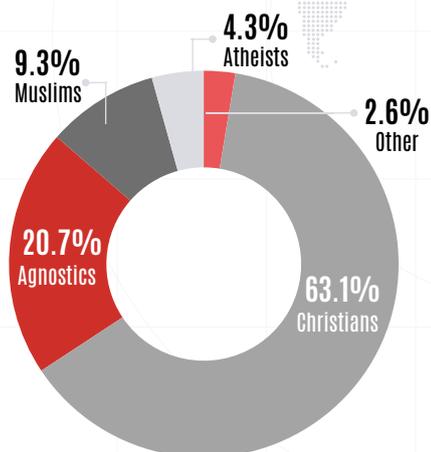




FRANCE

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The French Constitution¹ establishes the country as a secular state: “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs” (Article 1).

The 9th December 1905 Law² regarding the separation of state and religions is the cornerstone of the French principle of “laïcité”. Article 1 reads: “The Republic ensures the liberty of conscience. It guarantees the free exercise of religion, under restrictions prescribed by the interest in public order.” Article 2 provides: “The Republic does not recognise, remunerate, or subsidise any religious denomination.” The law does not apply in three departments in the Alsace-Moselle region, which are still governed by the Concordat of 1801.³

The state owns and is responsible for the maintenance of all places of worship built before 1905. Eighty-seven out of 154 cathedrals (all built before 1905) in the country are owned by the French government; nearly all of the remaining 67 are owned by municipalities.⁴ For example, the

Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris, which was devastated by a fire in April 2019,⁵ is owned by the French state and its restoration is the responsibility of the government.⁶

Despite the separation between the state and religions, religious groups may register as associations of worship or cultural associations, or both, to receive some government benefits, such as loan guarantees or leased properties at discounted rates, and places of worship may be exempt from property taxes.⁷

There are three types of schools in France: free and secular public schools with the state curriculum, private schools “under contract” with the state, and private “out of contract” schools. The schools “under contract,” 97 percent of which are Catholic, receive subsidies from the state, implement the state curriculum, and accept all children regardless of their religious affiliation. The independent “out of contract” schools neither receive state assistance nor are they required to follow the state curriculum.⁸ A 2018 law (the “Gatel Act”) increased the requirements to open and operate independent private schools, including that school directors and secondary level teachers must hold French nationality.⁹ This requirement has been criticised as disproportionately affecting Muslim schools.¹⁰

In an October 2020 speech on the “fight against Islamic

separatism” after a series of terror attacks, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that schools would be among the areas of focus. He expressed a desire to see home-schooling banned to avoid children “outside the system” at “so-called” schools “often administrated by religious extremists.”¹¹ He referred to the “Gatel Act” regulating independent schools, saying “school must first and foremost instill the values of the Republic and not those of a religion, and educate citizens not worshippers.”¹²

Sweeping legislation was proposed in December 2020 - a bill “confirming respect for the principles of the Republic.”¹³ In it, however, the government backed away from a total ban on home-schooling but proposed a number of restrictions on education including private educational institutions and home schooling (Articles 21-24). Other sections of the proposed law included stricter punishments for “provocation to acts of terrorism” (Article 3), hate speech and illegal online content (Articles 18-20), threatening civil servants (Article 4), and the dissolution of groups or closure of places of worship that seriously disturb public order or violate rights or fundamental freedoms (Articles 8 and 44). It also included a provision to prohibit health professionals from issuing “certificates of virginity” (Article 16) and protections against forced marriages (Article 17).

In Title II of the proposed law related to religion, provisions were included guaranteeing: the free exercise of worship (Article 30); increased penalties for interference with religious worship (Article 39); a simplification of the law relating to religious associations and their financing, and; increased reporting requirements for funding from outside France (Articles 26-28, 35).

