

The Religious Education and the beginning of the Secular State in France: A weak relationship?*

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Introduction

As far as the position of Christianity and, by extension, Christian religious education is concerned, France possesses a special status. Because of its history, which was decisively shaped by two centuries of religious wars between Protestants and Catholics (in particular an all-powerful Catholicism) and then by the French Revolution of 1789 (vehemently anti-Catholic), France is undoubtedly the most secular and indeed the most “anti-religious” country in Western Europe. However, freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Constitution, and in some areas, Christianity, because of its historical weight, remains privileged. It is more or less the story of the glass being half empty and half full, with some emphasizing Christianity’s autonomous marginalization in France, which is governed by the principle of the secular state/principle of *laïcité*, and others, on the contrary, defending the privileged position

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it continues to have and maintain, despite the separation of Church and State.

1. Historical overview

Officially, religious education does not exist within the French education system, which is completely secular, neutral, and irreligious. Religious matters belong to the private sector and are the exclusive responsibility of the Church and religious institutions¹. It is good to recall that the first article of the current Constitution of France, dating from 4 October 1958 (5th French Republic), states: “France is a Republic indivisible, secular, democratic and social. It guarantees equality before the law for all citizens without distinction of origin, race, or religion. It respects all beliefs”. These principles of equality, fruits of the struggles of the French Revolution of 1789, are inscribed within the framework of the secular state principle of most European countries, which is based on a twofold recognition: freedom of opinion/belief and the principle of non-discrimination.

This neutrality of the French state, as far as religion and, by extension, the teaching of religion is concerned, was expressed through two important historical events:

i. In 1880, Jules Ferry introduced a public, secular, free, and compulsory school. The law was prepared by anti-clerical quarters and with the participation of many Protestants, who were interested in cutting off education from the influence of Catholicism. The Protestants, who had acquired many rights in the 19th century (in the previous centuries they had lived “*clandestinely*”), transferred them all to the state, thus gaining various privileges to this day, as there are still today in France (unlike other religions) Protestant schools, gymnasiums and high schools.

1. B. Massignon, V. Riva, *L'Europe, avec ou sans Dieu? Héritages et nouveaux défis*, éd. de l'Atelier, Paris 2010, σ. 24, à propos de «l'exception française»: «La France est le seul pays européen à ne pas dispenser aujourd'hui de cours de religion confessionnel ou non confessionnel à l'école publique».

ii. The second milestone event dates to 1905, when a law was passed separating Churches and the State, according to which the Churches became private organizations. The Catholic Church, which still represented at that time 80-90% of the population, lost its privileged status, and Theology schools were taken out of the University to become private institutions, funded by the Churches. Priests, pastors (and rabbis) were no longer paid by the State, as in the 19th century, but by their Churches.

The situation in 19th century France, divided into two antagonistic and rival groups, with the Catholic Church on the one hand and free thought stemming from the French Revolution on the other, explains why this secularism is often militant, assertive, and anti-clerical. Protestantism has always stood in the middle of these two oppositions, as it was with the anticlericalism against the power of the Catholic Church, but at the same time on the latter's side for an education based on a Christian vision of the world and man. However, Protestantism showed particular confidence in a state founded on the secularism principle, supporting it vigorously because it guaranteed the rights of a small minority (Protestantism represents 1-2% of the population) against the Roman Catholic Church's power and authority.

