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Teaching About Religion in a Spirit of Laïcité

The Case of France

ANNE FRANÇOISE WEBER

Teaching about religion in France is strongly influenced by the principle of laïcité as laid down in the French Constitution: “France shall be an indivisible, secular (laïque), democratic and social republic.” The strict separation between church and state is a long-term result of the French Revolution and was finally implemented by law in 1905. Education was at the heart of the lengthy emancipation process of the new republic from the Catholic Church, so it is not surprising that the teaching of religion, or even teaching about religion, was banned at the end of the nineteenth century.

Jules Ferry, minister for state education at the beginning of the 1880s and father of the modern French state school, promoted laws first to make primary schooling free and, a few months later, to make it compulsory and laic. In 1886, another law laid down that the primary school teachers had to be lay persons, so as to diminish the influence of clerics and nuns on the children. Notwithstanding this, Ferry also ruled that one day a week (apart from Sunday) should be free to allow families the opportunity to take care of their children’s religious education. In other words, his measures were not directed against religion as such, but against the influence of the church on primary school, a public institution most important for the implementation of a new social order.

Today, the constitution of the Fifth Republic not only states that the republic is secular (laïque), but also that “the state has the duty to organise public free and secular education at all levels”. Again, as the Code of Education shows, this stance is not anti-religion. The Code states that children and young people will receive an education “that accords all faiths equal respect” and that the state ensures the students’ freedom of worship and freedom of religious instruction. Therefore, the day off is maintained to give parents the chance to ensure their children’s religious instruction outside the school. Primary school teachers still have to be lay persons.

Although the principle of laïcité seems so crucial for French national identity, there is one important exception: the case of Alsace-Moselle. This region consists of three of the 96 French departments and about 5% of the population (excluding the overseas territories). Located on the left bank of the River Rhine, the region has a complicated history, passing back and forth between France and Germany several times. Following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, Alsace-Moselle was part of Germany when the

1 In this article, I prefer using the word laïcité, which has a uniquely French connotation, instead of the English word laicism
3 For an historical overview, see Baubérot (2004), Portier (2011) and Bedouelle/Casta (1998).
French public school system was consolidated and the law of separation between the church and the state was passed. Therefore, the concordat concluded in 1801 between Napoleon Bonaparte and the Catholic Church as well as the subsequent arrangements with Protestant and Jewish religious authorities survived in Alsace-Moselle, as did the Falloux Law of 1850, which provided for religious education in public schools. When the territory was returned to France in 1918, some local law remained in force, among it the parts concerning the cooperation between religious authorities and the state as well as those governing religious education. The special case of Alsace-Moselle will be treated at the end of this article; first, we shall trace the history of teaching about religion in France, how it is practised and what the difficulties are.

A Need for Knowledge About Religions

Despite the strong laïcité framework, religion has found its way back into French schools even outside Alsace-Moselle. In the 1980s, concerns arose about a lack of religious culture among students. A survey showed for example that only a small percentage of the French were able to name the four Evangelists. Teachers complained about the difficulties of studying historical events such as the crusades or reading works by Blaise Pascal, Jean Racine, Victor Hugo or Voltaire with students who lacked a basic knowledge of religion.

The Ministry of National Education therefore commissioned Philippe Joutard, a historian and school inspector, to write a report on teaching about religion. In this report, Joutard strongly recommended teaching more about religion in history, geography and literature classes to avoid losing a part of the collective memory. In a follow-up conference, there was a consensus not to create an additional course, taught by a specialist, but to incorporate knowledge about religion in existing school subjects. The history curriculum for secondary schools was changed accordingly. But, apparently, implementation did not go very far.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, students expressed a huge need for more information about religions and fundamentalism. The Ministry of National Education asked Régis Debray, a philosopher and counsellor to several French presidents, to evaluate current practice and develop some proposals for amelioration. His report, published in 2002, again called for the teaching about religion, claiming that “fact of religion (le fait religieux)” is part of most civilisations and that its study could give an awareness of place and time to students who nowadays live more and more in a “prison of the present”. He evaluated what had been done since the curriculum review in the 1990s and stated that despite some progress in the matter there were still tensions on both sides. The defenders of laïcité were afraid of proselytisation and of encouraging
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communitarianism if religion were a topic in school; the churches and believers were afraid that if teachers adopted an attitude of relativism it would deny their faith and feelings.

