



# **THEO-WEB**

**Zeitschrift für Religionspädagogik**

**Academic Journal of Religious Education**

**16. Jahrgang 2017, Heft 2**

**ISSN 1863-0502**

**Thema: „Migration, Religion und Bildung.  
Wege zu einer migrationssensiblen Religionspädagogik“**

Barb, A. (2017). Governing Religious Diversity In a (Post)Secular Age: Teaching about Religion in French and American Public Schools. *Theo-Web*, 16(2), 204–222

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23770/tw035>



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# Governing Religious Diversity In a (Post)Secular Age: Teaching about Religion in French and American Public Schools

by  
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## *Abstract*

*With France and the United States as case studies, this article undertakes a transatlantic comparison which aims to explore why and how, in these two constitutionally secular states, religion has come to be reconsidered a legitimate educational and civic requirement over the past three decades. The article retraces how “teaching about religion” has been integrated into French and American public secondary schools since the 1980s, not only as a mean to manage the challenges of religious diversity in the sphere of education, but also, more generally, to promote a model for the “good” governance of faith within a secular democratic society. This contribution critically examines these attempts at achieving an inclusive and pluralist education about religion in the context of constitutionally secular states, where religious identities remain highly politicized.*

*Keywords: France; laïcité; postsecularism; public education; secularism; United States*

Over the past three decades, one of the main developments regarding the place and role of religion in public schools has been the introduction by several western democracies of a new pluralist model of religious education, characterized by the comparative, non-sectarian, and non-devotional study of religions. This type of inclusive religious education has been strongly promoted by supra-national organizations, including the Council of Europe (2008), the OSCE (2007), the UNESCO (2003; 1994), and the United Nations (2001). At the state level, it has been recently adopted by countries such as Canada (Québec), England, and South Africa, which have abandoned their historically Christian confessional instruction in favor of a more pluralistic approach, which puts emphasis on religious culture education and ethics. But this academic and comparative study of religion has also been introduced in France and the United States, two constitutionally secular states, where religious education did not previously exist in public schools. Indeed, although France and the United States have a different historical experience and understanding of the separation between church and state, both countries, bound by a strict secular legal framework, had traditionally overlooked the topic of religion in the sphere of education. In France, the 1905 “law of separation between the churches and the state”, asserts that “the Republic [does not] recognize any religion”, and the preamble of the 1958 Constitution further provides that “France is a [...], secular democratic and social Republic”.<sup>1</sup> As a result, French schools, which had gone through an early process of “laïcisation” at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have long disregarded faith as irrelevant and potentially corruptive for the making of modern, democratic citizens. In the United States, the First Amendment of the *Bill of Rights*, adopted in 1791, indicates that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion [Establishment clause] or prohibiting the free exercise thereof [Free Exercise clause]”. Starting in the 1940s and the strict secularization of public education by the Supreme Court, religion became also largely marginalized and neglected in American schools concerned with not

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution of the 5th Republic, adopted on October 4th, 1958.

breaching the “wall of separation”. Beginning in the late 1980s, however, against the backdrop of a growing diversification and politicization of faith on both sides of the Atlantic, France and the United States introduced new courses *about* religions. Today, they are an established academic standard in history and social science curricula.

With France and the United States as case studies, this article undertakes a transatlantic comparison, which aims to explore why and how in these two constitutionally secular states, religion has come to be reconsidered a legitimate educational and civic requirement over the past three decades. Through the example of religious education, it analyzes more generally how globalization and the diversification of the French and American religious landscapes have triggered what Jürgen Habermas described as the emergence of a “postsecular consciousness” (Calhoun et al., 2013, p. 22). By that Habermas means the *realization* that, despite the secular nature of the state, or the continuous decline of religious beliefs and practices, religion does “maintain [...] a public influence and relevance” as an element that contributes to inform civic discourses, cultures and identities – at the national and global levels (Habermas, 2008, p. 21). For Habermas, this “change in consciousness” should lead to “mutual recognition” and “equal respect” between secular and religious perspectives, to ensure that “social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious worldviews” (Ibid., p. 20, 21). This article thus examines to what extent this “postsecular paradigm shift” on both sides of the Atlantic has actually impacted the way the state manages faith in the public sphere (Loobuyck, 2015, p. 104). In this context, the concepts of “separation” or “neutrality”, commonly used to characterize the French and American models of political secularism, remain useful as a basic framework to describe the legal arrangement between the state and religious groups. But they appear nevertheless too limited in order to grasp the complex forms that the public governance of religion takes today, as these concepts often imply a schematic divide between the secular and the religious, thus “obscuring” their many instances of “interactions and integrations”. In contrast, this article argues that the politics of religious education in France and the United States reveal that the secular state, far from ignoring, marginalizing, or merely privatizing religion, actively *engages* with it, as it attempts to “regulate religious differences” (Cady & Shakman Hurd, 2013, p. 12–13) in order to avoid frictions and conflicts within society. Following Saba Mahmood, Talal Asad and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, political secularism is thus understood as the “modern state’s sovereign power to [...] stipulate what religion is or ought to be” and as a “series of [...] processes of defining and remaking religion in public space” through a “set of legal, cultural and political practices” (Ibid., p. 5–6). In that respect, this contribution shows how teaching about religion has been construed as a policy tool designed, not only to manage the challenges of religious diversity in education, but also, more generally, to promote a model for the “good” governance of faith within a secular democratic society, a model which I characterize as a “civilized pluralism”.

