

Parisian prayers: a litany of liturgies

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by Duncan JD Smith



Paris is a city too often straitjacketed by its galleries, museums, restaurants, and cabarets. Balzac of course knew better than to judge the city by those showcase attractions. For him, Paris was more than merely *la ville lumière*. Instead it was an ocean criss-crossed by myriad currents. And still that's true today. One of the least known of those currents charts a course around the city's places of worship, along the way capturing the spirit of Parisian devotions.

Churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples together provide a history of Paris every bit as illuminating as that proffered by the secular sights. Visiting them reveals not only distinctive architecture but also memorable rites and liturgies.

SYMPHONIES IN STONE

The geographic heart of Paris is the Île de la Cité, an island in the Seine where the Romans kick-started urban development in 52 BC. Of their many temples, little remains but over the ruins of one now stands the best known church in Christendom. Notre-Dame de Paris was described by Victor Hugo as "a vast symphony in stone," a mountainous structure that took centuries to create.

Drawn as much by legend as by liturgy, I make my pilgrimage to Notre-Dame one Friday afternoon to witness something extraordinary.

LEFT: Legend as much as liturgy draws the crowds to Notre-Dame de Paris (photo by Duncan JD Smith).

Paris est un véritable océan. Jetez-y la sonde, vous n'en connaîtrez jamais la profondeur.

from 'Le Père Goriot' by Honoré de Balzac (1835)

Out of the shadows emerge the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, their white cloaks adorned with blood-red crosses. They are carrying a jewelled reliquary containing nothing less than Christ's True Crown of Thorns. Bemused tourists scatter briefly whilst genuine emotion touches the faces of the Parisians who have come to witness this little fragment of ecclesiastical theatre.

Notre-Dame, however, is only the first movement in the symphony. Arranged around it are other ancient Roman Catholic churches, as would be expected of a city where Catholicism was long the state religion. The Église Saint-Séverin on the Left Bank is a case in point: occupying the site of the saint's fifth-century tomb it was first an oratory, then a Romanesque chapel, and eventually a Gothic church, replete with gargoyles, flying buttresses, and a vaulted ossuary. The building served briefly as a gunpowder store following the Revolution, and in 1956 witnessed demonstrations by Christian conscripts against the war in Algeria. I witness a well-attended Holy Mass on a Sunday, the joyful congregation bathed in a pool of prismatic light from some glorious stained glass windows.

ANCIENT RITES

The city's rich variety of Catholic rites illustrates well the complex heritage of Christianity that dominated Paris from the fall of the Roman Empire until the Revolution. The Église Saint-Eugène-Sainte-Cécile on Rue Sainte-Cécile, for example, boasts not only two patron saints but also two rites. The older-style Tridentine Mass is given in Latin by a priest with his back to the congregation. By contrast the Pauline Mass, which has been the norm since its introduction by Pope Paul VI in 1969, sees the priest turning towards the congregation and speaking in French.

Other rites are more ancient but bear witness to communities that have arrived more recently in Paris. The anonymous-looking Église Notre-Dame de Chaldée on Rue Pajol offers something very special. On Sunday mornings a Mass is celebrated

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in Aramaic, the language thought to have been spoken by Jesus. It is attended by ethnic Assyrians (Chaldeans) who have fled persecution in Syria and Iraq. Their origins lie in the Sumero-Akkadian civilisation that emerged in Mesopotamia six thousand years ago.

The Eastern Orthodox Byzantine rite, whilst not quite as old, can be heard sung beautifully in Greek, French, and Arabic in

the Église Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre on Rue Galande. It is one of the city's oldest churches. In 1889 it was granted to the Melkites, a mixed community of Greek and East Mediterranean Catholics whose origins reach back to first-century Antioch. This explains the iconostasis inserted into the building's sturdy Romanesque apse, revealed to me by a young Syrian church warden. In a hushed voice he expresses concern for his family in war-torn Aleppo.

