

FRANCE

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. Some laws and policies, however, restrict religious expression in public and others provide for monitoring of minority religious group activities. In April the government implemented a law adopted in 2010 prohibiting the covering of one's face in public.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. The country is home to Europe's largest Muslim and Jewish communities and its second largest population of Roman Catholics.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The embassy actively promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance among the country's major religious groups, particularly focusing on relations between the Muslim and Jewish communities. Representatives from the embassy met with government officials, private citizens, religious organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved with religious freedom. They also met with senior representatives from the major faith traditions. The embassy conducted public affairs outreach programs to minority communities throughout the country, and hosted an annual iftar with a focus on young Muslim leaders. Engagement was often conducted in collaboration with U.S. consulates and American presence posts.

Section I. Religious Demography

In accordance with its definition of separation of state and religion, the government does not keep statistics on religious affiliation. According to a poll published in *Le Parisien* in February, 36 percent believe in God, 34 percent do not, and 30 percent are uncertain.

A December 2009 poll in the Catholic daily *La Croix* found that 64 percent of the population, about 41 million people, identify themselves as Roman Catholic, 4.5

percent of whom are observant. The Interior Ministry estimates that 8 to 10 percent of the population, or five to six million people, are Muslim, 25 percent of whom attend Friday prayers. The Muslim population primarily consists of immigrants from former French North African and sub-Saharan colonies and their descendants.

All other religious groups combined constitute less than 7 percent of the population. *Le Figaro* estimates that there are 1.5 million Protestants, 400,000-600,000 of whom are evangelical. Many evangelical churches are African-style “prosperity” churches composed primarily of African and Antillean immigrants. *Le Parisien* estimates there are 800,000 Buddhist sympathizers and practitioners. The Buddhist population mainly consists of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants and their descendants. The Jewish community numbers approximately 600,000, of whom 40 percent are highly observant, according to press reports. The Jewish community is comprised of approximately 70 percent Sephardic and 30 percent Ashkenazi Jews. Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that there are approximately 120,000 observant members. Orthodox Christians number between 80,000 and 100,000; most are associated with the Greek or Russian Orthodox churches. The Church of Scientology estimates 50,000 members. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimates its numbers at 35,000-36,000, 30 percent of whom are observant. According to the press, there are between 7,000 and 15,000 Sikhs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. Some laws and policies restrict religious expression in public, and others provide for monitoring of minority religious group activities.

The constitution and laws, as well as international and European covenants to which the country is bound, protect the right of individuals to choose, change, and practice their religion. The constitution provides that the country “shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race, or religion. It shall respect all beliefs.” Interference with religious freedom is subject to criminal penalties, including fines and imprisonment. Moreover, individuals who are defendants in a trial may challenge the constitutionality of the law they allege impedes their religious freedom.

Strict anti-defamation laws prohibit racially or religiously motivated attacks. It is illegal to deny crimes against humanity as defined in the 1945 London Charter. Crimes of a “racist, anti-Semitic, or xenophobic” nature are prohibited, and perpetrators of “hate” crimes face increased punishments. Thus, for certain crimes, the penalties are increased when the offense is committed because of the victim’s actual or perceived membership or non-membership in a given ethnic group, nation, race, or religion. The government may expel aliens for “inciting discrimination, hatred, or violence against a specific person or group of persons.”

Although not legally required, religious organizations may apply for tax-exempt status and register to gain official recognition. The government defines two categories under which religious groups may register: associations of worship, which are exempt from taxes, and cultural associations, which normally are not exempt. Associations in either category are subject to certain management and financial disclosure requirements. An association of worship may organize only religious activities, defined as liturgical services and practices. Although not tax-exempt, a cultural association may engage in profit-making activity and receive government subsidies for its cultural and educational operations. Religious groups normally register under both of these categories. For example, Mormons run strictly religious activities through their association of worship and operate a school under their cultural association.

Under the law, religious groups must apply at the local prefecture to be recognized as an association of worship and receive tax-exempt status. In order to qualify, the group’s sole purpose must be the practice of religion, which may include religious training and the construction of buildings serving the religion. Among excluded activities are those purely cultural, social, or humanitarian in nature. The government does not tax associations of worship on donations they receive. However, if the prefecture determines that an association is not in conformity with the law, the government may change the association’s status and require it to pay taxes at a rate of 60 percent on future and past donations.

