Catholics and the Far Right in France

A Breach in the Dam

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Introduction

This chapter is about the ambiguous relationship between religion and far-right politics in France. From the defense of nativity scenes in public spaces to a new rhetoric about France's Catholic identity, just like other right-wing populist movements in Europe and North America, the French Rassemblement National (RN)—called the Front National (FN) until 2018—is increasingly referencing Christianity in the context of its ethno-cultural right-wing identity politics. During the 2022 election, the RN was joined in this endeavor by Éric Zemmour, a former journalist turned far-right presidential candidate, who, although being Jewish, has called himself "steeped in Christianity" and proclaimed that Catholicism has a "birth right" to cultural hegemony in France (Zemmour and Leclerc 2018). However, closer inspection suggests that both the RN's and Zemmour's references to religion are driven less by an appreciation of Catholic values, beliefs, and institutions than by a desire to employ a cultural *Christianism* (Brubaker 2017; Cremer 2021b, Cremer 2023) or a *zombie Catholicism* (Le Bras and Todd 2013) as a secularized ethnic identity marker against Islam. Zemmour himself, for instance, confirmed in an interview that he was "for the Church but against Christ" (Lindell 2022).

For many decades, the historically dominant Catholic Church in France has strongly opposed the far right. Bishops repeatedly broke their *laïcité*-imposed silence on party politics to condemn the FN/RN's policies and call their flock to vote against it. Conversely, Catholic voters have traditionally exhibited a strong *religious immunity* against the populist right, voting for the FN/RN at significantly lower rates than the rest of the country (Perrineau 2017). More recently, however, there have been cracks in this Catholic bastion against far-right pol-

itics. Under the impression of internal crises, public scandals, and overall demographic decline, Catholic hierarchies have begun to gradually retreat from politics, while a group of conservative Catholic laypeople have sought to erode traditional taboos among their brethren by forming a *union of the rights* against what they perceive as the threats of Islam and liberal cosmopolitanism. As a result, in 2022, practicing Catholics, for the first time in France's post-war history, disproportionately supported a far-right candidate in the first round of the presidential election, with 16% of them voting for Éric Zemmour compared to just 7.1% of the population writ large (IFOP 2022).

This chapter investigates these ambiguous dynamics between Catholicism and the far right in France. Specifically, it explores the rise of a new Christian right and how it relates to far-right identitarian movements and the right-wing populist campaigns of Éric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen. It does so in three steps: first, it traces back the historical relationship between religion and politics in France and the ways in which Catholicism has become a barrier to the far right; second, it analyzes the factors that have led to the gradual erosion of the Catholic taboo against the far right; and third, it discusses the potential consequences of the breach in the Catholic anti-far-right dam for French politics.

Background: The Catholic dam against the far right in the 20th century

France's Catholics, while on average politically conservative, have historically been one of the most formidable bastions against the far right in the country. As political scientist Pascal Perrineau has observed, "the nationalist drive that feeds the far right in France always stumbled against the block of practicing Catholics who yield far less to the temptation of the FN than most other parts of the population" (Perrineau 2014, 39). For decades, polling data and election results showed a significant *religious immunity* against the populist right, with churchgoers supporting the FN at significantly lower rates than the rest of the population (Cremer 2021a). For instance, in the 2012 presidential election, only 4% of practicing Catholics chose Marine Le Pen compared to 18% of the general population (Du Cleuziou 2019, 312).

This reluctance among Catholic voters vis-à-vis the FN was mirrored in their leaders' behaviors. Senior clergy opposed the FN's ethno-nationalism and its references to Catholic identity on theological grounds, referring to Catholi-

cism's universalist principles, publicly castigating the party's paganist tendencies, and calling FN policies "incompatible with the Gospel and the teaching of the Church," as Cardinal Decourtray stated from the pulpit in 1985 ("We are tired of seeing contempt, distrust and hostility against immigrants grow in the country. We are tired of the ideologies that justify these attitudes. How could we allow ourselves to believe that language and theories that despise the immigrant have the guarantee of the Church of Jesus Christ?" [Tincq 2015]). When in 2002, the far-right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen qualified for the second round of the presidential election for the first time, France's bishops under the leadership of Cardinal Lustiger publicly urged Catholics not to vote for him.