By the fifth century the Romans had merged elements of both the Aramaic and Greek rites to provide Western Christendom with its own Latin-language Gallican rite. Abolished under Charlemagne it was not reintroduced until the twentieth century — but remains sufficiently

rare that even many Catholics are hardly aware of its existence. It can be witnessed today in a remarkable celebration of Holy Mass for living animals that is held each November in the Église Sainte-Rita on Rue François-Bonvin. For a couple of hours the church resembles Noah's Ark!

ARMENIANS AND RUSSIANS

Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as its state religion. That was way back in 301, and thus predated Constantine the Great's personal acceptance of Christianity on behalf of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. Armenians began arriving in France during the Great War, when their homeland was centre stage in the conflict between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. The word 'genocide' was originally coined to describe the massacre that prompted their exodus.

Some got as far as Paris, where they set themselves up as gemstone workers and shoemakers.

A discreet Armenian community is still there today and its members accord me a warm welcome when I arrive unannounced at the Cathédrale Saint-Jean-Baptiste on Rue Jean Goujon. An elderly gentleman points proudly to a fresco commemorating the short-lived Republic of Armenia (1918–1920) — lasting independence came only in 1990 — then leads me into the church, where the ancient rite of the Armenian Apostolic Church is celebrated. It being a weekday the place is empty except for a man high up on a ladder wiping away decades of candle soot from the magnificent gilded apse.

Russia has also long provided a stream of émigrés to the French capital. Amongst their number were pro-tsarist White Russians fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution, many of them well-to-do aristocrats who settled in the 15th and 16th arrondissements. There they established a handful of Orthodox churches and early one Sunday I visit them. The Église Saint-Séraphin-de-Sarov on Rue Lecourbe is not easy to find. The tiny onion-domed church is secreted inside a courtyard, its rustic construction recalling the log cabin occupied in life by its patron saint. From the surrounding flower-filled garden I watch as the faithful arrive and the priest adjusts his garments *al fresco*.

The Église de Tous-les-Saints-de-la-Terre-Russe on Rue Claude-Lorain is even more tucked away, being installed inside an unremarkable town house. It falls under the sway of neither Moscow nor Constantinople but rather the patriarchate known as The Russian Church beyond the Frontiers. Only the warm glow of icons emanating from an open side door betrays its presence, as well as the robust *a cappella* singing, which momentarily competes with a sung service from a Polish chapel across the street. I've missed the Divine Liturgy, though, and instead the kindly priest waves me off with a handful of fruit.

My Russian church odyssey concludes at the Cathédrale Saint-Alexandre-Newsky on Rue Daru. Truth be told it finishes in the Café à la Ville de Petrograd opposite, where in 1918 the artist Picasso celebrated his marriage to a Russian

LEFT: Cleaning the apse of the Cathédrale Saint-Jean-Baptiste, where the rite of the Armenian Apostolic Church is celebrated (photo by Duncan JD Smith).



RIGHT: If it weren't for the nearby apartment houses the Grande Mosquée de Paris could be in the Maghreb (photo by Duncan JD Smith).

ballerina. Financed by Tsar Alexander II, the cathedral serves today as the archdiocesan seat of the Russian Orthodox Exarchate in Western Europe.

MINT TEA AND CHALLAH

Islam and Judaism provide Paris with two of its most distinctive places of worship. On a sunny summer's day the minaret of the Grande Mosquée de Paris transforms a corner of the 5th arrondissement into a scene straight out of the Maghreb, whence the Muslims of Paris first hailed during the late 19th century. Realised in the Hispano-Moorish style, it was constructed by the French government in 1926 to honour *tirailleurs* from the country's North African colonies, who died for France in the First World War.

