

Country Profile

France

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October 2019

This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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The GREASE project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 770640

Total population: 66.9 million

Religious affiliation (percent)

Christian	63
Muslim	7.5
Jews	0.5
Buddhist	0.5
Folk Religions	0.3
Hindu	<0.1
Unaffiliated	28
Other	0.2

Source: Pew 2010 figures from: <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projection-table/2010/number/Europe/>

Role of religion in state and government

Central to understanding France’s state-religion relations is the principle of *laïcité*, often rendered in English as “secular” or “secularism”. Yet, French *laïcité* connotes a particular anti-clerical attitude and particular policies, and thus the state’s role is often thought about as one of protecting citizens *from* religion.

French *laïcité* stands out as an exception in Western Europe and has been called a model of *radical secularism* in contrast to the moderate secularism of other European countries. With the exception of Turkey, France is the only country in Europe with an explicitly secular constitution. Although not explicitly mentioning *laïcité*, it is the law of separation of 1905 that forms the constitutional benchmark of this arrangement. The 1905 law of church-state separation is enshrined in the current Constitution (1958), which states “France is an indivisible, secular [laïc], democratic and social Republic”.

There are, nevertheless, several connections between state and religion. Official affairs to do with religion are the responsibility of the Bureau of Religious Affairs (*Bureau des Cultes*). It is this office that is responsible for deciding, amongst other things, which religious associations are officially recognised as “religions” and receive the benefits of this status, rather than simply being recognised as “associations”. Legal institutional status was granted to representative bodies for Catholics, Protestants and Jews, represented by The Council of Bishops, Protestant Federation, and Central Consistory respectively. This recognition comes with tax exemptions and assistance in access to public spaces and building places of worship. These bodies consult with the state on pertinent issues such as the management and regulation of religious life, the presence of clerics in public services and bodies, and organisation of holidays.

Freedom of religion

The 1905 law also “ensures the equality before the law of all its citizens, without distinction as to origin, race, or religion. It respects all beliefs” (Article 2). Although originally aimed at the Catholic Church as the dominant force at the time, the current law applies to any religious faith or organisation. Thus, although the focus is often on the separation aspect of this law, it also guarantees basic religious freedoms such as freedom of conscience. Nevertheless, this is generally considered a private rather than public matter, and public spaces are meant to be “neutral”.

In line with this constitutional provision of religious freedom, the state does undertake certain measures to help support the position of religions in French society. There are state-paid chaplains who operate in public schools, prisons, hospitals and the military. Faith-based hospitals and institutions for care can also get state funding in recognition of their *'utilité publique'*, provided they meet certain criteria.

Obtaining the status necessary to be recognised as a religion and receive such benefits requires the state undertake “a substantive review” of the religion, its purposes and practices. Several factors are considered, including: whether members of the group come together in formal ceremonies, how long the group has existed, whether the group’s beliefs contain universal religious principles, and whether the group ensures that its activities do not threaten public order. Moreover, the state intervenes significantly in the internal affairs of recognised religions. Before the pope appoints new Bishops, for example, the responsible minister checks that the values of the nominees are not incompatible with those of the Republic. The state is also heavily involved in making decisions about employees and the curriculum in religious schools it funds.

For religious groups not granted recognition as religions but instead regarded as *cultes*, measures are even more restrictive. *Cultes* do not receive the types of benefits that religions do. France has been highly restrictive of religious associations, particularly those regarded as New Religious Movements. Indeed, some note that France is unusually strict compared to other European states in its pursuance of *cultes* on the grounds that they threaten public order.

Moreover, there is notable regional variance in how *laïcité* and the resulting restrictions on religious freedoms have been applied. Some regions have adopted a more accommodationist approach, whereas others have been more combatively secular. There are also regions where the 1905 law doesn’t apply for historical reasons. The region of Alsace-Moselle, for example, recognises Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism and Judaism. The state pays the salaries of the clergy of these religions and religious instruction is taught in schools. Six overseas colonies, such as French Polynesia, have also not had the secularization laws imposed on them.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

France experienced terror attacks early on linked to its policies and interventions in the Middle East as well as in its former colonial territories in North Africa, most notably Algeria. While it is unclear to what extent these were religiously inspired attacks of the kind experienced more recently, this history has played an important role in the tendency to associate terrorism with Islam and Muslims.