The article first retraces how religion has been integrated into French and American public secondary schools since the 1980s. It then analyzes how state officials and educators foster religious literacy as a civic skill, essential to the making of “global citizens”, able to negotiate differences in a world of diversity. The third part is a critical examination of these attempts at achieving an inclusive and pluralist education about religion in the context of constitutionally secular states, where religious identities remain highly politicized.

## 1 The (Re)Integration of Religion into Public School Curricula

Starting in the 1980s, the issue of religious education gained new relevance in both France and the United States, gradually becoming an object of public interest, where it had previously been considered all but pedagogically useless, and incompatible with the values of a secular democracy.

### 1.1 The United States

As the American educational system is decentralized, the choice of textbooks depends on the individual states or on school districts. The Federal Department of Education requires state boards of education to develop a curriculum for each subject taught in public schools. National organizations comprised of scholars and educators, such as the *National Council for the Social Studies* and the *National Center for History in the Schools*, set broad educational standards. But state boards of education, which are often elected in the United States, can choose to follow these national standards or to adopt them only partially. Publishers then produce textbooks in accordance with the adopted standards.

Starting in the 1940s, the Supreme Court significantly extended the scope of the separation between church and state in public schools across the country<sup>2</sup>. The Justices ruled that religious instruction during school hours and teacher-led prayers were unconstitutional, in violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment (*McCullum v. Board of Education*, 1948; *Engel v. Vitale*, 1962). Asserting that the “wall between Church and State [...] must be kept high and impregnable“, the Court also prohibited the devotional reading of the Bible (*Abington v. Schempp*, 1963), and the teaching of creationism in biology classes (*Epperson v. Arkansas*, 1968; *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 1987). The Justices explicitly acknowledged, however, that since “one can hardly respect a system of education that would leave the student wholly ignorant of the currents of religious thought that move the world society” (*McCullum v. Board of Education*, 1948), the “study of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may [...] be [consistent] with the First Amendment” (*Abington v. Schempp*, 1963). Yet as a result of the Court jurisprudence, religion became largely neglected in textbooks across the country, even though in the 1960s scholars within the *American Academy of Religion*, as well as educators’ associations, did attempt to develop new curricula on religion for social studies and literature classes. They believed that students should be able to understand the religious heritage of their country, but also hoped that courses *about* religion could help foster moral values and character development among young Americans (Barb, 2017).

If these initiatives remained at first marginal and ineffective, the question of the place and role of religion in school curricula started to trigger greater interest in the 1980s, when it gained resonance and visibility at the national level. During that period, indeed, the absence of religion from public education and the resulting lack of religious culture among students began to be construed by various actors – with often competing goals – as a problem of public importance, in need, therefore, of a comprehensive mobilization and of a political solution. This happened mainly for two reasons. First, the so-called Christian Right, a close-ally of the Republican Party, repeatedly sought to “bring religion back” into the classroom, thus contributing to turn the topic of reli-

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<sup>2</sup> When adopted in 1791, the First Amendment only applied to the Federal government. The Supreme Court, via the Fourteenth Amendment, extended the scope of the Free Exercise and Establishment clauses to the states in 1940 and 1947 respectively (*Cantwell v. Connecticut*; *Everson v. Board of Education*).

gion and education into a hot political issue. At the same time, advocates of “multicultural education”, who wanted students to learn more about the contributions of minorities, also supported the inclusion of religions into the curriculum, as American society needed to adapt to its growing religious diversity: the 1965 *Immigration and Nationality Act*, for example, which had removed the restrictions on immigration from Asia and the Middle East, had led over the years to an increase in the number of non-Christian minorities in the United States. As a result of these developments, the *National Council for the Social Studies* acknowledged for the first time in 1984 that the study of comparative religion has “a rightful place in public schools because of the pervasive nature of religious beliefs, practices, institutions and sensitivities” (National Council for the Social Studies, 1984). Four years later, in 1988, California made teaching about religion compulsory in history courses, and in 1995, the *Federal Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools* published by the Clinton administration, made clear that “comparative religion, the Bible as literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States [...] are all permissible public school subjects. Similarly, it is permissible to consider religious influences on art, music, literature and social studies”.

