

Emmanuel Macron's speech to the French bishops: A poisonous gift?



On 9 April, French President Emmanuel Macron made a speech at the Bishops' Conference of France, raising questions about the country's traditional divide between Church and State. [Arthur Ghins](#) writes that the speech was an invitation to mutual trust rather than mutual suspicion, and that it should be seen as a welcome development as long as Catholics are not expected to relinquish their Catholicism.



Notre Dame, Paris, Credit: [Luc Mercelis \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

What was Macron's intention? This question came back to me repeatedly as I read through the speech the president gave on 9 April to the French Bishops. There was a lot to please French Catholics in the speech. Throughout history, Macron says, France has been fortified by Catholics' commitment to the common good.

A big charm offensive to attract Catholic votes, then? Yes, to a certain extent. In recent years, practising Catholics in France have increasingly moved to the right. Their favourite candidate at the past presidential election was the right-wing François Fillon, and there are signs that Marine Le Pen's Front National is drawing in a growing number of Catholic votes.

Macron knows that the situation in 2017 – the socialists carrying the burden of Hollande's disastrous reputation and Fillon's campaign ruined by a series of scandals – will not reproduce itself. The vote of practising Catholics might be marginal (roughly 5% of the French population), but if we include non-practising Catholics in the equation, the gain for Macron's centrist party might not be so negligible.

This speech, however, was not simply about electioneering, far from it. One of its main points was to push for a liberal understanding of the concept of *laïcité à la française* (the French concept of secularism). State neutrality, Macron pleaded, does not amount to indifference to religiosity. He called for Catholics to get involved in politics. This is a refreshing alternative to the republican intransigence France has often displayed.

But it might come with a cost, one which the galvanised Catholic audience that gave Macron a standing ovation after his speech might not have fully considered. The President has set quite clear conditions to the expression of Catholic opinions in the public debate. On immigration and ethical questions, he wants an open Catholicism, that is to say a Catholicism that "raises questions" rather than one that sets red lines and gives lessons.

In other words, Macron has reached out to Catholics but he is, in a way, setting the rules of the game. I found myself wondering how Catholics could impact the public debate when the President himself has already defined what their ideal contribution should look like.

What makes religious voices interesting is that they often run contrary to received wisdom. This usually does not make them popular. In answering Macron's invitation to "accomplish great things together", French Catholics will have the difficult task of showing willingness without renouncing their core principles. If they fail to reach this balance, Macron's speech will have perhaps earned him both the Catholics' vote and their silence.

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Note: This article originally appeared at the LSE's [Religion and Global Society blog](#). It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

About the author



Arthur Ghins – *University of Cambridge*

Arthur Ghins is a PhD candidate in Politics at the University of Cambridge and an LSE alumnus. His research focuses on the history of French liberalism. He is on Twitter [@ArthurGhins](#)