

NICOLAS SARKOZY'S FAITH IN THE REPUBLIC

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INTRODUCTION

Religion, which never intervenes directly in the government of American society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions, for although it did not give them the taste for liberty, it singularly facilitates their use thereof. . . I do not know if all Americans have faith in their religion—for who can read the secrets of the heart?—but I am sure that they think it necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions.¹

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

This time, the rioting erupted after a young man died in a motorcycle collision with a police cruiser. “We’ve had it up to here with the cops,” said a 19-year old Frenchman of Moroccan origin. The *New York Times* reported that “Hundreds of youths looted stores, threw rocks at police officers and set fires.”² If this scene sounds familiar, it’s because the narrative closely mirrors confrontations in two Parisian suburbs that have tested the authority of Nicolas Sarkozy: once in Clichy-sous-Bois (October 2005), when he was Interior Minister, and once in Villiers-le-Bel (November 2007), early in his presidency. The event in question actually took place on the outskirts of Lyon in October 1990. The Socialist-led government in place in 1990 did its best to address the widespread

disenfranchisement and alienation: it inaugurated a ministry for urban affairs and set aside 40 million *Francs* for sports centers and soccer fields in France's worst neighborhoods. These efforts were layered on top of the administrative "zones"—for priority education, for tax rebates, for job creation—designated by previous Socialist governments to help young people after riots in the *banlieues* ten years before that.

The unrest in Villiers-le-bel was the first street violence of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency—despite the opposition's predictions of unrest after an eventual Sarkozy victory—and he did not disappoint those who have become accustomed to his brash rhetoric. While interior minister he notoriously joined the impolitic words *kärcher* and *racaille*. This time, he coined the term *voyoucratie*, promised to track down the young men who had shot at police, and downplayed the possibility that the rioting were indicative of "social problems." Beyond punishing the guilty and restoring law and order, what could he do?

Several years earlier, shortly after Sarkozy became Interior Minister he told an interviewer that "We are not going to resolve the problem of young people in the *banlieues* just by giving them soccer fields and youth centers." Then he began to raise his voice in the secular cloister of republican government: "The *banlieues*, like any other cities, need inspirational places where people gather and respect one another, where the values of life and hope are defended. A synagogue, a temple, a church, or a mosque can fulfill this function."³ In his book, *La république, les religions, l'espérance*, published two years before he announced his presidential campaign, Sarkozy wrote: "*Je suis convaincu que l'esprit religieux et la pratique religieuse peuvent contribuer à apaiser et à réguler une société de liberté*", and called for:

une grande réflexion sur la nécessité de construire des synagogues, des églises et des mosquées dans les banlieues. Il est aussi important d'ouvrir des lieux de culte dans les grandes zones urbaines que d'inaugurer des salles de sport, elles-mêmes très utiles ! Ce qui doit nous préoccuper, c'est ce que vont être les idéaux de la jeunesse qui vient. Tous ces jeunes qui ne croient plus à grand-chose, voilà un défi pour toutes les religions!

French politicians have spent nearly three decades puzzling over what to do about social exclusion, unemployment, education, and discrimination amongst its growing population of African and North African origin. The Republic has run through its arsenal of policy tools and come up short. The socio-economic integration of an

underprivileged group poses tough challenges in any national context, and it has proven even harder in a political culture where the collective expression of minorities, religion or ethnicity—and public policies specifically targeted at them—are taboo. This being the cradle of *laïcité*, no French president for more than a century uttered a word about the role religion might play in these young peoples' lives. Sarkozy's predecessors—on the Left and on the Right—figured that more sports, internships and new housing should do the trick.

It is fair to say that the *pur et dur* republican approach wasn't working. The clinical discussion of *jeunes* and *quartiers* in thirty years of periodic urban unrest studiously avoided any mention of ethnicity or minorities. But the recurrent street battles between rioters and police which first began in the early 1980s were as depressing as the succession of *banlieues* that added their names to the list of those that have gone up in flames: Villeurbane, Vaulx-en-Velin, les Minguettes, Noisy-le-Bond, Sartrouville, Clichy-sous-Bois, Villiers-le-Bel.

Each round of rioting produced countless reports and policy initiatives for new waves of urban planning. In 1995, the Gaullists took over and Prime Minister Alain Juppé proposed a “Marshall Plan” for the *banlieues*: a vast economic recovery and housing plan including pacts to create incentives to hire local youth in paid internships and tax incentives for neighborhoods to attract businesses, etc. At the end, the most useful (and tautological) aspect of this alphabet soup of ZFs and ZUPs and ZUS's and ZEP's was that they are an excellent predictor of where urban unrest is likely to occur.⁴ Their boundaries matched up perfectly with the 300 neighborhoods that went up in flames in October 2005.

Worse, discrimination has become systemic in the Fifth Republic. One researcher recently sent out 1800 *résumés* for jobs—listing the same qualifications but including different names and photographs—and received 258 responses. The *résumés* from a white “native” Parisian garnered 75 interview requests, whereas the same profile with an address in the *banlieues* got 45 interview requests. When the identical *résumé* was submitted with a Moroccan-sounding name, only 14 interview requests came back. A mere 11% of Algerian-origin university graduates between the ages of 25 and 33 have successfully found white-collar jobs, compared to 46% of “native” Frenchmen in the same age group.⁵

Now that he's been president for two years, what does Nicolas Sarkozy's long-term strategy for integration look like? As an avowed adherent of liberal economic policies ("work more to earn more"), many observers assumed that the President's plan would consist of job creation and urban renewal, following the common wisdom that the *banlieues* just need an economic miracle. But a review of Sarkozy's record indicates that he was always unlikely to rely on schools, rec rooms and jobs alone. He reckons that these neighborhoods are in need of more old-fashioned miracles.

