

Educate for Religious Freedom

Dominique Santelli. Colegio Chevreul-Champavier, Marseille (France)

Someone asked me to give an answer to the question: how does History as it is taught contribute to an education to religious freedom?

I shall attempt to put forward my own point of view, that is from the point of view of a teacher and formation person in Catholic Education, by trying to seek how to give back meaning to history lessons what the editorial and pedagogical vulgates have sometimes rendered sterile.

It seems to me that in its preliminary stages we need to remember how, historically, the question of religious culture and lack of culture in education in France arose and in what ways are the French school programmes markers in these debates.

Contrary to what the recent debates might let us think, religions have always had their place in school programmes.

« Sacred History » has been taught in colleges since the reign of Louis XIV. Judaism and Christianity figure at least since the beginning of the 20th century in the programmes of year 6. The confrontation between Islam and Christianity in the 12th century is itself treated in the Primary school by means of the Crusades, at least since 1827.

However in class programmes there have been numerous meanderings...

In fact under the pretext of neutrality, the School has for a long time neglected the religious dimension of culture.

At the start of the 20th century, the law of separation of the Church and the State seemed to regulate in a definitive manner the relations between religion and society by excluding, in the name of tolerance, all religious approach to teaching. Relegated to the private sphere religion thus lost all scholarly status and this for a long time, right to the beginning of the eighties.

In 1982, the General Assembly of the La Ligue française de l'Enseignement de Montpellier took a stand for the introduction of the teaching of religions in the public school.

Then in November 1986, an article from the *Monde d'Éducation* rang alarm bells. Jean-Pierre Garrigue, dean of the history-geography inspectors wrote an article in it entitled: « *Is Christianity part of our history?* ». In the same article, the programmes were attacked virulently because, according to the article they did not allow for a remedy to be applied to a worrying lack of religious culture: « *secularism, for a century, has erased from the programmes everything which was confessional: by cutting them out in this way and leaving an emptiness, the Republic has made part of their history incomprehensible for generations of young people.* »

So initiatives were multiplied.

Course of religious culture were seen to be developing in establishments. Religious knowledge was presented in them as a discipline, in an organised and progressive manner, considered independent to a faith commitment.

These courses in religious culture offered advantages: the knowledge was all-encompassing and organised. The evaluation of what was gained was easy. But it also presented inconveniences: with some pupils there was often confusion with catechesis.

It also served in some cases to salve the conscience of the institution which substituted it for a catechesis which was judged too difficult.

But the chief risk lay elsewhere, for when there was no other practice accompanying it in the establishment it could contribute to leaving the religion to choice. In cutting it off from the rest of culture there was a risk, paradoxically, of depriving it of meaning.

At the beginning of the nineties, a cycle of conferences on religious facts was set in motion in the Buffon High School in Paris following an anecdote of a pupil in year 2, taking in a picture of Mategna, Saint Sebastian pierced with arrows, for a victim of the Indians of the Wild West in America.

The fact had been established: « young people have no longer any religious culture! » and so we need to teach this religious culture once again.

However, very quickly voices were raised in the public school as well as in the Catholic School, to point out the limitations of this approach.

Paul Lamotte, then assistant General Secretary for Catholic Education wrote in his pastoral Guide for Catholic Education: « *In fact to specialise teachers in religious knowledge is to push specialisation still more and the partition between different disciplines and the religious one : it is to make even more profane the profane disciplines, to take away all concern about the spiritual and the religious from the teachers, to cut life and the human project into « slices of sausage » : on one side life, on the other science, on one side leisure, on the other religion... not only would culture be torn apart but humankind as well, the young person divided, split up, ravaged.* ».

He pleads for «*the spiritual and religious dimension to be taken into account in the teaching of profane disciplines* ».

In the same year, in the month of December, in the revue Télérâma there was a title: « *The Trinity is not only an underground station* ». The inquiry, which focussed on the lack of religious culture in young people, was accompanied by a survey which confirmed that public opinion was favourable to the introduction of a teaching about the history of religions in school.

In 1989, a report, drawn up at the request of Lionel Jospin, minister of National, Education proposed to give the history of religions a more important place in the first and second degree programmes. Its editor Philippe Joutard, charged with presiding over the commission for the reform of the history/geography programmes noted in it: « *It is a whole piece of our collective memory which is threatened. Ignorance of the religious fact has risked the prevention of contemporary spirits, especially those who do not belong to any religious community, from accessing the major works of our artistic, literary and philosophical patrimony, from the 19th century at least...This ignorance is not allowing either the understanding of contemporary realities whose importance we are weighing up more and more (the Middle East, but also the United States). Finally, a greater religious diversity in France with the development of an important Moslem community is making the need for wider information more urgent* » still relevant today!

