

CHAPTER 10

COVID-19 in France

An Insight into the Recompositions of the Religious in a Secular-Majority Country

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Abstract

This chapter aims to show the specific features of COVID-19 management in a secular country, where there is a strict separation between the state and religions. It also shows how the relationship established by the state and the society with each of the religions present in the country affects their reaction to restrictive measures. Two tendencies sum up how COVID-19 impacted religion and its position in French society. It confirms, first, the secularisation of French society and, second, how the collective practice of faith was deemed non-essential. Theoretically, this analysis engages with two discussions. The first deals with an axis of polarisation, namely the secularisation of society, confirmed by the COVID-19 crisis. The second analyses the recomposition of the religious, which the pandemic highlights. The chapter sheds light on this changing face of religion in a secular country, from a legal and sociological perspective.

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Introduction

The first cases of COVID-19 contamination were reported in France in January 2020.¹ These were also the first three cases reported in Europe. The extremely rapid spread of the virus, combined with its dangerous nature and the risk of hospital overcrowding, prompted the government to introduce restrictive measures, some of which had a direct impact on religious worship (Office parlementaire d'évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques 2020). Three confinements were introduced between March 2020 and May 2021. Collective ceremonies were cancelled (Easter, Pesach, and Eid al-Fitr), as were pilgrimages (to Mecca, made impossible owing to the closure of borders, and to Lourdes, where the site was closed for several weeks). Funeral rituals also had to be modified. Further restrictions included, for instance, the suspension of ritual cleansing for Jews and Muslims and the abolition of the use of the *goupillon* (the liturgical bottlehead) for Catholics. In addition, community rituals and family ceremonies had to be limited, notably the Ramadan fasting, which largely took place during the confinement in 2020.

These measures are not unique to France. Their strict application, however, as well as the rare protests from religious authorities, mainly from the Catholic Church, are more specific to France. They can be explained by the strict separation of state and religion that prevails in France. They also undoubtedly reflect the '*catho-laicity*' that is specific to this country.

Two tendencies sum up how COVID-19 impacted religion and its position in French society. It confirms, first, the secularisation of French society and, second, how the collective practice of faith was deemed non-essential. Theoretically, this analysis engages with two discussions. The first deals with an axis of polarisation, namely the secularisation of society, confirmed by the COVID-19 crisis. The second analyses the recomposition of the religious, which the pandemic highlights.

The chapter sheds light on this changing face of religion, from a legal and sociological perspective.

Setting the Context

France is a secular country or, more precisely, a ‘*laïc*’ country. From a legal point of view, this implies a strict separation between state and religion:² France neither recognises nor pays any religion. Secularism means that everyone is equal before the law, regardless of religion or belief. The state is neutral. France nevertheless remains a country with a Catholic culture. The secular state has a special relationship with Catholicism, linked to its history and the national imaginary: presidents of the republic have visited the Vatican, France’s Christian heritage was emphasised by Emmanuel Macron in 2018, and public holidays correspond to Catholic feast days. The church remains a point of reference in axiological and moral debates (although this has been weakened since the report about sexual abuses in the Catholic Church, the CIASE report). This special relationship is sometimes referred to as catho-laicism.

However, Catholics are in decline in this country, in terms of both practices and beliefs. In 1950, 92 per cent of French people said they belonged to Catholicism, compared with 70 per cent in 1981 and 29 per cent in 2019–2020. This figure is even lower if we look at the 18–29 age group. Religious practice (whether in terms of attendance at places of worship or frequency of prayer) is higher among Jews and Muslims. Islam is now France’s second-largest religion (10 per cent of the French population in 2023). Other Christians make up 9 per cent of the population (Drouhot, Simon, and Tiberj 2023). There has been a marked increase in the number of ‘no-religions’, which accounted for 18 per cent of the population in 1981; they made up 56 per cent in 2023 (Ifop 2023; Portier and Willaime 2021).

Finally, the traditionalist forces are on the increase: 40 per cent of young French Catholics who registered for the World Youth Day in Lisbon this summer considered the traditional Mass to be ‘resourcing’.³ The dynamism of the ultra-conservative Saint Martin community is a second illustration.