SARKOZY L'AMÉRICAIN

There is hardly any human action... which does not result from some very general conception men have of God, of His relations with the human race, of the nature of their soul, and of their duties to their fellows. Nothing can prevent such ideas from being the common spring from which all else originates. (Tocqueville, *DA*, 442-443)

Sarkozy is the first French president to arrive in the Elysée with personal and political acquaintances from a wide swath of France's organized Muslim community. "Religions represent hope," he wrote in his instructions to the first Interior Minister to serve under his rule. "And hope must not be seen as a threat to the Republic."⁶ The French public first got a glimpse of his views on the utility of religious equality when he led negotiations while Interior Minister to create the French Council for the Muslim Faith (CFCM) in 2002. He forged the CFCM by going further with the hard-line *Union des Organisations Islamiques de France* (UOIF) than any previous Interior Minister had done—over the voluble objections of the opposition—and gambling that only the UOIF could deliver the *banlieues*' prayer spaces to the *Bureau central des cultes*. His experience wrangling with the Muslim Brotherhood-linked UOIF marked both him and his critics. In his autobiography, *Testimony*, he described his experience learning about Islam and French Muslims through the CFCM:

They were of foreign origin but profoundly French in their thinking. Actually, I feel much closer to someone like Ali Berka—founding president of the Ali Berka Mosque, former worker at Renault (where he worked all his life), and Moroccan national who has lived in France for a number of years—than I do to a number of Parisian lawyers.⁷

Sarkozy's instinct suggested that the CFCM could deliver the distinction between hoodlum and respectful citizen, between terrorist

and simple believer. He thought that getting a handle on French Islam might help him address geopolitical issues. In a 2002 interview shortly after arriving at Place Beauveau, he told a community magazine that “The creation of a representative body for Islam will eliminate the conflation of the Muslim community and a handful of delinquents.”⁸ Two years later, after Muslim delegates he had appointed to the CFCM traveled to Baghdad to demand the release of two French journalists being held hostage in Iraq, Sarkozy felt redeemed: “There is no more credible or stronger voice than CFCM—with the UOIF in its heart—to show that Islam has nothing to do with that and to denounce the mental confusion of hostage-takers, sap their demands of all credibility.”⁹

It is not in Sarkozy's genetic code to respect taboos or to be restricted by consensus, and his first five-year term is likely to dismantle as many of the French exceptionalisms as he has time to do: including the use of religion policy as an instrument of immigrant integration. While he was interior minister (in 2002-5 and 2006-7), he repeatedly butted up against the foundations of French refusal of identity politics. His early support for affirmative action *à la française* and broad hints that the 1905 law separating church and state needed updating earned him accusations of foreign influence.

‘Sarko the American’ is a comment you hear in France that’s meant to suggest that I want to transform the French social model into the Anglo-Saxon model... And they lump together everything that can possibly make me seem like a henchman for the inequalities and excesses of the United States: belief in free markets, my point of view on affirmative action, my institutional proposals, my book on religion—though they tend to overlook that the first word of the title was “Republic. (*Testimony*, 72)

Sarkozy has posed a set of *faux innocent* questions in an environment that was inhospitable to new inquiry. Why can't the state help pay for mosques? Why doesn't French census data take account of ethnic origins? Why shouldn't the state reflect the diversity of the population?

I never understood in what way the desire to want to diversify the hiring of our elites would be against the republican ideal. What should offend the Republic is the idea that someone's prospects for promotion should depend on the color of his skin or what his name is—not that someone should want to end this injustice.... *The French love to denounce inequities without wanting to do what's necessary to overcome them.* (Sarkozy, *Testimony*,

119, emphasis mine)

He even questioned the sufficiency of the mythical republican classroom—once hailed as “citizen factories”—to inculcate everything one needs for modern-day citizenship. Sarkozy argued in 2005 that the French school system is no longer fit for the task it faced. “Today, our neighborhoods are spiritual deserts,” he said. “I don’t say that the Republic cannot [...] speak to young people about self-respect and respect for others and for women[.]” But he went on to suggest that the 19th-century reforms which removed priests from public education are partly to blame for this sacred void. “Notwithstanding the ambitions of Jules Ferry, the Republic is not up to the task and doesn’t do it. Religions give today’s men and women the perspective of fundamental questions of human existence: the meaning of life and death and society and history.”¹⁰

Having presented himself as the candidate of “rupture,” Nicolas Sarkozy was more likely than any of his predecessors to change tack. Like any other French politician with more than a passing interest in the *banlieues*, he had seen the coming and going of *zones d’éducation prioritaire*, *zones à urbaniser en priorité*, and *zones franches*. At the end of the day—and this recalls Tocqueville’s remark on the pantheistic tendencies of democracy—Sarkozy places more stock in Zeus than ZUS.

NAPOLEON COMPLEX

One must not praise or blame Napoleon for concentrating almost all administrative powers in his own hands. . . . Centralization does not spread in a democracy simply in step with the progress toward equality, but also depends on the way in which that equality was established. (Tocqueville, *DA*, 675)

Sarkozy’s focus on religion and religious community has led many to accuse him of being a *communautariste*: of preferring to deal with collectivities at the expense of individuals. This is naturally an extremely sensitive charge to level, for it implies the negation of the Revolution’s individualist *acquis*—namely, citizenship and the abolition of ascribed group membership. If France at this turn of century was slowly getting used to *communautés*, as Jacques Chirac put it, it could not accept *communautarisme*.

The aftermath of the 2007 riots provided a glimpse of Sarkozy’s political-religious choreography. His first state visit was to Algeria,

and he brought him with the religious leader Dalil Boubakeur, head of the French Council for the Muslim Faith. The first state visitor to France happened to be Moammar Qaddafi, “the Guide,” who camped five days in Paris. Sarkozy’s next state visit was to the Vatican.¹¹ (He found time in between to step out with his future wife in Eurodisney.) Later in his first year in office, he delivered major speeches on the “positive contributions” of religion in Riyadh and Rome, and at the CRIF’s annual dinner. “Le drame du XX^e siècle n’est pas né d’un excès de dieu,” Sarkozy told the CRIF annual dinner, “mais de sa redoutable absence.”