According to the Ministry of the Interior, 109 Protestant, 15 Jewish, approximately 30 Islamic, an estimated 100 Catholic, and more than 50 Jehovah’s Witnesses associations have tax-exempt status.

According to the 1905 law separating church and state, the government does not directly finance religious organizations to build new mosques, churches, synagogues, or temples. The government may, however, provide loan guarantees or lease property to organizations at rates advantageous to the groups. It also

exempts places of worship from property taxes. In addition, the government may fund cultural organizations with a religious connection.

There are three French territories in which the 1905 law does not apply. Since Alsace-Lorraine was part of the German Empire during the passage of the law separating church and state, adherents of Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Jewish groups may choose to allocate a portion of their income tax to their religious organization. Local governments may also provide financial support for the building of religious edifices. French Guyana, which is governed under the colonial laws of Charles X, may provide subsidies to the Catholic Church. The French Overseas Departments and Territories, which include island territories in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian oceans, and several peri-Antarctic islands as well as a claim in Antarctica, are also not subject to the 1905 law and may provide funding for religious entities within their territories.

On April 11, the government implemented a law approved in 2010 prohibiting the covering of one's face in public. Although not explicitly stated in the law, it is widely recognized that it is intended to prohibit Muslim women from wearing the burqa or niqab. On March 31, before implementation of the law, Interior Minister Claude Gueant issued a circular providing instruction to police and Interior Ministry officials on the enforcement of the new law. According to the circular, police are only to enforce the law in public places, including public transportation, government buildings, and other public spaces such as restaurants and movie theatres. The circular specifically instructed police not to enforce the law in private locations, or around places of worship, where the law's application would unduly interfere with the free exercise of religion. If the police encounter someone in a public space wearing a face covering garment such as a mask or burqa, they are instructed to ask the individual to remove it to verify the individual's identity. Police officials are not allowed to remove it themselves. If individuals refuse to remove the garment, police may detain them and take them to the local police station to verify their identity. However, an individual may not be questioned or held for more than four hours.

The law imposes a fine of 150 euros (\$200) on violators or requires attendance at a course in citizenship. Additionally, those who coerce another person on account of gender, by threat, violence, force, or abuse of power or authority, to cover his or her face are subject to a fine of 30,000 euros (\$40,000) and could receive a sentence of up to one year in prison; the fine and sentence is doubled if the victim is a minor.

On December 27 a woman wearing a niqab was fined 35 euros (\$45) for unsafe driving. Departmental Director of Public Safety Laurent Dufour stated the niqab was limiting the woman's vision while driving and presented a safety hazard.

In July the mayor of Douai prohibited the use of the Islamic bathing suit, consisting of long pants and a head covering, in two public swimming pools in his city for reasons of hygiene.

Charged by the government with observing and analyzing minority religious groups that have been labeled as sects for activities that violate the law or constitute a threat to public order, the Interministerial Mission for Vigilance and to Combat Sectarian Abuses (MIVILUDES) coordinates the appropriate responses to abuses by such groups, informs the public about potential risks, and helps victims receive aid. MIVILUDES publishes an annual report as well as several guides intended to identify and protect citizens from what it labels sectarian abuses. Some groups expressed concern in previous years that these publications contributed to public mistrust of minority religious groups.

In its eighth annual report, released June 15, MIVILUDES warned that there has been an upsurge in apocalyptic speech as December 12, 2012, the day some groups believe the world will end, draws nearer. The MIVILUDES report recommends that authorities increase monitoring and vigilance of these groups to prevent mass suicides. The report also highlights concerns about abuses by apocalyptic groups with respect to healthcare, particularly for cancer patients. According to MIVILUDES, several cancer patients opted for unconventional treatments recommended by these groups, which led to the deaths of three people in "excruciating conditions." Even though MIVILUDES continues to monitor closely religious movements that it considers to be sects, the 2010 report does not deliberately single out Scientology and Jehovah's Witnesses as it has in the past.