### **1.2 France**

The French educational system is centralized, governed by a *Ministry of National Education*. All in all, it took the French state more than a century to accept the idea that religion could actually be a legitimate and relevant topic for the education of its citizens. The Ferry Laws, adopted between 1879 and 1882 had indeed led to the complete “laïcisation” of French public schools by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the laws prohibited religious instruction, but also deprived the minister in charged of cults of any authority in matters related to primary education (Joutard, 1989). In the 1980s, however in parallel to what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic, the absence of religion from textbooks also began to emerge as an issue of public interest in France, in a context of diversification and politicization of religious identities. As French society was becoming increasingly aware of its growing Muslim population, the so-called Joutard Report, released in 1989, the same year as the first “headscarf controversy”, formally recommended that public school curricula take into account the “importance of [...] religion in history [as well as] its permanence in contemporary society” (Joutard, 1989). The report’s author, the historian Philippe Joutard, provided three main justifications: students had to know their own cultural and patrimonial heritage; courses about religions could help students understand the global resurgence of religious identity politics; and they could prepare them to live in an increasingly diverse society – especially, emphasized Joutard, in light of a “growing Muslim community”. The report triggered some criticisms, notably from advocates of a strict laïcité, who feared that teaching about religion would end up being a “Trojan horse”, leading to the return of a proselytizing form of religious instruction into public schools. But in 2002, one year after 9/11, a new government report written by philosopher Régis Debray once again stressed the idea that what he called “teaching about religious facts” could contribute to replace a “laïcité of ignorance” with a “laïcité of intelligence” among young French citizens (Debray, 2002). Debray thus suggested that public schools further integrate the study of religion as an “object of culture” within the already existing history, literature, philosophy, and art courses. As a result, teaching about religion in France became gradually institutionalized as what historian Philippe Gaudin calls an “educational public policy” (Gaudin, 2014).

### **1.3 Religion in Educational Standards Today**

Over the past three decades, the comparative study of religions, mainly integrated into history courses, has become an established academic standard in both countries. It enjoys broad support from teachers and scholars, as well as from religious groups and church/state separation advocates. Today, middle and high school students are required to learn about the history and traditions of major world religions, as well as about their cultural, social and political influence.

In the United States, for instance, the Texas standards for *World History Studies* ask students to “describe the origins, central ideas, and spread of major religious traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, [and] Sikhism”.<sup>3</sup> The New Jersey standards for *World History and Global Studies* similarly require students to “compare the tenets of various religions, their patterns of expansion, and their responses to the current challenges of globalization”.<sup>4</sup> These World History courses also include an examination of religious art and architecture. In California, high school students examine the “global revival of religiosity” in the contemporary world and, more particularly, “investigate if the world is becoming more or less religious, and what the implications of religion are for international relations and for domestic politics in the United States and other societies”.<sup>5</sup> More generally, American history courses cover indigenous beliefs, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> “Great Awakenings”, the history of religious minorities, the role of African American churches during slavery and the Civil Rights movement, as well as the rise of Christian conservatism in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In France, according to the *Ministry of National Education*, students must be introduced to the “diversity of civilizations, societies and religions” “in Europe and the world”, and are expected to understand the “multiples forms [...] and the meaning” of “religious facts”.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the United States, however, the study of religion in France is still limited to the three monotheisms. The most recent programs for middle school history courses, which were implemented in September 2016, include sessions on the “Origins of Jewish Monotheism”, “Christendom and Islam in the Middle Ages: Two Worlds in Contact”, “Society, Church and Political Power in the Feudal West”, as well as the “Protestant Reformation and Religious Conflicts”. In French history courses, high school students learn about “The Republic, Religions and Laïcité since 1880”. Literature and philosophy classes must also involve the reading of “seminal religious texts”, such as the Bible and the Koran. Moreover, in France, as in the United States, official guidelines emphasize the importance of teaching about the diversity within each religious tradition.

Finally, in recent years a few initiatives have been introduced in both countries to improve the training of teachers on the topic of religion – albeit with limited success. In 2002, following a recommendation set forth in the Debray Report, the French government established the *European Institute for Religious Sciences*, with the goal of “implementing the teaching of religious facts in primary and secondary schools”. Bringing together scholars of religion, the *Institute* provides teachers with academic resources and organizes seminars as well as summer schools. This year, for example,

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<sup>3</sup> Texas Education Code, Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills for Social Studies, Chapter 113, Subchapter C: High school; § 113.42. World History Studies, Beginning with school year 2011-2012.

<sup>4</sup> State of New Jersey Department of Education, New Jersey Student Learning Standards for Social Studies, 6.2. World History/Global Studies.

<sup>5</sup> California Department of Education 2016, Chapter 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry for National Education.

the *Institute* offers courses on “Laïcité in France and the World”, the Hebrew Bible, Protestantism, Islam, and Hinduism. But these seminars are optional and, more generally, courses on the history of religions are still not systematically integrated into the training of teachers. In the United States, Harvard is one of the few universities that offer a “Religious Studies & Education Certificate”, which aims to “provide [...] educators a multidisciplinary foundation for approaching the study of religion in public school classrooms”.<sup>7</sup> Jointly organized by Harvard Extension School and Harvard Divinity School, certificate courses include “Religion, Education, and Democracy”, “Methods in Religious Studies and Education”, as well as “World Religions”, “Shi’a Islam and Politics”, and “Religion, the Art, and Social Change”.