Cumulatively, these actions have upset the fragile secular settlement that reigned for more than a century. Sarkozy’s lay critics accuse him of wanting to:

*Remplacer la solidarité républicaine par la charité des Eglises, remplacer les travailleurs sociaux et les policiers par les imams et les grands frères, rien de tel quand on veut communautariser la société, et briser les solidarités sociales. Aux Etats-Unis, cela a remarquablement marché.*¹²

After Sarkozy’s CRIF speech, one liberal observer noted fearfully that “On a échappé (pour l’instant) à la mise en cause de la philosophie des lumières, mais de peu.”¹³

This reputation had already dogged him during his presidential campaign. In a Socialist Party brochure from 2007, Eric Besson called Sarkozy an apologist for the “*modèle communautariste religieux*?” (before he went to work for him). He said that Sarkozy seeks to: “*Raviver les sentiments communautaires et la religiosité, [... et de] substituer à la solidarité nationale des solidarités communautaires [...]. Comme aux Etats-Unis, il faut en appeler aux religions pour régler nos problèmes.*”¹⁴

In many ways, Sarkozy strikingly recalled that great tamer of early nineteenth-century religions Napoleon Bonaparte, who remarked in 1800: “no society can live without morals, and there are no good morals without religion; only religion, therefore, can offer the state a firm and durable support.”¹⁵ Sarkozy’s opponents have compared him unfavorably to Bonaparte—for his short stature and grand ambitions, for the Napoleonic task of giving himself one hundred days to win back Cécilia, his Joséphine, in summer 2006. But most of all he has been criticized for his corporatist impulses—the man has a knack for negotiating with notables. He seems to genuinely enjoy charming union leaders as much as he does when rolling up his

sleeves with *les barbus*. By taking institutional steps to reconcile faith and citizenship for a stigmatized minority, his 2003 CFCM did for French Muslims what Bonaparte did for French Jews with the 1807 Consistoire. He extended official recognition to their minority faith, unveiling one more façade on the laicized public square – or pulling up another seat at *la table de la république*¹ -- while simultaneously encouraging that faith's privatization and domestication in a French context. The process is paradoxical but ultimately emancipatory by design: it embraces the group at the highest administrative level to better free the individual citizen of an ascribed community identity. It guarantees religious liberty by preserving the options of active participation in – or withdrawal from – the minority community on an equal basis with members of other major religions.

Of course, being called Napoleon is par for the course for French Interior Ministers, who are charged with the supplementary title of *Ministre des cultes*. France's first national consultations with Muslims began rather innocuously in 1990. The first headscarf affair, the Rushdie affair, and the first Gulf War had raised policymakers' antennae to the growing Muslim minority on their cities' edges. Joxe said that around that time, he simply remarked to François Mitterrand—"Next time we should invite a Muslim [to the New Year's reception]."¹⁶ That spring, Prime Minister Michel Rocard instructed Pierre Joxe to proceed with a first attempt at institutionalizing Islam: the Conseil de réflexion sur l'islam en France (CORIF). Joxe was a fellow Protestant who wrote a book about the Edict of Nantes and served as president of the Fédération Protestante; he had more than a little latter-day Adolphe Crémieux about him.

Lors d'une réunion de réflexion, qui n'était heureusement pas publique, un des membres du CORIF m'a dit à moi-même 'ab, vous êtes notre Napoléon.' J'ai dit 'arrêtez-vous!' Quand quelqu'un dit qu'il se prend pour Napoléon en France, c'est qu'il est fou. C'est une image classique dans la médecine clinique.¹⁷

¹ This formulation is inspired by the historian Maurice Agulhon, who wrote "S'il y a place pour trois, il doit bien y avoir place pour quatre, à la table de la République," cited in "Allocution de Jean-Pierre Chevènement, ministre de l'Intérieur à la suite de l'ordination épiscopale de Mgr Joseph Doré, nouvel évêque de Strasbourg," Strasbourg, le 23 novembre 1997;

Joxe says that he objected to the designation because Napoleon used authoritarian means to organize religions, whereas he Joxe insisted on revitalizing civil society from below.

*Je leur ai dit : créez des associations ! partout où vous voulez, après vous allez vous fédérer, entre origine théologique, géographique, entre ce qui sont branchés vers la Mecque, le Maroc, la Tunisie, etc. Et c'est ce qui se passe depuis 15 ans. Non seulement ils ont multiplié les associations locales mais elles se fédèrent entre croisés.*¹⁸

But the Islamic federations participating in the CORIF were in frequent disagreement on what to ask of the French administration; public authorities found they could not paper over the tension between “moderates” and the “less moderate”—namely, the UOIF. In an interview on the early attempt to create a council for Islam, Michel Rocard praised Napoleon's organization of the Jewish faith in France, and seemed humbled by the CORIF's failure to keep religious leaders of the Muslim community at the negotiating table.

Napoleon paid attention to the necessity of having religious authorities in France accept the Convention of 1801-2. There was no Jewish authority capable of making common statements, and so he succeeded with a *coup formidable* and held a meeting of the Sanhedrin which had not taken place since the destruction of the second temple. I don't know how the Jewish community deals with the question of that Sanhedrin's legitimacy. But it was a move of efficient democracy! And the Civil Code was accepted! It is difficult for the French to think anew about the problem that is posed by the Muslims and their institutionalization. But the relationship between the Jewish community and France shows that it can work—we don't have any more problems with the Jews.¹⁹

This was the feat that Sarkozy achieved for French Islam in Napoleonic fashion: he locked the UOIF leaders up with the other main federations in Nainville les Roches until a power-sharing agreement was hammered out between bitter rivals.²⁰

GOT STATISTICS?

Catholicism may predispose the faithful to obedience, but it does not prepare them for inequality. (Tocqueville, *DA*, 288)

Sarkozy has consistently demonstrated little patience for the purist version of the Republican model, and has shown a willingness to call things by their proper name, if that means that he can help shape better integration outcomes. He is effectively asking the electorate to decide for itself which is worse: A) The previous practice of vague speeches on the problems of *les jeunes* who periodically erupt

in violence, or B) His practice of recognizing the law-abiding “Muslims” who are perfectly at home in France and French institutions, and separately condemning suburban unrest as the isolated work of *racaille* or *voyous*. His institutional accommodation of Islam afforded him the luxury of creating these distinctions in French minds.