The law prohibits state school students from wearing clothing or insignia that “ostensibly manifest a religious affiliation.”¹⁴ In 2018, France’s National Assembly adopted a dress code barring deputies from wearing “any conspicuous religious sign, a uniform, a logo or commercial message, or political slogans.”¹⁵ A 2010 law prohibits “the concealment of the face in the public space,” including wearing the niqab (which shows only the eyes) or the burqa (a full-face veil).¹⁶ However, during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, wearing face masks was mandatory for all. Some critics said this was an example of the anti-Muslim bias behind the 2010 law.¹⁷

Conscientious objection for moral or religious reasons is not recognised for pharmacists in France.¹⁸ In 2020, a

bioethics bill was introduced that would loosen abortion restrictions, open assisted reproductive technology to all women, and remove an abortion-specific conscience clause. The proposal in 2019, and the 2020 bill, were met with demonstrations by pro-life and pro-family groups¹⁹ and were opposed by faith leaders including the permanent council of the French Bishops Conference, the Chief Rabbi of France, and the Protestant Evangelical Committee of Human Dignity (CPDH).²⁰ Lawmakers were set to give the bill a second reading in February 2021 after review by a special bioethics committee in January.²¹

Catholic and pro-life activists around the world, along with French Catholic officials, expressed concern that the outcome of what became known as “L’affaire Lambert” would open the door to euthanasia in France.²² The legal battle over continued treatment or withdrawal of life support from Vincent Lambert, who had been in a “vegetative state” since 2008, ended when France’s highest court ruled in July 2019 that artificial nutrition and hydration could be withdrawn. After Lambert’s death in July 2019, Pope Francis said: “Let us not build a civilization that discards persons whose lives we no longer consider to be worthy of living: every life is valuable, always.”²³

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

2020 was marked with several Islamist terror attacks in France that led to the legislation some see as specifically targeting Muslims. On 29th October 2020, three people were murdered in the Notre Dame de l’Assomption Basilica in Nice by a knife-wielding Tunisian man who entered France after arriving in Italy in September. Police said the man was arrested after lunging at police officers while yelling “Allahu akbar.”²⁴ That attack was preceded by the beheading of a teacher in a Paris suburb less than two weeks earlier on 16th October. Samuel Paty, a high school history teacher, was targeted with a “fatwa” after showing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad to his students. Paty warned the class ahead of time that he would show the images so that Muslim students could leave the room to avoid offence.²⁵ On 25th September 2020, an attacker injured the victims with a meat cleaver outside the former office of Charlie Hebdo near the start of the terror trial for the Islamist attack on the magazine in 2015.²⁶

According to Jean-François Ricard, head of the National Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor’s office, as of the end of August 2020, the government had foiled at least six terror plots

in the previous months.²⁷ More than 8,000 people were being monitored by the government for possible terrorist radicalisation, but in 2020 and 2021, many sentenced terrorist detainees were scheduled to be released.²⁸ In January 2020, a report by the French internal security service, which claimed that at least 150 neighbourhoods across France were “held” by Islamists, was leaked.²⁹

The French Interior Ministry’s official hate crime figures for 2018 indicated that after two years of decline, the number of anti-Semitic incidents rose sharply in 2018 (from 311 to 541). At the same time, recorded anti-Muslim acts were at a ten-year low with 100 incidents. The number of anti-Christian acts was nearly the same as the previous year with 1,063 reported.³⁰ In the official data reported to the OSCE for 2018, the numbers registered were higher: 588 anti-Semitic crimes; 145 anti-Muslim crimes; and 1,944 anti-Christian crimes.³¹

For 2019, the number of anti-Semitic incidents rose by 27% (687 incidents, described as mostly threats, with personal attacks falling sharply); anti-Muslim acts remained relatively low (154 incidents, with 91 threats); and 1,052 anti-Christian acts were reported, the majority of which were attacks on religious property.³² Again, the figures reported to the OSCE were higher: 741 anti-Semitic crimes; 204 crimes with a bias against Muslims; and 2,038 crimes with a bias against Christians.³³