This special situation makes us argue that there are two, or even three co-existing cases/forms of the principle of the secular state²:

a. The principle of the secular state has a polemical dimension; it holds that the empire of religions in society is negative; the less prominent the religious element is, the better for men. To be free and emancipated, they must live without religion. This sensitivity no longer differentiates between Catholicism and Protestantism - indeed, Christianity and other religions. Every religion and every dominance subjugate man.

b. Then there is the principle of the secular state through *the dimension of public administration*. In this case, this principle guarantees the state's neutrality in religious matters and the equality of all religions before the law. Perhaps even some representatives of this secularism, the most

2. This distinction has been propounded by the sociologist J.-P. Willaime, «Laïcité», in: P. Gisel (éd.), *Encyclopédie du protestantisme*, Labor et Fides, PUF-Quadrige, Genève-Paris 2006, p. 747 et. seq.

neutral and open, might favor a few partnerships with religions in the educational and social field.

c. According to the sociologist Jean-Paul Willaime, we would see the emergence of a third type of secular state authority, operating in a framework of recognition and dialogue, marked neither by militancy against religions nor by strict neutrality, but by a desire for openness and cooperation³. Religions can and should play an important role in social peace, respect for minorities, tolerance, and acceptance of differences. Religions, well framed, help to fight against communalism⁴.

2. Two important exceptions

What we have just reminded you of is the theory. In practice, there are two exceptions:

I. The special status of the three French departments of Alsace, Haut-Rhin, Bas-Rhin, and Moselle. In this region of eastern France, whose capital is Strasbourg, there is the Concordat regime, created by Napoleon in 1801, establishing that four religions, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Judaism, have a special status. Priests and pastors continue to be paid by the state, theology (Protestant and Catholic) is taught in universities and there are religious education classes in its schools. Which is the reason for this exception? When the law for the separation of Church from the State was passed in 1905, this region belonged to the German Reich and was incorporated into the Republic after the First World War in 1918.

II. The second exception is that there are still many religious schools in France, most of them Catholic. In certain regions of France (for example in Brittany, Pays de la Loire), private Catholic education is even more

3. J.-P. Willaime, *Le retour du religieux dans la sphère publique. Vers une laïcité de reconnaissance et de dialogue*, Olivetan, Lyon 2008.

4. Voltaire, *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763). La tolérance est une valeur positive et bienveillante envers l'autre et s'oppose au fanatisme religieux. Voltaire a écrit ce traité pour réhabiliter un protestant, Jean Calas, mis à mort par les autorités publiques pour avoir été faussement accusé d'avoir assassiné son fils afin de l'empêcher de se convertir au catholicisme.

important than public secular one. In the first one, religious courses of a different nature are taking place, ranging from traditional Catholic catechism to simple lessons in morality or humanistic culture and lessons on various religions, the discovery of the Bible, etc. The highest institute, which trains these teachers in private Catholic education, is the Catholic University of the West (Angers), which, unlike its Parisian counterpart (Catholic Institute of Paris), retained the title “University”, which was not possible in the capital, where a strict view of the principle of the secular state prevailed.

3. An innovation from 2006:
the “Course dealing with the phenomenon of religion”
(«l’enseignement du fait religieux»)

One of the developments that have taken place in recent years concerning schools in France has been the general introduction not of the Religious Studies Course but of the “Course dealing with the phenomenon of Religion” [i.e. the course that studies and analyses the religious phenomenon]. What is it about?

More and more teachers and school principals were concerned about the growing ignorance of students regarding their knowledge of the religious phenomenon’s past and present. Thus, teaching literature, history, geography, and the arts is impossible, as these subjects are imbued with Christian references. The government requested a report on this subject from the philosopher Régis Debray, who concluded that it was necessary to introduce elements of religious culture into school curricula⁵. This was done for all schools in France and thus a taboo has been broken. The opportunity was given to teach religious elements in a neutral and democratic school but within a curriculum with great restrictions.

5. R. Debray, *L’enseignement du fait religieux dans l’école laïque*, Rapport au ministre de l’éducation nationale, éd. Odile Jacob, Paris 2002.

More specifically, among these limitations were the following:

- These elements of religious culture are not 100% lessons but are scattered throughout the history and literature lessons.

- “The course dealing with the phenomenon of religion” is one among many possible teaching options; consequently, it is most likely that the teacher will not choose it.

- Some classes or curricula, mainly STEM (Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), do not recommend the “Course dealing with the phenomenon of Religion”.