After five years of skirting the issue of affirmative action in France—calling for “effective equality” or “positive discrimination”—Sarkozy finally came around to some quasi-American notions to help ensure ethnic diversity in France's top universities and workplaces. Affirmative action in the US has never been strictly quota-based—this is a common French misperception—but the French rejection of taking ethnic, national or other background into account has always been near absolute (with the notable exception of the Parity Law requiring that half of all parliamentary candidates be female). He wrote in *Testimony* that:

Making an effort to consider different profiles for each nomination is a form of positive discrimination, activism that is far removed from the idea of quotas. And let the best person win! That's why I supported the nomination of a “Muslim prefect.” And it's why I later supported people from immigrant communities or overseas territories for the posts of equal-opportunity prefects that were created after the suburbs crisis of fall 2005. If I hadn't obliged the Interior Ministry to look beyond the seventeen deputy prefects who were waiting their turn to become prefect, we would still be in the same place, and we would still be there ten years from now as well. (*Testimony*, 119)

One can imagine him saying the same for the seventeen people in line for the job of Justice Minister in his first cabinet (2005-9), all of whom were outraged when he handed the job to Rachida Dati.

A commission headed by the former Minister (and Holocaust survivor) Simone Veil recently recommended against amending the Constitution to recognize a commitment to “diversity,” but that did not deter Sarkozy from announcing a broad set of new measures in pursuit of that same aim. In a speech last December, the President called for modernizing society's commitment to the values of the Republic, noting that “our integration model worked for a century; it has since been proven powerless.” The entrepreneur Yazid Sabeg was named the first “commissioner for diversity and equal opportunity,” and six months later he announced several measures to enhance the color-blind republic's perception of hues: 30% of seats (c. 12,000) in

the highly-competitive preparatory courses for entrance examinations to each of France's *grandes écoles* will be reserved for scholarship students; 5% of apprenticeships in medium and large firms will be set aside; the use of "anonymous CV's" will be broadened to increase diversity in the country's top 100 companies; and 7,500 students from *Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire* will be offered places in boarding schools.²¹

Nonetheless, Yazid Sabeg's unsuccessful detour into the political fray on the issue of ethnic statistics demarcated the outer limits of Sarkozy's reformist insolence: the President has remained publicly aloof on the question.²²

REDEFINING REPUBLICANISM

Encountering Sarkozy has meant unlearning everything I thought I knew about a certain elite consensus in French politics and religion—lessons that were learned the hard way in the exploratory phase of my graduate fieldwork on French politics a decade ago. My first interview with a French politician took place in the U.S. in 1999, with the former *Assemblée Nationale* president Philippe Séguin. I naïvely raised questions about Muslim and Jewish communities and he patiently explained to me that in France,

*La notion de communauté n'existe pas. Nous ne savons pas qu'est-ce que c'est que la communauté juive. D'ailleurs personne ne serait capable de vous donner quelque chiffre que ce soit. Ce sujet, pour nous, cette notion est une notion inexistante. Nous avons un principe en France, qui est le principe de la laïcité, et comme on dirait, à aucun moment de la vie administrative, la vie quotidienne de la religion ou l'origine peut être demandée à quiconque, ce qui fait que juridiquement, politiquement ça n'existe pas. Maintenant, on emploie l'expression parfois du fait, j'imagine, de la contamination étrangère. Mais c'est une facilité de langage, ça n'est en rien une réalité.*²³

This prompted consideration of what politicians were up to at the annual *Dîner du CRIF*, to take one example, and I asked Séguin why a sitting Prime Minister would take time from his busy schedule to attend a Jewish community event. Séguin explained that "*chaque année le CRIF fait un dîner auquel je suis invité régulièrement et auquel je m'abstiens régulièrement d'apparaître.*" Why, I asked? "*Parce que je ne reconnais pas les communautés.*" Later, responding to a question about Chirac's decision to apologize for the *raffles du vélodrome d'hiver*. "*On peut dire que c'était une opération à caractère électoral... dans le but de satisfaire à une revendication explicite ou implicite, dans le but de se concilier des bonnes grâces de certaines catégories.*" I was confused; weren't Jews a tiny electorate? "*Enfin tout est*

toujours bon à prendre, vous savez. C'est le cas aussi aux États Unis. Pourtant, je crois qu'il y a certaines considérations. Moi j'essaie de vous expliquer les choses." At the tender age of 22, I was clearly in over my head. At one point during my interview with Séguin, the local Consul général spoke up to inform me that my epidermis was showing: "*votre prisme d'analyse est très 'américano-centrique' et ça peut vous gêner, mais il n'y a pas de communautés, et je crois que c'est même une de nos fiertés.*"

This foreshadowed what a member of Chevènement's cabinet would tell me the following summer, when I approached him to discuss the consultation with Islam—a revival of Joxe's CORIF—that he was busy trying to bring to fruition.

Le modèle [américain] fédéraliste est un modèle démocratique, mais au fond il consiste à traiter le problème de la diversité – culturelle, sociale, ethno-culturelle – en créant autant de petites niches, un système de juxtaposition ou d'empiètement de petites niches. C'est-à-dire de chercher le respect des différences, dans ce qu'on a appelé le 'droit à la différence'. Alors que dans la conception républicaine, le respect de différence, la véritable reconnaissance de la différence, on la cherche par le droit à l'égalité. C'est-à-dire, cette abstraction politique, c'est la politique républicaine qui transcende la différence, l'inégalité, la diversité sociale et culturelle.²⁴

In the course of my interviews during these early years of research, however, I also felt the occasional tremors presaging Sarkozy's tectonic shift. President Chirac's *chef de cabinet* told me that something would soon have to give:

Le problème, c'est qu'il y a dans certaines villes, pas seulement des banlieues, ... une mosaïque d'immigrés de toutes provenances... C'est tout le problème de l'intégration, de la gestion de toutes ces populations... Est-ce que par ailleurs on ne demande pas trop à l'école ? C'est un de nos vieux travers, pas seulement pour l'intégration mais pour l'éducation.... Il y a peut-être une autre façon de voir les choses et qui s'applique non seulement aux problèmes de l'immigration mais aussi aux problèmes de la gestion du service public et de nos responsabilités publiques. Il s'agit de savoir si notre Etat centralisé et jacobin ne montre pas ses limites à la solution de ces problèmes... La famille gaulliste est quand même l'héritière de ce qu' il y a de plus jacobin, mais on est en train de prendre de plus en plus de distance avec ce modèle qui apparaît ancien, parce qu' inadapté, parce qu'il ne rend plus les services quotidiens qu'on en attend, que ce soit pour la sécurité, l'école, l'intégration, la gestion des services publics en général.²⁵

Eric Raoult, for example, who had served as Minister for Urban Affairs, also seemed to be saying something different than his peers.

Une intégration marche, quand il y a tout à la fois, la communauté et le drapeau, la communauté où on met ses racines, et le drapeau qu'on regarde en affiliation. Il y a des Américains d'origine serbe, d'origine polonaise. Ils sont fiers de leurs racines, mais

*ils font l'acte d'appartenance... L'intégration c'est cette double affiliation, à la nation d'accueil, et à la nation de départ. Le respect des racines et un espoir.*²⁶

Raoult was more in touch with his imminent political future than either of us realized at the time.

PERFORMANCE OF THE CFCM

Early press reports described Sarkozy's *Conseil français du culte musulman* as the moral equivalent of the Ottoman-era Millet system. One editorial cartoon in *Le Parisien* from 2003 pictured a black turbaned mufti assuring a stout Sarkozy, "no need to worry about law and order in the *banlieues*; we'll take care of cutting off the hands of thieves." In fact, Sarkozy has always insisted he was interested in precisely the opposite: to bring the writ of French law *into* the *banlieues*, not have it stop at their borders. He sought to lift these organizations "out of the cellars" and into the "light of day." "What was the alternative?" he was fond of saying. "Stand by while the *banlieues* radicalize? We have refused to confront reality for forty years. If you find Islam incompatible with the Republic, then what do you do with the 5 million people of Muslim origin living in France? Do you kick them out, or make them convert, or ask them not to practice their religion?"²⁷ Mosque delegates have gone to polls three times over the past six years to elect representatives to the CFCM and twenty-five regional councils (CRCM), who alongside ministerial appointees have slowly taken up some of the practical aspects of formal religious observance for French Muslims – from halal to Hajj, and chaplains to mosque construction.

In late 2003, the year after his defeat in the 1st round of the presidential elections, Lionel Jospin said that Sarkozy's attendance at the UOIF's annual conference was inherently problematic:

Quand il va au congrès d'une fédération [UOIF] qui a l'interprétation la plus fondamentaliste de l'islam, Quand il parle devant des femmes voilées – et le Français voit ça à sa télé [...] Il y a un risque de "délégation" – un danger. La religion est une affaire privée ; ce sont davantage des citoyens, des individus.

Q : Ne serait-ce pas parce que l'UOIF est 'utile' ? Qu'elle peut apporter la 'pacification des banlieues' ?

*Justement j'ai peur que c'est dans sa tête. Il ne faut pas confondre les communautés et l'expression religieuse : il faut chercher les interlocuteurs dans le monde associatif.*²⁸

In his campaign pamphlet for the Socialist Party, similarly, Eric Besson had cited disapprovingly the example of Sarkozy's dealings

with UOIF:

Que penser de la connexion entre [le CFCM] et l'ambition de l'UOIF de promouvoir l'islam comme un moyen de lutter contre la délinquance ? L'un de ses dirigeants, Amar Lasfar, qui anime la mosquée de Lille, insiste sur ce rôle de pacification des relations sociales qui incomberait à l'islam.²⁹

For further support of his thesis, Besson quoted Farid Abdelkrim, a former leader of the UOIF's youth section; but the speaker's ironic tone eluded him: "*L'islam, c'est un Kärcher qui permet de nettoyer les comportements les plus tordus qui soient. Avec l'islam, j'ai arrêté de fumer, j'ai arrêté de boire, j'ai arrêté de voler, j'ai respecté mes parents, j'ai voulu faire des études.*"³⁰

Shortly after the CFCM's first elections were held, Chevènement explained the reasoning behind his re-launching of the consultation with representatives of organized Islam:

L'idée était d'aider l'Islam à évoluer, à surmonter ses blocages historiques, à faire revivre les traditions de l'interprétation. Il s'agissait donc de créer une instance culturelle. Ce n'était pas de créer une instance communautaire, comme Sarkozy semble le croire. Il a eu le mérite d'achever ce que j'avais commencé, mais je pense qu'il n'a pas bien compris tous les présupposés.³¹

In September 2003, Sarkozy was confident that his strategy was paying off: "There has never been as little violence in the *banlieues* as today... Who can't see the relation between an overture to an Islam of France in broad daylight, on the one hand, and the cleaning up of difficult neighborhoods?"³²

The 2005 riots posed the first serious challenge to this view. The UOIF had indeed fulfilled its role, issuing a fatwa that the Interior Minister could not have drafted any better: "it is un-Islamic to destroy your neighbor's property." There was only one problem: the secular rioters weren't interested in the UOIF's standards of *Islamicité*. The well-intentioned words were about as effective as the CFCM's trip to Baghdad, which had produced a news conference worthy of Moses Montefiore: "show us you are good Muslims like us and give us the Frenchmen," said the CFCM delegates. They returned to Paris empty-handed, but the script could not have been better written by the Minister for Foreign Affairs (there was a public dispute between those involved with the visit about who suggested the trip to begin with, the UOIF or the Ministry). The Baghdad visit helped the French government pass the 2004 law prohibiting headscarves, since

the kidnapers had demanded the law's withdrawal in exchange for the journalists' freedom. To accede to these demands would have meant caving in to "an odious form of blackmail," as Tariq Ramadan wrote at the time.

