

French Cultural Studies



The Return of Faith and Reason to *Laïcité* Régis Debray and 'le fait religieux'

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In 1985, Marcel Gauchet wrote of the 'retour du religieux' as an end to the social role of religion and the beginning of its privatisation. However, far from an indication of the withering of religion on the vine of modernity, the return of a religious discourse was resurrected by the democratisation of the 'croyant' in the mid-1980s. The 'âge égalitaire', coupled with the specificity of the 'croyant', created a platform on which to challenge the model of *laïcité* in contemporary France. This discourse sought to re-appropriate reason from the logic of secular objectivity and postmodern self-reliance, and re-signify it within a Catholic theological language of belief and faith. The transmission of religious 'knowledge' would also be seen to compete for intellectual equality with the forms and transmission of knowledge approved by *laïcité* in the republican school. Régis Debray's report to the Ministry of Education in 2002 on the teaching of the 'fait religieux' in French schools advances this debate by defending the introduction of the study of religion in school from the perspectives of theological rigour, the indivisibility of knowledge (the co-existence of 'témoin' and 'savant'), and the inextricable links between faith and reason in their production of knowledge with a valid claim for public consumption.

Keywords: belief, Debray, *école*, *Esprit*, knowledge, *laïcité*

Introduction

In 2005 France has celebrated the centenary of the separation of church and state. One of the principles of this separation has been the protection of freedom of conscience over religious freedom. Religious 'cultes' have continued to exist freely but they have been shorn of legal and political influence. The

swing to secularism over the twentieth century, and particularly during *les trente glorieuses*, modernised attitudes to sex, freedom and culture, and provided a framework in which individuals, liberated from the shackles of the institution of the church, were free to rationalise their own meanings of existence. In short, the rationale of secularism was seen to find a natural niche in modernity, and lay the foundations in France for a tradition of *laïque* exceptionalism in an otherwise religious and in some cases theocratic Europe.

In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), Zygmunt Bauman wrote eloquently on the terrorism of reason in the structure of modernity. He questioned the 'innateness' of religion in the human condition and the insertion of faith in the secular mindset. In his celebrated work *Le Désenchantement du monde* (1985), Marcel Gauchet announced the end of the social role of religion in modernity, the collapse of the metaphysical and the beginning of a new era where individuals would be masters of their own destinies. However, this representation of secularism as antithetical to religion has come under scrutiny, particularly in what is called our postmodern age. Recent debates in Britain, North America and France have challenged ways in which secularism has appropriated the logic of reason to justify its permanence at the expense of what it sees as theological 'fiction'. Milbank (1990) and Ward (1997) in Britain, Meynel (1999) and Stout (2004) in the US, Hervieu-Léger (1986) Debray (2003a, b) and Valadier (1999) in France have, in their unique ways, sought to redress a perceived territorialisation of culture, politics and religious debates within the rationale of secularism. From their respective positions, each calls for the return of the metanarrative of Christianity as a rationale for the indeterminacy of postmodernity, and for the reconnection of knowledge with divine disclosure.

In contemporary France, religion has been privatised under *laïcité* and the division between 'l'institution de la religion et religiosité vagabonde' has widened (Gisel, 1998: 51). However, the loss of status of the church is not attributable solely to the effects of postmodernity and universal secularism. Christophe Boureux has argued that the church in France and beyond must accept that part of its decline is due to the way it has cut itself off from western culture and simultaneously preached a doctrine of 'inculturation'¹ of other cultures (Boureux, 1997: 235–66). And yet the decline of the church and religious institutions has not eclipsed religious belief altogether. It is claimed that there has been an increase in belief, albeit in 'croyances de moins en moins messianiques' (Schlegel, 1997: 5). Traditional forms of spiritual transcendence are being challenged by what has been called elsewhere the religion of immanence (Bauman, 1997).² However, this cultivation of religion on the fringes of orthodoxy has not thwarted attempts among intellectuals, notably 'croyants intellectuels', to try to reclaim the centre ground for a traditional religious and Christian discourse. In her response to a survey carried out by the journal *Esprit* in 1997 into the future

of religion in postmodernity, Danièle Hervieu-Léger indicates that religion must 'renouer enfin son alliance fondatrice avec la modernité, en travaillant à la reconstruction du discours chrétien par, et à travers, la reconstruction de la raison' (*Esprit*, 1997: 88). This article will explore the rehabilitation of a religious discourse through modernity to postmodernity in the context of secular France. This discourse will seek to challenge the rationale of *laïcité*, and particularly its production of knowledge, by locating in faith, belief and religious study a theological rigour and discipline that will contest the perceived segregation of knowledge under *laïcité*.