- It is a broad approach to the religious phenomenon, which also includes the study of philosophical currents and religions that are not monotheistic. Therefore, not much is left of a Christian culture (and even less of a knowledge of biblical texts).

Despite its shortcomings, this not-so-comprehensive Religious Education Course proposal highlights four important dimensions concerning religion, which are:

A. A *collective dimension*: Religions are made up of individuals who come together because they have common values to share. The religious part connects people (one of the etymologies of the word *religion*, *religare*, *relier* = to connect); it should be approached from a social point of view, not simply individually or psychologically.

B. The *dimension of visible* (“material”) *imprints*: religious life produces visible traces that need further interpretation: texts, images, objects, buildings, gestures, rituals, etc. Most of these visible / “material” traces are several years old and belong to the heritage of history or art, so the religious part becomes cultural.

C. The *symbolic dimension*: Every religion is based on a symbolic representation of the world, humanity, and God – hence the necessity of a mind that can understand these symbols. “The symbol gives the thought”, said the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, a major representative of Phenomenological Hermeneutics⁶. We propose here another etymology of the word religion, deriving from *religare* = *relire* = to reread.

6. P. Ricoeur, «Le symbole donne à penser», *Esprit*, n° 7-8 (1959/II), pp. 60-76; «Le symbole et le mythe», *Le semeur*, 1963/2, pp. 47-53; *Le conflit des interprétations. Essai d'herméneutique*, Paris, Seuil, 1969, p. 284.

D. *The dimension based on experience and receptivity/feeling*: These symbolic realities, linked to religions, are not initially consistent with thought but with the sensory experiences acquired by thousands, if not millions of people, touching realities that are also fundamental, such as the body, food, sensations, emotions. To leave them at the level of concepts or historical events is to forget what the religious part does in everyday life, which essentially conveys words, gestures, objects, and rituals that speak to the human being individually and collectively, and embody them on a personal level.

With the introduction of the “Course on the phenomenon of Religion”, we can only be pleased that for the first time in France, in the Curricula, religious issues are discussed from a different perspective, that of history, including the social, moral and ritual aspect of this religious component in contemporary society⁷. Following this innovation, the European Institute for the Science of Religions (IESR), affiliated with the University of Paris-Sorbonne, was created in 2002; it provides training, including doctoral studies, and publishes quality books⁸.

4. The Religion lesson in Alsace – Moselle⁹

It is always a school course, the organization of which is the responsibility of the four officially recognized religions (Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, Judaism). Most of these belong to the Catholic Church, with small Protestant and Jewish minorities. Islam, although the second religion in this region, does not partake in the whole scheme, which is

7. We manage Christianity well within the history curriculum concerning topics related to Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance (Reformation). But this is an essentially historical and pragmatic approach as if Christianity was only in the past.

8. Someone can find extremely useful things on the webpage: www.iesr.ephe.sorbonne.fr.

9. On the distinction between school religious education and parochial catechesis from a Protestant perspective: J. Cottin, J.-M. Meyer (éds.), *Catéchèse protestante et enseignement religieux, Etat des lieux et perspectives*, Lumen Vitae, Bruxelles 2013; L. Hourmant, J.-P. Willaime, «L'enseignement religieux dans les écoles publiques d'Alsace-Moselle», in: J.-P. Willaime (éd.), *Le défi de l'enseignement des faits religieux à l'école. Réponses européennes et québécoises*, Riveneuve éd., Paris 2014, pp. 309-330.

a clear anomaly¹⁰. These religious courses are in theory compulsory, but an exemption can be requested, which is automatically granted. This practice has become widespread, which means that in many places the participants in religion classes are a minority.

