

# RiMe

Rivista dell'Istituto  
di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea

ISBN 9788897317470

ISSN 2035-794X

numero 5/I n. s., dicembre 2019

## Religious history of France and public debate: The “eternal return” of a polemic issue

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7410/1390>

Istituto di Storia dell'Europa Mediterranea  
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## **Special Issue**

### **Religious culture and education in 20th and 21st century Europe**

**Maria Giuseppina Meloni and Anna Maria Oliva (eds.)**



## RiMe 5/I n.s. (December 2019)

### Special Issue

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## Religious history of France and public debate: The 'eternal return' of a polemic issue

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Date of receipt: 25th September 2019

Date of acceptance: 6th November 2019

### *Abstract*

Religious history of France and public debate: The 'eternal return' of a polemic issue. It is well known that religious history has long been a controversial topic in France, due to long-standing polemics about secularism and the relationship between the Churches and the State. But a consensus had finally emerged around two possible stories, one of liberal inspiration and the other marked by a Catholicism that was more critical of modernity. Since the end of the twentieth century, the conditions for this balance have changed, due to the emergence of Islam as the second religious denomination, and the resulting conflict over religious pluralism. Over the past twenty years, some Catholics, minority but visible, have also committed themselves against the new family and life policies. Debates on Islam, on the one hand, and gender policies, on the other, have thus revived controversies over France's religious history and its teaching in middle and high schools.

### *Keywords*

Religious history; Church and State; Secularism; Public Education; Religious Pluralism.

### *Resumé*

L'histoire religieuse en France et le débat public: l'«éternel retour» d'un enjeu polémique. On sait que l'histoire religieuse a longtemps fait l'objet de controverses en France, du fait de polémiques anciennes autour de la laïcité et de la relation entre les Eglises et l'Etat. Mais un consensus avait fini par se faire autour de deux histoires possibles, l'une d'inspiration libérale et l'autre marquée par un catholicisme plus critique à l'égard de la modernité. Depuis la fin du vingtième siècle, les conditions de cet équilibre ont changé, du fait de l'émergence de l'islam comme seconde confession religieuse, et du conflit sur le pluralisme religieux qui en a résulté. Durant les vingt dernières années, une partie des catholiques, minoritaires mais visibles, se sont par ailleurs engagés contre les nouvelles politiques de la famille et de la vie. Les débats sur l'islam, d'une part, et sur les politiques du genre, d'autre part, ont ainsi ravivé les controverses sur du l'histoire religieuse de la France et sur son enseignement dans les collèges et les lycées.

### *Mots-clés*

Histoire religieuse; Eglise et Etat; Laïcité; Enseignement; Pluralisme religieux.



1. Bibliography. - 2. Curriculum vitae.

This contribution concerns the relationship between the French conception of Religious history, and the public debate about Religions and Politics. I will not directly speak about teaching the history of religion in French Public School, because Isabelle Saint-Martin proposes a contribution on this subject in the proceedings of this same conference. But I would like to propose some reflections about the political and cultural conditions in which teaching religious history is possible or not in France.

1. Before going any further, I must present one important issue of this debate, which is the question of secularism (in French: *laïcité*) as it arises in France (Mayeur, 1997; Baubérot, 2015; Portier, 2016). For a contemporary French historian, there is a basic distinction between secularism and secularization. Secularization is the process by which the different sectors of social activity, take their autonomy from the religious sphere that originally founded them. Secularization is therefore a social, cultural, anthropological phenomenon, and a plurisecular one, by which the religions comes to be less and less relevant for explaining collective behaviors and social attitudes. Secularism is a political and a legal process, in which we strictly separate the religious sphere and the political one, since the 1905 Law about separation of Church and State. Secularization started in the Middle Ages, while secularism is a consequence of the Revolution of 1789.