The historical trajectory

When Marcel Gauchet introduced the term 'le retour du religieux' (Gauchet, 1985), it provoked a wave of debate in the pages of the journal *Esprit*. In a special issue called *Le Temps des religions sans Dieu* in 1997, Jean-Claude Eslin couched this 'retour' within a 'univers de droits individuels illimités, le souci de soi, le confort, le bien-être', in short 'le retour du privé' (Eslin, 1997: 12–13). In other words, the 'retour du religieux' ushered in an era, not of religious tradition and devotion, but of a crisis of Christianity in modernity. According to Alain Touraine, secularism had manufactured a new and different religious subject, one who had been undone by modernity and delivered to the fragilities of individualism and communitarianism (Touraine, 1997: 60). Touraine goes on to say that the traditional religious subject had been surpassed by a new political one for whom the 'sacralisation du social' had become the new religion of society. Pierre-Olivier Monteil highlighted the impact of this elevation of the social in the late 1990s, underlining the dangerous effects of pluralism, relativism and a polytheism of values. However, he (like Christophe Boureux in the same issue) drew attention to the idea that relativism does not imply the end of belief. While belief ('croire') may have become displaced by materialism and relativism, Monteil defines belief as an eternal property of the mind, and as a need for alterity not to end. He describes belief as going through a process of 'métabolisation' and 'substitution' under secularism (Monteil, 1997: 269), with the promise of its refinement in the longer term.

The way postmodernity appears to have displaced religion from the centre of people's lives in the late 1990s is in direct contrast to modernity's dialectic with religion in the previous decade. In a special issue of *Esprit* in 1985 entitled *Actualités de la religion*, the editorial asks its readers if, in the struggle against the fracturing effects of modernity, the nation's collective memory might not be better served focusing on the past and those religious institutions that have formed collectively the nation's religious heritage. In 1986, another special issue of *Esprit* entitled *La Religion ... sans retour ni détour* addressed religious displacement by proposing that religion might have a more constructive role at the conjuncture of individual and collective

freedoms (Eslin, Mongin and Schlegel, 1986: 4). It would seem that in the mid-1980s the ambiguity of the term 'retour du religieux' crystallised the nature of the relationship between secularism and religion in France. This was a relationship characterised primarily by conjunctures between the individual and the social, present and past, memory and actuality. Over time, these conjunctures have intensified, culminating in a 'rationalisation' of religion as a purely individualistic and private pursuit in late modernity and postmodernity. However, in the course of this trajectory two constants continue to undermine secular modernity and postmodern relativism. The first is the invariant that the 'fait religieux' is an eternal property of the mind and that, by implication, belief remains an unfulfilled absolute. The second is the perception that secularism, in its pursuit of freedom of conscience, has quarantined the believer, compromised his affinity with a religious community and obstructed the transmission of a collective religious heritage.

La Revue du MAUSS devoted a special 2003 issue to the debate on religion entitled *Qu'est-ce que le religieux?* The arguments played out in *Esprit* in the mid-1980s and in subsequent special issues are rehearsed in the postmodern context in an exchange of articles between Marcel Gauchet, Alain Caillé and others. Gauchet, in particular, revises his original thesis. He replaces the celebrated 'retour du religieux' with the phrase 'sortir du religieux'. This shift reflects his perception that postmodernity has finalised the end of the structures of religion, that history and tradition have vanished from the ideological map, and that citizens can now do without religion without fear or regret. For Gauchet there are new challenges in the postmodern age which involve organising society 'hors religion' and within what he calls the new universals of science, technology, politics and the judiciary. However, in a separate article entitled 'Quelle conception politique de la religion?', Gauchet appears to qualify his representation of religion by coming out in defence of the ways in which it has helped humanity understand the collective and the social. He writes eloquently of humanity's debt to the coherence offered by the 'mode religieux de structuration des communautés humaines' (Gauchet, 2003a: 313), and of how religion has not only instructed the individual in subservience to power, but how it has also created the ambition within the individual to want power. The ironic twist, however, to Gauchet's argument is that, for him, religion is blessed with a self-awareness that knows when it has run its course in the postmodern age, and when to pass on the baton of self-reliance to future generations.

In a later exchange of opinions between Gauchet and Régis Debray in *Le Débat*, the latter responds to Gauchet by saying that to opt out of religion is tantamount to opting out of history. In stressing the permanence of religion in the world, he invokes (as did Gauchet) the structuring and communitarian influences of religion. He is critical of modernity and postmodernity and the roles they have played in removing religion from people's lives. To this degree he opposes the positive 'antérocentré' focus of religion to the

