
Laurent Klein

Religions Education in France Teaching religion in the country of “laïcité”

Summary

In Frankreich verbietet das öffentliche Erziehungssystem jede Form religiöser Belehrung. Die Schülerinnen und Schüler können zwar Fakten lernen über die Geschichte der Juden, die Entstehung des Islam oder die Macht der Kirche im Mittelalter, aber sie erfahren nichts wirklich über die Religionen: ihre Praktiken, ihre Feste und ihre Ansichten von Leben und Welt. Nur Privatschulen dürfen einen solchen Unterricht bieten, aber der Mangel an Kenntnissen ist weit verbreitet, in öffentlichen wie in privaten Schulen, besonders hinsichtlich der nichtchristlichen Religionen.

Der Verlag *L'Atelier* hat beschlossen, Bücher für Schülerinnen und Schüler der Sekundarschulen zu veröffentlichen, um ihnen eine fundiertere Kenntnis über die wichtigsten Religionen zu vermitteln, die in Frankreich praktiziert werden: Christentum, Islam, Judentum, Buddhismus und Hinduismus. Der Verlag forderte Angehörige oder Spezialisten dieser Religionen auf, zusammen zu arbeiten – und zwar so, dass jeder seinen Beitrag in allgemeinverständlicher Form leistete.

Die an diesem Projekt Beteiligten haben sich zur Mitarbeit entschlossen, weil sie überzeugt sind, dass Kenntnis über die Religionen aus mehreren Gründen Teil des Curriculums der öffentlichen Schulen sein sollte:

- um grundlegendes Wissen über diesen wichtigen Teil der Kultur zu vermitteln
- um den Schülerinnen und Schülern Gelegenheit zu geben, etwas über die anderen Religionen zu lernen
- um Religionslehre unter öffentlicher Schulaufsicht zu haben
- um Lehrer mit angemessene Kenntnissen über Religionsfragen zu versehen

Alle Beteiligten an diesem Projekt hoffen, dass diese Schulbücher helfen, die vielen Lehrerinnen und Lehrer, die sich jeder Einführung religiöser Fragen im öffentlichen Schulwesen entgegenstellen, davon überzeugen, dass es wichtig ist, der weit verbreiteten Ignoranz entgegenzuwirken, in deren Schatten Fanatiker so leicht Anhänger gewinnen können.

Laizismus wurde in Frankreich lange Zeit als notwendig im Kampf gegen den Einfluss der katholischen Kirche angesehen, um Gedanken- und Redefreiheit durchzusetzen. Manche meinen, dass heutzutage der Laizismus in Frankreich fest verankert ist und deshalb zu einem offenen Raum werden sollte, in dem alle – Gläubige wie Atheisten – sich begegnen und voneinander lernen können.

Summary

In France, the public education system forbids any religious teaching. Pupils and students may learn facts about the history of the Hebrews, the rise of Islam or the power of the Church in the Middle Ages, but they will never be taught anything about religions: their practice, their celebrations and their philosophies about life and mankind. Only private schools may deliver such a teaching, but the lack of knowledge is widely spread, in public as well in private schools, especially concerning non-Christian religions.

L'Atelier publishing house decided to print schoolbooks for secondary school students in order to give them a good knowledge of the main religions practiced in France: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism. The publishers asked members or specialists of these religions to work together, each one giving his contribution in a common frame.

The people who took part in this work did so because they consider that the teaching of religion should be part of the public schools curriculum for different reasons:

- To give the keys of knowledge of this fundamental part of civilisation
- To offer opportunities for pupils to learn about other religions
- To keep religion teaching under the control of public administration
- To provide adequate knowledge to teachers on religion matters

I as well as the other contributors hope that these schoolbooks will prove to the many teachers who remain reluctant to any intrusion of religion in the French public education system that it is important to fill the wide gap of ignorance in which fanatics recruit new adepts so easily.

“Laïcité” in France was long considered as a necessary fight against the influence of the Catholic Church in order to promote freedom of thought and speech. Some people consider that today, this fight is needed to counterpart the influence of the fundamentalists. We do think that today “laïcité” is well established in France and should become an open space where every one – believers and atheists - can meet and learn from one another.