The COVID-19 crisis confirmed the polarisation of religion analysed by Philippe Portier and Jean-Paul Willaime in their book *La religion dans la France contemporaine. Entre sécularisation et recomposition* (Portier and Willaime 2021). A fading of the religious, particularly visible at the start of the epidemic, is a clear sign of the secularisation of French society; at the same time, it is reasserting itself, in recomposed

forms. The two authors highlight three particularities of this recomposition of the religious: a deinstitutionalisation of faith, a deprivatisation of belief, with religions once again weighing on the public agenda, and a dissemination of the religious, marked by a 'patchwork' of beliefs and affiliations.

Legal Aspects

A Legal Difference between Freedom of Conscience and Freedom of Religion

In France, there was no legislation to regulate religious life in the event of a pandemic or natural disaster. It was therefore as part of the management of COVID-19 that such regulations were put in place, with various successive 'adjustments' reflecting the need to adapt the law to the epidemic context and its evolution. The multiplicity of texts adopted reflects the need to fill this 'legal vacuum': Decree no. 2020-293 of 23 March 2020, prescribing the general measures necessary to deal with the COVID-19 epidemic as part of the state of health emergency; Decree no. 2020-548 of 11 May 2020, prescribing the general measures necessary to deal with the COVID-19 epidemic as part of the state of health emergency; Decree no. 2020-618 of 22 May 2020, supplementing Decree no. 2020-548 of 11 May 2020 prescribing the general measures necessary to deal with the COVID-19 epidemic as part of the state of health emergency; Decree no. 2020-1310 of 29 October 2020, prescribing measures to deal with the epidemic; Decree no. 2020-1454 of 27 November 2020, amending the previous decree prescribing the general measures necessary to deal with the COVID-19 epidemic as part of the state of health emergency (a decree allowing public meetings in places of worship, with a limit of around 30 people), etc. (Fornerod 2021). European law, on the other hand, provides for restrictions on the freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs, particularly when it is necessary to protect the health of individuals. Article 9.2 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that:

[T]he freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

These various regulations mark the difference between freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. The former has in no way been affected by the various restrictive measures adopted by the French government. By contrast, the latter was made temporarily impossible. Of course, access to places of worship was not banned. However, collective worship was no longer authorised, and communal rituals were no longer possible.⁴ Although other activities were allowed to continue, as they were deemed essential (food shopping, health care, individual sports activities, professional activities, etc.), religious ceremonies were no longer allowed. They presented a more obvious risk of contamination: as the Conseil d'Etat order explained, the risk of such ceremonies was 'all the greater when they take place in a confined space, of restricted size, for a significant duration, with a large number of people, accompanied by prayers recited aloud or chants, ritual gestures involving contact, movement, or exchanges between participants, including on the bangs of the ceremonies themselves'. The spiritual need for collective practice was thus not envisaged or considered an 'essential activity'. As Jacqueline Lalouette (2020) points out, if you needed to travel to a place of worship less than a kilometre away, you could do so by ticking the 'short journeys' box, 'but when the distance exceeds one kilometre, as is often the case in rural areas, no such arrangement applied'.

The regulatory texts adopted after 2020 clarified the legal understanding of freedom of worship as linked to a place of worship and strengthened its protection as a fundamental freedom. In French law, freedom of worship is primarily considered, and the pandemic context confirmed this, as being associated with a place of worship: this was particularly apparent in the Conseil d'Etat's order of 18 May 2020. Indeed, it obliged the prime minister to amend the decree that maintained the ban on gatherings and meetings in places of worship, on the grounds of 'the absence of an alternative to safeguard freedom of worship'.⁵ On the other hand, in the same decision, the Council of State did not consider it problematic to ban religious events. It stated that 'banning open-air gatherings in public spaces would not, in general or with regard to religious activities in particular, constitute a serious and manifestly illegal infringement of a fundamental freedom'. In its decision of 29 October 2020, it enshrined freedom of worship as a fundamental freedom, stating that 'freedom of worship is a fundamental freedom' and that it 'is not limited to the right of every individual

to express the religious convictions of his or her choice', since it 'also includes, among its essential components, the right to participate collectively, subject to the same reservation [of public order], in ceremonies, in particular in places of worship'.

Which Regulation of Religious Issues by a Secular State?