## 2 Teaching about Religion as Multicultural Civic Education

### 2.1 Educating “Global Citizens”

As Patrick Loobuyck points it out, the “postsecular paradigm shift” – the growing public consciousness of the social, cultural and political relevance of faith on a global level – finally “made it possible for religion to become a more visible part of regular school curricula” in France and the United States (Loobuyck, 2015, p. 104). Today the focus is not so much on transmitting a specific religious culture, or on promoting values and moral education. Resolutely pluralist – at least in their intent – courses about religion are primarily conceived as a response to the challenges raised by globalization and a growing diversity. The US *National Council for the Social Studies* explains, for instance, that “knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person, it is also absolutely necessary for [...] living in a world of diversity. Knowledge of religious differences [...] can help promote understanding and alleviate prejudice”.<sup>8</sup> Since 2012, the *National Endowment for the Humanities*, a US federal agency, has organized an annual *Summer Institute* called “The Religious Worlds of New York”, designed to help educators teach about religious diversity, an essential prerequisite for their students to “become truly educated, engaged citizens of their multicultural democracy”.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion*, published by the *American Academy of Religion*, and written in cooperation with educators and scholars, explains that “enhancing literacy about religion [...] can enrich civic dimensions of education”, and “promote respect for diversity, peaceful co-existence, and cooperative endeavors in local, national and global arenas”<sup>10</sup>. After decades of neglecting faith in public schools, state officials, scholars and educators have thus acknowledged that courses about religion are an integral part of civic education, and that religious literacy now belongs to what sociologist James Banks calls the essential “knowledge and skills” that students have to acquire in order to “become effective citizens in the global community” (Banks, 2008, p. 61). In France, following the publication of the Debray Report in 2002, President Jacques Chirac also emphasized the civic dimension of religious education, stating that

“[...] tracing the manifestations of religion in history, in the arts and in the culture of each one of us is something that will strengthen the spirit of tolerance among young citizens, giving them the means to better respect each other” (L’enseignement du fait

<sup>7</sup> Harvard Extension School, Religious Studies and Education Certificate. URL: [www.extension.harvard.edu/academics/professional-graduate-certificates/religious-studies-education-certificate](http://www.extension.harvard.edu/academics/professional-graduate-certificates/religious-studies-education-certificate) [checked on 19.06.2017].

<sup>8</sup> National Council for the Social Studies 2005.

<sup>9</sup> National Endowment for the Humanities.

<sup>10</sup> American Academy of Religion 2010.

religieux (2003). In *Les Actes de la DESCO*, Scérén, CRDP Académie de Versailles. Quoted in Willaime, 2014, p. 106).

In one of the first speeches he gave in January 2015 following the attacks against *Charlie Hebdo* and a Jewish supermarket in Paris, President François Hollande stressed the special importance of a “secular education” about religion, as it can play a crucial role in preventing sectarianism and conflicts (Peiron, 2015). Echoing François Hollande, the *Secularism Monitoring Center (Observatoire de la laïcité)*, which belongs to the Prime Minister’s Office, suggested in reaction to the attacks to further “expand” the teaching of religious facts – notably in primary schools – as a way to foster attitudes and values conducive to peaceful coexistence.<sup>11</sup> A Senate report on the fight against discriminations had already recommended, in 2014, the introduction of a course entirely dedicated to the study of religious facts, in order to further improve “knowledge of religious and cultural differences”, which, according to the authors, could ultimately help alleviate “prejudices” within society (Benbassa & Lecerf, 2014).

## **2.2 The Promotion of a “Civilized Pluralism”**

In contrast, therefore, to the assumption that political secularism implies the absence of religion, or indifference towards it, the case study of religious education testifies, as Elizabeth Shakman Hurd puts it, to a “shift [...] away from an understanding of religion as private and largely irrelevant to global governance [...], toward a different [...] political agenda, in which religion is seen as a public good, agent of transformation, and potential source of violence in need of domestication” (Shakman Hurd 2015, p. 26). As a result, the secular state does not merely acknowledge the public relevance of faith, but also attempts to *control* and *shape* the narrative about religions and religious diversity: eager to prevent fundamentalism and conflicts, and assuming, therefore, that “the wrong kind of [faith] is an object of reform and discipline” (Ibid., p. 27), the state takes the role of “governor of [...] democracy-friendly religion”. In that sense, “[...] it becomes its responsibility to “support and engender the conditions in which tolerant [...] religion[s] can flourish” (Ibid., p. 16.), through, for instance, the realm of public education, a crucial vector of values and collective identity. Debray explicitly addressed this goal in his 2002 report, when he wrote that

“since an objective and detailed knowledge of sacred texts [...] [can] lead many young [believers] to challenge the authority of fanatical leaders, sometimes ignorant or incompetent” it would be a mistake for the secular state to keep “religious facts outside the realm of the rational and state-controlled transmission of knowledge” (Debray, 2002).