Public schools are secular. The law prohibits public school employees and students from wearing conspicuous religious symbols, including the Islamic headscarf, Jewish skullcap, Sikh turban, and large Christian crosses. Religious instruction is not provided in public schools, excepting the three territories previously mentioned. However, facts about religious groups are taught as part of the history curriculum. Parents who wish their children to wear religious symbols or to be given religious instruction in school may homeschool or send their children to private school. Homeschooling and private schools must conform to the educational standards established for public schools. Public schools make an effort to supply special meals for students with religious dietary restrictions. The

government subsidizes private schools, including those affiliated with religious organizations. With respect to the law banning the wearing of religious symbols in schools, the government reported there were no disciplinary cases brought under the law against students since 2009.

Foreign missionaries from countries not exempted from entry visa requirements must obtain a three-month tourist visa before traveling to the country. All missionaries who wish to remain longer than 90 days must obtain long-duration visas before entering the country. Upon arrival missionaries must provide a letter from their sponsoring religious organization in order to apply with the local prefecture for a temporary residence card.

The law establishes preventive and punitive measures against associations, both religious and nonreligious, that endanger the life or the physical or psychological well-being of a person; place minors at mortal risk; violate another person's freedom, dignity, or identity; illegally practice medicine or pharmacology; or falsely advertise. Individuals convicted under this law face up to five years' imprisonment and a 750,000 euro (one million dollar) fine, while associations are subject to fines, dissolution, or a definitive ban. Advocates for religious minorities expressed the concern, among others, that provisions of this law that allow certain individuals and groups to bring claims could be abused by those seeking to advance an ideological agenda.

The law affirms that "detained persons have the right to freedom of opinion, conscience, and religion. They can practice the religion of their choice ... without other limits than those imposed by the security needs and good order of the institution." According to the government, the number of prison chaplains has increased since 2008 and efforts have been made to improve access to food appropriate for prisoners with religious dietary restrictions. Religious celebrations, such as Ramadan, are observed in prisons. As of January 1, according to the French Ministry of Justice, there are 702 Catholic, 308 Protestant, 134 Muslim, 97 Jewish, 12 Orthodox, and 45 "other" chaplains employed by the penitentiary system. Detainees may receive visitors if they are family members, close friends, chaplains, or authorized volunteers. In the general visiting area, any visitor can bring objects of worship to an inmate or speak with the prisoner about religious issues, but they cannot pray. However, prisoners can pray individually in their cells, with the chaplain in the designated prayer rooms, or, in some institutions, in special apartments in which they can receive family for up to 48 hours.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter, Ascension Day, Assumption Day, All Saints' Day, and Christmas Day.

Government Practices

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. There were some notable changes in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period, with mixed consequences. The government investigated and prosecuted criminal behavior directed at religious groups. The government implemented a law prohibiting the wearing of face covering veils in public, and groups such as Scientologists expressed concern that government policies contributed to public mistrust of minority religious groups and acts of discrimination.

The government made efforts to promote interfaith understanding. The government combated racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim acts through public awareness campaigns and by encouraging dialogue among local officials, police, and citizen groups. Government leaders, along with representatives from the Jewish community, the Paris and Marseille grand mosques, the Protestant Federation, and the Conference of Bishops, publicly condemned racist and other forms of violence. The government regularly prosecuted anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic, and other similar crimes. Prosecutors were ordered to seek maximum punishments for hate crimes and to appeal systematically sentences not considered adequate.

From April 11, when the ban on covering of one's face in public went into effect, to December 31, 231 women were given warnings by police and six were convicted and fined. While several women were sentenced to attend citizenship class, none has yet participated. On April 9 police arrested 61 people in Paris for participating in an unapproved demonstration against the law. The law, although initially controversial, has the support of major political and religious leaders.

On October 27, a Versailles appeals court ruled that a privately owned daycare center in a Paris suburb could ban its employees from wearing religious symbols at work. The landmark case is expected to set a precedent for other private educational establishments to enforce the principle of "religious neutrality," a term defined by the 2004 law banning "ostentatious signs of religion" in public schools. The appeals court's decision reinforces a previous ruling in December 2010 that a nursery in Mantes-la-Jolie, a Paris suburb, was within its rights to fire a female employee in 2008 after she refused to remove her headscarf.

On June 30 the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that France violated article 9 of the European Convention on Religious Freedom in imposing taxes on donations received by Jehovah's Witnesses. The judges also declared that the law taxing donations was too vague. The assessed tax of 57 million euros (\$76 million) would consume all of the group's assets in the country and could compel its closure. The French government, represented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, did not appeal the ruling. During the reporting period, the government of France and the Jehovah's Witnesses did not come to an agreement on the issue of compensation, including the reimbursement of funds already seized. As such, the ECHR is expected to rule again in summer 2012.