'futurocentré' ideology after/without religion. In his defence of religion Debray proceeds to attach to it an identifying structure which is centred on the use of the 'sacré' as 'une identité d'appartenance' (Gauchet, 2003c: 3–19). It is a theme developed by two other contributors to *MAUSS*. Jacques Dewitte conceptualises the 'retour du religieux' as a need for a return to signs of sacredness and a cherished language which are perceived to bring back stability and coherence to what he characterises as postmodernity's tyranny of difference: 'le langage religieux hérité, élaboré au fil des siècles est sans doute le meilleur accès qu'on puisse y trouver et il ne serait pas raisonnable de s'en priver' (Dewitte, 2003: 87). The return of the sacred and a sacred language are also described as a welcome return to the transfiguring potential of overly politicised and fractured societies. Jean-Paul Willaime extends this use of the sacred to a defence of religion as 'une actualité symbolique', and as 'culture', where religion is perceived to structure identities (individual and collective) and produce alternative ways of understanding. Religion as culture is justified, for Willaime, in respect of identity, coherence, tradition and autonomy of its determinants (Willaime, 2003: 247–67). We can see from this brief outline that, for the period of *les trente glorieuses*, religion occupied what could be described as its natural place in the modern, secular, republican space – in other words, a private function of 'libre pensée'. Postmodernity has accentuated this privatisation through a process of relativism. But, critically, the democratisation of republicanism in recent decades has itself relativised the notion of privatisation in such a way that the traditional republican distinction between private and public has been undermined by the democratisation of the private in the public. In the context of contemporary secular France, this process has helped legitimise a religious 'croire' within *laïcité*. Not only that, but the emergence of a more structured discourse, around notions of identity, faith and 'knowledge' of a religious heritage, has staked a claim philosophically, culturally and, as we will see, politically, for its reinsertion into the domains of secularism and postmodernity.

***Laïcité*, specificity and a new religious discourse**

The recent resignation of the European Minister for Justice Rocco Buttiglione because of his views on women and homosexuals throws a contemporary light on an old but complex issue, notably the place of religion within democratic societies. The example of Buttiglione is particularly apt given recent pronouncements by the Vatican which have called upon Catholics globally to oppose legislation that jeopardises the doctrines of the Magisterium, and specifically the conjugality of marriage.³ Buttiglione's situation also echoes current debates in *MAUSS* between Gauchet and Caillé, and in *Le Débat* between Debray and Gauchet, about the complexity of the relationship between 'le religieux' and 'le politique'. For Gauchet, postmodernity has

enabled politics to stand on its own and create its own governing structures. In his exchanges with Caillé, he highlights the polarity between religion and politics, claiming, for example, that religion is secondary to the political and therefore responsible for constituting humans as dependants rather than initiators. He summarises this assessment in the phrase: 'le politique est instituant, le religieux ne l'est pas. Il est institutionnalisant' (Gauchet, 2003b: 326). Caillé is less categorical and advocates a closer affiliation between religion and politics (Caillé, 2003: 315–24). Régis Debray and Gauchet continue the debate in *Le Débat*. Debray contests the idea that a democracy needs to or indeed can divorce itself from religious ideas. He wants to minimise the political 'modulations' that militate against the participation of religion in democracy. Gauchet, on the other hand, wants to maximise them as forms of control over religious enchantment.

In his recent work *Democracy and Tradition* (2004), Jeffrey Stout, writing within the context of American political culture, criticises the view that modern democracies are secularised spheres from which the 'believer' must withdraw. In doing so, he opposes the view of other political scientists, notably John Rawls (1996) and Richard Rorty (1991), who claim that democratic participation effectively excludes religious reasoning. The *laïque* tradition in France resembles the Rorty and Rawls models. However, we have seen recently that the *affaire du foulard* has threatened to compromise the neutrality of French secularism. Among many things, the *affaire* demonstrates that it is inaccurate to depict *laïcité* as wholly immune to religion or as a place of secular utopia. Jeffrey Stout makes the following apt observation in this regard:

secularisation entails neither the denial of theological assumptions nor the expulsion of theological expression from the public sphere. And it leaves believers free to view both the state and democratic culture as domains standing ultimately under divine judgement and authority. That believers view the political sphere in this way does not entail that others will. (Stout, 2004: 93)

I think it would be equally misleading to paint a picture of complete secular objectivity in a *laïque*, Christian, Catholic France, where Vatican encyclicals and letters from bishops are read aloud regularly at Catholic Mass on Sundays. The Catholic church (with or without the imprimatur of the Vatican) has a tradition of defending religious/political alliances. In one of its recent letters (Vatican, 2002), the Vatican calls for Catholics to challenge actively the secular traditions of France. Invoking reason and rightness, it claims that ethical pluralism and cultural relativism have undermined the central theological link between reason and revelation. It questions the idea that political freedom is founded on the thesis of relativism in which all conceptions of common good have the same truth and the same value. Crucially, it defends the right and duty of the believer to intervene in

political decisions that undermine Catholic faith and codes of morality. The Vatican challenges the legitimacy of *laïcité* by contesting its separation of 'l'autonomie de la sphère civile et politique' from 'la sphère religieuse et ecclésiastique' (Vatican, 2002). In so doing, it defends what it sees as the inextricable link between 'vivre et agir politiquement'.

