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French Catholics, Secularization and Politics

Blandine Chelini-Pont

A turn of the century religious revival

In 1985, Marcel Gauchet published *Le désenchantement du monde* [The disenchantment of the world]. In the wake of his analysis, two generations of political and social scientists working in the field of religion have added their weight to the theory of the inexorable “secularization” of contemporary societies, according to which modernization “negatively” entails a decline in religion as a cultural source for society and as a structuring framework for behavior and “positively” allows for the deployment of critical thinking, concerted democratic choices and individualized life-styles. Today, these same political and social scientists of religion seem to be back-peddling. To give an example of this, in 2001 the French edition of a book edited by the American scholar Peter Berger bore a symptomatic title: *Le réenchantement du monde* [The re-enchantment of the world], a retrospective allusion to the work of Marcel Gauchet. The underlying argument of the book, the fruit of numerous investigations, some of them French, is that our epoch has become “furiously” religious (this is the term that Berger uses), and that the predictions linked to the inexorability of secularization have been

shown to be erroneous. Accelerated modernization has, on the contrary, engendered a movement of extremely acute counter-secularization – a movement which has propagated itself rapidly given the speed of media interconnections, their technological power, the increasing intermingling/cross-fertilization of populations, their deterritorialization which, in some ways, has provoked the birth of a post-modern spiritual nomadism, in part due to economic migrations in which over ten years, more than 50 million people have migrated across the world – a figure that is truly staggering.

French researchers such as Guy Michelat¹ have on the one hand highlighted the strong dilution of Catholic identity in France, including that pertaining to “political influence”, while at the same time noting the paradox of a phenomenon of impregnation which makes it impossible to conclude that there is no real Catholic perspective, either in general or with reference to political questions in particular. In a sense, Catholics are now everywhere instead of nowhere. The Catholic religion is still dominant in terms of the identity to which people in France say they “belong” – 64% of French people refer to themselves as Catholics in a CSA-*La Vie* survey of December 2004, and in the *Le Monde des religions*-CSA survey of June 2005, 78% believe that human beings have an essential need for religions. This religious affiliation still affects electoral behavior, and plays a part in major societal debates. Also, it turns out that a minority characterized by Guy Michelat as “undiluted”² retain a strong internal religious cohesion (through faith, religious practice, and the transmission of these things) simultaneously with strong political and social orientations which they are determined to defend. In the final analysis, therefore, a Catholic presence in contemporary political debates is still perceptible. As Italian historian Giancarlo Zizola writes, that presence is no longer such as to give “power a conscience” but continues, in a toned-down form, to ensure that “conscience has a degree of power.”³

¹ Guy Michelat, Julien Poter, Jacques Sutter, *Les Français sont-ils encore catholiques ?* Cerf, 1991, 332p. and by the same authors, *L'héritage chrétien en disgrâce*, L'Harmattan, 2003, 335p.

² I.e., those who feel that the terms “Catholic”, “believer”, “Christian”, and “one who practices religion” define them very well.

³ In *Le Successeur*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1995, p.18.

The “solubility” of Catholics in French politics:

Numerical weakening and evanescence of Catholics

If we return to the general idea of an absence of Catholic specificity in contemporary political debates, a primary cause of this would no doubt be the substantial numerical weakening of Catholics, accompanied by a transformation in their sense of belonging which means that, when they see themselves as Catholics, they do so only in an extremely diluted fashion⁴. On a great many points, Catholic specificity has disappeared, and Catholics today are hardly distinguishable from the rest of the French population.

Widespread rejection of Catholic norms on sexual and family matters

In a December 2003 BVA survey on *laïcité*, it is quite noteworthy that 46% of those questioned felt that the Catholic Church was acting within its role when intervening in cultural questions, while 45% were of the opposite view. Some 44% felt the church was entitled to intervene on economic and social questions, while 44% were of a contrary opinion. However, 60% considered that the church was over-stepping its role when taking positions on moral questions (such as abortion, sexuality and procreation). Some 73% felt that homosexuality was an acceptable way of living one’s sexuality, and 67% felt that the adoption of the PACS (civil unions for homosexuals) did not endanger the family as an institution. These responses to questions which might at first sight appear out of place in an opinion survey on *laïcité* suggest that sexuality and procreation are considered as falling within the domain of *laïcité* in France, that, like the political sphere, they are quite separate from religion, indeed one might say that they are regarded as purely “political”.