Debray also opposed introducing a separate school subject, primarily because the school syllabus was already very demanding, but also to avoid a situation in which, in the absence of qualified public school teachers, external instructors could be asked to teach this subject. A large part of his report deals with the question of what kind of laïcité would be suitable for French public schools. It concludes that schools would prove themselves even more laicistic by combatting religious analphabetism with an impartial and neutral teaching staff. Schools had the duty to understand the “fact of religion”, and could no longer act as though it were not their concern.

In his report, Debray also briefly mentioned the case of Alsace-Moselle and used it to demonstrate that the demand for knowledge about religion was not a demand for religious education at school, as many students in Alsace-Moselle had asked to be exempted from religious education courses – the rate is as high as one third in primary school and about 86% in the final years of secondary school (lycée). Debray recommended small changes to the curricula, and, more importantly, a new module in the training of future primary school teachers titled “the philosophy of laïcité and history of religions”. Furthermore, he suggested the creation of an institute focused on ensuring a better transmission between university studies of religion and teachers’ in-service training on the topic. Most of Debray’s recommendations were put into practice, although a few years later he criticised that certain académies (regional school authorities) were very slow in implementing the modules. In 2011, he concluded that the question was no longer if teaching about religion was legitimate, but how to do it and how to do it better.

France was agitated during these years by on-going conflicts about the possibility of Muslim girls wearing a head scarf in school – another commission again examined the question of laïcité and in 2004 a new law on laïcité in school was passed. It prohibited wearing ostensibly religious signs, but stated at the same time that schools should not be places of uniformity and anonymity that ignored the “fact of religion”. One year later, a report related to a new educational law highlighted the importance of teaching about

9 Gillig (2012) gives these figures for the school year 2011/2012: in elementary school 63.7% of the students took religious education, in collège 31.2% and in lycée 13.8%.
10 This training currently takes place at the IUFM (instituts universitaires de formation des maîtres); due to important changes in the French university system, these institutes might be transformed or even replaced in the next few years.
11 The Institut européen en sciences des religions was founded in 2002 as a part of the École pratique des hautes études in Paris.
12 Debray (2011).
13 Law 2004–228 of March 15, 2004. This brief overview cannot deal with the situation of French private schools, most of which are Catholic, although there are some Jewish and Protestant schools; recently a few Muslim private schools have also been established. During the 1980s, the question of public subsidies for private schools, which are free to offer religious education, was hotly debated in France.
religion as “transmission of knowledge and references to the fact of religion and its history”.\textsuperscript{14}

Religion in the Curricula

In France, curricula are issued by the Ministry for National Education, which also appoints teachers. It is worth looking at how these declarations about teaching the fact of religion in a spirit of laïcité have been included in curricula. This applied not only to the detailed subject-related curricula, but also to a text called the common foundation (socle commun) for primary school and the first years of secondary school (collège). This common foundation, established in 2005, defines what every student should know at the end of his compulsory schooling.\textsuperscript{15} It embraces for example knowledge about different historical periods, including some religious aspects, and knowledge of major antique texts such as – listed in this order – the Iliad and Odyssey, texts on the foundation of Rome and the Bible. Most explicit is the point: “Understand the unity and complexity of the world”, which includes studying the fact of religion in France, Europe and the world in an “esprit de laïcité that respects conscience and conviction”. Laïcité, as a principle students are supposed to know, appears again, in the paragraph on social and civic competences.