Introduction

As a former primary school teacher, today Principal of a primary school in Paris, I've always been interested in the topic of inter-religious education. The irony of my situation is that I am working in a state school, which implies that I have to respect the French regulation about “laïcité”. This means that religious education has no place at all in the curriculum of the pupils. This is why the French school week has a strange schedule: all day long on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and on Saturday mornings, pupils go to school, but Wednesdays are free to let children go to “Sunday

school” if the parents wish to. The week time is shared between secular and religious education for many of our pupils.

The taboo of religious education in French public education is very strong. The fight between the Catholic Church and public primary school teachers was very harsh when Jules FERRY, then Prime Minister, created the French compulsory, free and lay education system. Primary school teachers became the “hussards de la République”, the “soldiers of the Republic”, fighting against the local vicars, in order to free the minds from the influence of the Catholic Church.

A strong anticlerical spirit has remained until today among primary school teachers. Only private schools were authorised to give a religious education, and this explains why in some very traditionalist regions, a majority of pupils still go to private catholic schools. It is important to note that Jules FERRY’s reform is still the basis of the French public education spirit and was set up before the separation of State and Church was voted in 1905.

What is the situation today?

Most of the pupils go to public schools and “laïcité” is accepted as an important part of our national heritage. Private schools are divided between religious schools (Catholic, Protestant and Jewish) and secular schools, but also between subsidised and non-subsidised schools. This means that most of the catholic private schools are partly granted by the State and must respect the national curriculum. They can also add religious education if the content is respectful of the national laws. As religious classes are not compulsory, many catholic schools today accept non-catholic pupils whose parents have chosen this type of education for other reasons such as better level, strict rules, etc... As Jewish or Muslim children attend these schools, the idea of inter religious teaching has aroused.

What about public schools? Facing the rise of religious practices among the younger generation, a former French ministry of National Education appointed Régis DEBRAY, a leftwing intellectual, to launch a study about the teaching of religious facts in public schools (*L’enseignement du fait religieux dans l’école laïque, rapport au Ministre de l’éducation nationale, février 2002*). In this essay, DEBRAY explains that the French public opinion is ready to introduce the teaching of religion as a cultural subject, and that laïcité should fear more from non-controlled religious teaching than from a rational approach of religious education. What has been done since this study: almost nothing. But the need to open the gates of public education to religion has become very recently a priority for the Ministry of National Education.

Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between “éducation religieuse” (religious education), and “enseignement du fait religieux” (teaching of religious facts). The aim

is not to convert children and so give them a new space to practice a religion but to give them knowledge about the philosophy and the rites of the different religions whose worshippers happen to be our neighbours.

The Publication of interreligious School books

Les Éditions de l'Atelier (The Workshop's publishing house) is well known in the fields of social and religious studies. It has a left wing Catholic orientation and they long worked to promote inter religious dialogue. It was then quite logic that they initiated the publication of interreligious school books. These books concern pupils of "collège", and cover the four years between primary school and high school, from age 11 to 14. The religions to be studied are Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, which are the main faiths in France. The books are divided in themes studied along the four years spent in college:

- 1st year: the origins of religious celebrations
- 2nd year: the religious arts and rites
- 3rd year: religions and the questions of life
- 4th year: the foundations of life

The whole collection is called: "Sur la piste des religions" ("On the trail of religions"). During the first two years, the pupils learn about the basis of each religion – their names and celebrations, the places of worship, holy sanctuaries, symbols and main practices. The lessons are like an investigation, whose main characters are Théophile (1st year) and Sophie (2nd year), two youngsters trying to resolve enigmas. The pupils take part in the researches.

The aim of the teachers is to guide their pupils in the discovery of these religions. For the children who do not receive any religious education, it is the opportunity to discover something new or vaguely known. But for those who do receive a religious education by their parents, this teaching will help them to learn about other religious traditions and compare them with their own. For children aged between 11 and 13, it is important to fix clear knowledge about this part of their identity and to start opening their minds about their schoolmates'. Do not forget that France has a strong secular tradition and many families do not teach any religion to their children. Yet, our calendar is Christian and even in public schools, Christian celebrations are days off. Learning about the meaning of these celebrations seemed important to us because we consider religion as an important part of our national cultural heritage.

As I did not work on the two first schoolbooks, I will tell you more precisely how we worked on the two last ones.

First of all, when the publisher contacted each one of us, their intention was both to find people who were ready to teach religions to all children and to find people who were living these religions "from inside".