This critique of *laïcité* is not confined to the Vatican. In a letter to the President of the Republic, the Catholic bishops of France have addressed problems with *laïcité* in respect of the *affaire du foulard*.⁴ Intimating Régis Debray's subsequent report to the Ministry of Education on the 'fait religieux' in French schools, the bishops confirm, on the one hand, their respect for the *laïque* vision, but, on the other hand, claim that *laïcité* has been responsible for 'constituting' spaces (the school, for example) that have been consciously emptied of religious dialogue, a claim which raises accusations of innate intolerance within secularism. And yet, as we have seen, these current conflicts between religion and politics have been at the heart of the secular vision in France since the late 1960s. The 1967 special issue of *Esprit* entitled *Le Nouveau Monde et parole de Dieu* conducted a survey on the question 'Y a-t-il une politique chrétienne?' The responses were wide-ranging. Generally, the tradition of *laïcité* was upheld as a worthy model of impartiality. However, there was unease expressed as to the lack of a spiritual significance in the engagement with the political (*Esprit*, 1967: 612). It was suggested that a 'réinsertion du Christianisme dans l'actualité' would be a welcome development but not in the sense of the establishment of a Christian order.⁵ A special issue of *Esprit* in 1971 entitled *Réinventer l'Église* reiterated the need for religious faith to engage socially and politically. Citing Michel de Certeau, the editor Jean-Marie Domenach announced: 'L'Église a pour ce sens de manifester ce lien de nécessité entre la confession d'une foi et une praxis sociale' (Domenach, 1971: 792). It would appear that post-1968 there was concern about the nature of the relationship between 'le projet politique' and 'le projet religieux', and a desire to connect the two. But clearly there was not enough of a consensus on this proximity, nor did it seem the relationship was sufficiently thought through and articulated to represent a serious challenge to the universality of *laïcité*. However, by the mid-1980s (1985 and 1986), this proximity was given a greater significance by the intensification of democracy in French republicanism. *Esprit*, as we will see, was to reflect the optimism of an age where the language of belief was to find a democratic voice in the 'âge égalitaire'.

The 1986 special issue of *Esprit* called *La Religion ... sans retour ni détour* is a critical document in the history of the relationship between *laïcité* and religion in France. Firstly, it heralded a crisis in *laïcité* in respect of the 'retour du religieux'. Secondly, the 'retour du religieux' became an opportunity to draw up a different road map for religion, away from the notion of religion coming back miraculously from the past, and towards

addressing the false equivalence of a 'modernité = irreligion éclairée' (Eslin, Mongin and Schlegel, 1986: 8). Jean-Louis Schlegel was adamant that *laïcité* was here to stay, indeed 'un fait acquis et irréversible' (Schlegel, 1986: 9). But, critically, this irreversibility did not imply that *laïcité* could not and should not change. The challenge, as described by Schlegel, was to invent 'des révolutions du croyable' that would eternalise the notion of 'croire' as a constant thorn in the side of *laïcité*. However, more than this, the 1986 special issue of *Esprit* brought together the religious and political projects in a way unforeseen up to that point. Out of the mix of equality of rights, individual freedoms and differences emerged a specific 'individualisme démocratique' of the 'croyant'. This new-found status of the 'croyant' was set in:

une époque où il apparaît que la crise de l'État assistance, qui est d'abord celle des normes collectives susceptibles de relier les individus autour de valeurs communes, oblige à inventer de nouvelles formes de délibération collective respectant les exigences individuelles. Non pas que la laïcité ait perdu du terrain, que l'autonomie politique soit remise en cause, la séparation du religieux et de l'État soupçonnée, mais la vie publique n'est plus arrimée à des valeurs collectives (une éthique républicaine par exemple) en rapport auxquelles l'individu, le citoyen organise ses choix et prend des décisions. (Eslin, Mongin and Schlegel, 1986: 3)

We have seen in *Esprit* examples of a desire for greater proximity between religion and politics throughout the 1960s and 1970s, but it would appear that it was not until the mid-1980s that a more structured link between the two was established along the lines of the rights of a minority group within the republican/democratic dialectic. Debray's ground-breaking article 'tes-vous démocrate ou républicain?' (Debray, 1989) testified to a new realignment in France's political tectonic plates. It would be my contention, therefore, that the post-1986 period represented a new departure for religion and religious debate in France. Beyond the historically organic solidarity between democratic politics and religious tolerance, the democratisation of the 'croyant' provided a platform from which to voice a legitimate opposition to *laïcité*. This democratisation did not involve the politicisation of a religious discourse per se. This discourse, as we shall see in the case of Catholicism, was to assume doctrinal and theological dimensions. What had changed, however, was that this discourse was now being re-signified in the light of a different political narrative.

As early as the special issue of *Esprit* in 1986, some contributors were fleshing out the possibility of a new religious language that could be offered as an olive branch to secularism. Schlegel speaks of secularism as not being a total void for religious debate, but potentially a place of plenitude: 'la société sécularisée n'appelle pas le vide des religions, mais leur plein' (Schlegel, 1986: 23). Guy Petitdémange is more specific in his identification

of a trend in religious thinking 'dont la dynamique est la mémoire' and whose language, while not of this world, 'oblige à s'opérer dans ce monde' (Petitdemange, 1986: 87). In its editorial, the search for a new 'identification d'elle-même ... tant au plan théologique que philosophique' (Eslin, Mongin, Schlegel, 1986: 14) is carefully balanced against 'a grammaire chrétienne' that respects the cultural, historical and aesthetic Christianity of the past. This duality between forging a new identity and an obligation to bow to the historical legacy of Christianity, produced, I would argue, an immobilism that characterised the 'croyant' in the mid-1980s. The 'croyant' was caught between a new religious 'droit de parole' gifted to him by democratisation, and a dutiful self-imposed 'aphasie'. I would suggest that this immobilism not only stunted the progress of a religious identity but it has subsequently made it prey to social and cultural diversification.