Hence the prevalence in school curricula of a “civilized pluralism”, i.e. a normative approach to religious diversity that favors “moderate”, “reflexive” and “ecumenical” religions, and highlights examples of interfaith encounters, while downplaying instances of conflicts and violence. In both France and the United States, courses about religion today reflect what Talal Asad calls a “legitimate diversity” (Asad, 2006, p. 505), prescribing how religious differences *should be* apprehended by students. The Texas standards for *World History studies*, for example, put special emphasis on the “interactions among Muslim, Christian, and Jewish societies in Europe, Asia and Africa”, or on the “interactions between Muslim and Hindu societies in South Asia”.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Observatoire de la laïcité 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Texas Education Code, Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills for Social Studies, Chapter 113, Subchapter C: High school; § 113.42. World History Studies, Beginning with school year 2011–



More particularly, in both countries the chapters on Islam in the most recent editions of history textbooks insist on its relationship with the two other “Abrahamic faiths” – Judaism and Christianity: they stress their theological similarities and shared ethical standards, draw parallels between the Koran and the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, or emphasize the circulation of ideas between Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities. French educational guidelines explicitly require teachers to show that “the relationships between the Christian and the Muslim worlds do not only consist in military confrontations”, and an emphasis is therefore put on the “peaceful encounters” between these religions, whether diplomatic, cultural, scientific or economic.<sup>13</sup> Middle school students, for example, learn about the “contacts” between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean world during and after the Crusades, while first year high school students analyze the exchanges between Muslims, Jews and Christians through the history of the city of Istanbul, described as a religious hub at the crossroads of civilizations. As historian Mireille Estivalèzes puts it in her examination of Islam in French textbooks, this “argument in favor of dialogue between civilizations clearly has civic connotations. It aims to show that there have been fruitful exchanges between Christians and Muslims long before our contemporary era [...], and that Islamic culture has contributed a lot to the Western world” (Estivalèzes, 2011, 49). In the same way, the California standards for middle school *World History and Geography* suggest the example of Medieval Sicily as a “site of encounter” and “exchange” “among Muslims, Jews, Latin Roman Christians, and Greek Byzantine Christians”. The standards specify that Californian textbooks should reflect the changes in historiography, which used to

“place [...] emphasis on religious differences and the Crusades, [and] now emphasize[s] the common features of these Mediterranean cultures and the many ways in which Christians, Muslims, and Jews interacted”. (California Department of Education, 2016, Chapter 11)

As an additional example, the textbook *Discovering Our Past*, used in the state of New York, contains such sentences as “Islam shares beliefs with Judaism and Christianity. Like Jews and Christians, Muslims are monotheists [...]; [...] many Muslims respect [Jews’ and Christians’] beliefs and practices”.<sup>14</sup> The textbook *World Cultures, A Global Mosaic*, used in Florida, California and Pennsylvania, also teaches that

“the beliefs of [Jews and Christians] influenced Islam. Muslims believe that Allah is the same God as the God of the Jews and Christians. [...] Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam sets ethical, or moral standards. The Muslims [...] did not force “people of the Book” to convert [...]. Jews and Christians were free to worship as they pleased”.<sup>15</sup>

These examples reflect therefore an approach to diversity and interfaith encounters that gives prominence to commonalities between religions.

In addition to stressing the importance of interreligious connections in historical perspective, the “civilizing discourse” about “moderate” religions, compatible with the expectations of a multicultural democratic society, is also apparent in the way religious education is integrated into a strict secular framework” (Shakman Hurd, 2015). In the United States, not all state boards of education require students to learn about

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2012.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry for National Education 2015.

<sup>14</sup> *Discovering Our Past: A History of the World*, McGraw-Hill, Grades 6–8, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> *World Cultures: A Global Mosaic*, Prentice Hall (Pearson), Grades 9–12.

the separation of church and state (this is the case in California, but not in Texas, for instance). But official guidelines and training programs for teachers do strongly emphasize the neutrality requirement of the First Amendment, as well as the related Supreme Court jurisprudence on the separation between church and state.<sup>16</sup> The previously mentioned “Religion and Public Education Project”, for example, conducted at CSU, Chico, offers such workshops as “A First Amendment Framework for Thinking about Religion and Public Education” or “What, Why, How, (and How Not!) to Teach about Religion in Public Schools” (Grelle, 2014, 133).

The articulation between teaching about religion and advancing the values of secularism is of course particularly strong in France, where the *Ministry for National Education* explicitly specifies that the study of religion must take place in a “general spirit of laïcité that is respectful of conscience and beliefs”.<sup>17</sup> High school history courses include a historical genealogy of laïcité, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the most recent debates over the wearing of religious clothes in public spaces. These courses aim to show how, with the advance of political and scientific modernity, the state and society managed to emancipate themselves from the grip of the Catholic Church. Moreover, in courses on “morals and civics” (*Enseignement moral et civique*) a chapter is titled the *Pluralism of Beliefs and Laïcité*: high school students learn about laïcité in a historical, philosophical, and legal perspective, while gaining greater awareness and understanding of the religious diversity of contemporary French society. They are warned about the danger of cults, and are invited to analyze the 2004 law banning religious signs and clothing in public schools. The implicit message here is that laïcité is what allows for the diversity of religious identities, but also what ultimately transcends these differences and brings French citizens together. In that sense, teaching about religion is conceived in France as a way to *reinforce* the ideal of a secular citizenship.