More recently France has experienced some of the most high-profile attacks linked with al-Qaeda and ISIS in Europe. In Toulouse and Montauban in 2012, Mohamed Merah killed 7 people. In contextualising his actions, the attacker cited the headscarf ban and France's role in Afghanistan and Israel-Palestine. In Paris in January 2015 the offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo were attacked by the brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, both associated with al-Qaeda. In November 2015 various bombs were detonated at a football stadium, cafés, restaurants, and the Bataclan concert hall, killing 89. In Nice in 2016 a truck was driven into crowds celebrating Bastille Day.

Foreign fighters have also been a source of major concern. By mid 2015 more than 1,200 foreign fighters had left to fight in the wars in Syria and Iraq, making France the European country with the highest total contribution of foreign fighters. It is noteworthy that most of the attacks in France in 2015 were by returnees.

The French government has undertaken a variety of top-down, bottom-up, "hard", and "soft" measures to tackle the problems of radicalisation and related violence.

France began undertaking anti-terrorism measures in 1993 and these were expanded in 1995 following the bombings that year. The measures made arrests easier under a framework resulting from a law on terrorist association. These measures have been successively strengthened and expanded. For example, anti-terrorism measures from the early 2000s - such as the 2001 Law on Everyday Security and a 2003 immigration law - expanded police surveillance powers of electronic and postal communication as well as financial records. They also strengthened powers to search vehicles and premises, deport individuals convicted of criminal offences and deport or ban individuals or groups that threaten public order.

Until 2014, France did not seriously consider radicalisation an issue that required intervention or rehabilitation initiatives. A plan published by the Interior Ministry in 2014 brought in a new focus on the process of radicalisation and proposed soft measures to address it. This led to the formation of the *Centre National d'Assistance et de Prévention de la Radicalisation* (CNAPR). At the centre of the plan was a nationwide hotline that individuals, families or community members could call to seek advice or notify authorities on anything of concern.

Religious diversity governance assessment

When it comes to managing religious diversity, Islam and Muslims have been the main focus in France for the past several decades. Driven by the desire to institute a “French Islam” shorn of foreign influence, numerous attempts were made starting in 1990 to found a representative organisation for Muslims . The *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman* (CFCM) was established in 2003. Muslims have also faced high levels of state influence and interference amid concerns over terrorism and their capacity to integrate into French society. Moreover, in keeping with *laïcité*, cultural aspects have often been emphasised above religious interests when it comes to funding provisions for the activities of mosques and religious centres.

Islam and Muslims have also come into stark focus in terms of visibility of religious diversity in the public sphere and the state’s response to it. Of particular importance here have been various instances focussed on Islamic clothing for women, which have also fuelled further debate concerning *laïcité*.

In 1989 three schoolgirls were expelled from their public school in Paris for wearing headscarves in class. Following that, a series of high-profile cases were brought before the French courts. This led to the creation of a commission to reassess *laïcité* and consider the issue of religious signs and symbols in schools. After the commission issued its report, legislation was introduced in 2004 to ban the headscarf and other religious accoutrements in schools. Under the new law, Sikh students have been expelled from school for wearing turbans, Jews for wearing the yarmulke, and Christians for displaying “big” crosses. Although the legislation applies to all religions, it has disproportionately affected Muslims. Commentators both for and against the legislation widely agree that it (and the commission that inspired it) intended to target Muslims and the headscarf.

In 2010 another ban was introduced, this time prohibiting clothing that concealed one’s face in public spaces, including the street and cars. The law, which took effect in April 2011, became known as the “burqa ban” because it targets the full-face coverings of the burqa and niqab worn by some Muslim women. These coverings were the subject of intense public debate in the period leading up to the ban. Cases stemming from enforcement of this ban are largely accountable for the fact that France was one of only two countries in Europe (the other being Russia) to register over 200 cases of government force against religious groups in 2014 and 2015.

From the French state’s perspective, these bans are necessary for the protection of positive liberty and equality for girls and women. Aimed at keeping public spaces “neutral” - i.e. free from religion - they are based on a universalist metaphysics going back to the French Revolution. These modes of state restrictions and interference are also seen to be important in maintaining public order, where the vision of Republican society is placed above individual religious freedoms.

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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October 2019

Document series reference: D2.2 Country Profiles