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## **Religion in the Classroom – the Challenge of a «*laïcité d'intelligence*» in Europe and Findings of the REDCo-Project**

### **Abstract**

Though at French schools there is neither a subject specifically dedicated to the study of religions and religiosity nor a body of teachers trained expressly in the field, that does not mean that students are not taught anything on religious issues there. Especially the impulses provided by the Debray Report (2002) on religious education in a laical school have strengthened the study of religion in public schools. Today, we have passed from an abstentionist laicalism that declares itself incompetent to address religion in its sphere towards a laicalism of understanding that takes into account the duty of the public school, cognisant of its strict religious neutrality and educational mission, to address religious issues. This is necessary not only to allow the students to better understand our past and present, but also to prepare them for peaceful coexistence in a society increasingly characterised by great religious and philosophical diversity.

The REDCo survey has shown that, though half of French pupils state that they have no religious affiliation, the majority of them believe that a place must be reserved in the school system for learning about religious beliefs. Yet these same French students also voice concern that this be done in a spirit of secular neutrality and respect for the school's educational objectives. They think the school an appropriate place for addressing religious issues precisely because they can there be addressed with a degree of objectivity and distance. This means that the approach to religion in school can not be reduced to its cultural and social dimension. Rather, we are currently seeing a form of European laicalism emerge across different nations, a laicalism that allows understanding and interreligious dialogue in modes compatible with their various forms of church-state relationship.

### **Résumé**

Bien qu'il n'y ait pas, dans les écoles publiques en France, une discipline particulière consacrée à l'étude des phénomènes religieux et un corps spécifique de professeurs consacrés à cet enseignement, cela ne signifie pas que les élèves n'apprennent rien à l'école sur les religions. L'étude des phénomènes religieux a été renforcée dans l'école publique en France, notamment grâce à l'impulsion du rapport Debray sur l'enseignement des faits religieux dans l'école laïque (2002). On est passé d'une laïcité d'abstention et d'incompétence à une *laïcité d'intelligence* considérant que l'école publique, tout en conservant sa neutralité et ses objectifs éducatifs propres, devait aborder l'étude des phénomènes religieux. Non seulement pour permettre aux élèves de mieux connaître et comprendre notre passé et notre présent, mais aussi pour leur apprendre à vivre-ensemble dans des sociétés caractérisées par une grande diversité de religions et de conceptions du monde.

L'enquête REDCo auprès des élèves de France révèle que si la moitié d'entre eux déclarent ne pas avoir de religion, la majorité pense que l'école doit réserver une place à l'étude des faits religieux. Mais les élèves français sont très soucieux que cela se fasse dans le respect de la neutralité laïque et des objectifs éducatifs de l'école publique. Si l'école leur apparaît un lieu sûr pour aborder les faits religieux, c'est justement parce que les faits religieux y sont abordés avec distanciation et un souci d'objectivité. Ce qui ne signifie pas réduire l'approche des religions à l'école aux aspects culturels et sociaux des religions. Au-delà des particularités de chaque pays, s'élabore peu à peu une laïcité européenne de *d'intelligence* et de dialogue qui est compatible avec différents systèmes nationaux de relations Eglises-Etat.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Wenn es auch an staatlichen Schulen in Frankreich weder ein reguläres Lehrfach Religion, noch speziell dafür ausgebildete Religionslehrkräfte gibt, so bedeutet dies doch nicht, dass die Schuelerinnen und Schueler dort nichts ueber Religion und religiöse Fragen lernen wuerden. Im Gegenteil, die aktuell stattfindende verstärkte Einbeziehung religiöser Themen in den französischen Schulunterricht ist besonders dem Debray-Bericht zur religiösen Bildung in der laizistischen Schule (2002) zu verdanken. In diesem Zusammenhang sehen wir den Uebergang von einem Laizismus, der sich von der Religion prinzipiell distanziert (*laïcité d'abstention*), zu einem Laizismus, der sie als Phänomen zu verstehen und sich ihr – unter Beachtung des Neutralitätsgebotes und Bildungsauftrages der staatlichen Schule – lernend zu nähern sucht (*laïcité d'intelligence*). So wird es Schuele-

rinnen und Schuelern nicht nur möglich, unsere Geschichte und Gegenwart besser zu verstehen, sondern sie erhalten auch eine wertvolle Gelegenheit, die friedliche Koexistenz in einer von großer religiöser und weltanschaulicher Pluralität gekennzeichneten Gesellschaft einzueben.