The *Secularism Monitoring Center* argues, for example, that teachers, through the historicization and contextualization of religious facts, can ultimately enable their students to adopt a “critical distance in their personal approach” towards their faith, thus leading them away from orthodoxy and fundamentalism.<sup>18</sup> In public schools, students learn that religions can be an object of academy scrutiny and examination, like any other topic. For the state, promoting a reflexive stance towards religions can help to *rationalize* and *discipline* religious beliefs for the democratic public square, and thus contribute to foster dialogue and peaceful coexistence. This applies once again particularly in the case of Islam, whose compatibility with laïcité has been for decades a never-ending object of public debates in France (Fernando, 2015). State officials – whether socialists or conservatives – have explicitly aimed at promoting a “French” and “Republican” brand of Islam – which led in recent years to the adoption of several controversial laws regarding the wearing of religious clothing in the public sphere. In that sense, courses about religion, taught within an ecumenical, moderate and critical framework, are also a medium through which the state can seek to achieve this “reform” of Islam, and its “integration” within the secular republican mold. Echoing Debray, the historian and former director of the *European Institute for Religious Sciences* Jean-Paul Willaime summarizes how the study of religions in public schools can eventually foster the “spirit of laïcité”:

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<sup>16</sup> American Academy of Religion 2010; First Amendment Center 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Ministry for National Education 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Observatoire de la laïcité 2015.

“introducing religion to school is to introduce it into the sphere of knowledge, critical examination, [and] collective deliberation. [...] The simple fact of having to talk about religions in front of a diverse audience, of not being able to rely on the collusion between co-religionists, but of having to objectivise the worlds of representations that correspond to a religion is a position that includes religious facts in the citizenship of pluralist democracies. The [integration] of religion [...] in the educational field is part of [...] a new age for laïcité that is an indication of its success” (Willaime, 2014, p. 108, 116).

### **3 The Limits to a Pluralist Approach to Religion in French and American Public Schools**

#### ***3.2 The Persistence of a “Secular Habitus” in the Classroom***

Yet the French and American examples also show that this strong secular framework makes it ultimately difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a truly pluralist and comprehensive education about religion in both countries. Some of the problems echo the criticism that scholars of religious education have long addressed to the comparative approach to “world religions” in school curricula (Jackson & Nesbitt, 1997).

Providing an often superficial, simplistic, and rigid view of religious traditions, mainly in a historical perspective, neither French nor American textbooks take into account, for example, how these faiths are actually “lived” and experienced by believers today. These deficiencies are inherent to the legal constraints imposed by a secular state on what can actually be taught about religion in public schools: due to the limitations imposed by the First Amendment and “laïcité”, American and French students – unlike their Canadian or German counterparts, for example – are not encouraged to discuss the different value systems of their religions. The question of how to take religious perspectives into account in discussion about ethics, or for “character”, “moral” and “civic” education, for instance, remains unresolved today in both countries (Gaudin, 2017). What can actually be done in terms of religious education is thus ultimately restricted. The many innovative ways to teach religion, as they have been developed in recent years, notably at the Universities of Warwick and Hamburg, and which favor a “student-centered, participatory and engaging” approach to religious education (Chidester, 2002, p. 19), appear for example impractical in the French and American contexts.

This also explains in part why, in contrast to the vast majority of European countries, there is still no specific course entirely dedicated to religious studies in France and the United States, where religion is only discussed transversally, in the context of other disciplines. Some elective courses on “world religions”, or on the “Bible as Literature” and the “Bible as History” exist in a few states and school districts across the Atlantic, but they remain overall very marginal. As a matter of fact, in school systems with already overcrowded curricula, where the main goal for students is the acquisition of basic skills in math and reading, adding another weekly course dedicated to religion is clearly not considered a priority today (Grelle, 2014). But the inclusion of religion into educational programs is made all the more complicated by the fact that French and American teachers still lack a systematic, comprehensive training on this issue (Willaime, 2015; Grelle, 2014), and that, as government employees, they are under pressure to respect the legal separation between church and state. Hence, when it comes to teaching about religion, there often seems to be a “risk averse behavior” on the part of educators, unsure about what exactly they are allowed to do or not, and anxious over the potentially detrimental consequences of what they say

about religion, a sensitive and politicized topic on both sides of the Atlantic. This is especially the case in the United States, where issues related to religion in public education tend to be very litigious, prompting school administrators to be wary of any controversy involving the First Amendment, as they can easily trigger lawsuits brought either by religious groups or by secularists (see Lester, 2011).

As Bruce Grelle points it out, for example, the requirement that American public schools remain neutral between religion and non religion leads some critics to regard any specific course or educational initiative on this topic as already reflecting an un-constitutional “pro-religion bias” (Grelle, 2014, p. 250). As a result, many teachers end up “practicing a type of self-censorship” (Estivalezes, 2006, p. 484), and rather choose to stay “secularly correct” (“*laïquement correct*”) (De Beaudrap, 2010, p. 126). These concerns also raise the more general question of whether a secular and *objective* presentation of religions is actually possible at all, without the teacher’s own beliefs, worldviews or prejudices influencing his or her approach of the topic.

