

Sarkozy's communion with God

President's repeated references to faith shock the French who say he should be the guardian of a secular state

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PARIS — More than a century after France officially separated religion and state, President Nicolas Sarkozy is trying to close the gap, talking about faith as the missing compass in private and public life.

By North American standards, or even those of other European countries, Mr. Sarkozy's remarks over the past two months, and the resulting French disapproval, may seem overwrought. He doesn't claim a personal relationship with God and is not a regular churchgoer.

But he has called religious faith a defining element of identity. And even more shocking in anticlerical France, he has invited the Roman Catholic Church and other organized religions to provide moral instruction to “enlighten our choices and build our future.”

Mr. Sarkozy's repeated references to God in speeches over the past two months have been denounced as attacks on the citadel of French secularism. Some critics accused him of political pandering, particularly to conservative Catholics dismayed by the attention paid to the twice-divorced President's social life.

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Others say he should be the guardian of state neutrality on faith. They say he has no business raising old demons, among them anti-Semitism and the residue of religious wars in past centuries.

“It's an unwritten rule that French presidents don't speak about religion,” said Jean-Luc Pouthier, the editor of Bible World magazine. “Since 1905, all our presidents, no matter what their politics, have taken care to never mention it.”

Secularism is so deeply ingrained in France that it is often called the state religion. The public space, as it is called, is meant to be a neutral safe ground. It was on that basis that Muslim girls were banned from wearing head scarves in public schools, a decision that set France apart from other European countries. It would be unthinkable for a public figure to swear on the Bible in taking the oath of office. But while some bishops and priests quietly advocate a more assertive role, the French Catholic Church has only timidly involved itself in political questions.

It urged voters to reject the far-right National Front at the peak of the party's popularity six years ago and only occasionally weighs in on debates over gay marriage and similar issues of family morals. With help from the state, church-based charities run the biggest aid programs for the homeless and illegal immigrants.

So Mr. Sarkozy has discomfited many people with recent speeches praising religion as an antidote to “human arrogance and folly.”

“What Sarkozy is doing is validating this demand from the church to find a new forum to act in political and social issues,” Mr. Pouthier said. “Religion already plays a role in the public space, but we choose not to see it.”

At the Vatican late last year, the President seemed to implicitly question the secular state education system by saying that teachers cannot replace “the priest or the pastor” in teaching the difference between good and evil.

A few weeks later, he told an assemblage of Arab notables in Saudi Arabia that religion has a civilizing role to play in the world. He used the word “God” 13 times in the space of a few minutes, prompting even his Gaullist allies to complain.

Two weeks ago, in a speech to French Jewish leaders, he caused the biggest stir yet when he offered what he described as a required course in tolerance.

He said that respecting secularism should not mean public officials don't talk about religion: “Should I not meet priests, pastors, rabbis and religious orders? Are they second-class citizens?” he asked.

He then made a proposal that divided the Jewish community and enraged many others.

Beginning next school year, he said, every nine-year-old schoolchild should “adopt” one of the 11,000 Jewish children deported to death camps with the complicity of the French state during the Second World War.

The idea was almost universally condemned as morbid, dictatorial and dangerous to social harmony. Critics said it would provoke a “competition among victims” and

inflare anti-Semitic feelings.

Among some French Jews, Mr. Sarkozy's overall focus on religion was a cause for worry even before this uproar.

"Ever since the Revolution, French Jews have been big supporters of state secularism," said Nadia Malinovich, author of the recently published book *French and Jewish*. "I think the common feeling is that when the state gets involved in religion, it's generally bad for the Jews."

Mr. Sarkozy's interest in re-examining the state's dealings with religious groups dates back some years. As minister of the interior, he was the state liaison to religious organizations. He invested years in organizing disparate factions of the country's growing Muslim minority so it would have an official representative in dealings with the state.

The group finally started operating five years ago. Its creation prompted a debate over whether the 1905 divorce of state and religion, largely aimed at emasculating the political influence of the Catholic Church, effectively orphaned Islam and other latecomers.

Last year, Mr. Sarkozy said he would not open the "Pandora's box" of the secularism law. But in his recent speeches, he has indicated he would like to tinker with it.

He said he wants to find a way for the state to recognize degrees earned at the Catholic Institute, a Paris university. And he said Muslims' desire to for decent prayer space should be accommodated by local governments and suggested the state help set up a training school for imams.

But, as with French Jews, Muslim leaders have retreated in nervous silence in face of the public backlash.

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