

## **Regulating religious diversity in the Parisian area**

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*(Sebastien FATH, draft paper)*

On April 2, 2011, Protesters have gathered at Place de la République in Paris to raise their objections to the debates about the French laws (Laïcité) governing secularism, emphasizing the fact that this debate was too much focused on Islamic practices in France. The groups participating in the rally objected to what they considered a false discussion on cultural aspects of Islam that incites Islamophobia and stigmatization of Muslims living here in France. One of the main claims was just : let's not change the rules. Let's not change laïcité (laicity). So nothing new under the sun ? Does the regulation of religious diversity in the Parisian area not change in any ways ?

The answer is not that simple. To address the challenges of regulating today's religious diversity in Paris, three questions will be asked. First : what about the relationship between the secular regulation and Catholicism ? Second : what about the relationship between the secular regulation and new visible religious minorities ? And third : what about the current trends towards a more pragmatic and diverse regulating mode ?

### **I. A secular regulation still putting Catholicism first ? *Towards a more separate but relaxed deal ?***

From worship of the Supreme Being in Revolutionary times to the World Youth Conferences (JMJ) in 1997, or from the Paris Mosque inauguration in 1926 to public processions for Ganesha the Hindu god, the religious landscape in the Parisian capital has always been quite diverse and complex, yet colored by the strong overtones of the Catholic Church. This echoes to the well known exclamation attributed in 1593 to Henri of Navarre « Paris is well worth a mass ». Before and after the 1905 law, Paris has for long been characterized by the might of the Catholic church, which made this city a religious capital<sup>1</sup>. Let's see, through a recent example, how this lasting Catholic impact reframes itself in the wider context of a secular regulation of religious diversity.

The example chosen is a highly publicized Catholic event organized in Paris on the 24th and 25th of March, 2011. It was the Vatican's first-ever "Courtyard

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jacques-Olivier Boudon's works, especially *Paris, capitale religieuse sous le Second Empire* (Paris, Cerf, 2001).

of the Gentiles”, which was held in Paris, France from March 24-25. The Pontifical Council for Culture, led by president Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, organized the two-day discussion between believers and non-believers in historically important cultural sites in the French capital. The Courtyard was formed by the Vatican's culture department after the Pope Benedict XVI hoped for such a forum to foster dialogue on religion in a December 2009 speech<sup>2</sup>.

Catholics, agnostics and atheists examined themes of enlightenment, religion and shared reason during public gatherings at the offices of the UNESCO, the Sorbonne University and the French Academy during the inaugural event led on the 24th of March, 2011.

The evening of the second day (25th of March, 2011) was capped off with a large gathering downtown Paris at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. The Taizé community (a very strong Ecumenical community located in Burgundy, which is targeting the European youth) held a prayer service inside the Notre Dame Church as people gathered for music and mixed in the square outside. A light show beamed onto the cathedral facade was part of the public festivities. In a pre-recorded message addressed to French youth in the square, Pope Benedict XVI said that the “question of God” should not be absent from contemporary discussion. He called all young people - believers and non-believers - to “rediscover the path of dialogue” in France and in Europe. Here is a significant part of the pope's discourse in Paris :

*"Dear young people, dear friends! I know that at the invitation of Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, the Archbishop of Paris, and of Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, you are gathered in great numbers in front of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. I greet all of you, together with our brothers and friends from the Taizé Community. I am grateful to the Pontifical Council for having taken up and extended my invitation to open a number of "Courts of the Gentiles" within the Church. This image refers to the vast open space near the Temple of Jerusalem where all those who did not share the faith of Israel could approach the Temple and ask questions about religion. There they could meet the scribes, speak of faith and even pray to the unknown God. The Court was then an area of separation, since Gentiles did not have the right to enter the consecrated area, yet Jesus Christ came to "break down the dividing wall" between Jews and Gentiles, and to "reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility in himself". In the words of Saint Paul, "He came and proclaimed peace..." (cf. Eph 2:14-17). At the heart of the "City of Light", in front of the magnificent masterwork of French religious culture which is Notre Dame, a great court has been created in order to give fresh impetus to respectful and friendly encounter between people of differing convictions. You young people, believers and non-believers alike, have chosen to come together this evening, as you do in your daily lives, in order to meet one another and to discuss the great questions of human existence. Nowadays many*

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<sup>2</sup> "I think that today too the Church should open a sort of 'Court of the Gentiles' in which people might in some way latch on to God, without knowing him and before gaining access to his mystery, at whose service the inner life of the Church stands. Today, in addition to interreligious dialogue, there should be a dialogue with those to whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown and who nevertheless do not wish to be left utterly without God, but rather to draw near to him, even if as to the Unknown."