Catholic immunity to the far right was not a matter of course historically. As the Republic was built, from its birth in the Revolution, against the Church and the latter's fusion with the *Ancien Régime*, Catholic leaders were for a long time highly critical of democratic politics. This resulted in the centuries-long antagonism that Portier has called the war of the two Frances: *La France Catholique* vs. *La République Laïque* (Portier 2016, 7). This antagonism culminated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries during the Third French Republic, leading to the 1905 law of separation, which, through the principle of *laïcité*, codified one of the strictest separations of Church and state in the world. The Church in France vehemently opposed its expulsion from the public sphere for decades, and it was only after 1945, under the influence of Charles De Gaulle, that the Church gradually accepted laïcité and encouraged Catholic lay people to engage in Republican politics (Willaime 2008).

In this context, most Catholics aligned themselves with center-right political parties that defended secularized Christian values, while abstaining from adopting the label of Christian Democrats in order to abide with laïcité. Despite the subsequent emergence of an influential faction of left-leaning Catholics who focused more on the social Gospel, the commitment of French Catholics to the center right has since become a constant in French politics. For instance, in the first round of the 2017 presidential election, 46% of practicing Catholics and 55% of frequent churchgoers voted for the center-right candidate François Fillon, compared to just 20.1% of the general population (IFOP 2017). This attachment to the center right, combined with the powerful taboo created against the FN by Catholic hierarchies, has historically kept France's Catholics away from extreme right-wing movements (Cremer 2021a).

Moreover, this antagonism has been reciprocated by the FN since its beginning. At its creation by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972, the Front National was composed of Pieds-noirs (former colonists returning from Algeria), monarchists,

and former Vichy supporters nostalgic for the *régime de Vichy* that ruled France and collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War, who showed no concern for Christianity and even opposed its influence on the grounds of fascist atheist ideology (Roy 2019). Despite some early connections between the FN and ultra-conservative Catholic monarchists around the Society of Saint Pius X (which lost its canonical recognition in 1975), the party was never close to the religious right and made no secret of its hostility toward Church representatives. For instance, in the 1990s, Jean-Marie Le Pen accused bishops of Freemasonry, arguing that because they would betray the French nation in favor of the interests of the universal Church, "we do not need the advice of the Bishops" (Roy 2016, 86). As the FN transformed from a neo-fascist to a more right-wing populist party, with its rhetoric shifting from a focus on race to a new *civilisationist* discourse directed against Islam, it was first neo-paganism and—following the leadership change from Jean-Marie Le Pen to his daughter Marine—then secularism rather than Christianity that were the FN's preferred points of reference (Almeida 2017). In recent years, however, this traditional antagonism between Catholicism and the FN appears to have softened, and Catholics' religious immunity to the far right has begun to erode.

Stemming the tide: French Catholicism and the temptation of the far right

Three factors have contributed to the weakening of Catholic opposition to the far right: first, the re-politicization of religion around the questions of bioethics and gay marriage; second, the marginalization of Catholics in their traditional political home on the center right; and third, the erosion of traditional taboos around the far right due to the silence of the Church's leadership and the growing influence of a group of *identity Catholics* who have sought to de-diabolize the far right in Catholic circles.

1. France's culture war and the Catholic counter-revolution

The election of Socialist President François Hollande in 2012 marked a turning point in Catholics' self-perception in society. Under his presidency, major legislative projects to introduce gay marriage and liberalize surrogacy were introduced, which led to a sizeable mobilization of Catholic voters. With millions taking to the streets, the Manif pour tous (LMPT; Demonstration for all),

a highly conservative movement critical of gay marriage and progressive social morals more broadly, was born. This mobilization spread rapidly over the country and took many observers by surprise. But it also highlighted a fundamental trend: the re-emergence of an organized Catholic right, backed by an electorate that considered itself to be the legitimate defender of a heritage that is religious, as well as economic, social, and political, and which which they saw under threat by the policies of the socialist government (Fourquet 2018).

However, at the root of these cultural anxieties were more than party politics. Instead, a momentous collapse of religious practice and allegiance had begun to cause major concerns that the *Catholic matrix*, which had structured French society for centuries, was eroding (Fourquet 2018). Indeed, since 1945, France has been one of the most rapidly de-Christianizing countries in the world. The share of Catholics, which in 1945 was still 98%, dropped to 80% in the 1980s and collapsed to just 32% in 2021, while church attendance imploded from about 38% in 1961 to just under 3% in 2021 (Portier and Willaime 2021). As the *first-born daughter of the Church* became increasingly de-Christianized and Catholics became a minority, many of them began to feel marginalized. Their fears often crystallized around perceived threats to the anthropological foundations of Christian morality as a result of the secular left (Du Cleuziou 2019). While most of France's practicing Catholics remain well integrated in French civil society and supportive of the country's liberal democratic institutions (in fact, on average, more so than the rest of the population; Fourquet and Gautier 2022), the *culture wars* arounds issues such as gender, gay rights, surrogacy, and assisted dying have facilitated the rise of a small but well-organized and politically potent movement of *identity Catholicism* that deliberately seeks to set itself apart from the dominant culture and the anthropological changes brought by modernity (Du Cleuziou 2019). Seeking to reinvigorate a centuries-old tradition of mistrust of modernity, it is promoted by intellectuals such as Chantal Delsol, Rémi Brague, Pierre Manent, and Fabrice Hadjadj, who are united in their rejection of relativism, egalitarianism, and an individualistic conception of autonomy (Elie, Choquet, and Guillard 2017).

