religieuse, et pas autrement.

En conclusion, les activités criminelles, quelles qu'elles soient, doivent être détectées en temps utile et poursuivies mais la transparence à propos de l'utilisation de l'argent des contribuables est également une nécessité si l'on veut qu'il soit employé efficacement.

Le budget officiel de la MIVILUDES de l'année dernière s'élevait à environ [500,000 EUR](#) mais des chercheurs ont été incapables de vérifier les détails de son utilisation. Il leur a été répondu qu'il était inclus dans le budget du premier ministre auquel la MIVILUDES était alors rattachée. Davantage de transparence doit également être introduit à cet égard.

Iranian converts have to prove their faith to obtain asylum

A significant proportion of Iranians seeking asylum in France say they are persecuted because of their conversion to Christianity

By Anne-Bénédicte Hoffner

La Croix International (17.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2N7kObE> - When Ali (not his real name) went to the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) for his interview, he knew that he would be questioned about his personal history, particularly about his conversion to Christianity in Iran.

He was asked to name a scripture passage that was important to him. He chose the Passion of Jesus Christ.

"How did this passage resonate with you?" the protection officer asked.

"What attracted me most is that a human being, even at the moment of being tortured, asks people for forgiveness, even though he is here because of their faults. (...) That's what made me begin to love Jesus and this gesture," Ali said.

The interviewer was not convinced. He informed Ali a few days later that his request for asylum had been rejected.

"When asked to describe the personal journey that led him to convert to Catholicism, the person described a family environment marked by a rigorous practice of Islam and his words remained impersonal, invoking only the notion of forgiveness," wrote the OFPRA agent.

"The agency cannot consider him to be at risk of persecution upon return to Iran, as the sincerity of his approach was not considered to be established," the official said.

Assessing the sincerity of a convert's faith

Every year, just over 100,000 foreigners seek France's protection because of the threats they face in their home countries.

A handful are Iranians -- around 350 in 2020, a little more in previous years -- and among them, many say they have converted to Christianity.

Though he does not keep statistics about the "motive", the director of OFPRA, Julien Boucher, observes that "for two decades" the issue of conversion has often appeared in the files of Iranians, most of the time within a Protestant Church.

Boucher says that, because religious persecutions "touch on the intimate", this is the reason why "the examination is very specific".

"We are fully aware of this. It is not a question of judging the sincerity of the applicant's faith, but of assessing the validity of the alleged fears," he points out.

Threats are very real for those the Iranian regime considers to be "apostates". But how can the true danger of such threats be verified without actually trying to assess the sincerity of the asylum seeker's conversion?

An obstacle course for Iranian asylum-seekers who have converted to Christianity

Father Jean-Marie Humeau assists the Iranian Catholic community. On his desk are seven files of Iranian converts whose requests have been rejected by OFPRA.

"In all seven cases, OFPRA asked spiritual questions to see whether or not the conversion is genuine and to challenge the risk of persecution. This raises questions," the priest argues.

Arshad, 36, is currently in France awaiting the decision of OFPRA. He's familiar with the obstacle course for Iranian converts.

He was arrested in Tehran while he was reading the Gospel with friends and subjected to several weeks of interrogation and psychological torture in prison before finally being released on bail.

After he returned home, he started receiving anonymous threats over the telephone. Pressure was put on those close to him, he lost his job and, finally, he did what many people do -- he fled to another country.

"The difficulty of the French interrogations is famous," he says.

OFPRA asked one of his friends "the name of the twelve apostles", another to say "what the Trinity means to him".

"I understand that they are trying to verify whether the danger is real, but that they decide that our faith is not 'complete' seems really strange to me," Arshad says.

For the National Association of Border Assistance for Foreigners (Anafé), these "intrusive" questions are even more incomprehensible when applicants are in waiting areas, such as ports, train stations or airports.

They are summoned to explain themselves in a few hours, face-to-face or over the phone, sometimes not even knowing whom, exactly, they are speaking with.