Die REDCo-Studie unter Schuelerinnen und Schuelern in Frankreich hat gezeigt, dass – obschon sich die Hälfte der Befragten keiner Religion zugehörig sieht – die große Mehrheit religiöse Fragen im Schulunterricht behandelt sehen will. Zugleich ist es ihnen jedoch auch wichtig, dass dies mit der gebotenen Neutralität und im Bewußtsein des Bildungsauftrages der staatlichen Schule geschieht. Gerade weil sie diese Fragen distanziert und im Bemuehen um Objektivität behandelt, erscheint ihnen die Schule als der geeignete Ort zu ihrer Thematisierung. Keineswegs bedeutet dies aber, die Religion im Schulunterricht auf ihre gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Aspekte zu reduzieren. Vielmehr beobachten wir schon heute die Entwicklung eines europäischen Laizismus ueber Ländergrenzen hinweg, der sich der Religion im Geiste von Verständnis und Dialog nähern kann und sich unter den Bedingungen der Beziehung zwischen Staat und Religion in verschiedenen europäischen Ländern bewährt.



**Prof. Dr. Jean-Paul Willaime in the European Parliament**

*Jean-Paul Willaime*

## **Religion in the Classroom – the Challenge of a «*laïcité d'intelligence*» in Europe and Findings of the REDCo-Project**

It is very interesting for my colleagues and me to participate in the REDCo project about Religion in Education. In Europe, as you know, France is the country often seen as the champion of the separation between church and state on the one hand, and between school and state on the other. It is why, among the participants in the REDCo project, France may seem to be an exception when it comes to addressing religion in the curriculum as there is no specific subject that does so. The *départements* in the Alsace region (*Haut-Rhin* and *Bas-Rhin*) and the Moselle *département*, for historical reasons, are exceptions in this regard. However, this does not imply that young French people learn nothing about religion in school. Rather, it was decided to present course material on religion within pre-existing subjects, mainly History, French and Civics. As a result, this material focuses on knowledge and is presented impartially. For about twenty years, there has been growing awareness of the need to reinforce the understanding French students have of this topic; this has led to reforms in the school curriculum and also to greater attention being paid to teacher training in this area, following Régis Debray's 2002 report and the creation of the *European Institute for Religious Studies* (IESR) which I have the privilege to lead.

### **The Debray report**

By entrusting Régis Debray with a survey of "the teaching of religious facts in the secular school system" on December 3 2001, the Minister for National Education realised that "a school system that is authentically and dispassionately secular" must allow every student to be able "to understand the world," which required teachers take into account "religions as essential and, to a large extent, constitutive elements of human history, sometimes as factors of peace and modernity, sometimes as instigators of discord, murderous conflict and regression"<sup>6</sup>. Hence the need, as Régis Debray put it so well, to move "from a *laïcité of incompetence* (religious belief, by its nature, doesn't concern us), to a *laïcité of intelligence* (it is our duty to understand it)"<sup>7</sup>. To this end, the Debray report calls for a number of measures that address both the school syllabus and the training, introductory and ongoing, of secondary school teachers, in particular the inclusion of a course on religious facts and *laïcité* at the University Institutes of Teacher Training<sup>8</sup>. Efforts to train teachers in the field of the history and sociology of religions are on the increase in different schools, following the creation of the *European Institute of Religious Studies*<sup>9</sup>, under the aegis of the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*. At first, the main focus of teaching about religion was to present religion from the perspective of cultural heritage. The idea was to enable students to understand monuments and works of art that would be incomprehensible to them without knowledge of religious traditions. Since the year 2000, a period

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Lang, Préface to Régis Debray, *L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque*, Rapport au ministre de l'Education Nationale, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2002, p. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> Régis Debray, *L'enseignement du fait religieux à l'école*, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Les Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maîtres (I.U.F.M.).

