

## Religion, Quality Education and Cultural Development

Dear President, Dear Colleagues,

First let me thank and congratulate everyone in the present scientific committee but also the army of good-willed assistants who have put together such an important summit. I am proud to participate.

When Professor Durham kindly invited me to join this panel, I proposed a topic on the new obligatory course for secondary public students on Civic and Laïque (secular) Education, included in the 2015 Law reforming secondary and high schools. This law was enacted by our Ministry of Public Education following the January terrorist attacks in Paris against the French satirical journalists of Charlie Hebdo, against two other anonymous people, and finally against people purchasing food in a Jewish store in Paris.

After the attacks, we realized that this ideological and juridical concept of Laïcité, so strong in our history, had never been explained by our educational system, despite the fact it was and still is, all the time, evoked by teachers, journalists, politicians, etc.

Our Minister, who was born in Morocco of Moroccan parents, wanted and succeeded (thanks to a team of specialists) in establishing a special course, teaching the meaning of French citizenship and the concept of Laïcité for French society.

The course was an immediate and double response: first, against the growth of a radical and hateful practice of Islam among a young generation of French Muslims, either born in Muslim families coming from the Maghreb area, or converts; and second, against the reaction of fear and hate the attacks provoked among those who are not Muslim and who are the majority.

Why did I choose to present this topic, although it seems far from the topic of our session, devoted to the privileged relations between religion and education, and between religion and the promotion of cultural development? In great part, because I was asked by the Rectorate of my region (the regional delegation of the French Ministry of Education) to explain to the directors of our regional public secondary schools (approximately 500 people) the tasks of this course. So I know its content. And, the second reason for my choice--this content is quite remarkable, even if it is late, perhaps too late. The content acknowledges and takes seriously the efforts of a lot of people, scholars and intellectuals, but also of institutional actors, to explain the richness and the flexibility of our founding first constitutional principle. If I try to resume the long-lasting debate preceding the birth of this course, it goes something like this:

On one side, we know exactly what Laïcité means; Laïcité means public neutrality, neutrality for public services, and neutrality for public servants, especially public teachers. Laïcité means Separation--the State has nothing more to do with any religion (more specifically with Catholicism), and the State does not help, protect, or give social power to a religion. Laïcité means we are free from religion and its authoritarian power on consciences and societies.

On the other side of the debate, we are free to think what we want and to criticize what we want. Our expression is free, our press is truly free. But we forget that Laïcité means also the legal

protection for religious freedom/ freedom of religious conscience in the freedom of conscience/ freedom of religious opinion in the freedom of opinion. It means the legal protection for religious education, free worship for all, and prohibition of any discrimination founded on religious belonging. It means prohibition of any incitement to (religious) hate, the specific prohibition of anti-Semitic purposes (and the penalization of any attempt to contest the historical existence of intentional genocide of Jews during WWII), etc.

This side of the debate was also arguing that you cannot confuse the state and the free citizens. The neutrality of the State is not obligatory neutrality for the citizens; our system is founded on freedom which can be only limited by the rule of Law. It is urgent to understand what our system really is and what it permits, at which extent it is capable to be adapted, at what extent it is capable to answer our new needs and to organize a peaceful society.

And that is the most important point. Laïcité could be presented as the true good frame to permit and to nurture religious co-existence, religious tolerance, and toleration for religious pluralism. Indeed, Laïcité could support religious pluralism and could even help religions to develop themselves peacefully by giving them this general frame of co-existence, not only the legal frame, but also the “cultural” one, in a different sense than that existing in the Interfaith dialogue, meaning a cultural attitude of mutual benevolence and solidarity.

For example, in my region, there exists a twenty year old association called Marseille Espérance (Marseille Hope), financed by the municipality, which gathers all the denominations present in the city. Each year, the association holds a huge meeting where everyone comes to discuss an inner or international event of conflict. They not only share religious ideas, but also try to adopt a common understanding. It is like a local Parliament of religions!

To come back to the new obligatory course, ON TEACHING CIVIC AND LAIQUE MORALS: before its contents were known, it was denounced that such a course is only a summary of general Republican values, built to denounce the contrary of the Republic, in our minds, the unbearable fear of secession or communitarianism. In fact, the course is strongly connected with the famous Republican values and if you analyze it, you will find a double purpose:

- Teach the civic morals destined to give children a strong affection to the Republican political model, gathering everyone into the citizens body/a moral destined to give some affective consistence and nobleness to the citizenship, in other words, the source of the power is the people
- Teach the laique morals, which is a presentation of the Republican values as universal values, given by philosophers century after century, finally translated in rights with the Declaration of Human Rights and citizen. It includes, liberty (all the freedoms), equality (before the law, every one shall be treated the same by the law and protected against discrimination, girls as well as boys), fraternity (every one shall be treated and viewed as a brother). Two notions are also strongly promoted: justice (which means the school is just--the school has the duty to promote the equality of opportunity for all children) and tolerance. Tolerance is a new value, presented as a positive attitude when confronting difference, a mutual attitude of respect. So it is not only a description of how to avoid bad reactions, or to avoid conflicting attitudes which are today very frequent in our schools, but to build a sincere respect for others, as a moral attitude. The fix is very practical.

So, we can discuss the lack of some other very important Republican values, especially for our time, like the right to resist oppression, the right of property, the sacred right to safety, and so forth. Being safe and living in peace together are incommensurable values, forgotten by our globalized world. But the point is that tolerance is included. For the first time in France, this course on morals asks the teachers to imagine concrete situations to deconstruct religious or racial stereotypes and to build a positive view of the other's religion.

I confess this educational attempt is late. The level of mutual suspicion is very high among the Youth, anti-Semitic hate is growing, Islamophobia is high, and contests against the French system are high. We don't live in a perfect place, and now we are living under a real terrorist threat. But, what happened last Friday night in Paris could be seen paradoxically as a chance for the French society--for the second time, we are testing our willingness to live together in peace. The first time, the indignation was not completely unanimous. It was possible to find dissent voices. For Charlie-Hebdo, some could say, these people died because of their total lack of respect for the Prophet of Islam, and they deserved their fate. For the Jewish store massacre, some could say, it could be understood that these stupid guys wanted to avenge the miserable fate of the Palestinian people. But this time, no excuse is presentable. No classical explanation could be advanced. It is a pure act of external and terrorist revenge. And so, the only logic of these attacks is the lethal imagery of the so called Daech caliphate, attempting to destabilize our society by dividing people in opposite and hateful categories, hoping that this horrific action will provoke such hate among the citizens that Muslims would be killed in reprisal in the streets. In fact, the task is to provoke a civil war. For the moment, the contrary happened. Unless to be provocative and punishable, no young at school could have refused or contested the minute of silence imposed everywhere in the country to mourn the dead. The President of the French Muslim Representative Council immediately condemned the attacks, saying they are only what they are barbarian acts Islam could never explain or justify. He called everyone to uphold the unity of the Nation. The same discourse was supported by other religious actors. There were consolation words for all and a confirmation that Islam is not the problem but radical criminals.

If our Republican values are more than words, my faith is that we will continue to improve the frame of French Laïcité, rendering it more inclusive and welcoming, more attentive to religious pluralism, with a strong educational public task: inculcating respect, tolerance and peace for all, permitting the responsible peoples of the religions present in our country to build a powerful network to sustain the peaceful context of our society.