

READY - Religious Education and Diversity

Sharing experiences of, and approaches to,
teacher education in the context of
"Education and Training 2020" (ET 2020)



Religious Education and Diversity?

Grassroots perspective on the French context

Whenever reference to Religion is made in France, especially in a public setting, the knee jerk reaction is to raise the flag of Laïcité, thus warning the speaker that the expression of Religion is not welcome. It is almost as if Religion was an offense to the territorial value called Laïcité.

What is Laïcité?

Some refer to it as the outcome of the 1905 law, preconising the separation of Church and State. Others may venture as far as 1881-1882 with Jules Ferry's laws on a free, compulsory and "laïque" school for everyone. One may then think of Laïcité as neutrality of the public space and in that regard an "inclusive" arena where all views are equally seen as valid, without any of them taking precedence over others. From Philippe Gaudin's perspective though, "it is not neutral insofar as it proceeds from a political philosophy that evolved from the French Revolution".

Indeed, the profound belief in the need to part religion and the public sphere is rooted in the aspirations for a radical change: up to the French Revolution, monarchs had their legitimacy established by divine order; thereafter, the choice of a governing figure was nothing absolute that would come from *above*. Political and public affairs in general were to be seen horizontally rather than through the lenses of a worldview involving transcendence.

On another note, etymology tells us (Littré dictionary) that "laïc" or "laïque" (as an adjective) is in essence in opposition to the religious. Formerly, the religious world was only for a *happy few*. Therefore, laïc has come to mean "for the non-religious" and by extension, "for ordinary people". The word comes from Latin *laicus*, originating from λαϊκός, a derivative of λαός, *people*.

Since Laïcité is foundational to the education system in France, Religious Education does not exist as a separate subject in the curriculum of state schools. The exception is Alsace-Moselle, where an hour of Religious Education is compulsory in schools and where religious ministers from Judaism, Catholicism and Protestantism are paid by the State. That singularity has been questioned many a time. In fact, for some

passionate defenders of Laïcité, the laïque school (“l’école laïque”) is a place of instruction where religion does not have any say, neither is it to be touched upon as a phenomenon or an experience to be explored.

Even in Alsace-Moselle, where there is no accommodation for Religious Education in Islam, the increasing diversity in the school population is a challenge which syllabi are not ready for. To counter further attacks on the exceptional situation of that region, a programme is currently piloted to diversify and extend the Religious Education course: it suggests an “education to Interreligious and intercultural Dialogue” in the three departments of Alsace-Moselle.

Beside state schools, the private sector, mainly Catholic, has an agreement with the State (écoles catholiques privées sous contrat) to deliver Religious Education and offer religious observance within schools. Families from the upper class tend to send their children to private Catholic schools regardless of their beliefs, and a good number of children would follow the Catechism (often scheduled weekly at lunch time) and attend the Mass services open to all. Those practices are not compulsory though, since pupils come from a variety of backgrounds. In fact, such diversity has been addressed by The Secrétariat Général de l'enseignement Catholique. A recent publication updates previous resources and advises on a dialogical approach to explore different cultures and religions: *Eduquer au dialogue - l'interculturel et l'interreligieux en école catholique*, September 2017.

The question is: how does the rest of France respond to Diversity?

Maybe reaffirming Laïcité as one of the values of the French Republic has been the way to accommodate a growingly diverse society. However, the commoner feels powerless in the face of religious diversity, because he or she has little understanding of what religion can bring to human experience, having always been sheltered from *the religious*. In fact, for many generations, the school curriculum has been out of sync, not preparing or equipping learners to welcome *the other*, as such, nor allowing them to embark on a voyage of discovery. In the laïque school, anyone confessing a faith would be perceived as *other* and their difference would need to be erased or overshadowed for them to “fit in”. This constant silencing can be interpreted as a rejection and one’s layers of individual identity soon conflict with the social imperative of Laïcité.

The situation is even more complex when, in the wake of multiple terrorist attacks, the collective conscience in France feels betrayed and moves onto a defensive mode, which translates into the tone and vocabulary used in public policies, like the “Charte de la Laïcité”: in case of an “incident”, schools are to contact the “crisis cell” of the local authority. The motto, “prévenir, répondre, soutenir”, is very much written

with a juridical vocabulary, in an atmosphere of control. Dialogue is being suggested if there is an incident, but cannot dialogue be learnt and cultivated beforehand?

<http://generationlaicite.fr/> gives young people guidelines about boundaries and how to live out Laïcité (rather than their religion) in public spaces. Likewise, guidelines are provided to child minders (Guide parents et assistants maternels – différences culturelles et religieuses) and parents about the ways to interact best in the face of difference.

Rather than responding to diversity through an open dialogue and addressing the need of all citizens, including those practising a religion, to be heard, public documentation feeds the phobia by only waving the flag of Laïcité. Yet the opportunity is immeasurable for an exploration of meaning and for opening to religion to reflect on it.

Introduction of “Le Fait Religieux” in school

To be fair, the official text “Rapport Debray” (2002) already pointed to the urgent need to move from a “Laïcité of ignorance” to one of “intelligence”. Therefore, the recommendation to teach “Le Fait Religieux” in schools was made. The workshops in Langres (2015) make it explicit: engaging with religion does require intelligence at an intellectual but also a relational level, where one reflects on religion and faces it, rather than shies away from it. Thus, “Le Fait Religieux” is to be taught through interdisciplinary learning rather than as a separate subject. To include it confidently in their lessons, teachers are encouraged to sign up for Continuous Professional Development modules organised by local authorities (rectorats), but the process is rather slow.

