

French Catholics' political awakening

In a nation legendary for its secularism, *les Cathos* are speaking up.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [April 12, 2017](#) issue



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Something quite unexpected is happening in France: in what has long been regarded as one of the world's most secular societies, Catholics are now reemerging as a potent force in public life.

For many years, French Catholicism has repeatedly been the subject of depressing news stories. Vocations are in sharp decline, and barely half of French people are willing to claim even a notional Catholic identity. In religious terms, the country

seemed destined for total secularization, or alternatively, perhaps some kind of Islamization.

How surprising, then, over the past couple of years to see the French media proclaiming the return of *les Cathos*. An early token of change was the mass movement formed to protest proposed legislation of same-sex marriages. That new law promised *le mariage pour tous* (marriage for all), to which Catholic protesters responded with *La Manif pour tous* (The Demonstration for All). *La Manif* drew many thousands to its protests, drawing comparisons to the Tea Party in the United States.

Still more remarkable is the role of Catholic belief in the current presidential election. The initial favorite in this contest was center-right candidate François Fillon, who explicitly proclaimed his Christian faith. But Fillon is not alone. As a stunned *Nouvel Observateur* asked, reporting on the five leading contenders for the presidency—from the far right to the far left—“Why the devil are *all* the candidates Cathos?”

Survey evidence also forced some rethinking about the scale of that Catholic presence. The familiar assumption has long been that French Catholics are overwhelmingly lukewarm or nominal in their faith. They are *Cathos culturels*. The number of *pratiquants* or practicing believers is tiny, basically the 5 percent or so of the population who attend Sunday mass regularly. But major surveys now move away from using that Sunday mass criterion and look instead at the number of believers who identify with church life and teachings. By these standards, about a quarter of the French population, some 16 million people, count as *Catholiques engagés*, being significantly involved or engaged with the church.

Many shades of belief and practice exist within that broad grouping, but a sizable minority are strikingly conservative and devout. Some favor traditional liturgy and might be inspired by charismatic movements like the Emmanuel Community and revived pilgrimage sites such as Paray-le-Monial. Age is actually a good predictor of loyalties, as younger Catholics—especially among clergy—are substantially more actively Catholic than are baby boomers. Depending on circumstances, the share of people who might join the *engagés* might grow or shrink over time.

Catholic ideals and sympathies are far more widespread in the French population than has long been assumed, and that underestimate owes much to media assumptions about what journalists and academics wanted to find. Strict secularists

themselves, they could hardly imagine that anyone else could take this religion stuff seriously. But in fact a very sizable Catholic interest has remained in place, politically dormant, until events brought them back to the public sphere. In terms of a submerged silent majority, and of media attitudes toward that group, it is tempting to draw resemblances to such recent events as the Brexit vote in Britain and Trump's election in the United States.

What awoke *les Cathos* from their political slumber? The same-sex marriage issue had some effect, but mainly among the hard core of faithful practitioners. Far more significant for the larger population has been the issue of Islam and its place in French life. Some believers are overtly anti-immigrant or Islamophobic, but even those who reject prejudice are disaffected by the double standard applied to Muslims and Catholics. Catholics had spent decades following the rules laid down by secularism and *laïcité*, however much they resented the exclusion of Christian symbols in public places. But when Muslims forcefully asserted their religious identity, it seemed that most media outlets and many politicians accepted this as a necessary part of multiculturalism.

Long-standing resentment found a focus in one event above all, which occurred in the parish of Saint-Étienne-du-Rouvray on July 26, 2016. On that day, two Muslim jihadis claiming loyalty to ISIL attacked the church and cut the throat of the 86-year-old priest, Jacques Hamel. A broad range of Christians (and non-Christians) immediately declared Father Hamel a martyr, and he is soon likely to be canonized. Beyond the horrible quality of the particular act, the murder drew attention to the frequency of Islamist attacks on French churches, few of which received media coverage at the time. Last Christmas, French authorities went on high alert in the expectation of other assaults on churches and believers.

For decades, many French Catholics have increasingly felt like exiles in their own country. Following the slaughter of Father Hamel, it was difficult to resist the language of "taking the country back."

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