

Governing Religious Diversity from Above and Below Marseilles 16th Century to the Present

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In his recent visit to Marseille in September 2023 Pope Francis praised the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural tradition of the city, mirroring the many civilizations of the Mediterranean as an example to imitate in a world increasingly torn by religious conflicts. The comment referred to Marseille's historical tradition that has since centuries stood out as welcoming large waves of immigrants, originating from the Mediterranean basin, but also from many other parts of the world. Most of the world's major religions are practiced here today, untroubled any major waves of violence or rejection. This chapter will examine the dynamics of this religious diversity from three angles. An introductory approach to the subject begins with the perspective of the history of immigrations taking account of recent studies that have analysed the waves of immigrants which have contributed to the building of Marseille's society since the end of the Middle Ages (Témime). In a second section, the chapter will make a close inquiry into the religious geography of the city today. It will strive to show how this religious plurality has not produced segregated neighbourhoods or ghettos on the model of other cities. On the contrary, it has made for a multitude of places of worship spread across the city. Finally, this study will examine the concrete forms of relations between different religious denominations, focusing particularly on the experiment launched by the town council in the early 1990s aimed at strengthening inter-religious dialogue between the leaders of different religious groups, an experiment that is currently unique in France, despite similar attempts in other major towns in the country.

Immigration and religious denominations

As a major Mediterranean port, Marseille has long welcomed large numbers of people of foreign origin. So much so that the city's development is largely the result of its migratory flows, as demonstrated by the group of historians led in the 1990s by Emile Témime¹. Founded by the Greeks around 6th century B.C., Marseille became an important economic and intellectual centre in Roman times, and was a Christian city from the first millennium AD onwards. It was home to a number of important religious institutions, the most powerful of which was St Victor's Abbey, founded in the 5th century and the largest in Provence. The presence of Jews dates back to the 6th century. This was not a marginal presence for a very long time, without a structured and

¹ E. Témime (ed.), *Migrance. Histoire des migrations à Marseille*, Aix-en-Provence, Edisud, 4 vol., 1989-1991.

organised community with its own public places of worship.² Besides being a seat of the Bishopric, recent archaeological research has also unearthed traces of Muslim burials from the initial period of Islamic expansion.

At the end of the Middle Ages, the town was a Mecca for Christianity and the Catholic Church, which is maintained and even strengthened by immigration, the majority of which is of Italian origin. However, there was a certain amount of diversity, mainly linked to trade. There was an Armenian presence in the 17th century with the establishment of the first Armenian printing works by Voskan Yerevantsi in 1672, authorised by Louis XIV. At the same time, several Jewish merchant families from Livorno set up business in the town. Home to the royal fleet of galleys, Marseille was also home to several thousand Muslim rowing slaves at the same time. This led to the creation of a Muslim cemetery outside the city walls (Régis Bertrand). However, these groups remained marginal in the urban fabric and did not pose a problem of religious diversity in a state which, after 1685, officially recognised only the Catholic faith. In this respect, its situation was very different from that of its maritime rival Livorno, where the Grand Duke of Tuscany had authorised the practice of the main religions since the end of the 16th century.

A change came about in the 19th century, when a large Jewish community gradually took root, enjoying nationwide recognition and organization during the First Empire. It became particularly visible with the building of a large synagogue in 1863. The Protestant presence grew, particularly with the arrival of Swiss and British merchants. A major colonial port in the 19th century, the city now welcomed African and Asian populations, practising Islam as well as Buddhism.

Contemporary religious geography: an approach from below

Today, the city of Marseille is home to a wide variety of religious practices. This diversity cannot be documented on the basis of census data as French law prohibits official public enquiries into the religious practices of citizens. Hence, this section mobilizes the field work conducted on the many and varied places of worship and religious institutions in the city. These surveys of different faiths first consider the sites of worship of the different faiths from Catholics, Protestant, Anglican, Armenian, Coopt, Orthodox, to Jews and Muslims, Witnesses of Jehovah, Mormons and Buddhists. These reveal a significant number of institutions (for eg. 58/85 synagogues, 73 mosques, 12 Armenian churches, 2 Greek orthodox churches, 34 protestant temples, 4 Buddhist temples...) widely scattered across the urban area. Although they are unevenly distributed, they do not contribute to the process of segregation and the identification of neighbourhoods

² J. Sibon, *Les juifs de Marseille au XIV^e siècle*, Paris, Cerf, 2011.

according to religious characteristics. Their study is still in progress. The precise results will be presented in a cartographic representation of the city. To these places of worship must be added various types of religious institutions (Christian convents and monasteries, Jewish and Koranic schools).

Inter-faith dialogue from above

This downward analysis of visible forms of religious practice and urban settlement of a religious nature is inseparable from a major operation initiated by Marseille City Council in 1990. Marseille Espérance (Marseille Hope) is a well-known interreligious association. It brings together religious leaders from the main spiritual families (Catholic, Armenian, Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist) around the city's mayor, with the aim of restoring a dialogue that can bring together the people of Marseille from different cultures and religions, while respecting the secular framework defined by the French Republic. The association's aim is neither political nor religious. It meets around the mayor, who is seen as the guardian of a secular society and representative of all citizens, to strengthen cohesion and responsible action by residents. Their activities range from a major annual festival to a series of conferences and cinema screenings, with the aim of exchanging views on the city as a common home.

The analysis will look at the reasons why the experiment succeeded in Marseille and has continued uninterrupted for over 30 years, while similar experiments in other French cities have failed. Is one of the reasons for the success of this experiment not to be found in the cultural origins of the people of Marseille, anchored in a vast Mediterranean world and its extensions? This is not the case in other French cities. Both in the light of France's laic commitment and realities of immigration, this empirical study of Marseille proposes a reflection on whether the Mediterranean city is an exception, a model or a fluke.