"The protection officer asked the man many questions about the Christian religion, its rituals, its saints and its beliefs, and expected him to give precise answers," said an Anafé employee who witnessed an Iranian couple being interviewed in 2017 at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport.

The man had to indicate how often he went to Mass, although going to religious services is illegal for Iranians who do not belong to recognized churches.

He was even asked "the date of Christmas, without taking into account the fact that Iranians do not have the same calendar".

Ordinariate for Catholics of the Eastern Churches offer to help

"While it is only supposed to verify the credibility of the request, OFPRA often launches into a substantive examination, under conditions that do not allow it," says Anafé's director, Laure Palun.

"And it is not even certain that those who have been Christians for a long time know how to answer these questions," she notes.

But OFPRA's director, Julien Boucher, denies that.

"Under no circumstances do we ask protection officers to give a kind of knowledge test," he insists.

He claims his organization takes its lead from the good practices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Agents limit themselves to asking questions concerning the person's "path of conversion", the "circumstances" of the conversion, the new religious practice and, finally, the persecutions suffered or feared.

"Something the claimant says may, in turn, prompt further questions from the instructor," Boucher explains.

The role of the interpreters -- in the vast majority of Iranian and Shia Muslim cases -- is also regularly questioned.

Do they know the Christian terms used? Do they risk distorting certain words because of their own bias against or disapproval of conversion?

OFPRA's director points out that interpreters are bound by a "strict code of ethics" and have received "awareness-raising and (other) training". In addition, "the recording of all interviews" are "available in case of a dispute".

The Ordinariate for Catholics of the Eastern Churches in France is trying to help improve the handling of these complex cases and has offered assistance, again based on UNHCR recommendations.

"Refugee status determinations based on religion could also benefit from the assistance of independent experts with particularized knowledge of the country, region and context of the particular claim and/or the use of corroborating testimony from other adherents of the same faith," UNHCR guidelines state.

But OFPRA's management, so far, has declined the Ordinariate's offer to help.

"Our information, documentation and research division already mobilizes many external resources to refine our knowledge of countries of origin," says Boucher, OFPRA's director.

"As for testimonials, we take them into consideration, but assess their probative value," he adds.

Photo : The family during Mass in a Catholic church in Tehran. (Photo by ATTA KENARE/AFP)

Minister of Interior apologise for "unfortunate" remarks against evangelicals

French evangelicals denounced that his comments « offended many evangelicals in France and several European countries ». Minister promised that « this bad experience will not happen again ».

Evangelical Focus (16.02.2021)- <https://bit.ly/3u9NjGk> - **The President and the General Director of the National Council of Evangelicals in France (CNEF), had a meeting with the Interior Minister's adviser for religious affairs on 9 February, to discuss Gérald Darmanin's latest remarks about evangelicals in France.**

The Interior Minister had said in an interview with TV broadcaster *C News*, that "**evangelicals are a very important problem** [...] obviously not a problem of the same nature than the Islamism that makes terrorist attacks and deaths".

After the meeting, the CNEF pointed out in a statement that "in the context of the examination of the draft law to strengthen secularism and the republican principles, **inappropriate comments by ministers and elected representatives** have offended many evangelical Protestants in France and in several European countries".

The evangelical entity "questioned the Ministry of the Interior and, at the same time, we wanted to resist any victimizing temptation and any media outbidding", because such actions "would not necessarily conform to the model of Christ".

"The expressions used had been unfortunate"

According to the CNEF, during the meeting, the Interior Minister's adviser for religious affairs "**acknowledged that the expressions used had been unfortunate**. They could possibly concern very specific cases but not evangelicals in general".

He also promised that “**this bad experience will not happen again**” and stressed that “Darmanin's speech during the CNEF's 10th anniversary remained totally relevant”. In autumn, the Interior Minister had joined the online event of the evangelical body.

Back then, the Minister stated, among other things, that “being a believer often makes it possible to be a good citizen” and thanked the CNEF for the “relationship of trust” they have with the government.

Photo : The Minister of Interior of France, Gérald Darmanin. / Twitter Gérald Darmanin.