Beyond the President's unquestioned midwifery of the CFCM, Sarkozy's government has also ensured the Council's very survival through a precarious infancy. The interior ministry actively sustains the organization, smoothes out rivalries, and promotes its place in public debate on Islam. The prefects of the republic even provided the service of collecting association dues from the prayer spaces participating in the CFCM, which is technically a 1901-law association. After untiringly (and unsuccessfully) attempting to arrange for the views of the CFCM to be represented in a European Parliament hearing on ritual animal slaughter this spring, the director of the *Bureau central des cultes* said, with a humor-lined degree of exasperation: "Le chef du CFCM, c'est Bertrand Gaume."³³

Officials in the Interior Ministry also help instruct future Muslim religious personnel in a course on basic religious history, civic and administration knowledge. The first thirty graduates of the training course—held at the Institut Catholique de Paris—recently received their diplomas, and the second class of forty students began coursework in January 2009. Subjects include an introduction to French law and the French political system, as well as the study of other religions in France and the financial-administrative basics of how to run a mosque. The idea is to help imams "become credible interlocutors for public authorities" and show them "how to run a religious community with the framework of republican legality."³⁴

Finally, the government helped bring the Fondation des Œuvres de l'Islam de France into existence to help oversee mosque financing; five government ministers sit on its executive board. There are currently more than 2 300 *lieux de prière* (there were under 1 600 at the end of the Jospin government)—and two hundred additional places of worship are in final planning stages.³⁵ Moreover, many of these are made possible by city councils who are less reticent to issue *baux emphytéotiques* than in the past because of the existence of reliable interlocutors: the *Conseils régionaux du culte musulman* that Sarkozy helped bring into existence in 2003. "*L'Islam des maires*" is in full

swing. One researcher recently returning from a study on mosque-building reported that:

Quelles que soient les critiques – fondées, notamment quant au fait qu’il s’agit là d’une institution créée d’en haut, à l’initiative du gouvernement, et dans les cadres établis par lui – faites au CFCM, j’ai découvert en faisant cette recherche que le processus de concertation préalable à la création de ce Conseil avait débloqué la situation : les maires se sentent autorisés à chercher des solutions pratiques alors qu’auparavant ils semblaient gérer la situation avec réticence. Curieusement, dans toutes les villes où j’ai enquêté, des relations structurées autour de réelles négociations ne s’établissent pas avant 2002-2003.³⁶

On balance, the CFCM is a fairly well functioning institution that has defied all expectations. It is hardly a model of efficiency, but nor did it implode; it has gone through three electoral cycles, and has even made some headway towards institutional equality for Islam with other religions, such as chaplaincies and the availability of halal food in hospitals, the army and prisons. Rather than viewing the CFCM’s blockage and paralysis as a disadvantage, some Interior Ministry officials have come to see this as a kind of institutional equilibrium—so long as representatives are haggling and cutting deals at the table, they are not off attacking each other in the press. Every time that one of the principals has threatened to resign or withdraw participation of his federation, he has quickly realized that it’s the only game in town. “*Ça tient à un fil, mais sa légitimité est renforcée chaque fois que des élections se tiennent,*” said an official in the Bureau central des cultes. “*C’est notre verrou de sécurité.*”³⁷

The most interesting development of all, for one senior official, is that that the UOIF has become little more than an “Islamic CGT.”³⁸ This appraisal was echoed by his colleague: like the Communist Parties of yesteryear, “the Muslim Brotherhood in general and the UOIF in particular have developed a strategy of taking control of institutions in order to gain power. The most important thing for them is less to resolve problems or propose solutions, rather it is to put their men in the main *rouages*. [On the other hand,] at least they have a structure.”³⁹ Not exactly the boy scouts, but still a far cry from the obstructive and obstinate threat represented by the UOIF in the early 1990s.

A TURBULENT SPRING FOR FRENCH ISLAM

The aftermath of the 2008-9 Gaza war shook up state-Islam

relations in France and jeopardized the fragile relationship between organized Jewish and Muslim communities. Inter-religious dialogue between the CRIF and the CFCM fell apart during the latest installment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The episode has stoked the festering desire of French Muslims to have their voice be heard on foreign policy issues and set off a round of fervent jockeying for influence. After the restrained French defense of Palestinians in the wake of the drubbing administered to Hamas (and several hundred civilian deaths) in Gaza, Muslim federations participating in the CFCM came under pressure to prove they haven't been thoroughly co-opted or de-fanged in their advisory role to French government.

President Sarkozy made his usual appearance at the annual dinner of the CRIF, giving a carefully balanced speech (just as the Elysée's response to the Gaza war had been) but the image of him cozying up to the strongly pro-Israeli CRIF set in motion a complicated series of events. Some of those whose stock in the CFCM has fallen in recent years—notably those with Algerian backing—saw fit to temporarily withdraw from the CFCM's governing board. The Grande Mosquée of Paris and Lyon announced they would be temporarily suspending their participation in the CFCM after an adviser to French Interior Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie attended a conference organized in Fes, Morocco. This paying of respect to the Moroccan government was seen as adding insult to injury after the French administration shifted their attention to the more popular Moroccan federations (including the UOIF) that handily dominated the last round of elections in summer 2008, replacing former CFCM President Dalil Boubakeur (2003-8).⁴⁰

In response, the Franco-Algerian Muslim leadership threw their support behind a new initiative to rival the monopolistic position of the CFCM: they aim to create a “Muslim CRIF,” or “CRIM” that could represent Muslims' political and foreign policy concerns at the highest levels of government. The CRIM has full backing of the government of Qatar, which has been increasingly active in European Islam, and seems to enjoy the support of Sarkozy's adviser Henri Guaino—the brain behind the Riyadh and Rome speeches as well as the “Mediterranean Union” that was launched during France's EU presidency in the fall (and which detractors say is a poor facsimile of Gaullist *politique arabe*).