On March 11 President Sarkozy fired his advisor for diversity and integration, Abdherrahmane Dahmane, after he openly criticized the Union for a Popular Movement's (UMP) upcoming debate on Islam and secularism. Many leading voices in the UMP expressed reservations about the debate, fearing it could lead to the stigmatization of Muslims. At the time, Defense Minister Alain Juppe said that "we must control this debate because it would be unimaginable to stigmatize the second largest religion in France."

On April 4 Interior Minister Claude Gueant told journalists that the growing number of Muslims in France "poses a problem." According to Gueant, "the increasing numbers of followers and a certain number of their behaviors cause problems." Gueant was quickly denounced by politicians, Muslim organizations, and human rights associations.

In October 2009 a Paris correctional court found the Church of Scientology and four of its leaders guilty of fraud and fined the organization 600,000 euros (\$800,000) but stopped short of banning the group's activities. The defendants had been charged under a statute targeting organized crime. Alain Rosenberg, described as the "mastermind" of the Spiritual Association of the Church of Scientology in France, received a two-year suspended sentence and was fined 30,000 euros (\$40,000). The three other leaders received suspended prison sentences ranging from 18 months to two years and fines of 5,000 to 30,000 euros (\$6,650 to \$40,000). The Church of Scientology appealed the ruling. The ruling on the appeal will be made in 2012.

The Association for the Defense of Family and the Individual (ADFI) in Nord Pas-de-Calais Picardie, an association whose purpose is "to prevent and aid victims of sects," created a comic book to help in its stated mission. The comic book is

targeted at 13-18 year olds and is aimed at preventing psychological dependence on or abuse of weaknesses by sectarian movements. Three thousand copies of the book have already been distributed, and the Ministry of Education plans to make them available to boards of education around the country.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On January 27 the museum memorial for the children of the Vél' d'Hiv, victims of the Holocaust, was inaugurated in Orléans. The mayor of Orleans conducted the inauguration in the presence of Jacques Chirac, former president of France, and Simone Veil, a survivor of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp and honorary president of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah.

On February 9 at the Representative Council for the Jewish Faith (CRIF) annual dinner, President Sarkozy spoke for the first time about France's "Jewish roots" and noted Judaism's contribution to the identity of France. Sarkozy also addressed continuing problems with desecrations of cemeteries and places of worship in France, saying "religious freedom is not negotiable." On March 3 Sarkozy likewise spoke about the Christian heritage of France. Sarkozy mentioned that without Christian cathedrals, many cities in France would not be what they are now.

On April 15 Interior Minister Claude Gueant met with representatives of the six major religions of France to discuss the UMP's proposals to preserve secularism. Gueant told religious leaders that he wants to "reinforce national cohesion and open the way for France to be more focused on its core values." Religious leaders hailed the positive climate of the meeting and the government's efforts to address their concerns.

On May 1-2, a ceremony at the Shoah Memorial in Paris was held to remember the 76,000 Jews who were deported from France to concentration camps between 1942 and 1944. During the 24-hour period, politicians, religious followers and leaders, and volunteers read aloud the list of names from a microphone. The interior and defense ministers, as well as the mayor of Paris, participated in the event.

On May 2 Interior Minister Claude Gueant submitted a written request to the civil service minister to make sure student and public exams did not take place during Passover. On June 30 Gueant announced that he had asked the government to take into account the Jewish Passover holiday "in the functioning of civil and public services" in France.

On May 2 Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë dedicated a Paris garden to Ilan Halimi, a 23-year-old Jewish man who was tortured and murdered in 2006. A plaque placed at the dedication reads, “Ilan Halimi--young victim of anti-Semitism from Paris’ 12th District.” Youssouf Fofana was convicted in July 2009 for the torture and murder of Halimi, and was sentenced to life in prison (and is not eligible for parole for at least 22 years). On December 17, 2010, following a government appeal, the court increased the sentences of the two main accomplices of Fofana from 15 to 18 years’ imprisonment. The court confirmed the sentences of 15 other accomplices, whose sentences ranged from six months suspended sentences to 18 years’ imprisonment.

On June 6 a Canadian court agreed to extradite to France Hassan Diab, the prime suspect in the 1980 terrorist attack on a well-known Paris synagogue on Rue Copernic that killed four people.