Eventually, these limitations *de facto* lessen any impact that courses about religion - restricted to an introduction of basic “facts” about each tradition, in a historical perspective - and thus the promotion of a “civilized pluralism”, could actually have on French and American students. In both countries, this discrepancy between the considerable efforts made over the past three decades to improve the treatment of religions in curriculum standards and textbooks, on the one hand, and the actual place they are given on a daily basis in the classroom, on the other, is in itself revelatory: it shows how pervasive the secular ethos and habitus of French and American public school teachers actually are, how deeply they have internalized what they think are the requirements of political secularism, and the extent to which this overwhelming secular framework still hinders the attempts to take religious perspectives seriously within the sphere of public education.

### **3.2 Textbooks and Religious Identity Politics**

But in France as in the United States, teaching about religion has also become in recent years a contentious *identity* and *political* issue, mobilized by various religious and secular actors who happen to hold competing worldviews and objectives and, more particularly, conflicting representations of their country’s identity. The resulting controversies threaten to erode the prevailing consensus over teaching about religion on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the United States most particularly, minority religions, such as Muslims, Hindus or Sikhs, have made the introduction of courses dedicated to their faith in history textbooks an important part of their identity strategies to gain greater public visibility. In recent years, for example, the *Sikh Coalition* – the main Sikh interest group in the United States – has actively lobbied state boards of education so that Sikhism would be taught in public schools. It is currently the case in Texas, New Jersey, New York and California. Through the inclusion of their religion in school curricula, the *Sikh Coalition* aims to achieve public recognition by highlighting how Sikhs “have contributed to American society”, but also wants to “ensure that future generations of Sikhs will be appreciated and no longer bullied at schools”.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the *Council on Muslim Education*, which provides teachers with resources about Islam and works in collaboration with boards of education and publishers, describes its mission as “counter[ing] stereotypes of Muslims in a culture with a strong Judeo-Christian bias”, in

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<sup>19</sup> Sikh Coalition.

order to “raise consciousness” about their faith. Accordingly, groups representing minority religions, in their attempts to assert themselves within the “American competitive multiculturalism” (Casanova, 2007), not only want their faith to be included in school curricula: they also increasingly seek to *control* the way their beliefs and traditions are presented in textbooks, in order to build a positive and attractive public image of their religion. In 2014, for example, the *Sikh Coalition* succeeded in convincing publishers to correct what the lobby considered as “over 50 inaccuracies” about Sikhism in the textbooks designed for the state of Texas.<sup>20</sup> But the particularistic claims raised by these interest groups can sometimes conflict with the narrative promoted by the state, scholars, and educators. In early 2017, for instance, the *California Parents for the Equalization of Educational Materials*, a Hindu-American advocacy organization, sued the California Department of Education, the state Board of Education and several school districts. The group claimed that the newly adopted CA standards for history and social studies were unconstitutional, as they “negatively portray[ed] Hinduism”, while on the other hand “endorsing the positive aspects” of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Yap, 2017). The lawsuit came after months of a highly publicized conflict between California and several Hindu organizations – notably the *Hindu American Foundation* – which criticized the connection drawn, in the state curricula, between the caste system and Hindu beliefs, as well as the mention of the inferior status of women in Ancient India. They argued that this “negative” presentation of Hinduism – which resulted from the work of an interdisciplinary group of scholars – could prove detrimental to Hindu children, reinforcing stereotypes and discriminations against them. Since, indeed, Hindu interest groups “have been trying to recast and reformulate Hinduism to make it a suitable vehicle for their [co-religionists] [...] to assimilate into multicultural America”, they have aimed at “making the religion more compatible with American culture and society” – for example on issues such as human rights and gender equality (Kurien, 2004, p. 371). In response to these identity claims, however, scholars of Hinduism have denounced a political “pressure from Hindu nationalist and community organizations” to “sanitize” the history of their faith (Redden, 2016).<sup>21</sup>

Religious conservatives in the United States, however, have also challenged the ideal of an inclusive and pluralistic approach to religion. Blaming secularism, globalization and multicultural education for “perverting” the nation’s identity, conservatives have repeatedly criticized the positive treatment of religious diversity – and especially of Islam – in the curricula. In recent years an increasing number of parents, supported by conservative interest groups, politicians, and media outlets, have indeed questioned the way Islam is taught in public schools, calling for a boycott of textbooks, and even bringing lawsuits against teachers, school districts and publishers, accused of promoting Islam, in violation of the First Amendment. In 2015, for example, parents in Augusta County, Virginia, complained that a high school teacher had required her students to practice calligraphy in a course on Islam, by using the Muslim statement of belief, the *Shahada*. The virulent islamophobic backlash that followed forced officials to temporarily close all public schools in the county, out of “safety precautions” (Balingit & Brown, 2015); in March 2016, following similar concerns about a chapter on Islam in Social Studies, the Assembly of Tennessee adopted a resolution to prohibit “religious indoctrination” in schools (Balakit, 2016). Given the general climate of suspicion towards Islam in the United States, even propagated today by the

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<sup>20</sup> Sikh Coalition 2014.

