RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

AND THE REDEFINITION OF 'IMAGINED COMMUNITIES':

Jewish & Protestant minorities in France, Ireland & Italy (1789-1948)

MAY 22nd & 23rd 2025

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MINORITY PROTESTANT RESEARCH NETWORK

MIRCOM PROJECT

MSH LORRAINE

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THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

IN THE REDEFINITION OF 'IMAGINED COMMUNITIES':

THE CASE OF JUDAISM AND PROTESTANTISM IN FRANCE, IRELAND AND ITALY,

FROM THE FRENCH REVOLUTION TO THE CREATION OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

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ARGUMENT

This international and bilingual symposium aims to explore the role of religious minorities, their visibility, their representation and their perception, both internally and externally, in nation building. As part of the MIRCOM project funded by the MSH Lorraine, this symposium is a preparatory stage for the organisation of an international conference in 2026 and the publication of an edited collection.

Historiography of nation-state building and nationalism is mainly based on the concept of Nation, either as an entity founded on a dominant culture (Gellner), or as a social and territorial entity whose political and national unity overlap (Hobsbawm). For Benedict Anderson, the Nation is established on 'invented traditions.' Their particularity 'lies in the fact that their continuity with this past is largely fictitious.' These 'imagined communities' rely on a certain linguistic or cultural homogeneity, which transcends the plurality of religious denominations through the shared ideal of freedom (Anderson, 1991). Max Weber, for his part, emphasises the centrality of the subjective dimension of political 'communalisation', which links social relations to the disposition of social activity based on the subjective feeling of participants to belong to the same community (Weber, 1971: 41). As Christine Chavillon points out, Anderson's notion of the 'imagined community' refers to the absence of face-to-face contact for communities that lie beyond the primordial village (2007). Yet this village has included different Christian communities since the Reformation. Furthermore, the presence of Jews, even if they could be excluded and marginalised from the primordial community, has been attested since Antiquity and predates the formation of monarchic states. In the primordial village, the confrontation therefore took place between social groups rather than individuals, and its homogeneity itself is the result of imagination. We might wonder to what extent the 'imagined community' of the Nation, as an imaginary supra-entity, might make it possible to transcend this fragmentation of reality by giving a shared meaning to the organisation of power relationships. When nation-states were formed, these 'imagined communities' defined themselves on the basis of history, collective negotiation, and the maturation of social relations (Chavillon, 2007: 162). In the case of France and Italy, Protestant and Jewish minorities played a decisive role in this negotiation, sometimes drawing on their 'elective affinities,' as well as on the material implementation of 'mechanisms for symbolising the social imaginary' and exercising power (Chavillon, 2007: 165).

Relying on previous studies of the relations between Protestant and Jewish minorities and European nation-states (Cabanel, 2024, 2004; Birnbaum & Katznelson, 1995; Sorkin, 2019 ; Turner, 2011), and on their role in the emergence of religious freedom, French secularism and religious pluralism, this symposium aims to examine how these minorities, by claiming their part in the construction of the Nation, also participated in redefining national identities in France, Ireland and Italy during the period from the late 18th century to the creation of the State of Israel. It invites us to go beyond the question of the integration of these minorities, generally considered through the prism of assimilation and homogenisation, by examining how they contributed to the heterogenisation of these 'imagined communities' in demanding equal treatment, a central principle of democratic regulation, inspired by the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (Biagini & Gerstle, 2022). As a result, national identities no longer appear as simple products of a desire for homogenisation, but the fruit of an antagonism between the two processes of homogenisation (a single Nation) and heterogenisation (acceptance of the diversity of its components).