With regard to individual subjects, religion appears most explicitly in the history curricula. For example, Islam is taught in the second class of secondary school (cinquième), under the title “The beginnings of Islam”. The first lines of the first paragraph in the curriculum are revealing here: “Muslims are treated in the context of the conquest and the first Arab Empires (…)”. Thereby, Islam is considered as a political rather than a religious phenomenon. The prophet Muhammad is not even mentioned here; only later is there a recommendation to use basic texts from the Koran, the Hadith or the Sunna to talk about Muhammad.\textsuperscript{16} An interesting topic was the treatment of the Mediterranean basin in the twelfth century as part of the curriculum for the seconde, the tenth school year. Here, the Christian West, the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic World were studied under the title “Crossroads of three civilizations”– but this topic was dropped with the revision of the curricula in 2010 and replaced by a topic on medieval Christianity, which brought back a Eurocentric focus.\textsuperscript{17} It is notable that religions other than the big monotheistic ones are barely mentioned in the curricula.

In general, the curricula treat religion as a historical rather than a contemporary phenomenon. For historical reasons, ethical problems are dealt with as part of moral instruction: when he abolished religious education in public schools, Jules Ferry introduced moral and civic instruction to put “in children’s souls the basic, solid foundations of simple morality”.\textsuperscript{18} Throughout the ensuing decades, despite name changes and

\textsuperscript{14} République Française (2005) 37.
\textsuperscript{15} Ministry of National Education (2006).
\textsuperscript{16} Ministry of National Education (2008).
\textsuperscript{17} Ministry of National Education (2010), 4.
\textsuperscript{18} Ferry (1883).
sometimes the loss of the moral component, the subject alway retained the idea of an education for citizens. In 2008, moral instruction was re-introduced in primary school with the aim of teaching respect for universal values and common rules as well as promoting the exercise of individual liberty. A covering circular by the Minister of National Education explained that the principles of neutrality and *laïcité* had to be strictly applied in this matter, especially with regard to the political and religious domain: “Knowledge of the fact of religion in particular implies no debate about religious obligations or questions related to belief.”

Avoiding such debates seems to be a difficult task when teaching six-to-ten-year-old children.

### The Practice: Vague Textbooks and Insecure Teachers

Several studies show that presenting the fact of religion in textbooks in a neutral and child-adapted way is not an easy task. Some textbooks fall into religious language, calling Abraham “the father of the Israelites” or classifying Judaism, Christianity and Islam as the “religions of the Book”, as if other religions did not have sacred books. The choice of words is never innocuous in this matter: by always calling God “Allah” in the context of Islam, textbooks make Islam even more foreign to non-Muslim students than necessary. Textbooks that give the subtitle “Jesus Christ” to an image of the crucifixion are not neutral, as Jesus is Christ only to the Christians. In 2005, one important textbook publisher decided to remove the face of the prophet Muhammad from its textbook illustration, a move that generated a lot of protest. In general, critics deplore the fact that the textbooks do not highlight mutual influences between religions and do not encourage direct comparisons; rather, they seem to treat the sources, especially the Koran, literally, instead of placing them in their historical context.

Concerning the acceptance of teaching about religion, a European study shows that students in France are reasonably convinced that this has its place in school. At the same time, a majority of students think that religion should not be a separate subject; this means that the practice chosen in the 1980s and confirmed by the Debray report is accepted among those primarily affected. With regard to the teachers supposed to impart this material, it seems that they do not feel at ease with this task. A small survey of teachers-to-be shows that those interviewed do know the essentials about *laïcité* and the laws concerning religious teaching in school. They are also able to name the basic facts about Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But none of them felt properly prepared to teach

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20 For the following, see Dussère et al. (2012), Nouilhat (2011), Harang (2007), Becquelin et al. (2003) and Nasr (2001). Whereas the curricula are coming directly from the Ministry of Education, it does usually not intervene on the content of the textbooks, which are just obliged to follow the curriculum and not to contain any hate speech or other message contrary to the mission of education. It is the teachers of every school who choose in subject-specific councils the textbooks for their school.
this to their students. They find that teaching about religion is a delicate matter and they are afraid of the fears parents and children could have concerning this topic.\(^{23}\)