'French Muslims will suffer' under separatism rules, critics say

Civil rights groups, academics and experts raise alarm ahead of key vote on controversial bill.



France is home to Europe's largest Muslim minority [File: Zohra Bensemra/Reuters]

By [Peter Yeung](#)

Al Jazeera (11.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3pjRBqX> - On October 2 last year, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a law against what he called “Islamist separatism” aimed at tackling “radical” movements in the country.

He described Islam as a religion “in crisis” globally, as he sought to boost support for measures intended to regulate how the faith is practised in France.

Critics say the proposed law further stigmatises France's 5.7 million-strong Muslim community – not only those individuals it supposedly targets – and forms part of a wider crackdown on civil liberties.

On February 4, the French lower house backed the bill. An anticipated vote by parliamentarians is expected to take place next week.

The National Assembly is now sorting through 1,860 proposed amendments to the controversial bill, including an extension of the hijab ban on university students and a ban on religious symbols worn by parents on school trips.

The legislation, officially named the draft bill on "Respect for the Principles of the Republic", has been the subject of fierce debate in civil society and among politicians.

"I don't see how this will help to stop the terrorism," said Oudie Elhamamouchi, a lawyer for the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) civil rights group.

"This law above all has a political rather than legal motive. It's stigmatising Muslims."

CCIF itself was forced to relocate after the French government accused the group of harbouring "radical" links and ordered its closure during the crackdown on suspected "separatism". Rights groups condemned the move against CCIF, saying it added to a climate of Islamophobia.

If the law is passed, according to Elhamamouchi, the government will be legitimising the xenophobic arguments made by France's [resurgent](#) far-right groups.

"It will fan the flames of the right," he said. "We will have crossed a line, and it will be an attack on public freedom. It is simply unjust. The law has set a very worrying discourse and French Muslims will suffer."

'Macron's gamble'

Measures agreed for the separatism law to date include sanctions for online hate speech, tighter controls on homeschooling, limits on donations to religious groups from abroad, and a requirement for all associations in France receiving public funding to sign a contract pledging to respect Republican values.

The latter, which will allow associations to be abolished more easily, was opposed by France's League of Human Rights.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, head of the left-wing *La France Insoumise* party, raised his concerns during the opening debates on the separatism law.

"We do not build France against those who compose it," he said. "This text is useless, it is dangerous."

French political analysts said the government's efforts to quickly push through the bill in the middle of the pandemic were made with an eye on next year's presidential elections.

"This is Macron's gamble," said Philippe Marliere, a professor of political science at the United Kingdom's University College London. "To focus on the sort of issues – the so-called terrorist threat posed by extremists – Macron is of the view that this will send a message to the public that it will curb the influence of the far right."

The threat of the far right was highlighted last month when a poll by French newspaper Le Parisien put National Rally leader Marine Le Pen and Macron almost neck and neck in the popularity stakes, at 48 percent and 52 percent respectively.

Marliere said that echoing the far right's nationalist rhetoric could embolden the Islamophobic tendencies of activist groups like Generation Identity, an anti-immigrant movement known to patrol France's borders.

"It's a very dangerous game he's playing," Marliere said. "It will only strengthen Le Pen and legitimise her ideas. History shows if you go along with the far right, the only party that benefits is the far right."

'Muslims are being targeted'

The changes are also seen by critics as part of a wider shift in government policy to crack down on social freedoms, including recent efforts to ban the filming of police with the Global Security Bill.

France was downgraded this month from a "full democracy" to a "flawed democracy" in The Economist's Global Democracy Index.

"Contrary to what the government says it's not [about] to reinforce the 1905 law on secularism," said Sarah Mazouz, a researcher at the National Center for Scientific Research and author of the book, Race. "But it is [going] to introduce harder controls on a lot more domains of society."

The freedom of the press has been threatened, said Mazouz, and there have been attempts to restrict university research due to the supposed "Islamogauchism" on campuses – a derogatory term coined by France's right wing in reference to the alleged political alliance between leftists and hardline Muslims.

