



International conference:
Religious pluralism and social diversity: religions in the European public space

3-5 October 2018
Nantes, France

“Identity”, wrote historian Tony Judt, “is a dangerous word”. Indeed identity politics today, often based on essentialized, ahistorical notions of religion and nation, call into question the bases of pluralistic, multi-ethnic and multireligious societies in Europe and beyond. This conference will explore some of the ways in which cultural and religious pluralism has always been a central element of European society and how it continues to be so today. We will look at how various European states have accommodated religion in general and diverse religious organizations, paying particular attention to questions of group identity and individual freedoms and of the distinctions between public and private space. We will remain attentive to the networks of exchange and the relations between societies and states in constant flux. We will bear in mind the constant question of the difficult definition of “Europe”, of which European states and societies we are discussing. Today’s Europe, often simplistically identified with a specific political project, the European Union, and with its relations with its Mediterranean and eastern neighbors, is not the same Europe as that of 1914, much less that of the Middle Ages or the 16th century.

The European confessional landscape has been both consistently diverse and constantly in flux. Religions constantly change, or perhaps better said, believers and practitioners constantly adapt their religion to changing social and political realities. Many faithful of, for example, Christianity or Islam, tend to think of their religions as eternal or immutable: calls to change or “reform” doctrine or practice are often pitched as efforts to “return” to a lost original purity of the religion’s putative apogee: the age of the Apostles, of the Prophet and his Companions, a thirteenth-century “Golden Age” of the Church, etc. This tends to essentialize religion and can lead to fundamentalism, and to doctrinaire rejection of rival versions of one’s own religion (Rabbinic Judaism/Karaism, Catholicism/Protestantism/Eastern Christianity or Sunnism/Shiism) and of elements of secular modernity. Such essentialization by those outside of a religious tradition can lead them to reject it as “backward” or incompatible with contemporary values of secularism. Yet religions are constantly in flux: the diverse forms of Judaism or Buddhism practiced in Europe today are different from those found centuries ago, or those practiced in other parts of the world today.

This conference will explore Europe’s religious heritage through a series of five academic sessions on key themes (papers may be given in French or in English). It also proposes a series of workshops (in French) aimed at a larger audience, of professionals and policy makers, interested in the challenges and possibilities that diversity in religious practice and belief pose to 21st century societies.



Academic workshops:

- Workshop 1: Defining religion
What is religion? How have philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, jurists and others delimited the boundaries between sacred and profane? Religious and secular? To what extent are such definitions culturally specific? How and when do we move between a polemical opposition between “religion” and “superstition” to an apparently more objective category of “religions” in the plural? Can non-theocentric belief systems (communism, fascism, etc.) be considered “religions”, to the extent that they contain many aspects of religious systems?
- Workshop 2: Secularization and pluralism in European society.
Secularization has often been studied in terms of a binary struggle between Church and State. The attention in this workshop will be on the role of a plurality of religions in determining state attitudes towards religion and definition of religious rights, whether the role of Jews and Protestants in the first French Republic, the place of dissident Protestants in seventeenth-century England, or the role of Islam in twentieth-century Europe. Will twenty-first century Europe see a reaffirmation or redefinition of secularity? Or an accommodation with religious specificities in a “post-secular” world?
- Workshop 3: Religious politics in Europe’s colonial empires
From the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, European nations ruled large colonial empires with tremendous religious diversity. This workshop will study the reactions of colonial powers to that religious diversity and the policies put into place, ranging from encouragement of Christian or Muslim missionaries, to policing and enforcing religious boundaries, to the manipulation of local religious elites and their recruitment into colonial hierarchies. Colonized populations used religious arguments and religious organizations in different ways, to navigate colonial structures, to argue for greater rights, or to oppose European colonial power.
- Workshop 4: Religious pluralism in the Muslim world
The attention in this workshop will be on how Muslim societies have responded, on the levels of theology, law, and practice, to religious pluralism. The legal category of *dhimmi* emerged in the first centuries of Islam, though in practice the status of *dhimmi* varied greatly between different Muslim societies. Since the nineteenth century, Muslim theologians and jurists confronted with the categories of secular law have had diverse strategies for defining the place of non-Muslims in Muslim societies and of Muslims in non-Muslim societies (principally Europe and the Americas).



- Workshop 5: Religion in a globalized world: secularization, commercialization, re-enchantment.

Increased personal mobility and revolutionary changes in communication technology have created a globalized market for religion. This workshop will examine the effects of these changes on religious practice and on the place of religion in European public space, on the organization and roles of traditional religious institutions and on the emergence of new institutions, but also on interreligious dialogue in European societies.

Submission guidelines

Submissions are invited from scholars in all academic fields. We in particular invite submissions from PhD students.

Proposals for a 30-minute paper may be submitted, by 1 September 2017, to ipra@univ-nantes.fr. Proposals may be in English or in French and should consist of:

1. A .doc file containing:
 - a. full name and affiliation of scholar
 - b. title for the proposed communication, with an indication of in which workshop participation is proposed.
 - c. an abstract (200-500 words) of the communication
 - d. a list of 5-10 keywords
2. A CV

Approval and confirmation

The organizational committee will confirm receipt of each proposition and will respond by 31 October 2017, at which time contributors will be asked to confirm their participation.

Local expenses (hotel, meals) will be paid by the organizers for those who are presenting papers. Travel expenses may be paid in part or totally for those whose universities are unable to pay for travel.

Organizational committee:

Dominique Avon, Université du Maine

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Michel Catala, Université de Nantes

John Tolan, Université de Nantes

Nicolas Stefanni, IPRA, Université de Nantes

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Programme committee:

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