

International Network of Societies of Catholic Theology (INSeCT)

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(English version)

Regional report for France

The general report for the European section of the ESCT (European Section of Catholic Theology) is given by Eamonn Convey. This report is an addition from the French perspective.

Profile of the French section of ESCT

The French Section was re-founded in November 2010 by a team largely female, secular, and young members. We are currently 25 but for now we are only starting and the proportions (male/female, young/older...) are not significant. Nevertheless the founding group is likely typical of a revival as much as a form of resistance (the "small remains"). However we must also recognize that the "associative culture" in France is much less developed than in other neighboring countries such as Germany, for example.

It is foreseen in our statutes that the Annual Meeting of ESCT-France will take place in conjunction with a conference on theology, alternating in Paris, in connection with the RSR (Journal *Recherches de Science Religieuse* that is organizing the conference) and in other cities. Also the idea is to podcast all information about conferences and publications in the field. And this is all the more necessary since France is a very secularized country: one of the most secularized in Europe; according to surveys, the proportion of non-believers is estimated to be between 30% and 40% of the population; and catholic religious practice continues to decline. The edition of theological books, especially of theological conferences, is more and more difficult.

ESCT is a way to help young scholars.

Location of theology

The Faculty of Theology of Strasbourg is an exception in the French landscape since it is completely integrated in the State University.

For the rest of France (« France from inside »!), theology is taught:

- In the « Instituts catholiques » (Paris, Lille, Angers, Toulouse, Lyon)
- In the Seminaries
- In some places such as the Centre Sèvres (University Center hold by the Jesuits) or the École Cathédrale in Paris (founded by Mgr Lustiger); or Diocesan Centers which are often offshoots of the Catholic institutes and remain linked with them.

The members of our Society (ESCT) – and to compare, I include the members of ATEM (association de théologiens pour l'étude de la morale, that is to say the French speaking moral theologians, of which I am the vice-president) – are mainly university people. In fact, it is very difficult to rally the colleagues from the seminaries which remain closed

places. At the symposium of the moral theologians in Trento in 2010, considerable publicity was aimed at seminaries, with the support of the person in charge at national level, and with a funding proposal given the low pay of these teachers; but there were no requests for funding and no seminary professors attended the symposium. This is very significant, indicating a pattern of functioning in a closed circle and likely a lower level of initial training.

Besides the seminars, the ESCT has active members in training centers (Meylan, Dijon). And same goes for ATEM: the members are sometimes professionals from other fields, trained in theology and who wish to participate in the life of an association. Some other members are involved in more social spheres, with pastoral perspectives, or in spiritual guidance, in commitment to social justice and interfaith dialogue.

Moreover, there are new attendees in the faculties of theology, who have not yet joined our association; there are men and women just interested in what we call "the religious fact" and who can be atheists. It has indeed become possible to enroll them in a university degree (and even a PhD) in Religious Science (since 2011 in Strasbourg).

General profile of theological schools

The first point to be made is a slow but constant decrease of the number of students in all theological structures. In Strasbourg, there are approximately 500 students this year (bachelor and master degree, in presence or distance learning), and 80 doctoral students...

Those who attend our faculties, besides the seminarians and the religious people, who intend to pursue a specific vocation, are attracted by theology insofar as it provides a place for reflection on the meaning of life. Occupations exposed to these questions (as in healthcare) are well represented. In France, where the religious is relegated to the private sphere, the faculties of theology are a main place where it is possible to think of faith and the meaning of life. So students are mainly people over 40-50 years, and even retired persons, who wish to help the Church and to reflect on their faith.

This is all the more possible since state university fees in France are not very expensive (between 300 and 400 EUR)

Nevertheless because on the one hand of secularization and on the other hand of the content of a Catholic theology program, potential attendees, since they are young, are often not able to integrate immediately a faculty in theology. New converts or those recently initiated in the faith do not always have the minimum package to integrate at the outset into a faculty of theology and to confront reflection on the faith from a critical distance... They have some experience of God and seek first to express it by staying in the "claim of faith" rather than in entering into a rational discourse (theology), and sometimes they even look for "quick solutions" that a Faculty of Theology does not give. For these attendees, theology has also to be accompanied by spiritual guidance. Theologians might keep this in mind and explore this field more and more.

Working conditions

These conditions result from both the secularization and the general financial crisis.

1. Fewer teachers

Fewer students coupled with financial concerns of the universities lead to reduced numbers of teaching staff; retirees are not replaced, to reduce the supply...