"Clearly, Muslims are being targeted with this law," Mazouz said. "It's leading to a blurring between Islam and radical Islamism, between Muslims and violent Islamists. It's reactivating the anxiety over French Muslims."

At the time of publishing, France's interior ministry had not responded to Al Jazeera's request for comment.

The separatism law, which contains about 50 articles, is at the same time seen by experts as a substantial transformation of France's secularist principle of laicite, which was first legally established in 1901 and then in relation to religious association in 1905.

"It's changed the French system of laicite," said Philippe Portier, a historian and sociologist of secularism at Sciences Po University Paris. "Today it's been substituted and it's a radical transformation."

Portier said that the original secularist law established in 1905 was intended to ensure freedom of religion for individuals, but that these new proposals are no longer in line with that concept.

"In fact, the original regime of laicite was one of liberty, but it has become a regime of control," he said.

Portier explained that under this law, for example, if you work for a private bus company that will serve the Olympic Games to be held in France in 2024, you must sign a contract to respect French Republican values because it is linked to the state.

"This simply didn't exist before," he said. "It's very concerning."

How taxes may be misused to persecute spiritual minorities

Interestingly enough, tax-based crackdown on spiritual movements started in France and Taiwan in the same year, 1996.

by Christine Mirre

Bitter Winter (06.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2YU2m8o> - As human rights and religious liberty activists, we have the experience in France of how fiscal weapons are used to attack spiritual groups. This French policy has strong similarities with the case of Tai Ji Men in Taiwan.

In 1996, the then Taiwanese government launched a crackdown on groups labelled as "xie jiao" or "cults," which, according to most scholars who have studied the incident, was politically motivated. The crackdown also involved Tai Ji Men, although it had not taken political sides.

In France, in the same year 1996 a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry established a blacklist of spiritual groups classified as "cults" (in French, *sectes*). 172 groups were thus criminalized, and a policy of repression was instituted against these spiritual movements.

Following this Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry, the Ministry of Justice published a circular in which it highlighted the tools that magistrates should use against associations qualified as "cults" by the Commission. In number 4 of the circular, we can read: "Breaches of the general tax code, and in particular tax fraud (article 1741 of the CGI)." In the same year, the Ministry of Interior also published a circular to highlight possible accusations involving the crime of tax evasion as a weapon to fight against "cults."

In the years that followed, it was the Jehovah's Witnesses in 1997, the Religious Association of the Pyramid Temple in 1995, the Association of the Knights of the Golden Lotus (connected with the same movement, the Aumist Religion of the Mandarom, of the Association of the Pyramid Temple) in 1995, and the Evangelical Pentecostal Church of Besançon in 1996, which were attacked by the French tax services.

All these associations were declared "fraudulent" by the tax services, and condemned to heavy tax adjustments, up to several million euros in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

All these spiritual groups, after having exhausted all legal remedies in France, went to defend their cases before the European Court of Human Rights, where they were all successful. The European Court found against France in all these cases, for violation of Article 9 (Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion) of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Case of The Jehovah's Witnesses

I will focus here on the most representative case, the one of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The French Association of Jehovah's Witnesses asked that the tax exemption applicable to gifts and legacies to local or national associations established for the purpose of organizing and managing religious worship, and authorized religious congregations, continued to be applied to them after 1993, as it had happened for every year before that date.

The authorities claimed that the French Association of Jehovah's Witnesses had not submitted the declaration requested by the tax authorities, and it was subjected to an automatic taxation procedure in respect of hand-to-hand gifts which it had received. The tax administration claimed that the hand-to-hand gifts "[had been] disclosed to the tax authorities in the course of the accounting audits to which it [had been] subjected".

The term "disclosed" is a key word in the French administrative language dealing with taxes. It implies that the "disclosure" was a voluntary move by the Association, which for the authorities meant that it had accepted to be taxed on the money it had received. In fact, this was not the case. The audit was not requested by the French Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, but was imposed on them by the tax administration and could not be refused. Moreover, there is no legal obligation to disclose hand-to-hand gifts to the tax administration. There was a clear manipulation of the administrative terminology to corner the French Association of Jehovah's Witnesses and, as it appeared afterwards, to kill them financially. This shows another similarity with the Tai Ji Men case.