It seems that these decisions reflect an advanced secular regime. Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière (2020) notes that, in Brazil, the United States, and Pakistan, societies in which 'secularist penetration is less strong ... public authorities have been less intransigent in applying the regime of confinement to the religious sphere' (p. 8). In keeping with José Casanova's (1994) definition of secularisation – privatisation of the religious, decline in beliefs and practices, separation of spheres – the restrictions imposed by the French government on COVID-19 are perfectly in line with this evolution: the decisions taken were largely guided by the reflections of the Scientific Council, composed exclusively of doctors and researchers. Religious considerations could not interfere here. The privatisation of belief – as well as its deinstitutionalisation – may have suggested a practice that can only be exercised individually. In reality, as Alberto Ambrosio (2021) observes, the collective expression of faith implied by membership of a religion is poorly – or not at all – understood in secularised societies. And yet the cessation of liturgical activities is not the same as the cessation of sporting, cultural, or other practices. 'Going to mass is not a distraction or an amusement, but a fundamental spiritual need,' explains the researcher. This is the basis of the argument put forward by religious leaders and ministers in an article published in *Le Figaro* in May 2020, in response to the continuing ban on religious attendance despite the end of the first confinement period:⁶ 'If factories, schools, shops and public transport re-open, what justification is there for keeping our churches empty and public masses banned?'

The various restrictive measures adopted to curb the spread of COVID-19 raised real legal issues, calling into question the legitimacy of such regulations in terms of fundamental freedoms, despite the health emergency. The difficulties encountered by the courts in justifying coercive measures, particularly when it came to banning demonstrations and gatherings 'for religious purposes' are a perfect illustration of this. Following in the footsteps of Cyrille Dounot (2020), we

may well question the competence of the state to rule on funeral issues, for instance. The legal expert points out that the decree of 29 October 2020, which stipulated that only funeral ceremonies may be held in places of worship, ‘contravenes the principle of neutrality of the State with regard to the internal organization of religious denominations ... Why should an exception be made for death, but not for birth or marriage? What competence does the State have to decide what is most essential in the life of a believer?’ Lastly, he points out that the Conseil d’Etat corrected this discrimination by ruling that ‘religious ceremonies for weddings must be considered, even if the provisions would benefit from further clarification, as not being prohibited in places of worship, within the limit of six people, as expressly indicated by the Prime Minister at his press conference on October 28, 2020’ (cons. no. 14) (Dounot 2020).

A Legal Expression of Religious Deprivatisation

It should be noted that the only cases brought by religious institutions to challenge the restrictions imposed were initiated by the Catholic Church. On 7 November 2020, some members of the Catholic clergy appealed to the Conseil d’Etat for the suspension of the restrictions imposed during the second confinement. In March 2020, two Catholic associations asked that Catholics be allowed to attend services after 7pm during Easter week, as this was when vigils were celebrated. This request was rejected (du Plessis and Portaru 2022, 650). As Frédéric Dieu (2021, 187–188) explains, COVID-19 marked:

an evolution, a new moment in the history of litigation concerning freedom of worship and religious expression. In the decades following the entry into force of the Separation Act, this dispute was essentially between the Catholic Church and the State; in more recent decades, it has been marked by a confrontation between Islam and the State.⁷

He adds: ‘By taking the lead alone in demanding the freedom to celebrate communal mass in churches, and by twice getting the government to abandon the prohibitions and restrictions it had decided on this point, the Catholic faith has clearly demonstrated its singularity and combativeness in relation to other faiths’.

COVID-19 also confirmed the growing influence of traditionalist movements within Catholicism, or at least their more visible and

stronger presence in public debate. Traditionalist associations were the first to lodge a summary application with the Conseil d'Etat against the initial restrictive measures; their relief was ordered on 18 May 2020.⁸ They criticised the government's decision because it seemed stricter for cults than for other activities, and because the impossibility of meeting in places of worship coincided with several major holidays of the three main religions present in France. Traditionalist groups also violated the ban on religious ceremonies. On the night of 11–12 April 2020, around 30 people gathered in the parish of Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. Barrier measures were not respected (no masks, Eucharist given from hand to mouth, etc.). As Jean-Louis Schlegel (2020) points out, the approach here was 'founded on the principle that God's law takes precedence over the law of men.' Quoting a traditionalist abbot, he explains that, in their view, 'the bishops of France were first and foremost entitled to examine whether the common good of the City was not being undermined, insofar as a civil law worthy of the name could not hinder the dissemination of supernatural goods.'