So, secularism and secularization are two different things, even if we can understand how French secularism reinforced the process of secularization. Practically, regarding the public education system and the teaching of religious history, the combination of both has important consequences. For a long time, pupils, children, young persons acquired a religious culture in their family, or in their Church, with catechism and religious education. This religious culture was a background for understanding certain parts of general history, like history of the Reformation, history of arts, history of the Enlightenment movement, etc. Due to the secularization, this background gradually disappeared during the second half of the twentieth century, and it has become necessary for secondary school teachers to form their pupils to 'religious facts'. But, due to the secularism, it is very difficult for them to define how they can go "teaching about the religions", and about religious history, without doing a properly "religious teaching" (Béraud - Willaime, 2009).

In the late 1980s a second issue went in the public debate, related to the fact that Islam had become the second religious denomination in France. The famous "case of the Islamic veil" came in 1989 in a secondary school seated in

Creil, a medium-sized city in the Paris region. This case should conduct to the Act of 15 March 2004 prohibiting the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols in State schools (Pelletier, 2005, pp. 159-176). In this perspective, for secondary school teachers, the issue became to understand how it was still possible to promote a secular teaching of religion history in schools where the question of religious belonging began to create difficulties and tensions. On February 2002, a few months after the September 11 attacks, Régis Debray published an official report about teaching religious facts in public education schools (Debray, 2002). A few months later, Régis Debray created the European Institute for Religious sciences (IESR), with the official support of president Chirac.

All these facts explain the role of several French scholars, and several French academics, strongly engaged both in religious sciences and in the public debate about Religion and Politics. And it also explains the importance of certain books, certain synthesis about religious French history, which are written by academics, but which 'cross the border' between the Academic World and the Public sphere of free debate, as would say Jürgen Habermas.

These books, not so plentiful, are my main topic in this paper. What I want to analyze now is the fact that these books, since a couple of decades, are no more historical books. We have in France philosophers and anthropologists who 'cross the border', as Marcel Gauchet, Michel Onfray, Rémy Brague or Régis Debray himself. But no more historians, and this is the main issue I want to develop now.

The last great synthesis about French religious history have been published during the eighties and the nineties of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We can quote two main publications. First is: Rémond - le Goff, 1988-1992. René Rémond (1918-2007) was a very well-known French scholar (Mercier, 2018). He was an academic historian of Catholicism, and a specialist of Political Sciences. He also was known as a Catholic scholar, with a strong engagement in the public debate about Religions and Politics. Jacques Le Goff (1924-2014) was a medievalist, a member of the *École des Annales*, and the founder of the *École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales* in 1974 (Pelletier, 2018, pp. 117-124). He was not really a specialist of religious history, but rather a social historian. But, as a medievalist, he worked on a Christian society and a Christian conception of politics.

The four volumes of *Histoire de la France religieuse* were a publishing success, with a pocket edition published at the end of the nineties. They proposed to a broad public a liberal history of religion, and an academic one, really 'secular', that means that the different authors (there were about 12 authors for the four volumes) presented religious history of France, but without taking any personal position concerning the debates and discussions internal to the Catholic church,

or Protestant churches, or Jewish world. Nevertheless, maybe should we say that they adopted a political position: Le Goff was a secularist scholar, and René Rémond a liberal Catholic, and so we can see that the French model of Secularism coincides with a liberal position, promoting individual freedom and promoting a conception of Religion which highlights the primacy of individual consciousness over religious obligations.

The second great synthesis is a little different from the former one: Cholvy - Hilaire, 1986-1988. It counts three volumes, for a contemporaneous history of religions in France (since the French Revolution), written by two academics: Gerard Cholvy (1932-2017) was a professor at the University of Montpellier, and Yves-Marie Hilaire (1927-2014) a professor at the University of Lille. The three volumes were also a publishing success – with a semi-pocket edition – and a series of books which was well known among catholic activists, catholic militants. But, unlike previous authors, Cholvy and Hilaire were adopting positions about internal religious debates. For taking some examples: they were critic about the French model of secularism and about the strict separation between Church and State. They were also critic about the French model of Catholic Action, and about the French experience of worker-priests and Workers Mission. And they were very critic about the way in which the second Council of Vatican has been implemented in France.