Regarding religious education in this region, the following is noted:

a. The course in question moves between a *confessional model* followed by the Churches (see parochial catechesis) and the “Course dealing with the phenomenon of Religion”. It remains confessional as long as the Church bears sole responsibility for its content and the training of the teachers who teach it. The Catholic Religious Education Course can sometimes resemble a catechism course (songs, prayers, invitation to participate in the Sunday Mass).

b. However, this course is increasingly evolving towards a model that promotes *learning about religion*, but in the sense of a course of study of religions from the perspective of Christianity. The Protestant Religious Education Course emphasizes the discovery of the Bible (Old and New Testaments), knowledge of the great feasts, and the study of moral and social issues (money, family, solidarity, etc.).

c. In the socially disadvantaged areas, we look to replace traditional religious lessons with moral ones. It is mainly about teaching respect for others and certain fundamental humanistic principles, as young people come from broken families without educational values. The advantage of this training, relating only to humanistic values, is that it is taught to all pupils.

d. Lastly, this model of the Religious Education Course sees its audience diminishing year by year. The innovations and pedagogical discoveries offer nothing; the course becomes increasingly marginal within the general educational plan, by always prioritizing “useful” subjects and sciences at the expense of humanities, music, and the arts. Some talk of a possible end to teaching religion in the three geographical areas under the Vatican agreement.

10. The number of people who embrace the Muslim culture or religion is estimated at 120,000 for these three segments, or 5% of the population. This figure rises to 25% of the population in cities such as Strasbourg and Mulhouse.

5. Christian education in a new religious environment

We cannot discuss the issues of education and religious transmission without taking into account recent political, cultural, and religious developments in the world and in Europe¹¹. France is particularly affected by tragic global events linked to the rise of violent and intolerant Islamism, as the number of terrorist attacks and victims on its territory since January 2015 testifies¹².

We note four characteristics of this evolution of the religious landscape in France:

i. *The weakening of Catholicism and the forms in which Christianity has appeared throughout history.* During a 1981 survey, 70% of the inhabitants declared themselves Catholic. A 2008 survey shows a development consistent with the concept of radical de-Christianization, as in that year the percentage of those declaring themselves Catholic was only 42%. At the same time, while only 27% of French people declared themselves atheists in 1981, this figure rose to 50% in 2008. For the 18-29 age group, those who declare themselves Catholic account for no more than 23%, as opposed to 67% who declare themselves “non-religious” or “convinced atheists”¹³. Another survey (REDCO), which assesses the relationship between young people aged 14-16 and religion, confirms this age group’s de-Christianization¹⁴. 21% believe that religion makes people aggressive and 27% believe that without religion the world would do much better¹⁵.

11. B. Massignon, V. Riva, *L'Europe, avec ou sans Dieu?*, *op. cit.* Une place importante est consacrée «aux religions orthodoxes et à la Turquie» (pp. 103-123).

12. 7-10 January 2015: attacks on the Charlie Hebdo newspaper and the Casher supermarket in Paris (17 dead); 13-14 November 2015: attacks on the Bataclan and on the street in Paris (130 dead and 351 injured); 13 June 2016: the murder of a couple of policemen in a Parisian district; 26 July 2016: murder of Father Hamel in a church near Rouen; 14 July 2016: attack against a crowd in Nice (85 dead and 434 wounded)..

13. For the presentation of this survey’s results EVS (European Values Surveys) see: P. Brechon, J.-Fr. Tchernia, *La France à travers ses valeurs*, Armand Colin, Paris 2009, pp. 227-266.

14. REDCO: Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries.

15. Collectif, *Teenagers Perspectives on the Role of Religion in their Lives. School and Societies*.

ii. An “open”, multi-religious society. Alongside this mass indifference to historical Christianity, we can observe an attraction to other religious currents, especially primitive and eastern religions. We offer two facts concerning Strasbourg: the opening of the Vaudou Museum (the first in Europe) in 2013; in the autumn of 2016, about 16000 people did not hesitate to pay 70 euros to hear the Dalai Lama in the European city.