<sup>9</sup> *L'Institut Européen en Sciences des Religions*.

marked by the beginning of the Second Intifada in the Middle East and the September 11 attacks, more emphasis has been placed on the civic dimension of this instruction. Approaching the question in the classroom is viewed as an opportunity to improve intercultural relations and promote mutual respect. In addition, from the point of view of school life, the law of March 14, 2004 prohibiting "the wearing of signs or clothes by which the students ostensibly demonstrate a religious affiliation"<sup>10</sup> is often seen as having eased some tensions in schools where there is a great deal of religious diversity.

### **The REDCo-project**

The REDCo project, which focuses on the problems of dialogue and conflict, has given us access to the opinions of several hundred adolescents on these questions. This is an innovative research approach in France, as other surveys have typically only dealt with teachers and their difficulties. Above all, the adolescents we surveyed confirm the phenomenon of young people's indifference to religious institutions: half of them say they have no religious affiliation. Religion is of secondary importance to them. Only a minority of students, comprised principally of two religions (Catholics and Muslims), distinguish themselves from the others by the intensity of their religious beliefs. But, in our view, one of the most significant results of the survey is that it suggests French adolescents embrace the school system's specific nature as a social sphere and as an institution.

We find that nearly all of the middle- and high-school students we surveyed have completely internalised the French model regarding the role of religion in school. As to the climate within public schools, students seem to be generally supportive of the 2004 law on religious symbols in schools and with school regulations in other areas (which accommodate certain special needs, including the food that is served in the cafeterias or leave of absence from school on some non-Christian holidays). Regarding curriculum design, nearly all students agree with the idea that religion should be discussed impartially within existing subjects. Contrary to some stereotypes associated with the situation in France, we should also point out that French adolescents readily agree that religion has a role to play in school, both in the curriculum and in school life, provided that the school's secular structure is respected.

Concerning the question of tolerance and the ability to enter into dialogue, we must once again stress that there does not seem to be any overt hostility between young people disinterested in religion and people for whom it plays a major role. Religion is of no concern to a large number of the adolescents surveyed. Despite this fact, only a small minority of them has adopted categorically anticlerical or antireligious attitudes. On the contrary, these adolescents emphasise that respecting other people's beliefs is important. They don't believe that any of the various religious traditions has a monopoly on absolute truth. This indifference and this tendency to see the situation in relative terms are as important as, if not more important than, the ability to exchange opinions and the knowledge acquired of other people's religions in accounting for the generally relaxed approach students take towards religion. We can thus speak of a type of passive tolerance.

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<sup>10</sup> An official notice from May 18 2005 specifies what is meant by "ostensible religious signs". These are signs "which immediately identify those who wear them as belonging to a religious group, such as the Muslim headscarf, whatever name it may have, the yarmulke, or a clearly oversized cross".