Within the Church, the supporters of this brand of *identity Christianity* use marketing techniques for proselytizing purposes, inspired by evangelization practices from Evangelical churches across the Atlantic. This is illustrated by the establishment of masculinist Christian camps by various Christian communities (Community of the Beatitudes, Emmanuel Community, Chemin Neuf Community, etc.), which are inspired by the pastoral proposals of John Eldredge in his book *Wild at Heart* (Eldredge 2001). It can also be seen in the

attempt of the Bishop of Toulon-Fréjus, Dominique Rey, to create a French version of the knightly order of the Knights of Columbus.

In this context, the international circulation of knowledge and practices among religious institutions, social movements, and academics mobilized against *gender ideology* has been particularly blatant. For example, the International Children's Rights Institute, whose board counts French and international activists associated with the LMPT, has been founded by American academic Robert Oscar Lopez. Meanwhile, the American leader of the National Organization for Marriage, Brian Brown, has come to France to meet with the organizers of the LMPT protests. The LMPT, moreover, appears to have become an international model for conservative mobilization, as an Italian offshoot, the „Manif pour tous—Italia", has adopted the label in order to initiate anti-gay rights protests of their own. The fact that it has also cooperated with far-right political parties such as Lega Nord and Fratelli d'Italia as well as neo-fascist groups (Garbagnoli 2018) reveals how far-right political movements have sought to infiltrate, politicize, and radicalize what started in 2012 as a comparatively mainstream Catholic grassroots movement in France (Kuhar and Patternote 2018).

2. The failure of the counter-revolution: Catholics' waning influence on the center right

The example of the Manif pour tous epitomizes how some Catholics' suspicion of modernity can be utilized by political actors with a desire to enter the political arena. For instance, a number of activists used the mobilization around the Manif pour tous as an opportunity to gain more influence within the center-right party Les Républicains (LR) by creating in 2013 the so-called Sens commun movement. Capitalizing on the hundreds of thousands of people in the streets in the spring of 2013, the new Catholic right quickly constituted itself as a force to be reckoned with. The fact that it associated itself with the LR was a reminder of the movement's anchorage in traditional Catholic milieus opposed to the far right. In fact, FN president Marine Le Pen and most of her paladins remained pointedly absent from the Manif pour tous demonstrations, and Sens commun leaders publicly criticized FN statements on Islam and immigration (Du Cleuziou 2019).

However, the *Catholic counter-revolution* also laid the seeds for new points of contact between Catholic conservatives and the identitarian right. For instance, through extensive media coverage, the Manif pour tous attracted many

non-practicing Catholics, who were often more concerned about identitarian questions such as the perceived threats of Islam and immigration than their churchgoing brethren, who were focused on societal issues (More in Common 2017, 2018). What is more, several FN figures, including Marion Maréchal Le Pen, Bruno Gollnisch, and Gilbert Collard, defied Marine Le Pen's example and publicly joined the demonstrations, while at the same time seeking to shift the conversation from faith and moral issues to identitarian concerns and encouraging a victimhood posture.

These influences became increasingly powerful as the Catholic's own position within the center right weakened. Since the defeat of their champions François Fillon and François-Xavier Bellamy in the 2017 presidential and 2019 European elections, the Catholic forces of Sens commun have become orphaned and were increasingly marginalized within LR, which gradually abandoned bioethical issues and the fight against the transformation of the family model. The result has been a strengthening of the *hard* identity wing among Catholics (Le Morhedec 2017), which has created new connections between conservative Catholic circles and identity-based networks and far-right politicians.

3. The de-demonization of the far right

The French far right itself has sought to further the porosity between Catholics and extreme right-wing circles in two ways: on the one hand, through the strategy of *dédiabolisation (*de-demonization) initiated by Marine Le Pen and, on the other, through an increased use of Christian references as an identity marker.