After the Algerians made their ire known, they inched their way back towards the CFCM, but the episode underscores the fragility of French advances in creating a reliable institutional voice for the country's 2300 Muslim prayer spaces. Meanwhile, Dalil Boubakeur gave an interview to a Jewish newspaper, *SVP Israel*, in which he suggested that Hamas's rockets had provoked the Israeli response—an objective evaluation, but calumny for some. The interview provoked a smallish protest outside the Grande Mosquée's grounds—and has led to increased calls for his resignation by prominent Franco-Algerians, the first time his leadership has been seriously threatened. Also for the first time, at the large annual gathering of the UOIF in Bourget, the secretary general Fouad Alaoui placed his support for Gaza at the center of his keynote speech, and lambasted Jewish leaders in France for their support of Israel.

At the end of this flurry of activity, it is safe to say that this has all been mostly much ado about nothing—the Algerian representatives to the CFCM have been in touch with the French administration and requested participate in further meetings, and the Qatar-sponsored CRIM dinner meeting was ultimately canceled. “But even if a CRIM were to see the light of day,” said Didier Leschi, a former director of the Bureau central des cultes, “in all likelihood it will hardly be a radical organization—the most it will do is host an annual dinner to rival the CRIF's own, at which some French politicians would stop by to pay their respects and pledge their resolve to help find a solution for a ‘just peace’ in the Middle East.”⁴¹ A superficial ritual, perhaps, but many French Muslims would likely appreciate the gesture as a move towards more “égalité.”

CONCLUSION

I do not think that self-interest is the only driving force behind men of religion. But I do think that interest is the chief means used by religions themselves to guide men, and I have no doubt that that is how they work on the crowd and become popular. (Tocqueville *DA*, 529)

The tumult of Sarkozy's private life in 2006-7 (infidelity, divorce, and sudden remarriage), and his challenges to the *ordre laïc* have sometimes made enemies of those his religious overtures were designed to court. He extols the virtues of the priesthood without pretending to emulate the good men. He has no time for Ash Wednesday but remembers to attend *Iftar*. “*Les catholiques les plus avertis*

savent aussi à quel point l'Église a bénéficié de la laïcité à la française en termes d'entretien du patrimoine," noted the director of a catholic magazine; in the space of one year, Sarkozy's approval rating dropped from 83% to "just 60%" among practicing Catholics.⁴² And his railing against *voynoucratie* and a fierce commitment to anti-terrorism and security measures, some have suggested, would alienate some Muslims as well. At first sight, it could appear that Sarkozy has managed, impressively, to rally both the religious and the fervently secular firmly against him.

Despite this apparent backlash, some continue to ascribe electoral motivations to President Sarkozy's handling of religious and ethnic questions—and the twin issues of Islam's status and affirmative action in particular. After all, he secured the vote of the UOIF president in 2007.⁴³ Following Sarkozy's election, the Oumma.com site printed a vigorous attack after the UOIF congratulated him on his accession to head of state.

Le clientélisme sarkozyste semble avoir pleinement porté ses fruits : clients musulmans d'hier, clients musulmans d'aujourd'hui et, très probablement, clients musulmans de demain, le nouveau Président de la République peut compter sur sa fidèle « garde islamique » rapprochée pour relancer un CFCM agonisant mais sûrement plus allégeant que le précédent, et appliquant à la lettre sa nouvelle politique musulmane, qu'ils ne manqueront pas de louer à coups de communiqués.⁴⁴

Despite the overwhelming degree of activity in the domains of religion, ethnicity and citizenship, one could ask whether all the superficial activity of declarations and symbolic politics amounts to much. Could it be that Sarkozy's rhetorical appeals for inclusion of the religious variable are mere opportunism, so much hot air, the Gallic equivalent of saying "God Bless America" at the closing of a policy speech in the U.S.? Sarkozy may speak of *laïcité positive* just as he once raised the question of *discrimination positive* but what laws has he actually changed in those domains? One could point to minor adjustments, such as the May 2009 accord to confer direct recognition of the diplomas delivered by Vatican-funded universities, ending the educational monopoly of public universities.⁴⁵ The Sabeg report of May 2009 also offered a series of modest changes in anti-discrimination policy, which reflect an evolving mentality on the question of ethnic statistics. But the 1905 law separating church and state and the 1978 law on statistics remain fundamentally untouched.

One reply has come in the form of personnel. The cabinet Sarkozy assembled in 2005 was the first government to contain such

extensive diversity. He appointed Christine Boutin, a controversial Catholic activist, as Minister of Housing. He named Rachida Dati, Fadela Amara and Rama Yade (“my Condi Rice”) to senior positions in the cabinet, and made Rachid Kaci a presidential advisor. Never have so many *minorités visibles* roamed the halls of Matignon and the Elysée. Likewise, the succession of the Prime Minister, Interior Minister and the President himself at break-fasts during Ramadan—marked the first time that many major politicians so frequently paid their respects to the country’s Muslim minority.

Still, some will reply, so what? His appointments of a handful of visible minorities to the cabinet and in the Elysée were undoubtedly milestones and barrier breakers. But the Assemblée Nationale is no less brimming with *Français de souche*.⁴⁶ And a visit to a mosque doesn’t tangibly improve Muslims’ lives in France. So is all this talk of religion and diversity just a sideshow to divert attention while nothing concrete changes? The unlikely figure of Marine Le Pen provided an astute answer to this question: “*Cette laïcité positive, Nicolas Sarkozy a commencé à la mettre en place au bénéfice de l’islam. C’est sur le fondement de cette laïcité positive qu’il voulait qu’en quelque sorte on mette l’islam à la même hauteur que la religion chrétienne.*”⁴⁷

This is the major sea change: the Sarkozy era will be noted for the slow achievement of equality for Islam in the republic. Much of this has occurred through the CFCM, *e.g.* the appointment of national chaplains for the armed forces and the prison system. The climate for mosque construction under the Sarkozy presidency is the most favorable in all Europe. But initiatives outside the CFCM have also been important, such as the state-funded course for Muslim religious personnel in “Religion, Laïcité and Inter-cultural Studies.” He has changed the tenor of religious politics in France, and these institutional adjustments have survived their first seasonal ups and downs.