2. Low salaries

In the state universities, all professors are paid according to a common grid. But in the “Instituts Catholiques” and more in Catholic Seminaries, the salaries are very low (around the SMIC). In addition the French system does not have associate professors. The administrative tasks can also be very heavy...

3. Theologians are suspected)

This is probably the hugest concern... The theologian sits between two chairs and this is not comfortable:

- He is suspected by the society for being too conservative and people are wary of his role
- He is suspected by the authorities of the Church of being too open-minded and gets also the same distrust in the opposite direction...

Concerned topics

- The role of women and laity in the Church remain a main concern, especially as there is an increasing “clericalization” of the clergy; but women do not form a coalition through feminist movements as in other countries. They « simply » leave the church, progressively and on tiptoe...
- Sexual abuse and pedophilia are provoking sadness but for the time being the scandals are apparently less numerous than elsewhere, possibly because the bishops have been called upon in 2000 (after the conviction of a bishop) to assign any suspected cases to civil authorities.
- The new evangelization holds a particular place in France, linked both to the Dagens report (overview of the question) that had a very positive and constructive impact, and to the so-called “French laïcité” (secularism) that defines the field and the limits of a religion.

French laïcité (secularism) and the “religious fact”

There is a triple movement linked to: 1) the increasing secularization with a new place for the religious fact; 2) the request of Islam and 3) some easing of tension of younger generations for whom president Sarkozy sometimes seems to be a spokesperson.

It is both the ignorance related to secularization and the increasing place of Islam which led in France - after an investigation and report by Regis Debray - to offer all youth the possibility of instruction concerning the “religious fact”. This is a minimum provision of religious knowledge, provided in schools on a non-denominational level, that is to say, by teachers of different disciplines. The purpose of this instruction is to foster a relatively objective knowledge of religions and agnosticism. The underlying idea is at least twofold:

- Encouraging the interpretation of literature and artistic works, thus offering key input in cultures that often bear the marks of a strongly religious influence

- And struggling against religious intolerance mainly due to ignorance of that which is represented by the religions or the lack of religion.

And if dogma receives bad press (a kind of authoritarian stress), the religious fact seems to be regarded as a "neutral" entity that may inform about the religious, and can also be charming. Moreover, experience has shown that adolescents often appreciate talking about religion with teachers and educators who are not church authorities. And this is a key issue for adolescents. Indeed, Gabriel Nissim notes about France: it is "almost impossible for a 15 year-old to assert his religious beliefs in schools, including denominational schools: that one believes and more practices his religion, gives rise to (from almost all the classmates) mockery, contempt and even physical bullying¹. The notion of « religious fact » allows some distance.

But the Dominican goes on: « This non-denominational teaching about religion does not exempt religious leaders from a double liability in relation to young people undergoing training or religious education under their aegis. On the one hand this education must include a critical dimension. In the name of freedom of conscience and religion, membership, to be truly free, has to be considered. On the other hand, in a world with a pluralism of beliefs, faith-based education and training must help young people to carry a positive understanding and regard for others, not despising those who do not share their own convictions. More generally, this requires on the part of those religions, an effort to reflect theologically in the way of thinking on the place of the "others" in their worldview and in their doctrinal system." But this is far from done. It is as much a theological as an ecclesial a challenge.

The second aspect that the religious fact attempts to address in France is pluralism (in particular religious pluralism), especially through the dialogue with Islam. France hosts indeed one of the largest Muslim communities in Europe (the first community of non-Arab countries). Yet Islam is settling with visible codes and rules, especially through clothes and "prayers in the streets", which are regularly hitting the social sensibility, and creating both a general perception of a "come back of religion" and a rejection of the more radical identity claims, perceived as an unacceptable intrusion of religion in public space and an attack on secularism. Sometimes this leads to discrimination, sometimes to calls for policies to correct excesses and to define new balances by law or justice. The legislation on the veil or the burqa is rooted in this context.

But through the margins of fundamentalist Islam, Catholicism can also be referred to and sometimes this leads to a real anti-Catholicism, at least to a very mixed perception of the place and role of the Catholic Church. The bioethics debate during this last year was suggestive: like other denominations, and more than them, the Catholic Church has tried to join in the debate; at the same time, some have also denounced the Church as "retrograde and dangerous" to the point of involving the theologians themselves.

¹ Gabriel Nissim, « La liberté religieuse des enfants », Actes du colloque de Fribourg, mai 2010. A paraître. Translation Marie-Jo Thiel.