Secular integration

French Catholics appear perfectly integrated in the general structure of French society, and recognize as their own that which for over a century was the *bête noire* of their

⁴ Michelat defines four categories of Catholics: weekly, monthly, occasional, and non-practicing in *Comportement électoral des catholiques*, **Dictionnaire du Vote**, PUF, 2001, pp.160-163.

religious leaders, i.e the Republic and its secular foundations, reflected in the functioning of its institutions and the content of may be regarded as a kind of civil religion⁵. *Laïcité* has become the cultural norm for French Catholics. In her analysis of a 2003 BVA survey⁶, Martine Barthélemy has shown that the attachment of Catholics to *laïcité* is as strong as among “other” French people.

Although the survey shows that 45% of respondents still consider that an opposition exists between the France of Catholic tradition and the France of *laïcité* (compared with 47% who feel that opposition is now definitively gone), the remainder of the responses demonstrate that this is more a question of old conflicts than of everyday realities today. On these matters, Catholic opinion is in fact broadly in line that of the general population: 61% of those surveyed believed that *laïcité* still has to be fought for, 67% believed that *laïcité* was threatened (of these 82% believed that it was threatened by Islam), and 87% believed that *laïcité* was a fundamental value, with 64% of people being against reserving time for religious instruction in the school system, 65% being hostile to chaplainships in public school establishments, 84% believing that the wearing of the Islamic headscarf in public schools is intolerable, 60% being against the taking into account of religious convictions in school canteens, 81% feeling that religion is not necessary to conduct oneself appropriately, 57% believing that *laïcité* is a shield against religious intolerance, 79% feeling that the separation between churches and the State - according to which churches do not intervene in political life, and the State does not intervene in the life of churches - was “satisfactory in France”, 53% believing that the State should not intervene in any way in religion (while 92% demanded that the state ban “sects”), and overwhelming majorities believing that religious practice is a strictly private affair, that the State is the most legitimate institution to defend republican

⁵ As Françoise Subileau puts it, *laïcité* constitutes a code of political interpretation that is “less a body of constituted doctrine, than a system of political organization and perception – an interpretative and explanatory code for viewing the world” in *La laïcité une valeur d’aujourd’hui, Contestations et renégociations du modèle français*, sous la direction de Philippe Portier, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2001, article *Les militants socialistes et la laïcité*, p. 175.

⁶ Martine Barthélemy, *Les Français et la Laïcité*, Final report, CEVIPOF, octobre 2004

values and the Rights of Man, and that those rights are the most important legacy of the French Revolution just ahead of equality, public education, the Constitution and *laïcité*.

A softer secularism

In the same way that Catholics have “blended into” the values of the Republic, French people in general –87% of whom declare that *laïcité* is a fundamental value – have ceased being distrustful or resentful towards Catholicism. The great conflicts of old are now gone. Anti-clericalism, the cement of secular thinking, has almost disappeared from French consciousness in parallel with the disappearance of religious culture. To offer some examples from the BVA survey of 2003: 73% of French people are in favor of the teaching of religious history in schools, and one can surmise that Catholics and other people of religious background support this out of self-interest, while non-religious people do so believing it help them by distancing students from religions, with the two situations converging perfectly to avoid the development of intolerance; 66% of people are favorable to public holidays or religious festivals (notably Christian festivals), 73% consider that *laïcité* is the only way for people of different convictions to live together, 47% think that the State is right to finance private religious schools, 29% and 28% think that private schools and the Catholic church do not threaten *laïcité* a great deal, and the remainder do not think that these threaten *laïcité* at all, 61% think that the word “religion” evokes something positive (though it also true that the word “atheism” is considered as positive by 48% of those surveyed), and finally, 63% agree that *laïcité* is a tradition which today must seek to renew its identity. And in that process of redefinition, 60% consider that is acceptable for members of the government to participate in religious ceremonies, and 43% agree with local authorities providing financial support for places of worship.