We can see that by 1997, and the special issue of *Esprit* called *Le Temps des religions sans Dieu*, France is a place where traditional monotheisms have been marginalised by other forms of esoteric religiosity. The editorial underlines the further marginalisation of the symbolic and spiritual elements that have structured the lives of French generations. French and European democracies, it claims, have lost the spiritual and intellectual properties common to their histories. To compound this picture, a survey carried out on the nature of the 'retour du privé' reveals that individualism is not solely a product of modernity and postmodernity, but also a symptom of Catholic and Christian oppression, which in turn have produced a spirit of rebellion in matters of the body, self-realisation and self-determination. According to the survey, there is the perception that the crisis of individualism is seen, at least by the Catholic church, as much as a crisis of its own making as it is a function of the postmodern age and a secular France. And clearly, as the survey confirms, *laïcité* has not helped in its creation of conditions of religious marginalisation and the decline of religious practice, rites, beliefs and the visibility of the church. The vacuum created by the absence of a consensus on a specific religious identity in the 1980s was filled by the fracturing effects of postmodernity. In the process, the lines of transmission by which faith, religious traditions and knowledge were traditionally acquired became blurred. It is against this backdrop of an embryonic religious 'identification' in the mid-1980s, and its malfunction in the 1990s and beyond, that a current crisis in the transmission of belief and faith has emerged. And yet, faced with this religious implosion, it is my contention that in recent times the Catholic church, and specifically the Vatican, has adopted an offensive strategy to re-educate Catholics, not by an accommodation of liberal progressiveness but by a return to strict theological doctrine, a trend which appears set to continue under the pontificate of Benedict XVI. While this strategy has angered and alienated many Catholics, its one positive effect has been to foreground important theological tenets, in particular the centrality of reason in the transmission of faith, knowledge

and ethics, and how reason may represent the key to a reassessment of the values of *laïcité* in France.

L'enseignement du religieux n'est pas un enseignement religieux

In 2002, Régis Debray submitted a report to the Ministry of Education entitled *L'Enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque* (Debray, 2002). In very general terms the report made a case for the teaching of religion in schools on the basis that there is an apparently broad public consensus for it, and also because there is a perception that many young French school students are growing up in a non-religious context where they know little about their religious past. As a result, their knowledge of the present and future is severely impoverished. Among the report's twelve recommendations, Debray calls for the establishment of an Institut européen en sciences et religions and, most controversially, for the introduction of two compulsory modules ('laïcité et religion' and 'philosophie de la laïcité et histoire des religions') to be taken by teachers as part of their teacher training. From a secular perspective, the report was heavily criticised for compromising the *laïque* principle of freedom of thought over religious freedom.⁶

It is no surprise that Debray's report was not well received by *laïcs*. However, his report needs to be evaluated within the broader context we sketched earlier of a theological religious discourse, a boundary-free post-modernity, and how religion might become a natural and reasoned ally of *laïcité*. The report is a subtle and complex argument, democratic and republican in direction, and it weaves a labyrinthine path between the virtues of *laïcité* and their simultaneous erosion. The report opens with an appeal to *laïcité's* tradition of objectivity and tolerance, and a concern for the loss of religious tradition, values and morality in contemporary secular culture. The 'fait religieux' is invoked as a potential enhancement of *laïcité*, but, in the same breath, Debray is careful to allay *laïque* fears of hidden agendas. He advances his argument tentatively by suggesting that religion and *laïcité* could become partners. This 'reasonable' hypothesis is explored through a correlation Debray makes between *laïcité's* objectivity and reason itself.

Critically, reason is identified in its links to revelation.⁷ This identification is an important development in Debray's argument because it locates reason and religion in a context that is alien to *laïcité's* understanding of their mutual exclusivity, but intrinsic to a Catholic theological tradition. The late Pope John Paul II, arguably the most philosophical of recent pontiffs, wrote extensively on this link. He sets up a twofold order of knowledge, natural reason and divine faith (John Paul II, 1998: 9); faith in God's revelation surpasses all knowledge proper to human reason. John Paul II characterises reason as having its own autonomy and scope for action, but reason is defined as being constrained and limited by original sin. Faith, however, not

based on human reason but unable to do without it, is seen to liberate reason in so far as it allows reason to attain correctly what it seeks to know and place it within the ultimate order of God's revelation (John Paul II, 1998: 20). The report's implicit religious (Catholic) underpinning to reason is qualified quickly by Debray's re-assertion that 'le fait religieux' in education is not designed to usurp the secular tradition. However, by its very suggestion early in the report, Debray has carefully planted a theory of religious 'knowledge' within *laïcité*. From the outset, he wishes to dispel a myth that religion and *laïcité* are not good partners. However, as readers, we are made aware that Debray wants to cultivate their connection; to link 'le fait religieux' to the objective 'transmission des connaissances' is a rationale that *laïcité* will have difficulty avoiding.⁸