## What about religious facts?

In France, the expression “faits religieux”, “religious facts” or “religious phenomena” in English, is frequently used. The very expression “religious facts”, which tends to provoke numerous questions, can be interpreted in different ways. It can, in particular, be understood in a positivist sense, restricting the idea of teaching about religions to their social and cultural functions and their relations with other institutions and activities. As I have had occasion to explain before<sup>5</sup>, the expression “religious facts” does not imply an exclusion of the spiritual dimension. Religious forms of expression constitute facts that need to be both *described* and *understood*: it is not sufficient to provide an accurate description of the perceptions and conceptions of believers and their practices and rites: it is also necessary to reveal what these conceptions and practices mean to those who adhere to them and take account of the fact that they are individually and collectively profoundly meaningful experiences. A mere historical and sociological approach would not provide much insight into religious facts if believers' experiences were overlooked. It is necessary to use *empathetic intelligence*, in other words, to develop an approach that combines objective knowledge with empathetic understanding. Religious facts are not confined to *collective* features (religious assemblies, pilgrimages) and *physical* forms of expression (religious architecture and art): they include *symbolic* features (doctrine, moral precepts and liturgy) and things that are *experienced* (religious sensibilities and religious experiences in daily life). It is quite possible for schools to pursue documented, pedagogical approaches to these facts while taking account of these different dimensions. Teaching religious facts at school in a secular setting also requires respecting these facts for what they are: things that have been experienced by, and make sense to, large numbers of people. This does not in any way require embarking on a theological debate or engaging in inter-faith dialogue. The idea is to remain in tune with the school's aims and the ethics of the teaching profession. The second part of the pair referenced above, *facts about beliefs*, indicates that non-religious conceptions of humanity and the world – what is commonly described as “secular humanism” – are granted equal status with religious ones. I believe this is an essential aspect of instruction on religion as a large number of Europeans identify with non-religious world-views.

## Knowledge-oriented teaching for all pupils in the same class

In the REDCo project, we are especially interested in the aspect of teaching facts about religions and beliefs to all pupils, irrespective of their religious or philosophical beliefs and those of their families, and, moreover, in the same classroom. In other words, the aim is to teach a pluralist audience composed of pupils from different religions along with those of no religion. The idea is not, therefore, to teach facts on religion and belief in different classes according to the pupils' religious and philosophical affiliations. Finally, we are looking at teaching these religions and beliefs in schools. These specifications have an important implication: we are talking about a form of instruction that must fully conform to the objectives and ethics of schools and teaching, in other words a form of instruction which, like all other subjects taught, furthers the school's general aims: a contribution to civic education in pluralist democracies. The requirement of approaching religions and beliefs in a documented and critical fashion (in other words, with due respect for the ethics of transmitting of knowledge in education), in the context of teacher-pupil relations as defined by law and by teachers' professional ethics, and in keeping with the aims of public schools as defined in a democracy, has numerous implications for the way in which they can be studied at school. The approaches pursued must not conflict with, or be fundamentally different from, those used in school contexts generally.

## **Towards a European secularism/laïcité**

Regardless of the genuine diversity of national systems in Europe in terms of relations between church and the state, and between religion, the government and public education in particular, which have their roots in history and in the religious and political features of each country, it is possible today to speak of **European laïcité or, if you prefer, of European secularism**, on the basis of three principles:

1) *the principle of freedom*: freedom of conscience and of thought includes the freedom to have a religion or not to have one, and the freedom to practise one's religion and to change it if one so wishes;

2) *the principle of non-discrimination*: equal rights, duties and respect for all citizens, regardless of their religious or philosophical beliefs, in other words the absence of discrimination against people on grounds of their religious or philosophical affiliation;

3) *the principle that politics and religion are independent of each other*: this independence means that politics can operate unhindered by religion, while religions can operate unhindered by politics (within the limits of the law in a democratic society, of course). This mutual independence can exist in various systems of structuring relations between religion and state or between religion and schools (not only systems which enforce strict separation, but also those where there is separation but cooperation, including concordats and other forms of agreement between the political, educational and religious authorities).

This secularism is neither anti-religious nor pro-religious. It is this attitude that, as an asset shared by all in pluralist democracies, allows individuals and groups with different religious and philosophical beliefs to contribute unhindered to public life and public schooling. I believe that in Europe today, we are seeing a move towards a European **laïcité/secularism** based on **intelligence** (knowledge and understanding of religious and philosophical diversity) and on **dialogue** (accounting for and encountering this diversity).

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