We can see here at first hand part of the “lost reference points” frequently deplored by French intellectual and the media. From a country that was clearly divided into two camps, which knew themselves very well and drew on their reciprocal hatred in order to exist, has emerged a country in which each camp is penetrated by the ideas of its

firmest enemy, constructing a vague consensus which fills politicians with despair. This catho-secular consensus is now in fact the nation's current cultural identity.

The disappearance of Catholic and Christian-Democrat political culture

In this confusing debacle the responsibility of French Catholics is considerable. As much as the march of secularization, the evolution of their own church and the political circumstances of the post-War period have all contributed to their "political absorption".

With the advent of the Second World War, the disintegration of the conservative parties towards which Catholics had traditionally gravitated, the discrediting of Third Republic who voted for the death of that régime in 1940, paving the way for the Vichy regime, the compromised status of Charles Maurras many Action Française nationalists as a result of collaboration between Vichy and the Nazi occupation, the legitimacy acquired by default by General de Gaulle, and, finally, American support all explain the considerable success of the Christian Democratic MRP (Mouvement Républicain Populaire) among voters from 1945 onwards, and the arrival of its members to the highest positions of state. Following the Liberation, it constituted and united together the dispersed groups of Christian-Democrat inspiration from the pre-War period.

Pierre Letamendia's 1995 study of the MRP explains very clearly the eventual disappearance of this party due the exhaustion of its goal⁷. It was thanks to the MRP that Catholicism re-found its acceptance in French political life. The leaders of this party, which in varying degrees participated in government throughout the Fourth Republic, achieved an impressive feat in rallying large numbers of Catholics who had up to this point been distrustful towards a Republic associated in their eyes with the idea of

⁷ Disappearance is also the topic of an analysis by Jean-Luc Pouthier in the chapter *Emergence et ambiguïté de la culture politique démocrate-chrétienne*, in *Les Cultures politiques en France*, under the direction of Serge Bernstein, Points Histoire, Seuil, 2003, pp.303-334. Cf also Blandine Chelini-Pont, « Le christianisme, référence ou alibi dans la politique française depuis 1944 », in *L'héritage chrétien dans le patrimoine culturel français*, Colloque de l'IDHC, PUAM, 1996, pp.155-185.

“persecution”. The men of the MRP forced the other political partners of this period – radicals, socialists and communists – to accept, through the play of electoral politics, the weight of the Catholic vote within a Constitution which was presented, from the very beginning, as secular. It was thus that the MRP, during its most influential phase, infused into French *laïcité* the spirit of the party’s economic ideals, notably in terms of the worth attached to individual human beings through the legal redistribution of wealth. Amid the need to reconstruct an economy that had devastated through war, it supported social reforms which were directly compatible with the social doctrine of the church, such as the organization of Social Security, improvements in labor legislation, the introduction of a minimum wage, the creation of the family policy, and family allowances. It also worked for the taxing of income, profits and products. Its social interventionism fitted admirably with the nation’s tradition of state-led *dirigisme*. State intervention in economic matters, the protection of trade union rights, social laws for the protection of the family and the promotion of the human person – all of these social and economic policies were, and remain, foundations of contemporary France, which explains why France is so reluctant to reflect on the notion that this policy of large-scale economic protection and intervention is perhaps the cause of its decline.

The MRP was also the party of Franco-German reconciliation and European integration *par excellence*. This orientation was largely the work of Robert Schuman, a German-speaking Alsacien, whose emphasis in this direction was not initially shared by the party rank and file, who were more anti-German and pro-Atlanticist in outlook, a line of thinking represented by Georges Bidault, for example. One only has to read the accounts of parliamentary debates on the ratification of the European Coal and Steel Community European Defence Community treaties to realize how innovative Schuman’s approach was and how widely misunderstood and opposed it was. The MRP was the party that began to calm the long-standing debate on education by trying to secure the position of religious schools without calling into question the existing public education system. Its action helped to pave the way for the recognition of educational freedom in the Constitution of 1958, marking the beginning of the Fifth Republic, and