The first phenomenon, the FN/RN's policy of dédiabolisation, has helped erode the common taboo associated with the far-right vote in not only society writ large but also among many Catholics (Dézé 2015). Widely regarded as a neo-fascist party at its foundation, the FN has gradually morphed into a mainstream right-wing populist party under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. Since taking over in 2011, she has removed her father's antisemitic references from her speeches and ended relations with neo-Nazi groups. She also replaced her father's old guard of party officials with a younger generation of politicians who were free from the legacy of the Vichy regime and the Algerian Pieds-noirs (Dézé 2015). Programmatically, the FN embraced more left-wing economic policies, calling for a strong welfare state and economic protectionism against the *neoliberal* and *cosmopolitan* elite (Perrineau 2017). This historic transformation of the FN, which changed its name in 2018 to Rassemblement

National (RN) in an attempt to relaunch the party, was rewarded by significant electoral success. As early as the 2012 elections, the party became the favorite of the working class, which voted for it at a rate of 31%, while also recording unprecedented success among 18–24-year-olds (+5 points) and 25–34-year-olds (+8 points) (Mayer 2017; Perrineau 2017). The 2017 and 2022 elections further confirmed this trend.

The party's metamorphosis from a neo-fascist to a right-wing populist party was also noticeable in its positioning toward religion. The FN/RN swapped its ethnic and racial rhetoric for a discourse with civilizational overtones aimed against Islam (Brubaker 2017). Marine Le Pen and the party leadership generally prioritized a radical reading of secularism over Catholic references as the best antidote to Islam, dedicating a whole chapter of its manifestos to laïcité and demanding a stricter ban on religion in the public sphere (Almeida 2017; Cremer 2021b). However, Marine Le Pen's niece, Marion Maréchal Le Pen, pursued a parallel strategy, which aimed at cultivating connections with Catholic circles and presenting herself as a champion of France's Catholic identity by intensifying the use of Christian symbols and language. Educated in the Catholic elite school of Saint-Pius X, Maréchal Le Pen knew how to appeal to Catholics' sense of marginalization. With concerns about the disappearance of Catholicism being ripe, this strategy began to bear fruits in the mid-2010s, as in 2015, Bishop Dominique Rey of Toulon-Fréjus, invited Maréchal Le Pen to a diocesan summer university.

This normalization of far-right voices in some Catholic milieus coincided with a noted retreat of France's institutional Church itself from the political debate. Under the impression of internal crises, public scandals, and demographic decline, important parts of the French episcopate, who would have been more critical of the far right were drawn to what Rob Dreher has called the "Benedict option," in which the Church assumes a minority position and focuses on the strengthening of internal ties, doctrine, and community, while largely abandoning aspirations to shape society as a whole (Dreher 2017). While theological in outlook, this privatization of institutional religion politically paved the way for the spread of counter-cultural attitudes within the Catholic community and meant that the reservations historically expressed by the bishops about the far-right party became increasingly muted. For instance, in contrast to 2002, on the eve of the first round of the presidential elections of both 2017 and 2022, France's bishops did not publicly call on Catholics to vote against Marine Le Pen. While far from endorsing the far-right candidate, this silence undermined the traditional taboo against the RN and created a vac-

uum in which political entrepreneurs, from the identity Catholics to Marion Maréchal Le Pen, could portray this lack of public opposition as tacit consent (Cremer 2021a, 2023). Yet, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen's religious-laden discourse only provided the blueprint for the strategy of another far-right politician who has appealed to Catholic voters in a way that the RN never managed.

The breach of the dam: Zemmour, la droite unie, and the end of the Catholic exception?

In December 2021, Eric Zemmour launched his 2022 election bid with the foundation of his new Reconquête party. As a regular guest on television and radio channels and a columnist in the written press, Zemmour had shaped French public opinion for 15 years through his rhetorical and political excesses, some of which have led to him being condemned for religious and racial hate speech (Finchelstein et al. 2021). He was particularly well known for his endorsement of the far-right *grand remplacement* theory, claiming that political, intellectual, and media elites seek to substitute the French and European population for immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb (Camus 2011).

While Zemmour thus pursued a similarly (if not more) radical rhetoric on issues such as race and immigration as that of Marine Le Pen, an important difference was that he has adopted more conservative stances on many social issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and gender equality. In numerous essays, such as "Mélancolie française" and "La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot," he has made the case for a *union of the rights* against a political class that in Zemmour's view has betrayed the *people* by renouncing the essential values of the nation, order, and tradition (Zemmour 2010, 2021). According to Zemmour, the term *far right* is only a leftist moral category to disqualify legitimate conservative thoughts (Zemmour 2021). The only reality that exists is a *patriotic right* promoting order and legitimate conservatism. In this attempt to erode the barriers between the far right and the center right, Zemmour capitalized on his status as a journalist, author, and *intellectual*, who often cites historical references or classical literature to appear more socially acceptable than Marine Le Pen (Roger-Lacan 2021).

