



The American *État Exégète*

The Erosion of Church-State Separation in the United States and Its Lessons for French Religious Pluralism

Programme **Religis** Religions et sociétés face aux défis contemporains

porté par l' Université de Strasbourg

Strasbourg 📅 **28 novembre 2025 (14h30-17h00)**

Misha 📍 **Salle Table ronde** مفاوضات

Intervenant : Mme Orit **AVISHAI** - Fordham University (Rose Hill)

Modérateur : M. Niccolò **BRANDODORO** - Università La Sapienza (Roma)

Histoire, sociologie, archéologie
et anthropologie des religions | **HiSAAR**

Les Instituts thématiques interdisciplinaires
de l'Université de Strasbourg
dans le cadre de l'Initiative d'excellence



Organisation :

Michele **CUTINO** ✉ cutino@unistra.fr

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The evolving struggle over the role of religion in American public life and the significant recent shifts in U.S. legal doctrine provide a critical contemporary case study highly relevant to the concept of the État exégète. This presentation examines how the United States, a liberal democracy historically committed to church-state separation, is currently manifesting this challenge, thereby serving as a case study relevant to any pluralist democracy seeking to maintain a pluralist and inclusive public sphere.

The talk analyzes the dramatic infusion of religion, specifically conservative Christianity, into American public life, often facilitated by the active involvement of federal, state, and local government authorities. Critically, this involvement moves beyond mere toleration or accommodation; it embodies the state's assumption of an interpretive role. This intervention is often indirect, realized through judicial and regulatory measures that effectively define and validate majoritarian religious interpretations while simultaneously limiting the freedom of expression for those whose religious exegeses the state deems illegitimate, raising the persistent question of the limits of state neutrality, potential censure, and majoritarian privilege.

Using the case of religion and public education, and analyzing recent legislation, litigation, and local school board battles, this case study identifies the criteria used by public authorities to qualify or disqualify religious practices and discourses. This reveals the repertoire of arguments used by secular authorities to determine which religious discourses are deemed possible and authorized in the public sphere, and how these dynamics challenge secular governance.

The American experience of governmental assertion of religious authority that is chipping away at the principle of neutrality offers a critical comparative insights into the challenges faced by France, where the foundational principle of laïcité confronts similar pressure from majoritarian religious legacies.

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