President Sarkozy’s personal style has elicited resentment and *pettegolezze*—from those who gossip about his penchant for gold watches to those who speculate on his *vizi minori*. But mostly he has provoked indignation for upending the self-conception of the post-war political elite and their understanding of citizenship and *laïcité* in the 21st century. Sarkozy’s faith in the integrating force of the institutions of the republic—adapted to *une France plurielle*—would

have pleased Tocqueville, who admired other countries for their ability to “modify institutions without destroying them.” This time, as Sarkozy might say, *la rupture est tranquille*.

NOTES

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- [2] Steven Greenhouse, “Vaulx-en-Velin Journal; Arab Youths of France: Their Anger Boils Over,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1990.
- [3] Josette Alia and Carole Barjon, “Le ministre de l'Intérieur intervient dans le débat sur le voile: ‘Ce que les intégristes refusent de voir,’” *Nouvel Observateur*, October 14, 2003.
- [4] Christophe Cazelles *et al.*, “Les ‘violences urbaines’ de l'automne 2005. Événements, acteurs: dynamiques et interactions,” Centre d'analyse stratégique, Premier Ministre, Février 2007, pp. 20-21.
- [5] Anne Chemin, “Il faut passer à l'action au lieu de se contenter des symboles!” *Le Monde*, December 17, 2008.
- [6] Lettre de mission de M. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de la République, adressée à Mme Michèle Alliot-Marie, ministre de l'Intérieur, de l'Outre-mer et des Collectivités territoriales. Le 30 juillet 2007.
- [7] Nicolas Sarkozy, *Testimony: France, Europe, and the World in the Twenty-First Century*, Translated by Philip H. Gordon, Harper Collins, 2007; all *Testimony* quotes are from this edition.
- [8] Hakim el Ghissassi, “Entretien avec Nicolas Sarkozy,” *La Medina*, no. 16, Octobre 2002.
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- [11] Henri Tincq, “Benoît XVI mise sur M. Sarkozy pour défendre en Europe les valeurs de l'Eglise,” *Le Monde*, December 19, 2007.
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- [13] Jean-Yves Camus, “Sarkozy ‘persiste et signe’ sur le rôle social des religions,” Rue89.com, February 14, 2008.
- [14] Eric Besson, *Les inquiétantes ruptures de Monsieur Sarkozy*, Parti Socialiste, 10 janvier 2007.

- [15] Antonin Debidour, *Histoire des rapports de l'Église et de l'État en France*, F. Alcan: 1898: 192.
- [16] For a full account of the history leading to the creation of the CORIF and the CFCM, see chapter five of Laurence and Vaisse, *Integrating Islam: Political and Religious Challenges in Contemporary France*, Brookings 2006.
- [17] Pierre Joxe, "L'organisation de l'islam en France," in Jonathan Laurence, ed., *Le conseil français du culte musulman, Special Issue of French Politics Culture and Society*, 2005, pp.110-115.
- [18] Interview by the author with Pierre Joxe, June 2002.
- [19] Interview by the author with Michel Rocard, July 2000.
- [20] See chapter five of Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse, *Integrating Islam*, Brookings, 2006.
- [21] http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Rapport_Commissariat_diversite.pdf
- [22] See Jonathan Laurence, "Les mérites du flou," *Esprit*, May, 2009.
- [23] Interview by the author with Philippe Séguin, December 3, 1999.
- [24] Interview by the author with Didier Motchane, July 2000.
- [25] Interview by the author with Bertrand Landrieu, July 2000, emphasis mine.
- [26] Interview by the author with Eric Raoult, July 2000.
- [27] Laurence and Vaisse, *Integrating Islam*, p.152.
- [28] Interview by the author with Lionel Jospin, December 5, 2003.
- [29] Eric Besson, *Les inquiétantes ruptures de Monsieur Sarkozy*, Parti Socialiste, 10 janvier 2007.
- [30] Eric Besson, *Les inquiétantes ruptures de Monsieur Sarkozy*, Parti Socialiste, 10 janvier 2007.
- [31] Interview by the author with Jean-Pierre Chevènement, November 23, 2003, emphasis mine.
- [32] Laurence and Vaisse, *Integrating Islam*, p.157.
- [33] Interview by the author with Bertrand Gaume, March 2009.
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- [38] Interview by the author with Didier Leschi, March 2007.
- [39] Ian Hamel, "Bernard Godard, co-auteur des 'Musulmans en France,'" Oumma.com, May 3, 2007.
- [40] Boubakeur has served as rector of the Algerian-sponsored Grand Mosquée de Paris for nearly seventeen years and was the longtime privileged interlocutor of the French government.
- [41] Interview by the author with Didier Leschi, March 2009.
- [42] Stéphanie Le Bars, "Les catholiques de droite sont gênés par la vie privée du Président," *Le Monde*, February 15, 2008.
- [43] Interview by the author with Lhaj Thami Brèze, March 2007.
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[45] Maryline Baumard and Christian Bonrepaux, "Le Vatican pourra viser des diplômés universitaires," *Le Monde*, May 12, 2009.

[46] Justin Vaisse, "Du bon usage d'Obama en politique française," *Esprit*, février 2009.

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Abstract: President Sarkozy has defied numerous French taboos regarding the role of religion in the Republic. While campaigning, he told journalists that he finds solace in church on Sundays. But since taking office, he has more often been seen visiting mosques and synagogues: he didn't publicly celebrate Ash Wednesday, but he brought journalists along to watch him break the Ramadan fast. In issuing a book on religious faith two years before running for president, Sarkozy signaled he would be of a different mold than the previous officeholders of the Fifth Republic. Is there something "American" about his comfort with religion in the public sphere? This essay provides a reflection on Sarkozy's attitudes towards religious community in France and Islam in particular. With the aid of field notes from a decade of interviews with French politicians, the author argues that Sarkozy is "globalizing" French attitudes towards religion and diversity in service of a conception of healthy democracy that would make Tocqueville proud.