

'Hands off my church' petition plays on fears French have of Islam

by [Tom Heneghan](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue

More than 40,000 French signed a petition denouncing a Muslim leader's remark that some of France's many empty or underused churches could be turned into mosques.

The petition, "Hands off my church," initially signed by 25 conservative politicians and intellectuals, including former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, was launched in mid-July after the head of the Grand Mosque of Paris said that Muslims needed to double the number of mosques around the country to 4,000 and that using empty churches could help them do that.

Dalil Boubakeur said in a morning radio interview: "Why not? It's the same God, the rites are like neighbors or brothers. I think that Muslims and Christians can coexist."

That comment sparked an uproar, and Boubakeur released a statement later that day saying "there is neither a desire nor a willingness to do this now." Only the Roman Catholic Church, he said, is authorized to speak about the fate of its empty churches.

Despite his quick retreat, the idea of prayers recited in Arabic within walls that for centuries echoed with Latin hit a sore nerve among French conservatives.

Those worries are shaping up as an issue in the country's next presidential election, in 2017, though mainstream politicians have until now left Muslim-bashing to the far-right National Front.

But the Front's surge in recent local and regional elections has prompted conservatives such as Sarkozy, who hopes to win back the Élysée Palace he lost to socialist François Hollande in 2012, to adopt its hot-button issues such as Islam and immigration.

*Valeurs actuelles*, a right-wing newsweekly, got the petition rolling with a cover picture of an ancient stone chapel under a headline that translates as "Hands off my church!" Inside, a Catholic writer, Denis Tillinac, penned an appeal to defend

France's religious heritage; an opinion poll showed that 67 percent of the French oppose Boubakeur's suggestion.

"Certain recent statements calling for churches to be transformed into mosques . . . deeply offend Catholics, as well as many imams attached to the uniqueness of their faith and ritual practices," he wrote. "A church is not a mosque, and pretending that 'the rites are the same' amounts to a scandalous denial of reality."

The seven-page spread included reports on two transformed churches. One chapel in the Atlantic port of Nantes was turned into a mosque and later torn down to make way for a larger mosque with a 56-foot-high minaret. Another church, in Graulhet, near Toulouse in the southwest, now serves as one of the town's two mosques.

However, most Muslims would prefer to build their own mosque rather than refit a rundown church built to Christian specifications and not pointing toward Mecca.

Many churches in France are empty; opinion polls show that only about 5 percent of the people in the highly secularized country regularly attend them. Many of the empty churches are in small towns and villages in regions that have lost population to expanding cities. There are usually few Muslims in these areas.

In many other European countries, churches that are in disuse and too costly to maintain are sold to become bars, restaurants, apartments, bookstores, concert venues, even supermarkets. In France, though, the state owns about 40,000 of the country's 45,000 churches and chapels and pays for their upkeep. Mayors can cut off the funds or tear the buildings down if they fall into serious disrepair. About 25 have been demolished in the past 15 years.

Reacting to the petition, Bishop Michel Dubost, head of the Catholic bishops conference's interreligious affairs department, said he would prefer that disused churches became mosques rather than restaurants. The best way for people to defend them from that fate, he said, was to attend mass regularly. —Religion News Service

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