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God creeps back into France

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. Germans, expressing ecstasy, purr that they are “as happy as God in France.” But -- *Mein Gott!* -- France passed a law in 1905 kicking God out of France. Well, of public life. That includes state schools, government and political discourse, with only a few anomalies: many official holidays reflect the Catholic calendar; and, while believers pay clergy, the state pays for upkeep of church buildings pre-dating 1905.

The 1905 law separating church and state introduced the French particularity of *la laïcité*. This is too-narrowly translatable as ‘secularism.’ It means much more: the state must avoid any link, reference or deference to religion.

La laïcité has seeped into Frenchmen’s marrow. Even fervent Catholics uphold it. No French president – Charles de Gaulle, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing or Jacques Chirac, for example -- ever invoked God in a speech. If attending a funeral in Notre-Dame Cathedral, officially a national monument, they would not take communion. Chirac fought to banish any reference to Christianity in the preamble to the European constitution. He banned Muslim veils and other ostentatious religious symbols in state schools.

All presidents honour Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim leaders. But curiously, they also regularly meet the Grand Master of the main,

vigilantly *laïque* Masonic Lodge, the politically influential *Grand Orient de France*. Such meetings are close to a state ritual of agnosticism – of confirming freedom *not* to believe as well as *to* believe.

Now, dramatically and on several fronts, President Nicolas Sarkozy has got religion – including “morality.” He’s not exactly known as a passionate church-goer -- a *grenouille de bénitier* (sorry: frog in a baptismal font). A self-described “cultural Catholic,” he has now been married three times and, claims ex-wife Cécilia, is a champion skirt-chaser. Money also sticks to him. When he won the presidency, he quickly increased his presidential salary by 140 percent. And investigators pursuing him in a housing scandal from his mayoral days in suburban Neuilly somehow found more pressing priorities.

But in a book barely noticed four years ago, and in recent spectacular speeches to Catholic, Muslim and Jewish audiences, Sarkozy has dragged God back into public debate. In his 2004 book called (in French) *Republic, Religions, Hope*, he revealed an affinity for issues of faith remarkable for a French politician steeped in *laïcité*. He also showed fascination with religion as interior minister, a job embracing government dealings with organized religion and forbidden, brain-washing “sects.” He united scattered Muslim groups into a single interlocutor for the state.

Since then, he has hyped faith-related morality and values at every turn. During last year’s presidential campaign, he praised “Christian values” embedded in Europe’s and France’s identities. His opposition to Turkey’s

someday joining the European Union seems rooted in Islam's alleged 'foreignness' to the continent's Judeo-Christian values. When he slyly says: "If Turkey were part of Europe, somebody would have noticed," he's not just talking geography.

In Rome last December, Sarkozy thrilled Pope Benedict XVI by praising Europe's Christian roots and values: "In transmitting and learning the difference between Good and Evil," he lyricized, "the [state] schoolteacher can never replace the priest or pastor". In Riyadh last month, he extolled to devout Saudi hosts "the transcendent God who is in the thoughts and hearts of every person" – another astounding phrase for a president legally bound to secularism. In Paris last week, he told a Jewish audience that faith-based morality reflected "a transcendence all the more credible that it is declining in [our] radical society." He added that 20th-century wars happened not because of too much God, but because of the "absence of God" (wait, wasn't Hitler an altar-boy and Stalin a seminarian?)

Why Sarkozy's new push for God? Where will it lead?

Several Sarkozy associates – especially chief of staff Emmanuelle Mignon, a committed Catholic -- are known as strong pro-religion advocates. Madame Mignon is pressing hard for a revision of the totemic 1905 *laïcité* law. Like Sarkozy, she promotes "positive secularism" - one that "does not consider religions as a danger, but as an asset".

Sarkozy – a pragmatist, not a mystic – won't present this "asset" as a way of sneaking God back into a godless society. He will tie it to national

identity and unity. But few in this aggressively secular country will buy that. Legends of priest-ridden 19th-century France still buttress 1905 -- making it, so to speak, gospel.

Sarkozy, an immigrant's son obsessed with belonging, will press on with his cultural-religious "symbols of memory." But instead of lighting candles, he may be playing with matches in a gas factory. Like many of his impetuous initiatives bereft of public consultation, reuniting God and State risks reigniting a long-buried civil war between democrats and theocrats.

French secularists warn that Sarkozy's planned 1905 heresy hasn't a prayer of succeeding. Francophile Germans notwithstanding, might not God be happier wherever He is?