The tradition of linking reason to revelation is well established. We have seen in the course of this article how Milbank, Meynel, Hervieu-Léger and Pope John Paul II (1993) have used reason to forge a very specific type of religious discourse linked to the concept of truth in the revelation of the resurrection. On the basis of this theological rationale, Debray is able to advance his theory that religion cannot be excluded from *laïcité* on the basis that it cannot participate in the *rationaly controlled, public transmission of knowledge* (my italics) in the republican school: 'la relégation du fait religieux hors des enceintes de la transmission rationnelle et publiquement contrôlée des connaissances, favorise la pathologie du terrain au lieu de l'assainir ... S'abstenir n'est pas guérir' (Debray, 2002: 12). The second main thrust of Debray's report is the link he establishes between religious faith and knowledge. Much is made in the report and among critics of the report of the need for a separation between faith and knowledge: specifically, that the pursuit of the latter in the republican school should be free from religious influence. Debray contests this assumption. One of the ways he does this is through a discussion of culture. The *laïque* tradition, he claims, is suffering from an 'inculture religieuse', or religious ignorance. A more worrying ailment is the 'culture de l'extension', a form of 'knowledge' that is achieved through over-exposure to the media and televisual zapping, symptoms of the technological age that privilege space over time. This temporal/spatial opposition is a theme used throughout the report to indicate a different approach to forms of knowledge acquired either immediately through the 'culture de l'extension' or through culture as a 'continuité cumulative' (Debray, 2002: 5). The horizontal and pejorative association of spatial knowledge is contrasted with the temporal and positive association of vertical knowledge, a form of knowledge that embraces transcendence and reflection, and therefore a knowledge to which the 'fait religieux' is linked. Through the debate on knowledge Debray wants to dispel the myth that faith and knowledge cannot co-exist in *laïcité*:

Pas plus que le savant et le témoin ne s'invalident l'un l'autre, l'approche *objectivante* et l'approche *confessante* ne se font concurrence, pourvu

que les deux puissent exister et prospérer simultanément ... Preuve en est que les deux peuvent coexister dans certaines personnes (un exégète peut être critique et ordonné). L'optique de la foi et l'optique de la connaissance ne font pas un jeu à somme nulle. (Debray, 2002: 13)

Debray's argument for the co-existence between 'savant' and 'témoin' is at the heart of this report. But as an idea it also reaches out to previous debates in this article on the spiritualisation of politics, on the role of the 'croyant' in a democracy, on the 'praxis chrétienne', and on the politico-religious axis in general. We should not forget, of course, that this co-existence is played out in the school and personified in the teacher. And yet, for Debray, the school, distinct from the relatively free space of the university, exemplifies the uniqueness of the *laïque* tradition with its emphasis on 'la libre pensée' and 'la mise entre parenthèses des convictions personnelles' (Debray, 2002: 14). Debray articulates the dilemma of the teacher in *laïcité* as follows: 'Donner à connaître une réalité ou une doctrine est une chose, promouvoir une norme ou un idéal en est une autre' (Debray, 2002: 14). The issue, for Debray, boils down to knowledge; the teacher (and by implication the concept of knowledge in the republican school) has laboured under a private/public division. On the one hand, there is the private knowledge associated with religious belief. It is defined by a self-reflexive ('interne') discourse; cloistered and self-referential, it is a discourse without external referent or need for public dissemination. It is defined by its self-worth, its intellectual consciousness and it is a discourse cultivated by the 'témoin'. On the other hand, there is knowledge that is defined by the fact that it is a common, shared knowledge. For Debray, this is 'savant' knowledge, approved and standardised by *laïcité* and the school as having a valid public function in 'enseignement général', 'pratique ordinaire', and 'niveau moyen'.

Implicitly, *laïcité* is charged with constructing a purity of knowledge. One-dimensional, selective and homogeneous, *laïcité* is perceived as defending the incompatibility of the knowledge of religious belief with a knowledge fit for public consumption. It is a perception grounded on two controversial notions: firstly, that belief can prejudice the objective transmission of knowledge, and secondly that belief is without conceptual rigour and intellectual rationale. In defence of *laïcité*, the notion of the incorruptibility of knowledge at the point of delivery to the school child is intellectually honest and laudable. Supporters of *laïcité* point to its rational, scientific basis, the benefits of universalism over particularism, and the dangers of dogmatic belief (Frelat-Khan, 1996). Debray takes a different line to the conventional debates on *laïcité*. Traditionally, *laïcité* is viewed either democratically, where the school should resemble civil society (Valadier, 1999) or, from the republican perspective, where society should resemble the school as a space of public and private separation (Péna-Ruiz, 1998). For Debray, the debate has more to do with knowledge and how *laïcité*'s

objective 'purity' is founded on the idea that religious belief compromises this 'purity' of knowledge on the grounds that belief is an irrational discourse. Debray, in the tradition of Catholic theology, contests the artificial construction of private/public knowledge by claiming that the two represent 'les deux lames trop écartées du même ciseau' (Debray, 2002: 18). Pope John Paul II was more precise: 'CREDO UT INTELLEGAM' (John Paul II, 1998: 27). Debray proffers his alternative model of indivisible knowledge, intimating that for *laïcité* to oppose the rational link between 'témoin' and 'savant' would indicate intolerance and discrimination. In short, Debray appeals to the democratic credentials of *laïcité* to accommodate 'le fait religieux' (private knowledge) with an argument that seeks to make *laïcité* more *laïque* than it already is.

