



## **Pt 2, Culture—the Vital Differences that Color Life**



## **Plus ça change: Fraud, Religion, and Law in France**

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In 1669, the French playwright Molière published *Tartuffe*, a classic portrait of a religious shyster. By pretending to be a holy man and spiritual guide, Tartuffe almost completely swindles a gullible man's fortune and ruins his family. The poor target of Tartuffe's wily charms, Orgon, recognizes the fraud too late, and is finally delivered by a representative of the King, who denounces and apprehends Tartuffe. Modern American critics have puzzled over this seemingly "forced" and "not convincing" resolution that is "so unexpected as to cast doubt upon the dramatic coherence of the

entire comedy.”

In a move that was equally baffling to Americans, over three hundred years later, French legislators also attempted to protect their population from religious fraud. Reacting to fears of “dangerous cults,” following investigations prompted by events that occurred in the mid-1990s, the French Senate and National Assembly adopted a law on 30 May 2001 “to strengthen prevention and repression of sectarian groups liable to undermine human rights and fundamental freedoms.” The law criminalizes “mental manipulation,” fraud, and deceptive practices by purportedly religious actors.

Both of these visions of a strong state protecting citizens from religious fraud sit uncomfortably with Americans. For precisely that reason, however, they are particularly useful vehicles in an attempt to understand French legal and religious culture. The noted cultural historian Robert Darnton suggested that “[w]hen we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning.”

No Events