On August 6 300 Muslims and non-Muslims assembled for the first prayer at the grand mosque of Strasbourg. Deputy Mayor Olivier Bitz said the mosque was an example of Strasbourg’s tradition of religious tolerance as the home for the ECHR. The mosque’s official opening is planned for mid-2012.

In November a Sikh gurdwara opened in Bobigny, the permits for which were obtained in 2005. Seine-Saint-Denis has the largest population of Sikhs in France, with approximately 1,000 observers.

As of November, permits were granted by the mayor of Chesnay for the construction of what will be the first Mormon temple in France. The temple will join 110 other Mormon sites in France.

On November 18-20, a series of interfaith dialogues took place between the Jewish and Muslim communities in Paris. Jews and Muslims, along with government and community leaders, gathered in 30 different places of worship to discuss belief systems, recent government actions, and religious activities in an effort to facilitate communication and understanding between the two groups.

On December 21 President Sarkozy awarded Haim Musicant, Director General of CRIF, the French National Order of Merit for distinguished civil achievements. Sarkozy praised Musicant for expressing the voice of French Jews in public debate and representing them in public institutions.

On December 27 the Auschwitz-Birkenau state museum released a statement saying that the French government pledged five million euros (\$6.5 million) for the preservation of barracks, the gas chambers, and the belongings of camp victims.

On November 2 an appeal court in Nancy ruled that the penitentiary administration in eastern France could not refuse Jehovah's Witness chaplains access to prison inmates of the same belief. This decision follows a February 2010 decision by the High Authority for the Struggle against Discrimination and for Equality (HALDE) which stated that denying Jehovah's Witnesses access to a chaplain was religious discrimination. The criminal code provides that "every detainee has the right to fulfill the needs of his religious, moral, or spiritual life in prison." A public authority can deny a prisoner the right to be visited by a chaplain of his or her own religion only if it is necessary, legitimate, and proportionate. In May 2010, following five separate decisions by the Administrative Court of Paris in favor of Jehovah's Witnesses having their own chaplains in prison, Jehovah's Witnesses in prison could receive visits from fellow believers. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, 100 inmates requested a chaplain in 2011. To date, however, a Jehovah's Witness chaplain has not been employed by the government because, according to the government, demand is insufficient.

On November 4 National Corporation of French Railways (SNCF) signed an agreement with Sciences-Po Bordeaux to create a genocide course run by a dedicated specialist. The course will study the major genocides of the 20th century. SNCF continued to support remembrance activities and memorials.

The Interior Ministry continued to fund a program at the Catholic Institute of Paris entitled "Religion, Secularism, and InterCulturalism." Government officials collaborated with academic specialists to create the curriculum for the training program that included 30 students for the academic year. Although the program is open to persons of all faiths, Muslims have expressed the greatest interest in the program. Consequently, the program seeks to address the fact that most imams come from overseas and do not speak French, hindering communication with their congregations and their understanding of local customs and laws. Initiated in collaboration with the Great Mosque of Paris, the program, for which the government provides 60 percent of funding, was intended to provide students, including future clerics, a broad understanding of French legal, historical, and social norms while avoiding theology. The goal of this portion of the program was to develop an Islam within the country that will be of the country and foster integration. Theological instruction was left to the Great Mosque of Paris, which has administered a four-year imam training program since 1993. The students are

primarily immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa. The training has been well received by the country's religious communities, including Muslims, and is open to high-level officials and clergy from all religious groups, as well as representatives of affiliated religious associations.

The Ministry of Education continued to sponsor nationwide courses and competitive examinations designed to educate students about discrimination and tolerance. It has a partnership with the League against Racism and Anti-Semitism (LICRA) to educate students about anti-Semitism and racism. LICRA provides educational tools, works directly in schools, and organizes trips to educate students about racism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. The majority of these acts were anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize some incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

According to a May 17-19 poll commissioned by the Union of Jewish Students of France and SOS-Racisme, 86 percent of French citizens do not consider themselves to be racist, while 13 percent openly acknowledge they are.

According to a parliamentary report released in November, 509 cemeteries and places of worship were desecrated between January 1 and October 31. The Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Ile-de-France regions were noted as having the largest concentration of acts against religious sites in the country. The report also stated that 621 cemeteries and religious buildings were desecrated in 2010. Of these, 522 occurred at Christian sites, 57 at Muslim sites, and 42 at Jewish sites.