Finally, one might have expected more protest from another religion just as ritualised as Catholicism: Orthodoxy. On an international scale, representatives of this religion were among those who most contested the restriction and confinement procedures. While processions were organised in Greece and Romania despite the bans, and rituals were occasionally maintained in Great Britain despite the restrictions, no opposition was voiced in France, no doubt due to the small number of Orthodox followers in the country (less than 1 per cent of the population).

Sociological Aspects

Acceptance of Restrictive Measures

The secularism of French society is reflected in the absence, or low level, of opposition to the restrictions imposed by religious authorities. Some of them even anticipated the confinement and closed their places of worship in advance of the government measures: thus, the meeting places of Jehovah's Witnesses were closed at the beginning of March 2020; on 12 March, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also suspended its public meetings. The following day, the Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM) in turn called for the closure

of mosques. Similar decisions were also taken locally, with the Compiègne mosque closed on 6 March, the Village des Pruniers Buddhist temple on 2 March, and the Beaugrenelle, Copernic, and Sumerlin synagogues ordered closed on 16 March. Jews and Muslims alike have not challenged the government's decisions, and in some cases have gone further, closing places of worship altogether. Chief Rabbi Haïm Korsia ordered the closure of all synagogues as of 16 March; the French Protestant Federation also spoke out in favour of closing temples. Buddhist temples and monasteries were also closed to the public. Jewish ritual bathing establishments were closed at the same time. Catholic churches, on the other hand, were not systematically closed; in the majority of cases, believers were able to access them, albeit without worshipping.

Similarly, religious leaders acted as intermediaries for government requests concerning health restrictions. On the whole, they called for compliance with the instructions, and sometimes even went beyond the recommended social distancing measures. For example, when the Conseil d'Etat imposed the reopening of places of worship on 29 May 2020, the CFCM recommended waiting until 2 June to reopen mosques. Religious leaders were also able to draw on sacred texts to justify the health restrictions: Chief Rabbi Haïm Korsia pointed out that the Talmud justifies the obligation of confinement, which prescribes confinement in the event of an epidemic;⁹ the CFCM explained that, according to a hadith, 'the best prayer is your prayer in your homes', a hadith that nevertheless specifies that this must not lead to the desertion of mosques. However, the CFCM added that 'in this emergency situation, where mosques are closed due to confinement, the condition not to desert mosques is lifted, since they are in fact closed' (CFCM 2020). The speeches of religious leaders were also able to support government measures without mobilising sacred texts. In mid-March, for example, Mgr Aupetit justified the suspension of Sunday Masses by saying: 'Our job is to pass on divine grace, not viruses.'¹⁰ On the whole, the faithful followed the recommendations of religious leaders and complied with government instructions. A few rare demonstrations were held to denounce the restrictive measures, such as those organised across France on 15 November 2020 in support of the reinstatement of the Mass. A few thousand Catholics gathered (250 in Rennes, 300 in Nantes). The French Bishops' Conference did not support these demonstrations. A few weeks earlier, a petition had attracted more than

100,000 signatures calling for the return of the Mass. However, these demonstrations remained largely a minority.

Religions did not oppose vaccination, usually leaving the choice to the faithful, while stressing the importance of vaccines in safeguarding the health of as many people as possible. Religious leaders tried to respond to the fears of the faithful on this subject. How to respond to rumours about the presence of pig cells in vaccines? ‘People are very good at seeking ritual purity at the molecular level. The only forbidden act is eating pork. These are futile, minority scruples that have nothing to do with the majority of believers,’ replied Tareq Oubrou, imam of the Grand Mosque of Bordeaux (Peschard 2020). The CFCM and the rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris pointed out that ‘Allah has not sent down a disease without also sending down its remedy’, citing a hadith and specifying that injections given during Ramadan did not imply a break in fasting (Le Priol 2021). The Protestants of France took a similar line, leaving everyone free to make their own choice, while denouncing the anti-vaccination rhetoric of American evangelical pastors such as Guillermo Maldonado. The Catholic Church in France encouraged vaccination. It even defended the government against detractors who criticised it for making vaccination compulsory.¹¹ It is true that Pope Francis said he was in favour of vaccination and that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reiterated its legality. Some conservative currents in Catholicism – for example, the Civitas movement, which denounced a ‘health dictatorship’ – remained opposed to vaccination, arguing that certain cell lines are derived from research on aborted embryos. They remained in the minority. Only the Chief Rabbinate of France chose to make vaccination a religious obligation.