- Why teaching all children? Because it is one thing to transmit religious practices or philosophy to members of your own community but something different to teach religion as a cultural matter, far from continuing a tradition by converting the younger generation. We had to keep in mind the very principles of “laïcité”, which we do consider as an open space where people of all origins can meet in the respect of every one.
- Why living these religions “from inside”? Because when addressing children in such matters, the teaching has to be lively and true. Pure knowledge is not enough. It was important that both the teachers and the pupils would feel that we are talking about our own experiences.

The aim was reached for the three monotheist religions. For Buddhism and Hinduism, the publisher had to ask a specialist of oriental religions, somebody who was used to teach children religious matters.

The order in which lessons are presented reflects the position of each religion in France:

- 1- **Judaism**, as it is the oldest of the monotheist religions, although far from being the most numerous (there are about 700 000 Jews living in France today). Jews have been living in France since the Roman period and have more or less been always present on the national territory, but their religion is widely unknown and a source of many clichés. It was a good opportunity to clarify things and let Judaism be known for what it is.
- 2- **Christianity**, the religion who influenced so much the history and traditions of our country, as well as Europe in general. France is called “the eldest daughter of the Church” in the Catholic tradition, and the Roman Catholic Church has until today modelled our cultural background. Protestants (around 800 000 people) are a strong and influential minority. Orthodoxy had not to be forgotten as an important branch of Christianity, although it represents a very tiny minority, mainly of foreign origins.
- 3- **Islam**, today the second religion in France by the number of worshippers (around 5 to 6 millions), was probably the most delicate part, due to its place as the religion of a majority of migrants and French children of migrant parents, coming from former French colonies and also because Islam takes part in many international events. It was important to rationalise the ideas and knowledge about Islam and show the links with the other faiths.
- 4- **Oriental religions, Buddhism and Hinduism**, the religions of a small minority of migrants but today the interest of many French. One lesson out of two was dealing with Buddhism, the other one with Hinduism. Taoism was not kept for lack of space, although it concerns a good part of the new Chinese migrants. As these religions are widely ignored or misunderstood, teaching them in a common frame with the others would help understanding them.

Each book started with a “close up” on each religion, in order to remind the basis that have been learned the years before.

Nine themes were taught each year:

- The 3rd year schoolbook, called “Religions and the questions of life”, deals with: Environment, the body, the other, happiness, pain, money, authority, violence and freedom.
- The 4th year schoolbook, called “the fundamentals of life”, deals with: globalisation, justice, laïcité, food, family, sexuality, death, art and good and evil.

The editor proposed the themes. We agreed, except for “bioethics”. Some of us thought that we were not able to work on such a specialised matter : we would have said banal or even stupid things on this very important issue. One of us proposed “art” and it was accepted after a harsh discussion between us.

Before each theme, one can find:

- 1- **A first page containing the title** with the name of the subject of each block and an illustration representing a corkboard similar to the ones teenagers can have in their bedrooms. Photographs, newspapers extracts, printed e-mails or collage are pinned on this board.
- 2- **A second page with Carole’s diary** (3rd year) **or Adam’s blog** (4th year). These pages can be read as a story in itself. To tell the truth, these pages are the pupils’ first interest in these schoolbooks. Other characters can be found along the two years’ schoolbooks. The aim is to introduce each subject through a teenager’s life and worries.
- 3- Then **a page of introduction to each subject**, containing a text with the general orientations and questions that link the subject to contemporary problems.

After each theme, one can find:

- 1- **Different points of view** in order to show the links as well as the differences. Of course, no judgement will be found on any point of view. A place for personal notes can be found in this page.
- 2- **Every three themes, there is a double page of games** such as crosswords, hidden words or a quiz.

In order to work each theme, **the editor proposed us a clear canvas** on which we would have to write our lessons. For each subject, we had to propose:

- 1 A title plus one or two lines in order to give the general orientation.
- 2 A first text with clear information that could be easily understood by the students. A guiding idea had to help the students understand what message each religion would consider the most important to transmit on each matter.
- 3 One or two extracts from traditional or contemporary, sacred or secular literature.

- 4 An illustration – photograph, painting, illumination – with a caption.
- 5 A lexicon of two to four words to remember
- 6 A second text showing how each subject was at the origin celebrations or was still a contemporary source of questioning for the worshipers.
- 7 Questions to evaluate the pupils' knowledge.