The extent to which this strategy had been successful in undermining traditional taboos among Catholics became obvious when Zemmour launched his political party. That very day, two political entities were present to support the new candidate: La voie du peuple (VIA), the new name for the Christian Demo-

crat Party, and the Mouvement conservateur, the new version of Sens commun, both of which had traditionally been associated with the center right and had hitherto remained distanced from the FN/RN. However, Zemmour succeeded in rallying these movements' leaders to his cause. Specifically, VIA's president, Jean-Frédéric Poisson, was working behind the scenes to ensure the success of Zemmour's candidacy by supporting the creation of the *New Conservative magazine*, released by Paul-Marie Coûteaux, a close acquaintance of Zemmour (Adenor 2021). Meanwhile, the president of the *Mouvement conservateur*, Laurence Trochu, who fought alongside François Fillon in 2017 and, after the latter's election defeat, transformed *Sens commun* into the *Mouvement conservateur* in 2020 (Adenor 2021), was disappointed by LR's subsequent development and announced that her movement would instead support the outsider Zemmour in 2021. This decision epitomized the erosion of the historical taboo around the far right in Catholic circles.

Zemmour's posture as an anti-system candidate and his constant transgressions against „political correctness" have also made him popular among those identity Catholics who have started to define themselves as a countercultural minority. Moreover, the institutional Church's relative retreat from the political debate and the subsequent normative vacuum in Catholic milieus have been accelerated by the rise of a new *cathosphère*—a derivative of *blogosphere*—in which laypeople with far-right opinions, who are often explicitly hostile to the pope and Catholic hierarchies, have promoted Zemmour's candidacy (Tricou 2016)."

Nicknamed the *family candidate*, Zemmour is presented as the only politician ready to fight the *culture of death* that according to him prevails in society (Zemmour 2016). Such a depiction of Zemmour may seem puzzling, as he has explicitly declared himself to be "against Christ and His values" (Zemmour 2018), and is highly critical of Church leaders. His conception of a *surveillance secularism*—"laïcité de surveillance" (i.e., the tendency to place religions under state control)—is, in fact, close to that of Le Pen, and this is only thinly concealed by his rhetoric about the importance of the Church in the national construction of France. Yet, such factors no longer seem to be sufficient to repel those identity Catholics who, steeped in a narrative of victimhood and decline, have shown themselves to be ready to support any candidate who promises to protect them against the dominant secular culture. Indeed, in the first round of the 2022 presidential election, 40% of all Catholics (and 40% of regular churchgoers) voted for one of the far-right candidates, eight points more than the French as a whole, and 16% of churchgoers voted for Zemmour, compared to

just 7% overall (IFOP 2022). In the second round, 55% of all Catholics and 61% of regular churchgoers still voted for Macron (more than the French overall average). Nonetheless, the share of Catholics voting for Le Pen grew significantly from 2017 (IFOP 2022), suggesting a broader erosion of the electoral bastion that French Catholicism has historically represented against the far right.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the gradual political radicalization of conservative Catholics over the past decade is reshaping the relationship between politics and religion in France. For over half a century, Catholics had acted as a safety net against the far right. But in recent years, French Catholics' *religious immunity* seems to have eroded. Our analysis has shown that this trend is the result of three key factors: First, it has been spurred by a sense of marginalization, declinism, and victimhood in Catholic circles as a result of the rapid secularization of society as well as the legal liberalization of gay marriage, abortion, and surrogacy. Second, the mainstream parties' gradual scaling back of their associations with Christian values and milieus has left Catholics politically *homeless* and made them more available to the far right's identitarian appeals. Finally, the institutional Church's self-imposed silence and retreat from the political sphere, combined with the rise of a cathosphère of lay leaders who are openly sympathetic to Le Pen and Zemmour, has eroded traditional social taboos.

This development may seem surprising given that the political platforms of the RN and Eric Zemmour continue to openly clash with Christian values, beliefs, and institutions, especially on their core issue of immigration. Yet, many conservative Catholics' focus on only one segment of Christian anthropology (sexuality, life, and the family) to the detriment of other Christian values (e.g., social and ecological justice). Moreover, their identitarian concerns around the future of *Catholic France*, has opened this milieu to personalities such as Zemmour. It is enough to read the pope's latest encyclical, *Fratelli tutti* (Pope Francis 2020), to understand that Catholic authorities have become keenly aware of the risks posed by such identitarian postures. The question is, however, whether their flock will follow their leadership or be more attuned to the *zombie Catholicism* preached by Zemmour and Le Pen.

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