In November 1991, a talk was organised by the CRDP of Besançon, on the initiative of the rector Joutard, in which Catholic Education was represented by France Rollin and René Nouaillhat, on the theme « *Teaching the history of religions from a lay point of view* ».

The opening discourse of Philippe Joutard leant strongly on the preceding debates: « It is not worth going back over the lack of religious culture ...*To stay as Jeremiahs will not do much to advance the solution to the problems. (...)*Everyone is agreed to distinguish history of religions and catechesis ». He was desirous that at the end of the talk « realistic proposals » be made.

He was heard, for in his closing discourse he said:

« *It is not necessary to create a special discipline* », but it is more a matter of « *pointing out in a more solid manner in the various programmes, as a whole, the importance of the religious phenomena* » and that « *if this history of religions or beliefs is so important today it is because it introduces us to a fundamental domain for mankind, the domain of the imaginary and the symbolic.* ».

This talk is in some sense an accelerator in the history of teaching the religious fact: universities, tools for the teachers, new programmes (notably those from the college of 1996 in French and in History) will follow.

But the project did not find it easy to come to completion for 10 years later, Régis Debray gave back to Jack Lang, minister of National Education, a report on the teaching of the religious fact in the lay school which took up again a great part of the conclusions of the talk. In it the author underlined the necessity of filling in the gaps which made works of culture and the realities of the contemporary world, where religions play a great role, incomprehensible for pupils.

He proposed to pass from an *incompetent secularism* (religion by its construction does not regard us) to an *intelligent secularism* (it is our duty to understand it).

We see here the smoothing over which has been done and the injunction made to the School. Thus after having ignored religions today we are seeking not only to know them but also to understand them by a quest for meaning.

Can we read this new paradigm in the history programmes of cycle 3 at the Terminal level and does it pass into class practice?

With the arrangement of the new history programmes the study of the religious fact is more forcefully affirmed.

From cycle 3 it is intended to have one of the main points of the programme is the passage from several gods to one God: the Christianisation of the Gallic-Roman world; Europe of the abbeys and cathedrals; in the Mediterranean a civilisation founded around a new religion, Islam....

For class 6 there is forecast an initiation into the great religions of Antiquity with the study of Egyptian, Greek and Roman polytheisms, and the birth of two monotheisms: Judaism and Christianity. The rapid expansion of Christianity in the Medieval West, the apparition of Islam and their more or less conflictual relations with each other are at the heart of the history programme for year 5, as well as the study of the crises which led to the huge divisions of Orthodoxy and the Protestant Reformation.

In the High School (lycée) and particularly in the year 2 new themes appear on the role of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In the lycée professionnel the study of monotheism is introduced and religion in France since 1850.

We can detect there a willingness of the National Council of Programmes to give a more important place to the religious fact and we can only rejoice that with these new programmes the religious fact may become a subject to be studied.

However the analysis of the manuals (and we know how much manuals can mislead teaching practices) makes us fear that there will be a mutilated teaching of the religious fact.

In year 6, they study Egypt by traditionally cutting up the sequence in three lessons (one for a geographical study with the vineyards of the Nile and the agricultural economy, then another on the power of pharaoh and finally one on the myth of Osiris, the pyramids and temples). But in Ancient Egypt, everything was lived religiously which this division does not take into account but which could be perceived by pupils focussing the whole sequence on the myth of Osiris.

Similarly in year 5, the study of the Middle Ages proposes lessons on the Crusades or others on the monasteries. These lessons are for the most part descriptive; they endeavour to make known to the students the different parts of the buildings with the help of a plan and the various journeys made by the Crusaders using maps.

From that how can the pupil see that the motivations for going to war in Jerusalem were first and foremost spiritual?

How can he/she seize the spiritual importance of these places?

Moreover, an apparently scientific approach to the events of the past is sometimes given to these lessons, which shows that it is a « confessional » reality. It is enough to open up the manuals to be convinced of that.

One example among others ¹?