Stated bluntly, the history of René Rémond and Jacques Le Goff was a little more leftist than the history of Cholvy and Hilaire. But the difference between both synthesis was interesting for each reader, because, in a certain way, it reflected something of the French debate about the place of Christianity in Modern France, and about the internal discussion between catholic believers. And so, there was something as a *consensus* concerning these two ways of telling the history of Religious France. French readers could not agree about all the details of one or the other synthesis, but they agreed about the general framework. And this consensus was sufficient to fuel and aliment the public debate about religion and politics, religions and democracy.

We have no more history like this one since 2000. I mean that we have no more historical synthesis able to cross the frontier between Academic world and the public sphere, and able to make a consensus about a general framework. This is the main topic of the second part of my article.

2. In fact, the alone popular synthesis, published since 2000, about religious history of France, has been the book edited by Corbin (2007), which really was a publishing success. Alain Corbin was born in 1936. He is a social historian, very well known in France for his seminar researches in history of sensibility, history of senses (sense of vision, sense of hearing, sense of smell, sense of taste), and history of mentalities. He received a catholic education and his book, which is

subtitled *Pour comprendre l'histoire de notre temps* (To understand our present history) is carried along by a nostalgic conception of ancient Catholicism. Something as “the world we have lost”, for paraphrasing the title of the famous book of the English historian Peter Laslett in 1965 (Laslett, 1965). Such a book (which is a very interesting book, there is no doubt about this) makes a consensus, but a consensus without any real contemporaneous issue, except the nostalgia of the past.

Yet, of course, we have in France some debates, and strong debates, about the relationship between religions and politics, between religions and democracy, between religions and individual freedom, in a double context: 1. International terrorism, the terrorist attacks of 2015 against Charlie Hebdo and against the Bataclan Concert Hall, and their consequences (Pelletier, 2018b); and 2. The polemics about the 2013 “Mariage pour tous” Act, that is the marriage for persons of the same sex and question of LGBT parenting. One French singularity, compared to our European neighbors, has been the strength, the intensity of the polemics about the “mariage pour tous”, and, more generally, about all that concerns politics of gender and politics of life (euthanasia, medically assisted procreation, bioethics more generally) (Béraud -Portier, 2015; Raison du Cleuziou, 2019). And of course the Catholic culture, and the Catholic Church, plays a central role in all these controversies. But in these debates, Religious history has no more place. In such debates, we mainly listen to political activist, religious believers, sociologists, philosophers and lawyers. But it has become hard to make the voice of historians heard, just as if the passing of religious history would make it no relevant for understanding the present issue about the relationship between religion and democracy, religion and modernity.

In order to explain this fact, I would like to focus on what I have called, in a recent paper, “the paradoxical religious pluralism of the French society” (Pelletier, 2017, pp. 395-410). As you know, historically, France is a Catholic country. In 1962, 85% of French interviewed persons still declared that they were Catholics. This past heritage had an impact on the way in which we considered the religious history of France. This history is primarily a history of Catholicism. Judaism and Protestantism appear as two little minorities, and two persecuted minorities: persecutions against protestants during the 17<sup>th</sup> century; persecutions against Jews, and antisemitism, with the Dreyfus affair and, of course, with the Vichy Regime (1940-1944) and its responsibility in Holocaust. And Islam just appears as a religion of colonized peoples, in Saharan and sub-saharan Africa.

Everything changed during the last decades. When you read newspapers today, when you go on the digital medias, you can see that the French society

now defines itself as a multi faith and multidenominational society, with a second religious denomination which is, nowadays and since the eighties, Islam. As historians or sociologists, we can confirm this fact. However, this situation needs to be analyzed thoroughly.

On one hand, during the last years, the persons who define themselves as Catholics still represent about 50% of French population: between 45 and 55%, depending on the way in which the question is asked. And persons who define themselves as unbelievers, or undenominational, represent about 40% (between 35 and 45%). In fact, statistically, our religious diversity concerns only 10% of the population (Muslims, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, Orthodox persons). That means that French society remains massively dominated by the past heritage of a face-to-face between Catholics and Unbelievers, which is the historical basis of our contemporaneous history.

But, on the other hand, when you asked people if they have a religious practice, the situation is different. Only 8% of Catholic people regularly go to Mass (regularly, that is one time a month): 8% of 50%, which is 4% of the French population. But 40% of Muslim persons pray each day and regularly frequent Mosque: 40% of 6% is a little less than 3% of the French population. 4% on one hand, 3% on the other hand: figures are comparable, almost similar.

