

# La France à la loupe

## Religions in France

The **French religious landscape** has become much more **diverse** in the past decades and religious practices, while now less ritualistic, have become secular and more individual.

### ■ The panorama of religions

No official statistics on religious affiliation have been available since 1872, on which date it was prohibited to collect data on people's religious persuasion and ethnic origin. Estimates are now poll-based. According to the 2006 Machelon Report commissioned by interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy, the following religions are found in France (Source: IFOP polling organization/La Croix 2006 poll):

- **Catholicism** is still the majority religion. In 2006, 65 per cent of French people declared themselves Catholics;
- **Islam** ranks second out of religions in France and consists of very many denominations. The number of people who come from countries with Islam as their religion is estimated at around 5 million, i.e. 6 per cent of the French population;
- **Protestantism** accounts for 2 per cent of the population, i.e. 1.2 million people, including 350,000 Evangelicals and Pentecostals;
- the "**historic Christianities**" number around 750,000 people who are members of the Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church and various Oriental Churches;
- **Judaism** is practised by some 600,000 people who are mostly Sephardim;
- Some 400,000 people practise **Buddhism**;

- **atypical religious movements** enjoy quite a big following, like Jehovah's Witnesses who say they number 140,000.

France has the most Muslims, Jews and Buddhists in Europe.

## ■ The place of religion in French secular society

The various religions in France support the **principle of secularism which marks the separation between church and state**. Article 1 of the French Constitution of 1958 provides – based on Article 10 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen – that France is a democratic and social **secular republic** that ensures equality before the law of all citizens, irrespective of origin, race or religion. **The French Republic respects all beliefs and the State is the guarantor of freedom of belief and religious pluralism**. The activities of a religious movement can be curtailed only if they break law and order<sup>1</sup>. **The State must remain neutral** by not making any one religion pre-eminent and treating all religions on a par. No given religion can be directly financed by the State.

While religions are separate from the State, they are not strictly a private matter. Religious leaders intervene in the **public debate** to give opinions on issues of our time such as **ethical questions** relating to progress in the life sciences and health care<sup>2</sup>.

**Denominational education** is dispensed in private teaching establishments (from nursery school to higher education) attended by over 2 million students, i.e. 17 per cent of the total student complement. Most, i.e. 98 per cent, of these establishments are under contract with the State, which means they are committed to teaching national curricula, while in return teachers are paid by the State. Denominational Catholic schools account for 97 per cent of contract private education establishments. In 2003, there were 256 Jewish schools attended by some 30,000 students, i.e. 30 per cent of young Jews in the corresponding age group. There are 4 Muslim schools in France, all of which are non-contract: the *collège-lycée La Réussite* in Aubervilliers (Seine-Saint-Denis department), established in 2001; the *Taalim-al-Islam* primary school opened in 1990 on the Reunion Island; the *lycée Averroès*, opened in Lille in 2003; and the *collège-lycée al-Kindi*, founded in 2007 in Décines, near Lyon<sup>3</sup>.

There are also denominational chaplaincies in government schools, hospitals and the armed forces.

---

1 : Article 10 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen: "No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law."

2 : The National Ethics Advisory Committee for the Life Sciences and Health (**CCNE**) is made up of personalities from the principal religious faiths (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim). These personalities are appointed by decree of the French health minister.

3 : « 2 millions d'élèves dans le privé » ["2 million students in private education"], by Aurélie Sobocinski.- Le Monde, 10 September 2007.

## The representation of religions in France

The principal religions are represented by a representative body which serves as the official interlocutor of the government authorities for issues relating to the organisation of religions.

- The Catholic Church has been represented by the *Conférence des évêques de France* – CEF (Conference of French Bishops) since 1966.
- Protestants are represented by the *Fédération protestante de France* – FPF (French Protestant Federation) since 1905.
- Judaism is structured around the Consistory [governing body] established on 11 December 1808. Since 1944, the Jewish community has been represented at political or secular level by the *Conseil Représentatif des Institutions juives de France* – CRIF (Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France).
- The Orthodox have been represented by the *Assemblée des évêques orthodoxes de France* – AEOF (Assembly of Orthodox Bishops of France) since 1997.
- Muslims have been represented by the *Conseil français du culte musulman* – CFCM (French Council of the Muslim Faith) since 2003.
- Buddhists have been represented by the *Union bouddhiste de France* – UBF (French Buddhist Union) since 1986.