In May 1998, the Association was notified of a supplementary tax bill, for the equivalent of about 45 million euros. The Association stressed that the taxes claimed concerned "gifts," by 250,000 persons over four years.

Decision of the European Court of Human Rights

After having exhausted all legal means in France, in 2005 the Association decided to appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

In its judgment of 30 June 2011, the European Court found a violation of Article 9 (Right to Freedom of Religion), noting that the supplementary tax bill "had concerned the entirety of the manual gifts received by the Association, although they represented the main source of its funding. Its operating resources having thus been cut, it had no longer been able to guarantee to its followers the free exercise of their religion in practical terms."

By a judgment of 5 July 2011, the Court held that France had to cancel the supplemental tax bill, and reimburse the 4,590,295 euros for the taxes unduly claimed by the tax administration that the Association of Jehovah's Witnesses had paid under coercion, plus 55,000 euros for costs and expenses. The judgment was issued in French only.

The European Court rendered similar decisions in favor of the three other associations labeled as "cults," and attacked by the French tax services.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, we can notice that the same strategy has been used in France and Taiwan to harass spiritual groups that disturbed States or bureaucrats for various reasons.

Unable to find any fault or crime, the States deflected their own tax regulations in order to undermine peaceful movements such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and others in France, and Tai Ji Men in Taiwan.

The French cases decided by the European Court of Human Rights, however, may be a reason of hope for Tai Ji Men *dizi*. They show that, despite the fact that it is a long and difficult fight, it can be won.*

*A paper presented at the international webinar "Education, Conscience, and Tax Justice: Reflecting on the Tai Ji Men Tax Case in Taiwan," January 24, 2021.

New French law on religion goes to the Parliament— Minister offends "Evangelicals"

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

Three Muslim groups in France snub anti-extremism charter

Three of eight federations belonging to France's main council of Muslims have refused to sign a document renouncing political Islam and religious intolerance

By Mélinée Le Priol

La Croix Int'l (22.01.2021) - Three Muslim federations in France have refused to sign an anti-extremism charter, revealing a division between them and five other Islamic groups that are signatories to the document.

French President Emmanuel Macron has pushed the "republican charter" in the wake of a spate of Islamist terrorist attacks in the country.

He first urged the eight-member French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) last November to set up a National Council of Imams to vet preachers who come from outside the country.

Ratification of a charter to combat Islamic extremism was expected to follow.

But the rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris, Chems-Eddine Hafiz, withdrew his support at the end of December because of disagreements over the text.

He then rejoined in mid-January after modifications were made. Now three members in the CFCM are refusing to sign the new version, even though the French government on January 18 hailed the charter as a "foundational act".

Two of the dissenting federations -- the Committee for Coordination of Turkish Muslims in France (CCMTF) and the Milli Gorus Islamic Confederation (CMIG) -- are linked to Turkey.

The third group, Faith and Practice, is the French branch of Tablighi, a spiritualist missionary movement from India.

The Grand Mosque of Reunion Island, which is considered a ninth member of the CFCM, has also withdrawn from the charter.

But the three federations that are opposing the new text say they do want to withdraw from the fledgling National Council of Imams, according to a joint statement on January 20.

The three are calling for amendments to the ten-article text, which notably affirms freedom of conscience and equality between men and women.

The dissenting groups say they approve of the spirit of the charter, but not its contents.

"We believe that certain passages and formulations of the submitted text are likely to weaken the bonds of trust between the Muslims of France and the Nation," they said in their statement.

They denounced the charter's "accusatory and marginalizing tone".

In fact, several imams have told La Croix they cannot support a text they see as "insulting".

"As French citizens, we are already bound to respect republican values!" said one.

Political Islam

There can be little doubt that the refusal of these federations to sign the charter relates to two particularly sensitive points. One is the rejection of foreign interference, and the other is what is qualified therein as "political Islam".

