

## The Nativity war in France

Unholy row as nativity scene ban divides France. Court orders council in La Roche-sur-Yon to dismantle crib, after complaint from secular campaigners. Nativity scene at Béziers city hall, France



It has been called the nativity war. A French court's ban on a nativity scene in a town hall in order to preserve France's secular traditions has triggered a fierce backlash.

“Why not ban Christmas and the public holidays that go with it?” thundered *Le Parisien* on Sunday. Its headline read: “Spare us a nativity war.” According to the newspaper, 86% of more than 12,000 readers surveyed were in favour of keeping nativity scenes in public places.

The court in Nantes ordered regional authorities in the western town of La Roche-sur-Yon to remove the crib from its building's entrance hall, after a complaint from the secular campaign group *Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée*.

The council is appealing against the decision with the support of national politicians including the Front National leader Marine Le Pen, who described it as “stupid and blinkered secularism”. The local senator, Bruno Retailleau, issued a statement saying: “Next we'll be banning epiphany cakes at the *Élysée Palace*.”

The Nantes tribunal invoked a 1905 law that enshrines the separation of state and church. But other town halls are fighting similar decisions. In the southern town of Béziers, the FN-supported mayor, Robert Ménard, is refusing to dismantle a crib in the town hall in defiance of a letter from the prefect ordering him to respect the constitutional and legislative principles guaranteeing secularism. Authorities in Melun, south-east of Paris, where a nativity scene has been set up in the town hall gardens for the past 10 years, are awaiting a court ruling.

The controversy comes as the government is anxious not to be seen as discriminating against only Muslims, who have been banned from wearing burqas or niqabs in public. But critics say the government is leaning too far the other way to protect the country's secular traditions.

Nadine Morano, an outspoken deputy with the centre-right UMP party, said "secularism must not kill our country, our roots and our traditions."

A sociologist, Jean Baubérot, claimed the upholding of France's religious "neutrality" had become an increasingly aggressive and repressive secularism affecting Islam.

"The anti-Islamic climate is causing a crackdown on other religions," he told *Le Nouvel Observateur* weekly magazine. But, he added, the law is the law, and "cribs are a religious symbol that has no place in a public space."

France is struggling to contain sectarian tensions. The interior minister, Bernard Cazeneuve, speaking after the brutal robbery of a Jewish couple in a Paris suburb last week, announced on Sunday that the fight against racism and antisemitism would be a "national cause".

Anne Penketh - The Guardian