The titles

It was very important that the title would introduce right away the pupils into what each one of us would consider as the most important to teach. It had to be original, although not too eye-catching. Let's take two examples. On a matter such as "money", the titles were:

- For Judaism: Money, lust and equity
- For Christianity: The Christians and money
- For Islam: Sharing with the other
- For Hinduism: Getting rich, an obligation.

As you can see, titles could be a little provocative, neutral or about the issue.

On another matter such as "death", the titles indicate common approaches, although the lessons themselves explain the differences:

- For Judaism: Death, another life
- For Christianity: Is death the last word of life?
- For Islam: Death, the way to eternal life
- For Buddhism: Death, another continuity of life

The first text.

The guiding idea of the first text is the spine of each lesson. We had to answer the question: "What is this religion saying on this matter?" We had to transmit the very gist of each religion, to give the pupils its original flavour. As we shared our work with others, we also had to avoid the stumbling block of syncretism.

The extract

It was obvious that we had to choose extracts from the main and classical sources of our tradition. For instance, the introduction text to the reading of Passover Haggadah would perfectly show how Judaism speaks about freedom. In the mean time, part of the texts had to be original. A speech of Gandhi about the abolition of casts was a good counterpart to the traditional point of view about the other in Hinduism.

The illustration

It was important for us to find the right illustration to explain what we were talking about. This image had to match our words and had to bring something new to the pupils. The problem was similar for the choice of extracts. Images had to show the tradition (for example, the imam talking from a mosque's minbar to illustrate the theme of authority), but also something new (Pope John Paul II praying at the Wailing Wall to

illustrate the theme of justice and forgiveness). Concerning contemporary photographs, they represent a good opportunity to show today's worshippers' environment.

The lexicon

Understanding another culture also means understanding another language. Similar words can have very different meanings. Translating the Hebrew word *tseḏaqa* by "charity", as it is often the case, is partly wrong because this word has to be related to *tseḏeq*, which means "justice" or *tsadiq*, which means "righteous". Another example with the Arabic and Hebrew words translating "merciful": both words "*raḥman*" and "*raḥaman*" are to be linked with the word meaning the "womb". This gives another dimension to words, which are connected to another reality for a Christian. Beside the common heritage, being a Jew or a Muslim is not another way of being a Christian. There are differences and words express them. Concerning the oriental religions, the lexicon helps the students:

- Understand ideas, which are sometimes very different from their cultural environment
- Understand how the same ideas of mercy, justice or love are expressed in other languages.

The second text

The second text deals more with today's practice and questions. For instance:

- The other: the texts about Judaism and Islam question the status of women.
- Death: Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism explain burial and mourning rites, but Islam talks about the use of martyrdom nowadays among fanatic Muslims.
- Sexuality: Judaism, Christianity and Islam wonder if their traditional texts are still accurate with today's way of life.

Our aim was to stress the questions believers of these faiths ask their clergies and the different answers proposed to them. It is important not to avoid the questions teenagers may ask themselves.

The evaluation

Every lesson has to be evaluated. All teachers check what his students have understood. For the writers of these lessons, it was also an opportunity to guide the teachers on the way to the important ideas and facts the pupils had to keep in mind, because teachers are sometimes discovering these matters while preparing their lessons.

The teachers' guide.

A "guide pédagogique" or teachers' guide accompanies each schoolbook. It is very helpful for different reasons.

- to give there more information helped the writers be more condensed lessons in the schoolbooks and accept all the necessary editorial cuts .

- As the teachers often discover the matter when preparing their lessons, it was important to give them enough information as well as ideas for extra questions, activities or debates. A precise description of the illustrations, further explanations about the abstracts and the answers to the evaluation are also given in the teachers' guide.

Our main sources of satisfaction are:

- We avoided any kind of syncretism.
- We gave keys to acquire essential knowledge about ignored or- misunderstood parts of our human heritage.
- The teachers who read or use these books say they have learnt a lot and that these books are a great help to prepare lessons.

Now this work is finished and published, we do think more than ever that the teaching of religion at school is a necessity. French society has a strong secular tradition; nevertheless religious matters are still present in the social debate. Because we are confident in the way teachers teach their pupils within schools, we would like to see children given the opportunity to learn together about each other faith or secular morals.

More and more people in France think that today "laïcité" is well established and should become the open space where every one - believers and atheists - can meet and learn from one another.

Education about religions may be the one answer to fight ignorance and fear and by doing so, fanaticism.