the Debré law of 1959 on state funding for religious schools. Since the end of the MRP, there has been no explicitly Christian party in French politics. The Catholic electorate was successfully wooed by the Gaullist Party, which succeeded in presenting itself as a party bridging the France of the past with the France of *laïcité*. The voting system used in presidential elections under the Fifth Republic has also favored more directly “political” positioning by candidates without reference to their religious convictions. In addition, the 1960s brought a rapid decline in religious observance and a generational break with the traditional idea of Catholicism as a system of binding beliefs and behavioral rules. The “Catholic vote” was now split across the whole party spectrum, with all parties of both left and right now entirely secular.⁸ From this point onwards, Catholics were no longer a unified, static bloc. A significant minority among them began voting on the left and to support corresponding opinions. From then on, European construction was no longer driven by a clear ideological motor in France, in contrast with the situation in other European countries, where Christian-Democratic parties continued to exist.

A Catholic “imprint” on French politics?

The continuation of a conservative tendency

Nevertheless, on the basis of data collected in 1966, Guy Michelat and Michel Simon were able to show that there was still, during that period of political polarization, a strong correlation between identifying oneself as a Catholic and voting for the right.⁹

⁸ On the left vote of Catholics, see Jean-Marie Donegani, *La liberté de choisir*, opus cit. In this book, Donegani presents the models of the identity choice by Catholics, whether marginalist, integralist or intermediate. Pierre Bréchon in *Attitudes religieuses et politiques des catholiques pratiquants; Enquête par questionnaire dans huit assemblées dominicales grenobloises*, BDPS-IEP, 1982, Grenoble [Religious and political attitudes of practicing Catholics. Questionary survey in eight Sunday assemblies in Grenoble], also shows that practitioners engaged in religious activism vote more to the left than Catholics practising without commitment, which would mean that political options also correspond to specific differences in religious commitment, and that Catholic compassionate commitment understood as concern for the other-social concern drives Catholic militants to the left.

⁹ In *Classe, Religion et comportement politique*, Presses de la FNSP, 1977, second part, *Systèmes d'opinion et choix politiques* and fifth part *Appartenance de classe, niveau d'intégration religieuse et comportement politique*.

Catholics voted more for the right and less for the left than non-religious people, and this was even more the case for practicing Catholics¹⁰. Through similar studies conducted in 1990 and 1997¹¹, Guy Michelat noted an erosion of this phenomenon, but not its disappearance. Thus during the elections of 1997, the vote for the right (not including the extreme-right National Front) was 57% among weekly-practicing Catholics, which was 20 points lower than in 1965, 46% among monthly-practicing Catholics, 34% for occasionally-practicing Catholics, 20% among non-practicing Catholics, and 8% for non-religious voters. Support for the left was in inverse proportion to this: 44% among non-religious people, 30% among non-practicing Catholics, 27% among occasionally-practicing Catholics, 22% among monthly-practicing Catholics, and 16% among weekly-practicing Catholics. This negative correlation between a Catholic affiliation and support for the left applied to all the main parties of the left (Socialists, Communists, Greens and Radicals), with the Communist party particularly marked by this, as in the past. The rate of abstention is particularly low among practicing Catholics (20%) and at its maximum among non-practicing Catholics and non-religious people (38% and 36% respectively).

Michelat infers from this that interest in politics is at its greatest among Catholics characterized by Guy Michelet as the most “undiluted” and is lower among others who in the past were more inclined to support the left and who are today the most affected by a crisis in public interest in politics leading to doubt, to disaffiliation, or voting for the National Front. Interestingly very few undiluted Catholics vote for the extreme right.

¹⁰ Michel Brulé in “L’appartenance religieuse et le vote (présidentiel) du 5 septembre 1965” [Religious belonging and the presidential vote of September 5, 1965], *Sondages*, 28(2), 1966, p.17, shows that out of the population of regularly practicing Catholics (i.e. 23% of French people during this time period), 72% voted for General de Gaulle and for Jean Lecanuet (of the moderate right). Out of the population of irregularly practicing Catholics (36% of the total population), the percentage decreased to 48% (versus 23%) for the candidate François Mitterrand. For non-practicing Catholics (27% of the total), the percentages were slightly in favor of the left: 34% voted for candidates of the right and 37% chose François Mitterrand.