iii. *The highly visible/dominant presence of Islam in society* (or a culture deeply influenced by Islam). The signs that we belong (religiously or culturally) to Islam are visible in the media and on the street. An education on the discovery of Islam and cultural codes is necessary to avoid amalgamations and simplifications, distinguishing between Islam as a religion, aggressive Islam, and Islam as a set of customs and rules, which concern either the life of citizens or religious rituals¹⁶.

iv. *The return of militant secularism/laicity*. Perhaps the presence of religion in social and political issues would begin a re-energizing of interest in religious matters in general, and Christian ones in particular. This is true for some, but for observers of the “religious phenomenon” this curiosity is marginal; the majority turn to the opposite side, which is a return to militant religiosity. The less religion exists and is presented in the public sphere and the less we talk about it, the better off society will be.

These political and social developments are further leading these religion courses, either Catholic or Protestant, to evolve into religion courses. The objectives of these courses are the following four:

1. The understanding of Christianity’s symbolic language, having as a departure point the respective Christian Church or Confession. Christianity, simultaneously universal and pluralistic, focuses on teachings shared by all Christians (Incarnation, Resurrection, Holy Trinity, Bible as a holy book) and is divided into many practices. Founded by Jesus Christ,

A European Quantitative Study, Münster-New York, Waxmann, 2009. As far as France is concerned, see: C. Beraud, J.-P. Willaime (éd.), *Les jeunes, la religion et l’école*, Bayard, Paris 2009.

16. Two of the best political, religious and social experts on Islam in France are G. Kepel, *Terreur dans l’hexagone. La genèse du djihad*, Gallimard, Paris 2015; *La fracture*, Gallimard, Paris 2016; Ol. Roy, *La laïcité face à l’islam*, Pluriel, Paris ³2001; *Le djihad et la mort*, Seuil, Paris 2016.

Christianity develops a rich symbolic language; is a configuration of texts, words, gestures, objects, music, and images. All this is to be learned (or relearned); otherwise, Christianity becomes incomprehensible.

2. *The understanding of the modern world, in which religious phenomena are constant and omnipresent.* One only has to turn on the television, listen to the radio, or read a newspaper to understand to what degree religions, especially Christianity, are particularly present in the modern world. It is worth mentioning that religious phenomena are approached and studied in two ways, revealing two aspects of their presence in society. On the one hand, there is the dominant light side, with the festivals and religious traditions, the ministry organizations, and social ones created by the Churches, through which the importance of Christianity is highlighted in areas such as health, the accompaniment of the elderly, the disabled and the homeless. On the other hand, there is the dark side, which is associated with violence in communities, fundamentalism, extreme radical religious ideas, isolationism, rigid conservatism, and persecution-denunciation of “blasphemers”¹⁷.

3. *The understanding of the Western Europe’s artistic and cultural heritage.* Our continent possesses many enviable works of architecture, music, theatre, literature, sculpture, and painting. The vast majority of these works of art originate from Christianity and tell stories, express beliefs, and appeal to emotions, not only aesthetic but also religious. Not knowing the fundamentals of Christianity means no longer being able to understand the artistic works we observe, visit, and listen to.

4. *The strengthening and enhancing readiness for tolerance through a better understanding of other religions.* The more we know the Other in his or her diversity and specificity, the less we will be inclined to judge or exclude him or her, since knowledge promotes tolerance. It is undeniable that among the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) there are many convergence and meeting points, starting with the belief in a single God possessing the same name. Ecumenism has returned, initially bringing about a rapprochement between Protestants and

17. J. Cottin, «Euvres ‘blasphématoires’. Une question de réception, non de création», in: «Que ton nom soit sanctifié». *Réflexions sur le blasphème. ThéophiLyon. Revue de l’Institut catholique de Lyon*, XXI/2 (nov. 2016), pp. xxx.

Catholics and then between Western and Eastern Christians. This has encouraged various inter-religious initiatives, aiming to create a climate of trust between the world's religions, as all of them want to foster peace and coexistence in the diversity of cultures and faiths.