The Tablighi movement, for example, is explicitly mentioned as one of those political currents.

The other two federations, which are much more influential within the CFCM, are suspected of being diplomatic instruments for Turkey on European soil.

For instance, the CCMTF is integrated into the French branch of the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs (or Diyanet) and "supports the conservative nationalist and Muslim policies of Turkish President Erdogan", explained Samim Akgönül, director of the Turkish Studies Department at the University of Strasbourg.

"Some of its members are French citizens, but the Turkish government pays its imams and finances its premises," Akgönül told La Croix.

Milli Görüş is also close to Ankara since the current regime stems from this very conservative and nationalistic religious movement founded in 1969.

"This federation receives indirect Turkish funding from state funds and has developed schools and groups of political activists in France," Akgönül pointed out.

He said it is likely that the two federations' refusal to sign the charter came directly from Ankara.

"We are not going to decide their fate today"

The president of the CFCM, Mohammed Moussaoui, criticized the three federations for issuing communiqué he labeled as "accusatory and unconstructive".

"I would have liked these statements to be clarified in writing in the form of amendments and transmitted to the CFCM," he said on January 21.

Gérard Larcher, the Republican president of France's Senate, said three federations will have to "face the consequences" of their actions and "think well about what it means not to sign this commitment". "We are still giving them 15 days. We are not going to decide their fate today, it will be up to the executive (to decide)," he told Franceinfo after being questioned whether the government will move to ban the federations.

Hakim El Karoui, who has been pleading for years for more transparency in the financing of the Muslim faith, said there was "contradiction" to try to fight against foreign interference and political Islam "with federations financed by foreign countries (i.e. Turkey, Algeria and Morocco) and some close to political Islam".

He told La Croix that a reform of the authority is necessary "by bringing in representatives of independent mosques, imams and women".

Read more at: <https://international.la-croix.com/news/world/three-muslim-groups-in-france-snob-anti-extremism-charter/13669>

French Muslim groups at odds over Macron's anti-extremism charter



Students attend a Koran study class in central France in October 2020. © Philippe Desmazes, AFP

France 24 (21.01.2021) - The head of France's main Muslim organisation on Thursday slammed a "unilateral" move by three Islamic groups not to sign up to an anti-extremism charter championed by President Emmanuel Macron.

[Macron](#) wants French [Muslim](#) groups [to sign up to the charter](#) as he seeks to secure [France's secular system](#) in the wake of a spate of attacks blamed on Islamist radicals in 2020.

But the Committee for Coordination of Turkish Muslims in France (CCMTF) and the Milli Gorus Islamic Confederation (CMIG) -- both catering to citizens of Turkish origin -- as well as the Faith and Practice movement, announced late Wednesday that they would not be signing up to the charter.

"Through these repetitive actions, the groups... all risk being held responsible for this situation of division," said Mohamed Moussaoui, the president of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), the umbrella grouping for France's Muslim groups.

This refusal "is not likely to provide reassurance... on the state of the representative bodies of the Muslim religion", he added.

A source close to the issue, who asked not to be named, said the three groups refusing to sign the charter were particularly concerned about the definition of foreign interference in religion and the definition of political Islam.

The row comes at a time of severe diplomatic tensions between France and [Turkey](#), whose President [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) has repeatedly lambasted Macron's bid to crack down on radical Islam in the country.

The Milli Gorus, a pan-European movement for the Turkish diaspora, is seen as inspired by the ideas of late prime minister Necmettin Erbakan, regarded as the father of political Islam in Turkey and Erdogan's mentor.

"We believe that certain passages and formulations in the text submitted are likely to weaken the bonds of trust between the Muslims of France and the nation," the three groups said in a statement.

"Furthermore, some statements are prejudicial to the honour of Muslims, with an accusatory and marginalising tone."

'Important clarification'

Five out of nine groups who make up the CFCM, a body set up almost 20 years ago to enable dialogue between the government and the Muslim community, have signed up to the charter after weeks of sometimes acrimonious debates.