Examples of anti-Semitic incidents over the reporting period included a Jewish man beaten unconscious in a Paris elevator,³⁴ threats sent by post to government spokesperson Gabriel Attal,³⁵ the targeting of Jewish philosopher Alain Finkielkraut with anti-Semitic threats and rhetoric, as well as damage to the Strasbourg synagogue during Yellow Vest demonstrations.³⁶ A memorial tree to the Jewish victim of a 2006 murder was chopped down, a bagel bakery was vandalised with the German word “Juden”, and swastikas were found on Paris post boxes.³⁷ In 2020, conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic messages relating to the coronavirus pandemic were seen on-line. The National Office for Vigilance against Anti-Semitism (BNVCA) filed about 50 complaints from March to July 2020.³⁸ In October 2020, Jewish schools and synagogues closed temporarily in Nice after a man shouting “Allahu akbar” killed three people in a church. “We are all feeling threatened,” the Chief Rabbi of Nice said.³⁹

A man was arrested in October 2019 for firing shots out-

side the Bayonne mosque and shooting two men as he tried to set fire to the door. The incident was condemned by President Macron.⁴⁰ As of December 2020, at least 76 mosques and Islamic private schools were closed by authorities since the beginning of the year to “combat extremist Islam.”⁴¹ In November 2020, the Collective against Islamophobia in France (CCIF) voluntarily dissolved its organisation after government officials announced it would dissolve the group after the assassination of teacher Samuel Paty and accused it of nurturing a “climate of hatred” and of being an “Islamist pharmacy working against the Republic.” Two other groups, BarakaCity and Sheik Yassine, were dissolved by the government.⁴²

Alarmed by the number of incidents targeting Christian sites, in 2019 several French politicians submitted questions to the Ministry of the Interior demanding more complete information and to learn what was being done to protect them.⁴³ The Ministry responded that the government had instructed security officials to give attacks on religious sites “priority treatment.”⁴⁴

Incidents during the reporting period included the aforementioned Islamist knife attack in a Nice church in October 2020, where three people died,⁴⁵ and an attempted arson at the Cathedral of Rennes in June 2020.⁴⁶ A sampling of the intentionally set fires in churches reported by the Observatory of Religious Patrimony during the reporting period included: the Saint-Sulpice Church in Paris, Lavour Cathedral, Saint-Jacques Church in Grenoble, Sélestat Church, Saint-Maclou Cathedral in Pontoise, the Basilica in Nancy, the Evangelical Church of Annemasse, the Saint-Pierre de Neuilly sur Seine, La Tour du Pin Church.⁴⁷ A 10-meter-high crucifix on the summit of Pic Saint-Loup was toppled and destroyed, with inscriptions around the pedestal reading “Witch Power.”⁴⁸ Crosses and Christian figures were broken and vandalised in cemeteries.⁴⁹ Christian converts from Islam had difficulty receiving asylum in some cases either because the French government does not believe there were threats in their Muslim-majority countries of origin, or that the convert would not be persecuted upon deportation.⁵⁰

During the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the French government completely banned public worship services from 17th March to 29th May 2020. The Catholic Bishop’s Conference filed a claim against the government. After the Council of State invalidated the ban, services were permitted with distancing rules. Again, in November 2020, the government suspended public worship as a health

measure. Christian groups demonstrated against these prohibitions, which included bans on outdoor worship or prayer.⁵¹ Again, for a second time, the Council of State invalidated the ban and services with distancing rules were permitted.

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The principle of “laïcité” (separation between state and religion) enshrined in the constitution, and the 1905 Law in France, are the traditional cornerstones for the relations

between state and religion. However, recent Islamist-inspired terrorist attacks have prompted the government to further regulate areas of life relating to religion or belief. Rising anti-Semitism and the high incidence of anti-Christian acts in the last two years are signs that societal tolerance is deteriorating. As the government seeks to stem the tide of extremism and lack of social integration with sweeping legislation, fundamental rights of all believers could be challenged in the near future.

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