Members of the Arab Muslim community experienced instances of assault, harassment, and vandalism during the year. The French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) reported that the number of anti-Islamic acts increased by 34 percent in 2011.

On December 7, a man was arrested and imprisoned for twice setting fire to a mosque in Montbeliard earlier in the year.

In September about 30 Muslim graves in Carcassonne were desecrated, with racist and pro-Nazi slogans written on the gravestones. The slogans targeted the Muslim and Jewish communities; swastikas were also found. Political and religious figures condemned the vandalism.

On September 9 police opened an investigation into the origins of a Facebook event titled “Cut the Throats of Muslims in Place of Sheep” which occurred on September 6.

On August 1 a police investigation was opened in Nice after assailants illegally relabeled three street signs near a mosque overnight on the first day of Ramadan. The streets were renamed “rue de la Lapidation” (Street of Stoning), “rue des Freres musulmans” (Street of the Muslim Brotherhood) and “rue de la Burqa” (Street of the Burqa).

On January 7 pork rinds were found on three Muslim graves in a cemetery in Castres. Using DNA technology, police were able to identify the assailant as a 48-year-old man living in Castres. He was arrested on November 21 and his trial was December 7. No verdict was passed by the end of the year.

The Jewish Community Protection Service (SPCJ) and Ministry of Interior reported a 16.5 percent reduction in anti-Semitic incidents during the year compared with 2010. Similarly, the Ministry of Interior reported a reduction in anti-Semitic incidents for the first five months of the year compared with 2010. For the period of January to May, the Ministry of Interior reported 185 anti-Semitic acts compared to 222 anti-Semitic acts for the same months in 2010.

On August 9 the iPhone application “Jew or not Jew?” was released for sale in the Apple Store online. The application gives the downloader a list of 3,500 public figures that are of Jewish origin or religion. The creator of the application was Johann Levy, an Englishman living in Marseille. While Levy stated that the goal of the application was “to bring to Jews a sense of pride, when they see that such businessman or such celebrity is also Jewish,” the application was perceived as racist by many human rights groups and Jewish student groups. President of CRIF Richard Prasquier called the application “totally against the rules of our society in France.” The application was removed from Apple’s French stores September 14 and from Apple stores worldwide October 18.

On May 18, Danish filmmaker Lars Von Trier told the press that he understood Hitler and was a little sympathetic towards him. His remarks took place after a

showing of his film “Melancholia” at the Cannes Film Festival. Von Trier was later questioned by Danish authorities following a French judicial request for an investigation into whether or not he had violated the French law against justification of war crimes. The investigation is still underway.

On May 7 racist and anti-Semitic graffiti was found at an elementary school in Nancy. An arson attempt in the library was also later discovered by police. The minister of education, as well as the town’s mayor, spoke out against the incident. An investigation was opened to find the perpetrators.

In April in Villeurbanne, a 21-year-old male was approached by two individuals who, after asking him if he was Jewish, shot him with a pellet gun four times. The victim tried to defend himself, and he received blows across his head and body. The victim was hospitalized and an investigation into the attempted murder was opened. A similar event happened on June 18 in the same town. A 21-year-old male was outside wearing a kippa when he was approached by an older male voicing Jewish insults. Shortly after the incident, the young man was attacked by several individuals with a hammer. The police in Villeurbanne are investigating the incidents.

In March, 16 skinheads were arrested for their involvement in the desecration of Jewish and Muslim cemeteries north and south of Strasbourg. They were responsible for acts committed over the course of several months in 2010.

According to the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) report, approximately a third of complaints of racism were reported by the North African community, with 695 racist and xenophobic threats, 117 of which were specifically related to anti-Islam bias, compared to 94 in 2010. Three Islamic buildings (representation du culte musulman) were targeted in attacks in 2011.

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ officials noted that 17 adherents were physically attacked this year. As of December 1, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 50 acts of vandalism of places of worship, most notably five firearms attacks and one use of a Molotov cocktail. Seven Witnesses were also threatened with weapons during the reporting period.

On May 12 four members of the Seventh-day Adventist church were questioned after having abducted a 19 year-old woman for seven days to exorcise her. They are being investigated for sequestration, with acts of torture and imprisonment. They kept the victim tied to a bed, with almost nothing to eat or drink for a week.