But the failure of the CFCM to so far show a totally united front risks robbing the initiative of the consensus within the Muslim community that it is supposed to highlight.

A government source however insisted that the groups' refusal would not weaken the process, adding that "the masks are coming off".

"An important clarification is being made," the source said.

The charter rejects "instrumentalising" [Islam](#) for political ends and affirms equality between men and women, while denouncing practices such as female circumcisions, forced marriages or "virginity certificates" for brides.

Macron railed against the promotion of "political Islam" in France in November last year after a teacher was beheaded outside his school.

He had shown pupils cartoons of the prophet Mohammed as part of a free-speech lesson.

The attack prompted a crackdown against extremist mosques and Islamist associations, along with a vigorous defence of French secularism. (AFP)

A White Paper on the bill confirming respect for the principles of the Republic

Experts question the 1905 Law and make proposals

HRWF/ Bitter Winter (11.01.2021) - While the bill Consolidating Respect for the Principles of the Republic (former bill *on separatism*) is currently being examined by a special committee of the French National Assembly, three renowned experts have just published a white paper entitled ***Laïcité, How to Preserve it.***

To do this, the authors undertook a meticulous research in the history of secularism, examined the parliamentary debates of 1905, case law and doctrine, while contextualizing everything in order to fully understand what this law had first of all changed after almost a centenary of the Napoleonic Concordat, and how "case law on the subject has struggled to evolve while the French religious landscape has changed considerably since the promulgation of the law of 1905."

For the authors, "The government, by wishing to strongly encourage associations of law 1901 (mainly Muslim, but not only) to join the regime of religious associations of law 1905, crosses an additional level in the state control of religions (...) Unfortunately, it's a safe bet that this harmonization of constraints, whatever the mode of exercise freely chosen, will not be enough to cause a real change of paradigm and to encourage associations under the 1901 law to join the regime of the 1905 law." They join in this the fears of representatives of religions heard on January 4 by the special committee responsible for examining the bill.

The authors, the jurist Frédéric Jérôme Pansier, author of more than 50 reference works in the field of law, the sociologist of religions Massimo Introvigne, author of more than 70 books and Willy Fautre, President of the NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers International, advocate in this forty-page document an approach that preserves the spirit of the 1905 law, while modernizing it to adapt it to the current religious reality in France.

The document ends with a final conclusion: "in order for the reform to achieve its goals, it is necessary to ensure that the spirit of freedom of the law of 1905 is preserved, and that the great majority of religions which do not represent a terrorist threat, do not provoke hatred or violence, can not only have access to the advantages of the status of religious association, but also that this access is facilitated, encouraged and attractive."

The White Paper is available at <https://hrwf.eu/forb/our-advocacy-papers/>

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Livre blanc sur le projet de Loi confortant le respect des principes de la République

Des experts interrogent la Loi de 1905 et font des propositions

HRWF/ Bitter Winter (11.01.2021) - Alors que le projet de *Loi confortant le respect des principes de la République* (ex-projet de loi sur les séparatismes) est actuellement examiné par une commission spéciale de l'Assemblée Nationale, trois experts de renom viennent de publier un livre blanc intitulé **La Laïcité, Comment la Préserver**.

Pour ce faire, les auteurs ont entrepris une recherche minutieuse dans l'histoire de la laïcité, ont épluché les débats parlementaires de 1905, la jurisprudence et la doctrine, en contextualisant le tout afin de bien comprendre ce que cette loi avait tout d'abord changé après un quasi-centenaire de Concordat napoléonien, et comment « la jurisprudence sur le sujet a peiné à évoluer tandis que le paysage religieux français s'est transformé considérablement depuis la promulgation de la loi de 1905 ».

Pour les auteurs, « Le gouvernement, en souhaitant inciter fortement les associations de loi 1901 (principalement musulmanes, mais pas seulement) à rejoindre le régime des associations culturelles de loi 1905, franchit un palier supplémentaire dans le contrôle étatique des cultes (...) Malheureusement, il y a fort à parier que cette harmonisation des contraintes, quel que soit le mode d'exercice librement choisi, ne suffira pas à provoquer un réel changement de paradigme et à inciter les associations loi 1901 à rejoindre le régime de la loi 1905 ». Ils rejoignent en cela les craintes des représentants des cultes auditionnés le 4 janvier par la commission spéciale chargée d'examiner le projet de loi.