Several official statements of the Catholic Church in particular regarding the “reintegration” of the “Lefevristes” and the Anglicans, in addition to the sexual abuse scandal in many countries and what have been interpreted as “judgments without heart” (e.g.: concerning a case of miscarriage by a teenage girl raped in Brazil) or as an “apology for deadly conduct” (e.g.: Pope Benedict’s XVI comments on AIDS, while travelling by plane to Africa) were severely criticized in France, described as “abuses of power” from a Church that “lectures to others” while it ignores – contrary to Christ Christ - the weak, the sick, the poor just outside its door. This has reinforced a climate of anti-Catholicism but more importantly, even if it is a bit schematic, contributed to a breakdown between “conservative” perspectives on the one hand, with reaffirmation of identity (much stronger than anti-Catholicism is aggressive), and on the other hand grassroots believers who took up their responsibilities in the years following Vatican II and who are now moving away from the “official” Church, deserting celebrations where they can only be passive listeners, and setting aside moral recommendations they consider “unrealistic” and “not credible”... While in Germany, these “departures” take place by de-registering so as to no longer pay taxes to their Church, in France, they happen most often with indifference and a certain rancur. This leads some people to say that the Church prefers her intransigence to the distribution of the spiritual heritage for which she is responsible and that doing so she leaves many starving at her door... The faculties of Catholic theology echo this evolution: some lay people refuse to train in theology any longer because “it is useless”, others on the contrary come looking for a place to deepen their faith (as opposed to a structure of obedience), and still others come seeking “security” in a world of uncertainty.

At the political level, many officials “skate” around the obligations of the Act of 1905. Thus “the government tries to respond to the needs expressed by believers through the creation of mosques, by creating designated areas for Muslims in cemeteries, by preserving churches, and establishing official relations in the framework of the dialogue between the State and the religions. New generations, characterized by a huge lack of religious literacy and confronted by the pluralism of belief, now have an uninhibited relationship to the religious fact and do not necessarily share the anxieties of their elders on the topic.”²

The President Nicolas Sarkozy has intervened repeatedly in the debate over secularism. He has not changed the institutional or legislative balances that underlie secularism in France. The 1905 law on the separation of church and state remained unchanged. In fact his has chosen to speak on this at a moment of global change.

On 20 December 2007, he was appointed as honorary canon of the Lateran Basilica. At that time he praised “believers” and criticized “French secularism” saying he would like to see replaced by a “positive secularism.” But his discourse run counter to the deeply rooted French conviction that religion belongs to private sphere, even more so that he is

² Stéphanie le Bars, « Les limites de la “laïcité positive” », *Le Monde* du 20 décembre 2008 p.2. Translation Marie-Jo Thiel.

the head of an officially “secular’ and republican state. At the same time, his provocative formulas, including his affirmation of the supposed superiority of the priest over the teacher, further discredited his position.

Nevertheless, President Sarkozy repeated similar views while in Saudi Arabia one year later, in January 2009, at a dinner with representatives of Jewish institutions in February 2009, and again during the visit of Pope Benedict to France in September 2009. Some voices - supporters of a militant secularism, Masons and freethinkers – have been raised but ultimately there have been no large protests and only a few critics. It is as if the French people were ready to show some tolerance if not indifference to religion, given the feeling that today's religions, or at least Catholicism, has lost too much power to be a any kind of threat to the Republic.

It is noteworthy note that Minister Bernard Kouchner created a center of religions in 2009 at the Quai d'Orsay. Surprisingly, this is the equivalent for French diplomats, of the introduction of the religious fact in the schools. The center’s Director, Joseph Maila, is a teacher at the Institut Catholique of Paris, an expert on Islam, on the sociology of conflict, and founder of the Institute for training in mediation and negotiation. The idea is to “educate the next generation of diplomats on religious questions”³ because it is difficult to speak about politics with no notion of what the religions are and how they function... It therefore makes a primarily instrumental use of religion.

Theologians are called to address this evolution, to encourage reflection on religious pluralism, on the role of power in the Church and society, on the importance of taking the spiritual life seriously, and on the objectives of the new evangelization. At the same time they are challenged move beyond the confusion between secularism as a dogma or an ideology on the one hand, and a secularism that is the condition for the possibility for a reflection on faith which implies an authentic religious freedom on the other.

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³ Stéphanie Le Bars, « La diplomatie intégrera désormais le fait religieux », *Le Monde* du 26 juillet 2009, p.10. Translation Marie-Jo Thiel.