*people acknowledge that they are not part of any religion, yet they long for a new world, a world that is freer, more just and united, more peaceful and happy. In speaking to you tonight, I think of all the things you have to say to each other. Those of you who are non-believers challenge believers in a particular way to live in a way consistent with the faith they profess and by your rejection of any distortion of religion which would make it unworthy of man. Those of you who are believers long to tell your friends that the treasure dwelling within you is meant to be shared, it raises questions, it calls for reflection. The question of God is not a menace to society, it does not threaten a truly human life! The question of God must not be absent from the other great questions of our time. Dear friends, you are challenged to build bridges between one another. Take advantage of this opportunity to discover, deep within your hearts and with serious arguments, the ways which lead to profound dialogue"*

This discourse sheds a renewed light upon the current reframing of the way religious regulations in Paris deal with the Catholic giant. The catholic Church still claims a strong heritage, symbolized by Notre Dame de Paris. It is still very capable to mobilize crowds, intellectuals and officials for a highly public event like this one, highlighting the fact that today's secular Paris still entertains a kind of special relationship with Catholicism, as the still major religious actor in the Parisian area as well as in French society. But meanwhile, what the pope emphasizes here, along with Cardinal Andre Vingt-Trois, archbishop of Paris, is a very clear statement about the minority situation of Catholicism, in a plural world where convictions collide, compete and debate. **Today's Catholicism in Paris does not see itself in a dominating mode anymore**, or in a conflicting mode. It has internalized pluralism, accepted the secular rules of a society in which God and religious practice do not make sense anymore for a majority of Parisians. As Blandine Chelini-Pont or Philippe Portier rightly emphasize in their works, "laïcité" has become the cultural norm of French Catholics"<sup>3</sup>, and the pope obviously takes this fact into account when he speaks in Paris. The role played today by Catholicism in religious regulations in the French capital is not merely driven by the idea of a aggressive counter-model anymore, at least if this counter-model is perceived as against secularism and laïcité. It frames itself as a way to witness peacefully, and to boost "respectful and friendly encounter between people of differing convictions". A more separate but relaxed deal ?

## **II. A secular regulation still blind to religious diversity ? The example of Hinduism between resentment and acceptance**

While Catholicism remains a major player in religious regulations in Paris, its role has changed. But does it have an impact on the way minority religions are treated in the Parisian area ? Or are secular regulations of religion in Paris still too

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Blandine Chelini-Pont, "Catholics in France", paper given at the international conference "Politics and religion in France and the United States", 25-26th of Septembre, 2005, Florida State University.

blind to empirical religious diversity, as many do accuse the French ? Let's take another example from the Hindu religious minority.

In the French capital, on the Rue Faubourg St Denis, near the Gare du Nord Station, half-a-hundred Sri Lankan and Pondicherry Tamil-owned restaurants and shops with names like 'Saree Palace', 'Chola Voyages', 'Rio Sapna', 'Ayngaran DVDs' and 'Sakthi Jewellery' develop since more than three decades a thriving trade, in what is now pinned down as the Paris Indian neighborhood.

But the mile-long Indian quarter is France's only visible, if impermanent and grossly commercial proof that it is home to a small but stable assortment of South Asian communities with disparate faiths and differing spiritual and social aspirations. In fact, it seems that Hindu temple downtown Paris and Sikh gurdwara in Bobigny (which is the name for worship place for the Sikh) stand proud only on paper, as Rashmee Roshan Lall writes in an article published in *The Times of India*<sup>4</sup>.

Rajaram is an IT entrepreneur who left Chennai for Paris 20 years ago. He says : "I have been battling to get official recognition for Hinduism as a religion, but to no avail." Shingara Singh is a member of the Bobigny Gurdwara Management Committee, which was running in 2005 a makeshift temple for the country's estimated 10,000 Sikhs and was raising money to build its grand architectural declaration of faith in France. He adds : "There is a Ramdas mandir near Paris, but there is no temple for the Hindus, no mosque for Pakistanis and South Asian Muslims. There is a definite void in the lives of our communities".