Let us take the sequence entitled in the programme for year 6 « *the Hebrews, the people of the Bible* ». It begins in numerous manuals by the study of a map tracing out the journeys of the Hebrews in the Fertile Crescent.

The « *wandering of the Hebrews* » appears faithfully traced out on this map. The pupils are requested on reading the key of the map to reply to the following questions: « *From which region did the Hebrew people set out? Retrace the journey of the Hebrews in the Fertile Crescent. Who are they led by out of Egypt? In what region did the Hebrews end up settling?* »

The pupils can only produce an answer of the style « *the Hebrews leave Mesopotamia led by Abraham to the country of Canaan. The Hebrews reached Egypt. Finally Moses led the Hebrews into the Promised Land (Canaan)* ». They have only copied the key of the manual.

This cartographic school exercise runs the risk of transforming the Biblical story into an immediately proved historical reality. Is that what the Bible tells us? The treatment makes us believe it here by validating a heroic vision of the History, while the migrations of peoples obeyed complex circumstances that historians have a rightful mission to establish. The

¹ Histoire Géographie 6°, Paris, Belin, 2000, page 45

concern to get the exercise done has led to losing sight of the necessary assessment of the sources on which they have leant.

They also run the risk of substituting the object of the lesson, by abandoning the religious fact in order to do cartography.

What is more serious, the key for this map likens the whole of a people (which before were only dispersed tribes) to a single religious dimension and makes us believe that monotheism was imposed wholesale.

By taking the Bible literally, the manuals give a false and reduced vision of Judaism

The map presents the Patriarchs (with Abraham at the head) as historical people of flesh and blood and validates their place in time. But their existence has never been proven.

Finally, the historical fact from the religious point of view is lessened and History as a whole is discredited.

How can we break with these editorial and pedagogical customs?

Perhaps in not insisting any more in tracing back its journey in pinpointing events but more in seeking the meaning of this History.

The fact of connecting up what is essential to the study of religions to the teaching of History is certainly legitimate to the extent that the religious phenomenon is undoubtedly as old as mankind itself and is written into a historical background. However we need to highlight the particularity of this perspective: what is taught there is according to the logic proper to this discipline.

So we need to dare to distance ourselves sometimes from a purely disciplinary step and not stop on a work on the sources.

If we take the example of the famous map of the movement of the Hebrew people we must certainly submit this document to a rigorous historical thought process but also give it meaning.

How? How can we get the pupils to grasp the foundations of this religion?

The gesture of the patriarchs must be considered as a tale whose end is both theological and political. A myth destined to affirm the worship of Yahweh, but also to reinforce the unification of what the Bible calls « the kingdom of Judah », to legitimise the Israelite society such as it was from the 9th century before our era.

In short to give a meaning by putting the contents into context, as has been done for a long time by exegesis and scientific research.

We need to let the students into the intelligence of the signification of these movements and their narration, to try to understand with them the symbolic and religious weight of these texts, the history of their composition and of their transmission.

Other subjects for study (Mahomet, Jesus...) need the same vigilance. It is a matter of each time looking at the facts, without contesting them, in order to draw out the meaning.

Thus will it be necessary in year 6 to persist in teaching the Jesus of history or the history of Jesus?

What does the programme say?

« Jesus is presented in his historical and spiritual milieu, and the Gospels as the essential sources of Christian beliefs. Maps allow us to see the diffusion of Christianity which, persecuted at the start, became the official religion of the Roman Empire. »

The theme is notional, explaining the Christian beliefs, developmental, describing the diffusion of Christianity and biographical, presenting the life of Jesus.

We can see right away the pitfalls to avoid.

Do a life history of Jesus, fall into a tale about his life or on the contrary deny his existence.

Present the Christian religion as an isolated phenomenon, new, without putting it in relation with the Hebrew religion and the Palestinian context.

Attribute the construction of the Christian Church at its origins to Constantine without calling to mind the hesitations, even the resistances but also the appropriation which the Roman State was going to do to it.

Refuse to use the reference documents (the New Testament) as classic historical sources.

I am going to attempt to give you some avenues for reflection

What do we know about Jesus?

The question has been asked for 2000 years. Jesus was the first to ask his disciples on the road to Caesarea by asking them « Who do men say that I am? ».

It is not the lack of sources on the life of Jesus which poses a problem but the way of treating them.

This work started at the Renaissance with the Humanists who first pointed out the differences between the Greek texts and the copies of the manuscripts of the Middle Ages. The certitudes which had been in place until then were shaken and since then we well know that the life of Jesus cannot be drawn from the sources without the mediation of a critical work.