According to a Senate report on ‘Religious cults and the COVID-19 epidemic in France’ (Office parlementaire d’évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques 2020), these positions can be explained by traditionally peaceful relations with the republic in the case of Judaism, ‘a legacy of the creation of the Grand Sanhedrin in 1807 and the long-standing organization of its authorities, on a departmental scale, under the protection of the State’. For Muslims, this can be explained by a quest for greater legitimacy in the eyes of the public and by more marked internal dissension. More generally, it underlines the loss by the religious actor of ‘its capacity for direct influence on politics, confirming the subordination of its authority to the State’, as analysed by Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière (2020, 8).

The COVID-19 crisis was also an opportunity to reaffirm identity-based discourses denouncing the presence of Islam in the public space. While the bells rang out on several occasions in solidarity with the nursing staff, in response to a call from the French Bishops' Conference, the equivalent could not be achieved by the muezzins: such an initiative was denounced in Lyon, where the call to prayer from the city's minaret drew fierce criticism, notably from members of the extreme right of the political spectrum (Frégosi 2020b).

Deprivatisation of Faith

As Jean-Paul Willaime and Philippe Portier point out in their aforementioned book, we are witnessing a deprivatisation of religion. This is reflected in the determination of religious authorities to influence the public agenda. Representatives of religious denominations and secular organisations were consulted on several occasions during the pandemic.¹² The aim was to encourage them to participate in the 'national effort'. Discussions also focused on 'the moral cohesion of the country in the face of the crisis'.¹³ This 'return' of religion to the public agenda is not without scepticism and criticism. The Senate spoke of 'quasi-concordant' relations between the state and religious institutions. It justified these exchanges by the exceptional nature of the situation:

[I]t is above all in political discourse that, during the crisis, a desire to institutionalize relations between the State and the 'established' cults appeared, in a quasi-contractualist or concordatory logic. These are certainly weak signals, which can be attributed to the inevitable improvisation of the public response to an unprecedented crisis, but they could also testify to a more profound evolution – and one that runs counter to the principle of *laïcité*. A case in point is the organization by the President of the Republic of two successive videoconferences on 'the moral cohesion of the country in the face of the crisis', to which religious leaders, Masonic obediences and secular associations such as the Comité Laïcité République were invited. (Office parlementaire d'évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques 2020, 35)¹⁴

However, this consultation of religious authorities is part of a 'secularisation of recognition' whose first manifestations predate the COVID-19 crisis. Religious institutions are regularly solicited for their expertise by the authorities, within the framework of parliamentary hearings, ad

hoc commissions or reflection committees. No formal interreligious body existed during the pandemic as far as we know; debates between religious representatives were nevertheless organised, such as a conference held in June 2020 in Paris (at the Collège des Bernardins) bringing together representatives of Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.¹⁵

Similarly, religions are recognised by the public authorities for their mission of solidarity and support for people who are isolated or in difficulty. But this role was undermined by health restrictions. Visits to the frail and lonely were no longer possible, even though they were particularly necessary during periods of confinement. However, religious institutions were able to adapt and maintain this core mission. Telephone hotlines were set up to provide a listening ear: 280 people were mobilised by the Catholic Church; Protestants, Muslims, and Jews also set up telephone platforms to provide psychological and spiritual assistance to victims of the pandemic. Their essential role in funeral ceremonies has also been recognised. While religious ceremonies were prohibited during the containment period, funerals were authorised but only for a maximum of 20 people. However, accompanying the sick and dying was no longer possible. Ritual cleansing by Jews and Muslims remained forbidden. Muslim leaders also lamented the lack of space in Muslim cemetery plots; in non-pandemic times, when borders are open, burials take place in the deceased's country of origin in 80 per cent of all Muslim funerals. In Mayotte, a French Indian ocean archipelago where 95 per cent of the population is Muslim, the dead are generally buried in simple shrouds so that they remain in contact with the earth. COVID-19 imposed the use of coffins, which was difficult for the Mahorais to accept. Similarly, their funeral rites, which are largely based on local customs, were for the most part banned.