In 2003, a survey of 400 school teachers in Alsace revealed that most of them wish to have more information on Islam and that they have difficulties teaching this topic. The notion of the fact of religion does not seem very clear to many of them. They complain about facing students who are either not interested in this topic or feel overly concerned. Some teachers deplore the fact that in Alsace-Moselle, in agreement with the religious authorities, one hour a week is already allotted to religious instruction;\(^{24}\) they fear religious authorities could try to influence their laic principles regarding teaching about religion. A small minority of the teachers quoted in this study still disapprove of any teaching about religion as in their view it contradicts laïcité.\(^{25}\)

### Religious Education as a Source of Political Conflict – The Case of Alsace-Moselle

The fact that, according to the aforementioned study, some teachers are still opposed to teaching about religion in school shows that some still understand laïcité to mean the refusal to have anything to do with religion in the public space. But this is no longer a national consensus. During his term as president, Nicolas Sarkozy promoted a concept of “positive laïcité” that called for a more open state attitude towards religion and religious communities.\(^{26}\) With the election of a socialist president in 2012, defenders of an extreme laïcité felt encouraged, as François Hollande had insisted in his election programme on the separation of religion and state and suggested entrenching the fundamental law on laïcité of 1905 in the constitution. Although Hollande had not even mentioned Alsace-Moselle in his initial comments, subsequently he had to assure the religious leaders in this region that he would not touch their particular status and would even be prepared to include it in the constitution (although this might be difficult from a juridical point of view). Politicians to the left of the socialist party, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon, keep on pressing for the abolition of this special status.\(^{27}\)

Even in Alsace-Moselle this status is no longer uniformly accepted. One point of dissent is the staff giving religious instruction. It was first supposed to be done by teachers who would volunteer for it, but as their number has decreased these lessons are increasingly given by religious instructors sent by religious institutions. In primary schools, religious instructors cannot be given permanent teacher status. With regard to secondary schools, a state diploma for religion teachers was introduced in 2000, shocking defenders of strict laïcité. They also protested against the procedure of exemption from religious instruction practised in primary schools in Alsace-Moselle from 2008 to 2012. In June 2012, two teacher unions and one parent federation launched a campaign

\(^{23}\) Nabor (2012).

\(^{24}\) This was fixed by a ministerial decree of 3 September 1974, see Gillig (2012) 305.


\(^{26}\) He used this expression for example in a discourse in Rome in December 2007, see Sarkozy (2007)

\(^{27}\) See Fortier (2012) and Gorce (2012). In April 2013, Hollande created an observatory for the laïcité, a project already put forward by Jacques Chirac.
to facilitate this exemption: they criticised the distribution of a form that asked parents to choose between Catholic, Protestant and Jewish religious instruction or to ask for another form to have their child exempted from religious teaching. The campaign asked for the schools to immediately include moral instruction (the replacement course for these children) as a fourth possibility on the first form, thereby demonstrating that this choice is as normal as the others are. This had also been the recommendation of the Commission on laïcité in 2003, and was finally put into practice at the beginning of the 2012–2013 school year. The Commission also suggested the introduction of Islamic religious instruction in Alsace-Moselle, a project that has not yet been realised. Nevertheless, in some secondary schools the strong presence of Muslim students and the awareness of a need for interreligious encounter has encouraged Protestant and Catholic religious instructors to draw up a subject called cultural and religious initiation (éveil culturel et religieux), which takes different religions into account. This step has to be approved by the religious authorities and every school director concerned.

Conclusion

Considering students’ ongoing need for information about religion and the sensitivity of this topic for believers, atheists and defenders of a strict laïcité, there will certainly be more debates on the place of religion in French public schools. The maintenance of the special status of Alsace-Moselle will depend on whether initiatives such as the “cultural and religious initiation”, or possible future Muslim religious instruction, will provide convincing answers to the questions raised in these debates. As the official documents quoted in this article show, the laïcité of the French Republic and its schools remains an important political and social issue.

Bibliography


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