During the period from the revolutions to the creation of the State of Israel, Europe saw the emergence of many nation-states against the backdrop of progressive political and philosophical secularisation[1]. The monarchical kingdoms of the Ancien Regime previously based on the *cujus religio, ejus regio* principle, with an alliance of Church and State, enshrined discrimination against minorities in law. Politically, European countries experienced the revolutionary movements of the late 18th century and 1848, and then the upheavals of the Russian Revolution and two world conflicts, accompanied by democratic demands and authoritarian resistance. Religiously, the revival movements turned the denominational landscape upside down as they penetrated all Protestant denominations. By putting the emphasis on emotional experience, they led to the individualisation of religious commitment that nourished tensions and confrontations. Catholicism has been and still is in the majority in these three countries, both quantitatively if one considers the number of believers, and culturally with its longstanding roots in society. However, its political status has varied from country to country and from period to period, ranging from an alliance between Church and State to a position of discriminated religion. Power relationships and processes of minoritisation and majoritisation sometimes reversed, thus revealing the issues at stake in the imbalances between majorities and minorities. In Ireland, for example, Protestant minorities were well represented among the United Irishmen who tried to promote an inclusive definition of the Irish nation in their discourse, but also in their legislative demands. This failed attempt gave way to the complete domination of the Kingdom of Ireland by the British Crown after the Act of Union in 1801, followed by the Catholicisation of Irish nationalism with the Campaign for Emancipation. Sectarian tensions, though periodically overcome in nationalist movements, remained firmly rooted in the social and political landscape.

The hypothesis that these minority religions played an active role in the constitution of European nations in the 19th century is in contrast with the constitution of the public sphere, which at that time proceeded from secular values. Particular attention will therefore be paid to the visibility of these minorities in the public sphere, a concept of visibility whose heuristic richness for human sciences has been outlined by Olivier Voirol (2005). However, religious visibility is not limited to the register of visual expression or to 'what is open to view' in urban spaces (Boillet and Rideau, 2021), but extends to the significant presence and more symbolic forms of representation in the public sphere.

This *lato sensu* understanding of visibilisation makes it possible to study the way in which the figure of the Protestant and Jewish citizen emerge, or are modified, in the public life of the Nation and their transformation into social actors (Quéré, 1992: 88). The representations of the Nation and national identity in the productions of these minorities (for example, in teaching manuals, sermons, prayers for the Nation practised in several cultures, etc.) may also be studied. How did the authorities in power and the religious majorities view and envision these minorities? How did religious minorities represent themselves in a nation where the majority is of a different religion? How far did they help to overcome religious antagonisms in a nation under construction? What role did they play in distancing the State from the majority religion?

Papers may focus on a minority and/or one of these three countries, or compare them. This interdisciplinary method, which combines parallel and comparative studies, aims to highlight both specific cases of interaction between minorities and majorities as well as broader

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[1] While the definition of modernity and secularisation deserves to be questioned (see Obadia, 2004), these notions are approached here in the sense of phenomena 'affecting the way in which social, economic and political relations are structured', rooted in the idea of individual autonomy and manifested in processes of differentiation, rationalisation, pluralisation and nationalisation (Portier & Willaime, 2021: 7-8) in Western Europe.

patterns. The study of religious minorities' involvement in the development of education could be based on correspondence, school textbooks and tools that formalised the language (dictionaries, encyclopaedias). Their role in promoting or opposing the separation between religion and State can be analysed in the press, political speeches, parliamentary debates, and legal texts. Analyses focusing on sermons, internal correspondence, or iconographic documents to study the way these religious communities represented themselves within the nation are also welcome. The critical study of sources could be enriched by relying on information and communication sciences, more particularly on the socio-semiotic analysis of both the techniques and content of discourse, images and social and political staging - in short, of all media of expression - in order to identify the implications of the concept of visibility, whereby social groups benefit or not (in the case of invisibilisation) from public attention, which proceeds from a conflictual logic, as emphasised by Voirol (2005: 19). Indeed, visibility allows religious minorities to be seen and recognised in the greater whole of the Nation.

Papers are invited to examine the effects of modernisation and secularisation on the processes of heterogenisation on the basis of case studies that will be grouped into three sub-periods, during which these three countries went through major regime changes: the first (1789-1848) ranges from the French Revolution to the *Printemps des Peuples* and corresponds to the emergence of demands for freedoms inspired by the Declaration of the Rights of Man ; the second (1848-1922) corresponds to the rise of nationalism until the First World War ; and the third (1922-1948) extends from the rise of totalitarian regimes to the creation of the State of Israel. Proposals for papers of 20 minutes each in English or French (300 words + short biobibliography) should be sent to Karina Bénazech Wendling (karina.wendling@univ-lorraine.fr) **by 30 January 2025**. Contributions from young researchers and doctoral students are strongly encouraged. Selected proposals will be notified at the beginning of February 2025.

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