What Debray understands by 'le fait religieux' and its specific role in *laïcité* reaches a climax towards the end of the report. He puts *laïcité* on its well-established pedestal, with 'liberté de conscience' in pride of place. But he challenges *laïcité's* definition of liberty by suggesting that liberty has a responsibility (in the interests of 'l'expérience humaine') to safeguard young people and future generations from 'analphabétisme religieux' (Debray, 2002: 19). In effect, Debray appeals to the principle of 'liberté de conscience' in *laïcité* to validate the study of religion, by underlining his perception that *laïcité* and religion are not opposites. He asks: 'Aussi ne peut-on séparer principe de laïcité et étude du religieux?' (Debray, 2002: 19). Debray reinforces his argument by allaying the fears of suspicious *laïcs* through an appeal to belief *and* reason. Belief, he implies, is not a mystical pursuit; rather, it is one in which reason is closely allied to its understanding. By its association with reason, belief becomes synonymous with self-awareness, cultural heritage, 'la lumière sur l'obscur'. To reject this association is, for Debray, to invoke a form of *laïcité* that is 'complexée par ses conditions de naissance'; in other words, a *laïcité* that sees in belief a 'déraison', and a *laïcité* that is steeped in a culture of rejection of belief and religious inclusion. For Debray, *laïcité*, as it is in France today, is 'démarrquée de l'anti-religion militante' (Debray, 2002: 21). But what Debray advocates is not a platitudinous democratisation of *laïcité* ('une laïcité plurielle, ouverte et repentante')⁹ but, ironically, a return to its republican roots: 'Enseigner à cette enseigne, c'est retrouver la "haute époque" des lois laïques et républicaines qui déboucha justement sur la création d'une section autonome de l'École pratique, en 1886, destinée à étudier, sur *un mode non-théologique, les phénomènes religieux*' (Debray, 2002: 21, my italics).

The teaching of religious phenomena in a non-theological way is Debray's compromise with *laïcité* in the republican school, in that it ensures that religious 'phenomena' will be taught but without any theological inflection. But it is a subtle compromise because, for Debray, the term 'phénomènes religieux' implies the study of the historical contextualisation of religion; in short, 'religious study' is underpinned by necessary intellectual and rigorous

discipline. As a compromise couched in the language of a return to the republican ideals of the Third Republic, Debray assuages the concerns of his *laïque* readers by saying that there is no need for modernisation or democratisation of *laïcité*. Instead, it is a question of 'ressourcement' and of *laïcité* to be 'refondée, ragaillardée, réassurée d'elle-même et de ses propres valeurs' (Debray, 2002: 22). In defending the republican traditions of the French school, we might ask whether Debray extends this defence to embrace a wider republican agenda of a universal and indivisible concept of knowledge. This cannot be discounted, but it would be my view that a republican interpretation is overridden by a theological defence of knowledge. Debray's defence of the republican school has a democratic logic in that he is actually defending the democratisation of religion in the instruction of religious studies. This is an argument for the rationalisation of religion (as 'phénomène') in *laïcité*, an argument that *laïcité* has thus far been unwilling to countenance.

Conclusion

As *Esprit* has been the main journal of debate for these issues and for this article, it seems appropriate to return to a recent article in this journal as part of my conclusion. Phillipe Capelle and Henry-Jérôme Gagey respond to Debray's report by setting up the university (with its emphasis on an epistemological approach to religious study) as a comparative space where religion and the study of it are embedded in a rational, disciplined and scientific discourse. Clearly, the republican school and university operate under different rules, but these co-authors use the university model as a parallel structure in order to highlight the artificiality (as they see it) in the *laïque* school of the division between 'confessant' and *laïc*. In a tightly argued article that attests to the historical institutionalisation of the French university based on a reciprocity between faith and reason, the authors meet part of the challenge of Debray's report, which is to answer the question whether one can, in an educational environment, be 'universitaire' and 'confessant'. The authors are keen to underline the fact that one can teach 'les phénomènes religieux'¹⁰ and also express a personal religious belief, neither of which should compromise *laïcité* nor one's professionalism. And the key to their argument, as it is with Debray's report, is that, in the context of 'la transmission rationnelle et publiquement contrôlée des connaissances' (Debray, 2002: 12) (which is the criterion by which *laïcité* is seen to operate in the school), religious belief and Catholicism in particular have a legitimate, objective and intellectual rationale that justifies their equal 'transmission' in school.¹¹ The crux of the debate therefore is not about whether belief and religion should be private concerns or whether they prejudice public knowledge, but whether belief *constitutes* a knowledge and whether it can be defined rationally.