Commenting on these powerful assessments, the Indian journalist strongly emphasizes what appears to him as a very dogmatic Parisian secularism : "if France's refusal officially to enfold minority religions seems dogmatic, it is meant to be. Nearly 400 years ago, Voltaire, the most eloquent and tireless advocate of the anti-dogmatic movement, the Enlightenment, famously declared, "If God did not exist it would be necessary for us to invent Him."

Since then, secularism, color-blindness and ethnic-neutrality is the closest thing France has had to a state religion. The trouble, say non-white Frenchman, is that the principles of secularism do not appear to be set in stone for everyone and they seem well able to accommodate white Christian exceptions. This includes allowing the eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine-which were German when the state officially stopped funding the church in 1905."

From this particular case study of Hindu-Sikh community in Paris, one could conclude that the more things change, the more they remain the same in terms

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<sup>4</sup> Rashmee Roshan Lall, "In Secular Paris, saree is scary", *The Times of India*, 14th of November, 2005.

of regulating religion in the Parisian landscape. But is it true ? One can not help but notice that this perception seems largely exaggerated. First, many comments quoted by the journalist are not accurate. Of course there are worship places in Paris for Pakistani and South Asian Muslims. And of course, the idea of "official recognition" for Hinduism is nonsense, since there is no "official recognition" for any religion in Paris or in the rest of France (except Alsace and Moselle indeed). Second, let's remind that more and more popular and media-friendly Hindu demonstration happens in Paris since 1985. It is the Ganesha demonstration, celebrating the God-headed elephant and his brother Murugan. It celebrated its 25th Anniversary in 2010. It goes from the rue du Faubourg St Denis to the Barbès area, and vice versa. Statues are installed in the morning, and then carried by the faithful, surrounded by musicians and dancers, walking barefoot. Lots of believers are also holding heavy decorations combining wood and feathers. The leading feature is a big elephant coming from the Bollywood studios. In front of the chariots, the road is carefully cleaned with sprayed water mixed with rose perfume and saffron (saffron), in order to purify the Parisian ground before the gods. Food is offered all along the procession by individuals but also local businesses, and many people come to see and even walk along. Organized since 1985, this procession appears to illustrate that minority religions are not that discriminated in front of "Christian exceptions", as the *Times of India* seems to imply. Parisian Hindus can proudly claim now a brand new temple located at the 17th, rue Pajol, from which the procession started in 2010, and will start also in 2011. Parisian officials have shown no hostility whatsoever to this very public and loud celebration, illustrating the fact that minority religions and cultural diversity is more and more accepted in a relaxed way.

The much wider example of Islam could have been also highlighted here, with many examples coming from the current town council, led since March 2001 by the major Bertrand Delanoë. The Bertrand Delanoë team has conducted a very open policy to build bridges and understanding with the diverse Muslim communities in Paris. Among many illustrations, the Ramadan nights, including every year the participation of many officials and politicians, involving some famous public places like the Charlety Stadium (Ramadan 2002), and the creation of Institute for Muslim Cultures (Institut des Cultures d'Islam), build with the money of the Parisian citizen, emphasize current changes in the way Parisian authorities deal with religious diversity. Although led mainly by a Socialist team, belonging to a political tradition often linked with secular ideology and even fight against organized religion, the Paris municipality deals in a very open and pragmatic way with religious diversity, as soon as this diversity does not appear to be a threat to social order<sup>5</sup>. Bertrand Delanoë is not the last to openly praise the social benefits from a peaceful and inclusive regulation of cultural and religious diversity. On the Buddhist side, the recent

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<sup>5</sup> While open to the positive social contribution of religions, Bertrand Delanoë does maintain a strong stance against "cults". Cf. this AFP article, "Sectes: Delanoë contre tout laxisme" (*Le Figaro*, 21th of February, 2008, available on internet).

research conducted by Fabien Quéré on the Laotian Buddhists in Paris also emphasizes the fact that minority religions are more and more welcomed in this peaceful way by local authorities. At a higher level, let's also remind the fact that the Paris mayor himself, Bertrand Delanoë designated the Dalaï Lama an Honorary Citizen of the City on the 7th of June, 2009. It was primarily a political stance, but also a public display of the municipality commitment to religious freedom, including the Tibetan Buddhist minority. This leads us to conclusive remarks, emphasizing the current trends of religious regulations.