The “Conseil des Sages” and the classroom

In contrast to the documents available to the wider public, the proposals of the “Conseil des Sages” clearly reflect the determination to move away from an ignorant and coward position to a positive Laïcité, one that is being redefined in the context of school and diversity. The “Conseil des Sages” gathers eminent academics and is the ultimate resource to be consulted for advice. The needed efforts, I believe, are about translating the academic understanding into the classroom practice, so that impact on society is tangible.

Once again, as the reports from the workshops in Langres (Rencontres Philosophiques de Langres) indicate, pupils are eager to learn about religion but teachers, especially philosophy teachers, are reluctant to embrace it. Although the teacher is legally bound to a confessional neutrality (all civil servants are under such an obligation), he or she needs to be impartial in the pedagogical approach: a

teacher, whether of science, history, Modern Languages or any other subject, is to be aware of their own stance and know that other life and worldview choices are possible.

The realm of philosophy, where most disinclination is shown by teachers, is however ideal to embrace a reflective attitude to religion and many fruitful paths can be trod upon.

Perspective from abroad

As a teacher, I am concerned with practice at classroom and school levels. What is the role of school: presenting diversity as an ever-increasing challenge or as opportunities to embrace?

Could it be that France tends to respond to diversity, especially religious diversity, by imposing Laïcité as “State religion”?

Although working in a place regulated by the principle of Laïcité, how is the teacher to articulate any learning and thinking about religion and engage pupils on the exploration journey?

I also wonder if religion could be viewed as a human experience, as it is in the Scottish Curriculum. If so, those who practice one need to feel valued, because their belief is at the very core of their identity. The challenge for the teacher working in the laïque school is to make sure their lessons do not portray religion as the ultimate *enemy* of Laïcité. Perhaps engaging with religion on pedagogical grounds (see Professor Miedema’s contribution to the READY conference in Vienna,) and considering it as one worldview among others can soften the stiff posture of teachers in the *Education Nationale*.

To that end, I have suggested to the French authorities a partnership with Scottish schools (which can be extended to other European countries along the lines of the READY project). I believe we, teachers in France, can learn a lot from observing Scottish colleagues teaching Religious Education or RMPS (Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies) to pupils within the Broad General Education and beyond. We can then easily appreciate that pupils do not need to wait until they finish school to start philosophical enquiry; young people in Scotland move into the Senior phase of school, having been exposed to an exploration and a reflection on religion, morality and philosophy. On the other hand, we, teachers of RMPS in Scotland, can hugely benefit from observing Philosophy teachers in France, for instance while they explain Averroès to their Terminale classes. Literacy and higher order thinking skills are developed, stretched and refined by a close reading of texts on the syllabus and by deep reflection. The scope for interdisciplinary learning (involving History, Ancient and Modern Languages teachers for instance) is immense: teaching and learning can only be enhanced by such a partnership!

This suggestion echoes the aims of the International and European Focus of the Ministry of Education in France: the latest report submitted by Thierry Bossard, Mark Sherringham and Yves Saint-Geours considers the benefits of knowing other education systems and the advantages of an international comparison for the French education system.

Key documents

Rapport DEBRAY, L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque, 2002.

L'expression du religieux dans la sphère publique: comparaisons internationales. *Textes réunis par Pascal COURTADE et Isabelle SAINT-MARTIN, avec la collaboration de Louis HOURMANT, 2016.*

I would particularly recommend the Third Part on "Laïcité and Education" and the Fourth Part on "the place of believers in secularised European societies". However, the whole book is worth reading as it questions the potential rise of a "European Laïcité" and explores the relation of State and Religion in various European countries.

Thierry BOSSARD, Mark SHERRRINGHAM and Yves SAINT-GEOURS, Les objectifs et l'organisation de l'action internationale au ministère de l'éducation nationale et au ministère de l'enseignement supérieur, de la recherche et de l'innovation, Janvier 2018 (on www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr).

See also:

Philippe GAUDIN, Vers une laïcité d'intelligence en France? L'enseignement des faits religieux en France comme politique publique d'éducation depuis les années 1980, Presses Universitaires d'Aix-Marseille 2014.

Bernd SCHRÖDER, Religionspädagogik, Tübingen 2012, § 25: Religionspädagogik in Frankreich, 388-404.

Jean-Paul WILLAIME, Religious Education in French Schools, in: Martin Rothgangel / Robert Jackson / Martin Jäggle (eds.): Religious Education at Schools in Europe, Part 2: Western Europe. Göttingen 2014, 99-119.

Enseigner les faits religieux, sous la direction de D. BORNE et J. P. WILLAIME, Armand Colin 2007.

L'enseignement des faits religieux, France-Espagne-Irlande-Écosse, sous la direction de Déborah VANDEWOUDE et Denis VIGNERON, Artois Presses Université coll. Études des Faits Religieux 2014.

Online

<http://www.egale.eu/concordat/concordat-2.html>

Site de l'Institut européen des sciences religieuses: <http://www.iesr.ephe.sorbonne.fr/>

Eduscol documents, e.g. Charte de la Laïcité, on:

<http://eduscol.education.fr/cid126696/la-laicite-a-l-ecole.html>

<http://generationlaicite.fr/>



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