I am not going to throw myself here into a history of Gospel criticism but rather ask myself : *What can the teacher of history say about Jesus to his pupils ?*²

The posture of the historians who are at present interested in the religious question can be resumed in this way:

Neither dogmatic (reporting a truth according to the events from the Scriptures), nor positivist (researching the raw facts) but rather hermeneutical (understanding this story in the context in which it has been written which means that of Palestinian Judaism of the First century).

What we know -or think we know- how do we know it?

By means of essentially literary and Christian sources which the four Gospels are, the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul. To these canonical texts we need to add the apocryphal works like the Gospel of Thomas or that of Peter. The point in common with all these texts being that they were written at the most twenty years after the death of Jesus even a hundred years for Peter. It is useful to add to this list the writings of the early Fathers, works before 150.

As for non-Christian sources, we possess the witness of a Jewish historian of the First century, Flavius Josephus and three allusions from Latin pagan authors from the First and Second centuries, Suetonius, Tacitus and Pliny the Younger.

It is quite an impressive amount for a single person but of uneven quality.

The witness given by Flavius Josephus about Jesus, commonly called *Testimonium flavinum*, makes a clear mention of his resurrection and gives him an image so surprising that some historians have seen there the touching up of a Christian hand³. As to the three other Latin ones, they only give indirect witness about Jesus.

There remain, in order to establish the historicity of Jesus, Christian sources which, treated as historical matter, give the historian quite weak tools for writing a history of Jesus.

So what do we know in going through all these sources? ...Not a lot

If it was only that he was born at the end of the reign of Herod (thus between 6 and 4 BC) very certainly in Galilee and died crucified, condemned by Pilate (thus between 26 and 36 AD). About his childhood and youth we know nothing and we only really know about the last three years of his adult life. We know that at his death, his followers were about a hundred. The history of his person stops there, in any case that of the earthly Jesus.

However, can we not consider that another history begins, that of Jesus of the Gospel, 20 centuries old and whose impact has been considerable

You can sense all the complexity of a sequence on the beginnings of Christianity is there: to present a person both as an object of permanent study for the researchers and the centre of faith for Christians.

You will have understood that what is necessary to look for in this lesson is not so much to establish a biography of Jesus by referring to the Gospels and other non-Christian documents but rather to let the pupils understand how this person became a historical product, the problem being « *Jesus of History or history of Jesus ?* ».

Earlier it was proposed to the pupils to apply the same critical step as that applied to Julius Caesar telling of his Gallic Wars: «*What can the historian say about Jesus? What sources are at his disposal and where does his competence stop?* »

With the help of the teacher, the pupil sees the multiplicity of sources on this person while noting that they teach us very little about his real existence but that since the first century people have claimed affiliation with him.

² See the article in the review L'Histoire n° 227 December 1998, of Maurice Sarre *Did Jesus exist ?*

³ A.Paul, « *Intertestament* », Cahiers Evangile, n°14, p.22-23.

Later we can show the students that the Gospels are the source of Christian belief. There we enter into a more conceptual area with the aim of getting the children to arrive at a beginning of symbolic thinking.

Here it is a matter of passing from the order of the event to the meaning.

It is important to get the pupils to understand the message and the symbol of which the person is the carrier, a message which in its turn a creator of history also for this Jesus of the Gospel, certainly not identifiable with the Jesus of History, also has a history lasting for 20 centuries which has had an impact, to the point where we can consider that it is the real history of Jesus, more than that of his earthly history!

To teach the beginnings of Christianity is certainly a delicate question, but it is in the same category as others, (e.g. colonisation). The historian knows that there is never complete access to the real, there perhaps still less than usual!

To tell about the life of Jesus, build a model of the Temple of Jerusalem or learn to enumerate the five pillars of Islam does not give one access to any of the three monotheistic religions.

That in no way allows for the intelligence to be opened up to the religious and spiritual experiences which have given meaning to the construction of the Temple or to the prescriptions of a religion. Isolated from their meaning, these facts have no interest. The risk is great in leaving these writings to be received at the initial stages.

The reservations which some teachers impose under the pretext of objectivity or secularism protect them perhaps from all risk of proselytism (even still ...), but they maintain in this way the very darkness. So the school will still be lacking in its mission of education, of forming the thinking and judgement of the person.