### **III. A secular regulation still dogmatic and centralized ? Towards more local diversity and pragmatism**

See from the United States, France often seems entrenched in its old battles against religion. But from the particular Parisian lens, secular regulations of religion appear by now less dogmatic and less centralized, and the main trend is clearly leading towards more local diversity and pragmatism. After Catholic and Hindu examples, let's conclude with other short case studies involving local town councils and Islam in the wider Paris area. These case studies will be taken from Françoise Duthu's research<sup>6</sup>.

Françoise Duthu has published a book which title is : *Le maire et la mosquée. Islam et laïcité en Ile de France*, L'Harmattan, 2008. She has started her research after having observed a kind of hostile climate towards Muslims in the Parisian area. She wanted to know more, and check if local regulations show a different picture. In order to find responses, she has analyzed local regulations in five municipalities located in the wider Paris area : Argenteuil, Montreuil, Rosny-sous-bois, Créteil and Bobigny. The main focus of her research has been the mosque, described as a complex and polarizing artifact for the local life, both politically, religiously and culturally. To summarize her long study, Françoise Duthu emphasizes the fact that Islam is really taken seriously by local town councils. Two main types can be observed : an explicit public policy, openly illustrated and explained, like in Montreuil, with Brard, and Creil, with Cathala. And a more implicit policy, less explained but still quite obvious. There is also another distinction to be made, between a pragmatic secular model which puts community and living together first, and a more dogmatic approach of secularism which highlights absolute religious neutrality and public atheism. But the main conclusion drowned by Françoise Duthu is that in all situations, even when Islam is seen with suspicion and fear, religious regulations are currently led with more and more pragmatism and openness.

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<sup>6</sup> Françoise Duthu has shared her work in a work session organized by the "Dieu Change à Paris" GSRL program (led by Martine Cohen and Sebastien Fath), on the 11th of October, 2010. See <http://dieuchangeaparis.hautetfort.com/archive/2011/01/31/reunion-programme-dcp-2010-11-n-1-francoise-duthu-compte-ren.html#more>

Contrasting with the cliché of a very centralized France, a great diversity of local situations and regulations has been observed by Françoise Duthu. In Montreuil, Jean-Pierre Brard, although strongly influenced by his communist identity, has created a local council of religions. In 2003, he has also inaugurated a Civic Center for the study of religions<sup>7</sup> which provides courses about all religions, taking into account the fact that "more and more people are religiously illiterate", and should be "informed"<sup>8</sup>.

In Argenteuil, the mayor attempted to implement a local charter of Islam, written by the town council. In all cases, public authorities seem to have a hard time to identify and choose their religious counterparts. Caught between political motivations, lobbying, impact from foreign countries (Algerian Islam versus Moroccan Islam for example), towns in the Parisian area struggle and tend to offer a very diverse panel of regulation models. This leads Françoise Duthu to conclude that the current challenge in the Parisian area is definitely not a centralized and dogmatic way to deal with Muslim local diversity. It is almost all the opposite, as municipalities display a much too diverse range of regulations, jeopardizing the very idea of equality between religions and citizens at a local level.

This does not mean that old State-control patterns have disappeared. These patterns remain visible in many ways, including the temptation to reduce the number of legitimate religious counterparts, or to choose between religious actors, or the temptation to lecture religions about a kind of religious correctness dictated by the political or cultural mood of the day. But these patterns do work in a more and more disorganized way, opening the way of a much greater diversity of local approaches from mayors who favor pragmatism over old secular ideologies.

To conclude this short overview of regulating religious diversity in the Parisian area, one can't help but notice that the Parisian example should help us to downplay a little the harsh contrast often made between a peaceful regulation of religious diversity in the United States, and a tense State-centered regulation in France. Current heated debates around the Muslim veil or headscarf<sup>9</sup>, or hallal recipes in certain French fast-foods may hide local realities in **which religious diversity is less and less seen as a threat, and more and more perceived as a pragmatic tool, among others, which could help to promote better ways to live together.**

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<sup>7</sup> Centre civique d'étude du fait religieux in Montreuil.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Louise Couvelaire, "Religieux : petits cours municipaux", *Nouvel Observateur, supplément Paris Obs Île de France*, 22th of November, 2005 (website).

<sup>9</sup> Let's remember the conflict about the headscarf started in in a Paris-suburb secondary school in 1989, where there was a local debate concerning admittance to class of three girls who refused to take off their headscarves.