Recomposition of Practices

COVID-19 has highlighted the recomposition of religious practices, already evident before the onset of the pandemic. It even seems to have accelerated the process. In response to the closure of places of worship and the ban on collective ceremonies, religions turned to digital devices. The COVID-19 did not initiate or 'reinvent' the digital offer, as digital religious studies in the United States show. It was, however, developed and renewed 'thanks to' the epidemic. In fact, all religions

already had audiovisual media enabling them to broadcast sacred texts or religious ceremonies. Just think of France 2's broadcasts – *Le Jour du Seigneur*, *Présence protestante*, *Islam*, *Orthodoxie* (originally *Berechit*), *Sagesses bouddhistes*, and denominational radio stations – Radio Notre-Dame, Radio Fidélité, Radio Orient, Radio Gazelle, Fréquence protestante, Radio Omega, Radio Judaïca, and Radio RCJ. Each denomination also has its own website or blog, at international, national or local level (parishes, consistories, synagogues, mosques, etc.). Arnaud Join-Lambert, in a study conducted among Catholics in 2020, underlines the strengthening of these practices. Nearly 60 per cent of those surveyed had taken part at least once in a Mass celebrated via the Internet. *Le Jour du Seigneur*, for example, attracted 1.7 million viewers on Sunday, 22 March, more than for the Easter and Christmas celebrations, compared with the usual audience of around 600,000. Haïm Korsia explained with a touch of humour that 'Zoom has become the biggest rave in the world' (Office parlementaire d'évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques 2020, 18). YouTube channels made it possible to retransmit live religious ceremonies. New media were developed and new teams mobilised to feed them: Messenger, Skype, and WhatsApp tools were widely used during the health restrictions.

What can we learn from these new digital uses, beyond the diversity of media mobilised and listed above? First and foremost, liturgical practices have changed. While religious ceremonies broadcast online have enabled liturgical life to be maintained, this has had to be done independently. For Easter, Catholics were able to perform the Stations of the Cross at home with their families, as Arnaud Join-Lambert's study (2020) points out. Similarly, Frank Frégosi refers to 'pleas for a resanctuarization of the home', observed both among Catholics (Mgr Christophe Dufour, Archbishop of Aix-en-Provence and Arles, invited Catholics in his diocese to consider that 'Your Churches are your homes') and Muslims (the argument is in fact used by several imams, such as Mohamed Bajrafil) (Frégosi 2020a). The internet has not been able to replace all liturgical ceremonies. For example, the Muslim authorities forbade participation in any collective prayer online, as the faithful had to stand physically behind the imam. Only individual prayers were allowed. Among Jews, the Senate report recalled that 'the Chief Rabbi rejected the possibility of overriding the prohibition on using electricity (and therefore the Internet) during the Sabbath, and a fortiori during the first two meals of Pesach, which are subject to the

same prohibitions' (Office parlementaire d'évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques 2020, 20). The 'digitisation' of practices was not the only solution proposed to the faithful to maintain the exercise of their worship: 'drive-in' confessions were initiated; communions, traditionally made with a spoon among the Orthodox, could be made with disposable spoons; Mgr Aupetit blessed the capital from the forecourt of the Sacré-Coeur basilica, reciting a prayer partly linked to the pandemic and calling for the support of caregivers.

What about individual religiosity? Arnaud Join-Lambert (2020) points out that a survey of Catholics showed that 74.4 per cent continued to celebrate mass. The Senate report, based on an American study, speaks of 'a revival of religious fervor', pointing out that France 'is among the countries where the increase observed in March 2020 is the most marked', stating finally that 'these results do seem to indicate a surge in religious fervor, and not a simple phenomenon of substitution of physical ceremonies by online prayers' (Office parlementaire d'évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques 2020, 27). However, other studies show opposite results: analysis carried out by Ifop for Ajir in August 2021 noted that to the question 'Has the COVID-19 epidemic brought you closer to a religious practice?' only 9 per cent of respondents answered in the affirmative.¹⁶ This figure remained broadly the same for men and women, whatever their age, position, or political orientation. On the other hand, it differed markedly according to the individual's faith: 40 per cent of practising Catholics (6 per cent of non-practising Catholics) felt that the pandemic had strengthened their religious practice; this was the case for 23 per cent of Protestants and 51 per cent of Muslims. The study conducted by the Pew Research Center confirmed these results: only 10 per cent of French people considered that COVID-19 had strengthened their religious fervour, and 11 per cent that of France as a whole. On the other hand, 38 per cent of people who considered religion to be very important in their lives felt that the pandemic had strengthened their faith (Pew Research Center 2021).