On March 7 the French Judeo-Muslim Friendship organization held its annual gala at the Paris city hall. Major players from the political, religious, and civil society spheres attended to emphasize dialogue and understanding between the two religious groups.

On January 11 a group of four Mormons was assaulted by three men in Martinique. The man, who injured three in the group with a pair of scissors, received 18 months in prison.

The Church of Scientology continued to report instances of societal discrimination during the year, including the difficulty some members had in obtaining bank accounts. Church officials noted, however, that the French National Bank often reversed the decisions of local banks that had refused accounts to church members even if the accounts ultimately granted were more basic than sought. Church officials also reported positive relations with local police and officials at the Ministry of Interior.

More than 180 dedicated antidiscrimination posts operated in district courts staffed by a referring judge charged with managing local cases in close collaboration with civil society. Despite the important partnerships forged by the antidiscrimination posts, the CNCDH reported that prosecutors blamed the relatively low number of complaints filed for discriminatory acts on a lack of reporting by institutional interlocutors, stressing the need to adopt methods to better identify cases of discrimination.

The Council of Christian Churches in France is composed of three seven-member delegations representing the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches. In addition a three-member delegation represents the Armenian Apostolic Church and one observer represents the Anglican Communion. The council served as a forum for dialogue among the major Christian churches.

There was also an organized interfaith dialogue among the Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish communities which addressed and issued statements on various national and international themes. Additionally the Bishops Conference, through its National Service for Relations with Islam, organized an annual training session on Islam to maintain regular contacts with Muslim associations and to advise Christians who have contact with Muslims.

The Documentation Center for Secularism and Religions sought to increase awareness of different religions. It published a calendar of all religious holidays and explained the origins and traditions associated with the holidays.

For the 2011-2012 academic year, the University of Strasbourg, France's largest public university, established a degree-granting program in secularism. This is the first public university to propose such a degree.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. embassy actively promoted interfaith dialogue and tolerance among the country's major religious groups, particularly focusing on relations between the Muslim and Jewish communities. Engagement was often conducted in collaboration with U.S. consulates and American presence posts.

Representatives from the embassy met with government officials responsible for religious freedom matters. Embassy officers also met regularly with private citizens, religious organizations, and NGOs involved with religious freedom. Embassy officials met with and discussed religious freedom with senior representatives from the major faith traditions. Embassy officials hosted visits from the Muslim-Jewish interfaith group Twinnings and Jewish organizations, including the Service for the Protection of the Jewish Community, American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Student Union of France, CRIF, and the International League against Racism and anti-Semitism. The embassy also conducted regular outreach to Muslim communities throughout the country, and the ambassador hosted an annual iftar with a focus on young Muslim leaders. Washington-based State Department representatives also traveled to the country to conduct outreach activities.

The embassy conducted public affairs outreach programs to minority communities throughout the country. The embassy also played a role in supporting projects of NGOs, such as SOS-Racisme, that promote tolerance and fight against anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment and actions.

France is home to two consulates and four American presence posts (APP) that support American citizens, provide consular services, and further commercial and public diplomacy goals. The consul general in Strasbourg participated in several outreach events to Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish communities, and APP Rennes

conducted social media outreach during major religious holidays. APP Bordeaux met with Muslim and Jewish leaders throughout the year and distributed publications to area high schools in efforts to tackle stereotypes about America. APP Lyon continued to meet with religious leaders, focusing its engagement on the local Muslim community to curb the formation of extremism and intolerance.

The embassy supported an Open Mosque and Open Synagogue exchange event November 18-20. This initiative opened the two largest Jewish and Muslim centers of worship in Paris to each other's members, bringing together members of both religious groups in dialogue and exchange.

The embassy supported the annual festival on Islam in America, September 6-17, put on by the Institute of Cultures of Islam. The festival included a series of events, often designed to attract a younger generation.

The embassy provided partial funding for a France 2 three-part French language documentary on Islam in America. The program aimed to dispel myths about the experience of Muslims in America and was aired on three consecutive Sundays that coincided with Jewish Passover and Christian celebrations of Easter.

The embassy partnered with the country's leaders in a range of sectors to share best practices for managing diversity and promoting effective models to allow individuals with different backgrounds, cultures, and beliefs to live harmoniously.