Capelle and Gagey call for new spaces of 'objectivation' removed from the 'voix unique et officielle' of *laïque* objectivity. But they also call for a rethink of the concept of knowledge. Debray's articulation of knowledge as the union of 'témoin' and 'savant' (two parts of the same scissors) is reinforced by Capelle and Gagey who state that to be 'universitaire' and 'confessant' constitutes 'un élément dialogal indispensable' (Capelle and Gagey, 2004: 64). Debray and these co-authors reject the apartheid of knowledge in the republican school. It is seen to promote a 'laïcité d'incompétence'. By contrast, they see in faith, belief and the study of religion a tradition of religious *knowledge* grounded in Catholic theology and philosophy, and a current political context that promotes the democratisation of this knowledge in the form of a 'laïcité d'intelligence'.

Notes

1. The use of the word 'culture' in connection with religion is problematic. In particular, it raises debates about the use of derivative terms ('inculturation' and 'acculturation'). Pope John Paul II deployed the term 'inculturation' in both his encyclicals *Veritatis Splendor* and *Fides et Ratio* to indicate the evangelisation of a transcendent, universal culture of truth in revelation, and therefore a culture that is not circumscribed by time or place. For more on this and related terms, see Gittens (2004).
2. Zygmunt Bauman describes this process as 'this-worldly transcendence' in Bauman (1997).
3. In recent years, the Vatican has published a host of documents relating to sexual mores, the couple, the family and the role of Catholics in public life (Vatican 1986, 2000, 2002, 2003).
4. Lettre des trois co-présidents du Conseil d'Églises chrétiennes en France sur la laïcité, au Président de la République, M. Jacques Chirac, 8 décembre 2003. For more on the Catholic Church in France, see the official website: cef.fr.
5. Other contributors highlighted the need to redefine faith as an element of intellectual consciousness. Another issue raised was the perception of a difference between 'Dire de l'Église' and 'Faire de l'Église', a distinction highlighted by Merleau-Ponty's celebrated phrase 'agir en Chrétien ou agir en tant que Chrétien' (*Esprit*, 1967: 630).
6. Benoît Mély criticised the report for being biased towards Catholic/Protestant and state perceptions of what is 'religieux' (Mély, 2002). He questioned one of Debray's postulates that belief in transcendence is an 'invariant' of the human condition, without which the individual is in a state of 'incomplétude'. In an ironic twist, Mély calls for compulsory modules on 'inculture laïque' and 'l'histoire de l'incroyance' which protect free examination, critical independence and the free assessment of other religious figures in the nation's collective memory. Jean LeFranc in 'Quel fait? Quelles religions?' sees Debray's real agenda in this report as an attempt to address intolerance in France and restore civil peace to a society fractured along religious lines. Nadine Wainer in 'Laïcité et le rapport Debray' accuses Debray of trying to re-enchant the world, and of a paternalistic attitude to teachers. She highlights the end of the role of school as a place of liberation, but also its failure to construct an autonomous space of thought. These texts were consulted in November 2004 at the following websites: www.appep.net/lefranc.pdf and www.appep.net/wainer.pdf.

7. *Veritatis Splendor* and *Fides et Ratio* are two of Pope John Paul II's most philosophical texts. They set out in particular his views on reason, faith and their inseparability. Faith is seen to liberate reason. Reason is perceived to have some autonomy and scope for action but the freedom of reason is predisposed to revelation. Interestingly, the editorial of *Esprit* (*La Croisée des religions*) in 1999, while welcoming the advent of rational thought into recent Vatican thinking, questions some aspects of the encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, in particular the 'propédeutique' relationship between reason and revelation.
8. Monod (1999) comments on the state of *laïcité* in France today, and particularly its fears about the precarious state of the separation of church and state. He voices concerns about a new 'retour du religieux' and other theocratic and 'intégriste' forms of religion.
9. Kintzler (1996) is equally dismissive of a *laïcité* that goes too far in the direction of a cultural *laïcité* where the school is seen to be a reflection of society. Like other commentators (Paul Valadier, Paul Ricoeur, Péna-Ruiz), she expresses reservations about moves to interfere with a teacher's 'devoir de réserve', particularly from the perspective of vulnerable children who are not old enough to act as free citizens.
10. Their use of 'phénomènes religieux' as opposed to 'le fait religieux' is a qualification to Debray's report. They see the use of the term 'le fait religieux' as a weak link in his argument. 'Phénomènes religieux' point to time, place and circumstance that need critical and rational evaluation in the perception of religious belief and study.
11. Debray's approach to the equality of transmission of knowledge exposes him to the charge of promoting a secularised conception of knowledge. I think this charge undervalues the rational and theological argument underpinning the specificity of religious knowledge.

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