Finally, COVID-19 appears to have reduced church attendance, even when the confinements and restrictions came to an end. At the beginning of June 2022, the Diocese of Paris observed a 10–15 per cent drop in Sunday worship.¹⁷

Conclusion

It would appear that the COVID-19 crisis has confirmed France's advanced secularisation, making it possible to ban collective religious practices without any real challenge from religious authorities. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted the recomposition of the religious in France: regular consultation by public decision-makers, manifestations in the public space and contestation of secular authority, changes in practices with the development of 'digitalisation', strengthening of the faith of the most devout.

The first is the economic impact of the pandemic. In 2020, the Catholic Church estimated that it had lost €90 million, representing a 30 to 40 per cent drop in resources from collection or *casuel*, as a result of the confinements and health restrictions (Conférence des évêques de France 2020; Tribot Laspierre 2020). These economic consequences are not confined to religious institutions. Far fewer pilgrims came to Lourdes in 2020, affecting the local economy as a whole. Between one and a half and two million accommodation bookings were cancelled due to COVID-19 during the year. Other religious denominations also experienced a decline in resources. Mosques, for example, derive 60 per cent of their income from Friday prayers and Ramadan prayers (Office parlementaire d'évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques 2020).

Last but not least, the pandemic has highlighted the points of convergence between the different religious denominations present on French territory – principally with regard to compliance with health regulations. Differences were more apparent within each religion: think of the masses celebrated in some churches despite the ban on collective ceremonies; think of the appeal lodged in May 2020 with the Conseil d'Etat by traditionalist movements rather than by the institutional representatives of the Church of France; let's underline the differences between the Conseil du culte musulman and the Grande Mosquée de Paris when it was announced that it would be possible to gather in places of worship on 29 May, i.e. after the feast of Eid al-Fitr. While the former called for increased health precautions and preparation for Eid al-Fitr ceremonies in restricted circles, the latter denounced discrimination, with Christians able to celebrate Pentecost while Muslims were deprived of the feast to break Ramadan.

Notes

- 1 A study by Inserm (Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale), published on 6 February 2021 in the *European Journal of Epidemiology*, shows that the coronavirus was already circulating in France as early as autumn 2019 (Carrat et al. 2021).
- 2 It should be noted that in Alsace-Moselle and certain overseas territories, such as French Guiana, Mayotte, New Caledonia, Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, and Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, the system of separation between religions and the state is not the same as in the rest of France.
- 3 According to the survey carried out by the newspaper *La Croix*, 'JMJ: des jeunes catholiques fervents et à contre-courant, notre sondage exclusif'. See the website of the newspaper, accessed 22 September 2023, <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/JMJ-jeunes-catholiques-fervents-contre-courant-notre-sondage-exclusif-2023-05-25-1201268810>.
- 4 During the first and second confinements in particular.
- 5 For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Fornerod (2020, 184).
- 6 Opinion column published in *Le Figaro* on 24 April 2020. 'L'appel de cent trente prêtres au président de la République: «Le 11 mai, laissez-nous servir!»'. Accessed 22 September 2023, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/l-appel-de-cent-trente-pretres-au-president-le-11-mai-laissez-nous-servir-20200424>.
- 7 Author's translation.
- 8 Among them: the Fraternité sacerdotale Saint-Pierre, the Alliance générale contre le racisme et le respect de l'identité française et chrétienne, the Association pour le soutien du sacerdoce catholique, and the Institut du Bon Pasteur.
- 9 See interview in *Le Point*, 8 April 2020, 'Haïm Korsia: « Une société qui choisit la vie se relève toujours »'. Accessed 22 September 2023. https://www.lepoint.fr/religion/haïm-korsia-une-societe-qui-choisit-la-vie-se-releve-toujours-08-04-2020-2370573_3958.php.
- 10 Mgr Aupetit, post on his twitter account, 13 March 2021. Accessed 22 September 2023. <https://twitter.com/MichelAupetit/status/1238513415884288001>.
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