¹¹ « Niveau d’intégration au catholicisme et vote » [The level of Catholic integration and the vote], *Données Sociales*, Paris, INSEE, 1990. « Intégration au catholicisme, attitudes éthico-politiques et comportement électoral » [Integration and Catholicism, ethico-political attitudes and electoral behavior], in *Les Cultures politiques des Français*, opus cité, pp 209-235.

Some 51% of those who believe in the existence of God voted for the right in 1986, compared with 25% who voted for the left, whereas, 67% of atheists voted for the left. The more that the content of the Catholic faith is known and practiced, the higher the probability that the vote for the right will increase. Yves Lambert proceeds through other avenues of inquiry and presents similar conclusions¹², which cause us to think that electoral trends are not just related to “simple survival”, but have a strong ideological dimension¹³. The religious variable remains a heavy one in political sociology in explaining votes for the right, as it is inexistent for people of no religious affiliation. Considering all of the percentages of Catholic votes between regularly practicing Catholics, monthly, occasional and non-practicing Catholics, predictions made over the last thirty years show a certain stability (Michelat, 1990). The religious variable explains 68% of the vote for the rights in 1966 and 70% in 1978. It explains 65% of this vote in 1997. In a general sense, in pre-Enlargement Europe (i.e. the Europe of 15 members), non-religious people were more to the left than non-practicing religious people, who were more to the left than people who practiced religion, whatever the confession¹⁴.

The continuation of an interventionist economic culture

The most recent European vote reveals habits of mind deeply anchored among the French population which help to explain the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005. France had helped to build a vision of Europe shaped to a considerable extent by Catholics which included a commitment to substantive social policies through of a consensus forged by Socialists and Christian-Democrats in the 1950s around a principle which is now referred to as “solidarity”, meaning policies designed to reduce social

¹² Yves Lambert « La religion : un paysage en profonde évolution », in Rifault H.dir. *Les Valeurs des Français*, PUF, 1994.

¹³ Michelat has thus shown that in 1997, the more that one was Catholic, the more one desired to see schools which favored discipline and effort. This correlation relies on a survey question from the BVA survey of 2003 asking what schools should teach to children as a priority: the response was the same – discipline and effort at a rate of 59%.

¹⁴ B. Cautrès, « l’influence de la religion sur les attitudes politiques : essai d’analyse spatio-temporelle dans l’Union européenne », in P. Bréchon et B. Cautrès dir., *Les enquêtes Eurobaromètres, analyse comparées des données socio-politiques*, Paris l’Harmattan, 1998.

inequalities and eliminate social marginalization and exclusion, with a strong emphasis on equal opportunities and living conditions for all citizens in a Republic which is defined in article one of its constitution as “social” in nature. It would be a grave misreading of the fabric of French society to overlook the fact that a vision of an economically “liberal” Europe and a presentation of the European Constitution in essentially commercial terms was bound to offend both practicing and non-practicing Catholics, who together represent 64 per cent of the electorate.

In the 1994 European elections, when the electorate in general tended towards hostility to Europe, showing a general lack of confidence and optimism, practicing Catholics showed them to be “Euro-optimists”. That optimism had declined by the 1999 European elections, when the social policy dimension also seemed to be in decline in the most recent European treaties. The treaties seemed to simply enshrine the idea of Europe as an ever larger and more efficient market with no real political project be it towards the United States or on questions of social justice and peace. In an exit poll, 61 per cent of French voters (and 62 per cent of Catholic voters) said they wanted a Europe that was more independent from the United States and with stronger social policies, in a word a European Welfare State. For Catholics as for the population as a whole, the top two priorities were the struggle against social inequalities and for greater personal security. If Europe were to pursue neither peace nor social justice, Europe would lose its purpose and its very soul.¹⁵

With hindsight we can see in those data (from 1999) the onset of what was to become the great disavowal of 2005. The majority of Catholics, like the majority of the population as a whole, voted against the Constitution in the name of their own European ideal and they showed themselves more and more sympathetic to Euro-sceptics on both the left and the right, despite the attempts by most party leaderships to bring people back into line around a pro-European platform.

¹⁵ *LA Croix, sondage CSA-opinion, 15/06/99*