Although the prayer hall is closed to non-Muslims, I catch a glimpse of it whilst exploring

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the mosque's glorious blue-tiled water garden. I then withdraw to sip *thé à la menthe* in the leafy shade of the neighbouring *La Mosquée* restaurant, a separate and decidedly secular enterprise. There it occurs to me that most Paris Muslims worship in premises far less grand than the Grand Mosquée; indeed it was the issue of overcrowding in makeshift suburban prayer halls that saw prayer mats

taken onto the streets in 2011. Perceived by some as a threat to French secularism, which has been enshrined in French law since 1905, street prayers have subsequently been outlawed.

Across the river, straddling the 3rd and 4th arrondissements, lies the Marais, an area of former marshland encompassed by Charles V's city wall during the fourteenth century. Prior to that the land was considered fit only for Sephardic Jews



whose summary expulsions during the Middle Ages were repeated across Europe. Renowned for their business acumen they were always encouraged back despite continuing prejudice. With the Revolution there came freedom of worship and, for a while, more equitable times for the Jews of Paris.

During the late nineteenth century the community was bolstered by Ashkenazi Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe, and the Marais became known unofficially as Pletzl (Yiddish for 'little place'). The emergence of a specifically French Yiddish culture was celebrated in 1913 with the construction of an Art Nouveau-style synagogue on Rue Pavée (it was designed by Hector Guimard who made his name with the city's iconic 'dragonfly' métro entrances). Only those with *kippahs* and curls visit the synagogue on Saturdays and so instead I call at one of the nearby kosher bakeries to sample *challah*, a golden braided bread reserved for the Jewish Sabbath.

PARIS MONDIAL

This litany of Paris liturgies is rounded out by two, more recently-arrived immigrant communities that help make up what is sometimes referred to as *Paris mondial*. The city's Southeast Asians hail predominantly from the former French colonies of Indochina. Some came in 1954 at the end of the First Indochina War, while others arrived in the 1970s after fleeing the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. During the late 1970s Vietnamese boat people came after the fall of Saigon, and in 1989 the events in Tiananmen Square prompted the arrival of ethnic Chinese, too. Many live in Les Olympiades, a forest of high-rise apartments in the 13th arrondissement, where neon-lit restaurants and grocery stores jostle for space on the busy pavements. Traditional dress is rare these

Worshippers celebrating the start of Buddhist Lent in a temple deep in the Bois de Vincennes (photo by Duncan JD Smith).



days but time-honoured Buddhist practices are still observed.

Parisians of Indochinese origin attend a cosy temple-cum-social club in an underground car park, its existence given away by the red lanterns swinging in the doorway. On the shopping concourse directly above, Han Chinese (known as Teochews) attend their own temple guarded by a series of life-sized deities. Cambodians, meanwhile,

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gravitate towards the Centre Bouddhique in the heart of the Bois de Vincennes. Quite by chance I arrive there at the start of Buddhist Lent (*Chaul Preah Vassa*) — when Buddhist monks traditionally withdraw for the rainy season — and witness prayers beneath Europe's largest Buddha.

My final port of call is the Sri Manicka Vinayakar Alayam on Rue Pajol. The first Hindu temple in Paris, it was established in 1985 by M. Sanderasekaram, a Tamil forced to flee the Sri Lankan civil war. Grey haired but still energetic he greets me at the door. Before I know it I'm shoeless and taking part in a lively *pooja* ceremony. In a cloud of incense and rose petals we circle a statue of the elephant-headed Ganesh, son of Shiva, who together with Brahma and Vishnu makes up the Hindu Trinity (*Trimurti*). It's an invigorating experience made unforgettable by what happens next. A young French woman tugs at my sleeve. She's just married a Hindu and they want their picture taken for posterity. I oblige and for a moment, as our worlds collide, we're all sharing the same Paris prayer. ■

Duncan J D Smith is an urban explorer, travel writer, historian, and photographer. He is the author of 'Only in Paris', one of a series of guidebooks by Duncan that probe the hidden corners of various European cities. Find out more at www.onlyinguides.com.