Les auteurs, le juriste Frédéric Jérôme Pansier, auteur de plus de 50 ouvrages-référence dans le domaine du droit, le sociologue des religions Massimo Introvigne, auteur de plus de 70 livres et Willy Fautré, Président de l'ONG Human Rights Without Frontiers International, préconisent dans ce document d'une quarantaine de pages une approche qui préserve l'esprit de la loi de 1905, tout en la modernisant pour l'adapter à la réalité religieuse actuelle de la France.

Le document se termine par une conclusion sans appel : « pour arriver à ce que la réforme puisse atteindre ses buts, il faut s'assurer que l'esprit de liberté de la loi de 1905 soit préservé, et que la grande majorité des cultes qui ne représentent pas de menace terroriste, ne provoquent pas à la haine ou à la violence, puissent non seulement avoir accès aux avantages du statut d'association culturelle, mais aussi que cet accès soit facilité, encouragé et attractif. »

Le livre blanc est accessible à l'adresse suivante : <https://hrwf.eu/forb/our-advocacy-papers/>

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French archbishop, others protest draft law against religious extremism

Archbishop Eric de Moulins-Beaufort says repressive legislation will bring control measures.

UCA News (06.01.2021) – <https://bit.ly/2MPL4Xp> – The head of the French bishops' conference testified to a special commission of the National Assembly that while he understands the need to strengthen national security, a proposed law designed to rein in extremist militancy would place religions and religious believers under particular surveillance.

Archbishop Eric de Moulins-Beaufort of Reims, conference president, told the commission on Jan. 4 that "the disadvantages of repressive legislation lie in the control measures they bring."

"Some may be legitimate. But we can reasonably ask why they should especially apply to religious groups, and not to other associations or elements," he said in remarks about the proposed law on separatism, which would impose new security and administrative curbs on churches and religious associations.

The legislation, introduced in December, would "strengthen respect for the principles of the republic" by compelling religious associations to comply with France's 1905 law on church-state separation and empowering regional governors to compile fuller data on religious groups.

The legislation proposes tightening rules on social media, including information "aimed at exposing a person to immediate risk of an attack on his life, or his physical or psychological security," and would speed court action against religiously motivated "threats, violence and intimidation against public service agents."

Among financial transparency rules, it would require foreign donations of more than \$12,300 to be officially registered by religious associations.

The law aims to curb "provocation of acts of terrorism, discrimination, hatred or violence" and would require official authorization for religious homeschooling, tighten rules against forced marriages and outlaw the issuing of "virginity certificates" for Muslim brides.

France's Muslim leaders were to submit opinions about the proposed law to the National Assembly commission on Jan. 6.

In his testimony, Archbishop de Moulins-Beaufort said the new financial rules would not affect Catholic parishes and dioceses, who "survived principally from faithful donations," but emphasized that other sectors of society, not just religion, should be subject to the same scrutiny.

"Our church can only express concern at such pressure, and ask why religions and religious believers are now to be kept under particular surveillance," he said.

Firmer measures have long been anticipated to contain Islamist militancy in France, where 12 people were massacred in January 2015 at the satirical magazine Charlie

Hebdo, and 90 were killed and 200 injured in coordinated attacks in Paris the following November.

In July 2016, a 75-year-old Catholic priest, Father Jacques Hamel, was murdered by Islamists during Mass at his Normandy church. In October, history teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded outside his school in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.

Protestant and Orthodox leaders also testified about the proposed law on Jan. 4 and criticized its blanket control and surveillance clauses. A leader of France's Jewish minority, Joël Mergui, warned it would "compromise the religious freedom of those who are not creating any problem."

"The enemy today is terrorism and radical Islam, not all religions -- I cannot accept that we become collateral damage," Mergui told the commission.