## French legal framework for religions

Religions are governed in France by three principal legal texts: the Law of 1 July 1901 on association governance ([loi du 1er juillet 1901](#) – *in French only*), the Law of 9 December 1905 on the Separation of Church and State which guarantees the free exercise of religion (Art. 1) and lays down the principle whereby the State cannot subsidise religion (Art. 2), cf. ([loi du 9 décembre 1905](#) – *in French only*), and the Law of 2 January 1907 on the public exercise of religion (cf. [loi du 2 janvier 1907](#) – *in French only*).

The existing law of religion is both complex and closely linked to the four religions recognised in 1905, i.e. Catholicism, Reformed Protestantism, Lutheran Protestantism, and Judaism, and today has to address a new religious diversity. It is therefore the subject of reflection and debate in contemporary French society, notably as regards the issue of the financing of places of worship, the social protection of ministers of religion, and the funeral legislation relating to the different religions.

## For more information

---

### Survey

- **Les pratiques religieuses en France.** – Documentation française survey, February 2008

<http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/dossiers/religions-france/index.shtml>

### Publications

- **Les religions dans la société.** - Cahiers français, no. 340, Sept-Oct 2007, 94 p.  
*Quelle est la place occupée par la religion dans la société française sécularisée et comment se manifestent aujourd'hui les formes d'expression du religieux* [What is the place of religion in secularised French society and what are the forms of religious expression?]
- **Etat et religions**, Xavier Ternisien. - Débat public, Odile Jacob, La Documentation française, January 2007, 159 p.

### Statistics

- **Les Français et la religion [The French and religion]**– TNS SOFRES poll conducted on 5 April 2007  
[http://www.tns-sofres.com/etudes/pol/050407\\_religion.htm](http://www.tns-sofres.com/etudes/pol/050407_religion.htm)
- **1989-2007 : enquête sur l'évolution de l'islam en France [Survey of the evolution of Islam in France]** – IFOP-La Croix poll - IFOP, 17 January 2008  
<http://www.ifop.com/europe/sondages/opinionf/evolutionislam.asp>
- **Le catholicisme en France en 2006 [Catholicism in France in 2006]** – IFOP analysis for La Croix. IFOP, July 2006, 15 p.  
<http://www.ifop.com/europe/analyses/Analysesurlecatholicism%20pourLaCroix-Ao%C3%BBt2006.pdf>

### Reports

- **Les relations des cultes avec les pouvoirs publics [The relationship between religion and government]** – report to the French Minister for the Interior and Regional Planning, Jean-Pierre Machelon. - La Documentation française, September 2006, 85 p.  
<http://lesrapports.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/BRP/064000727/0000.pdf>
- **Religion et intégration sociale [Religion and social integration]**, Cécile Jolly, Groupe de projet Sigma ; Commissariat général du plan [French Planning Office]. La Documentation française, July 2005, 45 p.  
<http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/rapports-publics/054000492/index.shtml>

- ⇒ **Un siècle de laïcité**, rapport public 2004 du Conseil d'Etat : jurisprudence et avis de 2003 [**A century of secularism**], 2004 public report of the French Council of State - La Documentation française, 2004, 238 p.

[http://www.conseil-etat.fr/ce/rappor/index\\_ra\\_li0402.shtml](http://www.conseil-etat.fr/ce/rappor/index_ra_li0402.shtml)

- ⇒ **L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque : rapport au Ministre de l'éducation nationale** [**The teaching of religious culture and history in secular schools: report to the French Minister for National Education**], Régis Debray. La Documentation française, 2002, 35 p.

<http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/rapports-publics/024000544/index.shtml>

## Websites

- ⇒ **Institut européen en sciences des religions** [European Institute for the Sciences of Religions]

<http://www.iesr.ephe.sorbonne.fr/index.html>

- ⇒ **Lexique religieux** [Glossary of religious terms]:

<http://www.iesr.ephe.sorbonne.fr/index.html?id=124>

- ⇒ **Conférence des évêques de France** [Conference of French Bishops]

<http://www.cef.fr/>

- ⇒ **Fédération protestante de France** [French Protestant Federation]

<http://www.protestants.org/>

- ⇒ **Le Consistoire de Paris** [Consistory of Paris]

<http://www.consistoire.org/>

- ⇒ **L'Assemblée des évêques orthodoxes de France** [Assembly of Orthodox Bishops of France]

<http://www.egliseorthodoxe.net/>

- ⇒ **Conseil Français du Culte Musulman – CFCM** [French Council of the Muslim Faith]

<http://www.cfcm.info/>

- ⇒ **L'Union bouddhiste de France** [French Buddhist Union]

<http://www.bouddhisme-france.org/>