<sup>21</sup> A similar controversy involving the state of California and Hindu lobbies had already taken place in 2006 (see Barb, 2017).

highest elected officials, this type of controversies is bound to multiply in the coming years. In that respect, it is interesting to note that Jeff Sessions, the Trump’s administration’s attorney general, asked in 2013, when he was Senator of Alabama, for an investigation to be opened against the *National Endowment for the Humanities*. Sessions, then member of the Senate Budget Committee, accused the Federal agency of a “questionable use of public funds” for sending educational books about Islam to 900 libraries across the country (including school libraries), as part of its program “Bridging Cultures: Muslim Journeys Bookshelves”. Sessions further asked the agency to “provide a list of all spending related to Christianity or Judaism” to make sure they were not being disfavored in comparison to Islam (Stratford, 2013).

Beyond their attacks against the teaching of Islam, conservatives also aim to promote a distinct Christian worldview in public school curricula. In 2015, for example, new textbooks were released in Texas for *US Government* and *US History* courses. They give more room to Christianity in the country’s history, stress the “importance of Judeo-Christian tradition” for the “American founding”, with an emphasis on “biblical law”, while “Moses” is mentioned as one of “the individuals whose principles of laws informed the American founding documents” (Barb, 2017).

In France as well, religious identity politics are now challenging the decade-long consensus on teaching about religion. Against the backdrop of a growing Islamophobia and the wave of terrorist attacks that have taken place since January 2015, conservatives – but also secularists – have suddenly turned their attention to the way Islam is taught in public schools. Indeed, although courses about Muslim history have been part of the curricula since at least the 1990s, they have recently been found to be problematic – as many other aspects of Islam in the public sphere. When the reform of middle school history programs was introduced in 2015, for example, conservative politicians and historians, as well as advocates of a strict laïcité, complained that Islam was among the compulsory topics that students had to learn about, whereas Christianity in the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment appeared to only be optional – although they were actually included into other mandatory units. As a result, the socialist government of Francois Hollande was accused of purposely downplaying the role of Christianity in French and European history, out of an “excessive” sensitivity for minorities and a blatant disregard for the “deep Catholic and Republican culture” of the country (Devecchio, 2015). This mobilization eventually prompted the *Ministry of National Education* to revise the programs in order to explicitly include compulsory chapters on the Christian Church and the Enlightenment. Furthermore, as in the United States, the chapters on Islam in textbooks have been criticized by conservatives for reflecting a “politically correct” or “complacent” view of the religion, which does not correspond to historical facts, and results in a “sanitization” of Islam and its culture. They argue, for instance, that the emphasis on the peaceful encounters between Muslims and members of the two other Abrahamic faiths glosses over the violent origins of Islam, especially the forced conversion of Christians and Jews. Textbooks are also blamed for purposely ignoring the problematic private life of Muhammad and the treatment of women in the Koran, as well as for “falsely” crediting Muslim societies for several key scientific discoveries and intellectual innovations in the Middle Ages (Tremolet de Villers, 2016). In contrast, however, other historians point to the persistence of some serious negative bias and prejudices in the chapters on Islam – because they include pictures of veiled women, for example, or because Islam

is mentioned only in connection to fundamentalism and terrorism in courses on contemporary world history (Durpaire & Mabilon-Bonfils, 2016).<sup>22</sup>

In the end, these religious identity politics, whether carried by Christian conservatives or minority faiths, further complicate, on both sides of the Atlantic, the promotion of a normative pluralism through school curricula. More generally, these controversies show how the politics of secularism and the public governance of religion are continuously shaped, in France and the United States, by the complex interplay and negotiations that take place between the state and other religious as well as secular actors.

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The case study of the politics of religious education in France and the United States illustrates the specific issues that come with integrating religion into public schools in the context of a constitutionally secular state. In both countries, this integration of religion into the curriculum has been in part successful over the past three decades: the principle of an education about religion is supported by a large constellation of religious and secular actors, and few doubt today that it is an important academic requirement to prepare citizens for the cultural and social challenges triggered by globalization and a diverse society. As a result, the dominant narrative in courses about religion today is that of a “civilized pluralism” – a positive, yet regulated and disciplined, engagement with religious diversity. On the other hand, this transatlantic comparison also shows that, despite the advent of a “postsecular consciousness”, the legal framework – neutrality and separation in the United States, *laïcité* in France – and the strong secular ethos of public education, inherently limits the extent to which the state can actually change the way religious perspectives are presented in the classroom. Moreover, the recent heated debates over the place of Christianity, Islam and the Enlightenment in textbooks, also reflect the persistent tensions that exist between competing national imaginaries on both sides of the Atlantic, and the disagreements as to how religion should fit within them at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The debates on teaching about religion thus still remain wide open today in the United States and France.

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<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the way Islam is presented in French textbooks, see Estivalèzes, 2011.

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