What is important, in order to understand the French situation regarding the religious diversity, is the fact that our current religious diversity concerns religious practice more than religious belonging. A majority denomination, Catholicism, with a low level of practice, coexists with a minority denomination, Islam, with a high level of practice.

As historians of Religious facts, we can explain this difference. We can explain that modern Catholicism and modern Islam do not give the same place to collective practices. In the same order of ideas, we know that more than 70% of Muslim believers observe the Ramadan, while less of 10% of Christian believers observe the Christian Lent. We can also understand that religious practices, for a minority, and a socially dominated minority, can be a way to get included in common society. But as a historian of politics, we must also observe that religious practices are visible, and that religions belonging is not.

Indeed, we live in societies of visibility: modern, or post-modern societies, are societies of visibility, societies where the question of visibility, and mainly the visibility of minorities, has become a central political issue. And, indeed, the recent French Religious crises are crises of visibility: the case of Islamic veil is an issue of visibility; the question of Muslim prayers in the street is a question of visibility, in a society which is secularized, but a society which, in the same time, considers that Catholicism is an important part of its historical heritage, of its historical identity (Dumons - Gugelot, 2017).

A short tale will illustrate this topic. In June 2015, Dalil Boubakeur, the Rector of the Paris Mosque, declared on a radio that, due to the fact that in many places it was difficult for Muslim believers to have a building for collective prayer, and due to the fact that in many places Churches were empty, maybe the Catholic Church could lend some church buildings to Muslims. In the following hours, he declared that it was not a specific demand; he apologized for such a reckless declaration; he explained that it was idle talk. But it was too late. He had launched a polemic. And, in July, the magazine *Valeurs actuelles*, which is politically situated between right and extreme right, started an online petition, for “saving the French steeples” (“Ne touchez pas à nos Eglises”, 2015). Several thousands of persons signed the petition, and of course not only, not firstly, practicing Catholics or even Catholics by belonging. In fact, this was not a religious issue, but an identity issue, just as if the French society should have needed Catholic steeples, Catholic churches, not for praying, but because they are a part the identity landscape of a society which however defines itself as a secular and secularized society.

We can now come back to our first topic: how writing synthesis about Religion history in France has become difficult and maybe impossible for several years? I will conclude this short paper with three answers.

1. For a long time, since the beginning of the twentieth century, Religious history could be controversial, but always on the basis of a consensual background and within a sort of consensual framework. This is not anymore the case today. This relative consensus has disappeared. Traditionally, the discussion between Catholics and Secularists about this history concerned the way in which we had built a modern and secularized democracy. As French Catholicism has always been pluralist, there were different ways for telling the same history, but it was with the same global framework: something that we called “la guerre des deux France”, the war between two France, the catholic one and the secularist one.

2. During the two last decades, when Islam became the second French religious denomination, and when politics of life, politics of gender, became a huge issue of controversies and polemics, a second split line, a second dividing line has come to complicate the first one. This second front line separates, on one hand, persons, Catholics and non-Catholics, believers and unbelievers, who have a liberal conception of politics, who accept the new role of Islam in the French society and who agree with the new politics of life, and, on the other hand, persons, Catholics and non-Catholics, who consider that the Catholic heritage of moral and political values is part of our collective identity. These persons, believers or non-believers, think that the politics of life, and the rise of Islam as the second French religious denomination (and for them, maybe one



day the first one) are a danger. Their conception of the religious past of France has become a patrimonial conception, and not only an historical one.

3. In such a situation, it becomes more difficult for academic historians to propose a common framework for Religious history of France. It becomes more and more difficult for teachers, in secondary public school, to speak about history of religions. I am not sure that this situation would be specific to France. But I am sure that a program like *REIRES*, for all the reasons that I have just mentioned and explained, can play a civic role in Europa today, and not only a scientific one, by crossing scientific research in Religion studies and history with a strong reflection about the relationship between religious diversity and European citizenship.

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## 2. Curriculum vitae

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