

The Return of Religion in France

From Democratisation to Postmetaphysics

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1

The Return of Religion in France

CREDO UT INTELLEGAM.

John Paul II
Fides et Ratio

According to the religious historian Jean-Paul Willaime, one of the forgotten and ironic consequences of the laïcisation of religion in France has been the sacralisation of the political where the State has now been invested with the role of individual regeneration and the reform of society. For Willaime, the real heritage of the French Revolution has been the creation of a civic theocracy in France which has replaced traditional forms of religious belief. In other words, in republican France today, the State has become the new foyer of moral and collective unity, with traditional religious expression banished to the margins of communitarianism. However, as Willaime also maintains, this republican *status quo* has been threatened in recent times by a more radical politics, underpinned and reinforced by global demands for individual, ethnic, sexual and religious rights of expression. In response to this global agenda, the French State has adopted what he calls a ‘reasoned accommodation’ of individual rights. He states: ‘This *reasoned* accommodation serves first and foremost the State. It is a question of limiting individual rights in the interests of republican citizenship and the State. Hence, the political has more power than the judicial, even if the judicial is absent.’¹ What is meant by the political is of course the politics of republicanism, its symbolic universalism and the mantra that everyone is equal regardless of difference. But there is a reasonable alternative to this republican politics, as Willaime outlines when he sums up the context of religion and religious expression in contemporary France: ‘A *reasonable* accommodation is an accommodation that serves individual rights. It is a question of finding a modality

that legalises all individual claims to any religious practice, as long as they do not harm the rights of others or the State.' In this reasoned/reasonable opposition, Willaime points to some of the key battle lines that define the substance of this chapter: republic versus democracy, general interest versus private interest, individual versus State, universalism versus relativism, modernity versus postmodernity, France versus globalisation and secularism versus pluralism.

In 2005 France celebrated the centenary of the separation of Church and State. One of the principles of this separation was the protection of freedom of conscience over religious freedom, a principle which has since become the bedrock of what is known as *laïcité*. Religious 'cultes' have continued to exist freely in France 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 Catholic 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*, 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 very insertion of faith in the secular mindset.² In his celebrated work *Le Désenchantement du monde*, 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.³ However, this representation of secularisation as antithetical to religion has recently come under scrutiny from different quarters. Willaime's recent work heralds a new age of ultramodernity where the separation of Church and State has actually produced a co-operation between the two leading to a *laïcité* where religion is socially recognised. Danièle Hervieu-Léger echoes this sentiment in her reassessment of secularisation as a new process in the restructuring of religious belief. We will also see in the work of Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo how secularisation can be a catalyst for religious renewal and redefinition and a friend of postmodernity in the ways it facilitates religious pluralism. In the same vein, recent debates in Britain, North America and France have challenged ways in which secularism has been seen to appropriate the logic of reason to justify itself and its relevance within secular modernity. John Milbank and Graham Ward in Britain, Hugo Meynel and Jeffrey Stout in the US and

Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Régis Debray and Paul Valadier in France have, in their different ways, sought to redress a perceived territorialisation of culture, politics and religious debates by the rationale of secularism. From their respective positions, each calls for the return of a meta-narrative of Christianity as an equally valid and more appropriate rationale for the indeterminacy of postmodernity.

In contemporary France, as Willaime has outlined, it is fair to say that religion has been privatised under *laïcité*, so much so that the gap between 'the institutions of religion and migrant religiosity' has widened.⁴ If we take the example of Catholicism in France, the Catholic Church's loss of status is not attributable solely to the effects of postmodernity and universal secularism, although their combined effects are considerable. 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 the broad net of Western culture and pursued a unilateral line of indiscriminate and doctrinal 'inculturation' of other cultures and ways of life.⁵ And yet, the decline of the Catholic Church and religious institutions in general since the 1960s has not eclipsed religious belief altogether. One of the ironies of our postmodern condition, as Willaime, Hervieu-Léger and Jean-Louis Schlegel testify, is that religious belief has flourished in the context of religious pluralism and cultural relativism. In fact, it is claimed that postmodernity has contributed to an increase in religious belief, albeit as Schlegel has said, in 'beliefs that are less and less messianic'.⁶ Postmodernity, it would appear, has made religion more accessible and possibly more relevant to people's lives, particularly in the way traditional forms of spiritual transcendence and metaphysics have been challenged and replaced by new compatible 'religions of immanence'.⁷ One of the differences between the practice of religion in the 1960s and today is that today religion is expressed in less institutional contexts, and significantly in forms outside the Judeo-Christian binary. However, this cultivation of religion on the fringes of orthodoxy has not thwarted attempts among intellectuals, notably Christian 'intellectual believers', to try to reclaim the centre ground in order to re-engage with new 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, Hervieu-Léger maintains that religion must 'renew its foundational alliance with modernity, by working on the reconstruction of Christian discourse by means of and through the reconstruction of reason'.⁸

Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, published in 1998, signalled an important step in Catholicism's response to the debate on the return of

religion. Distancing itself from the flurry of new religiosities and New Ageism that had captured the minds and spiritualities of the postmodern subject, *Fides et Ratio* underlined the essential link between faith and reason as interdependent components in the revelation of metaphysical truth. In other words, the former Pontiff argued that reason must be preserved as an autonomy with its own scope for action, but that ultimately reason must be guided by faith (which surpasses any knowledge proper to human reason). For John Paul II, faith liberates reason in so far as it 'allows reason to attain correctly what it seeks to know and places it within the ultimate order of things', an order that is constrained and limited by what happened as a consequence of original sin. While the Vatican's position on reason seems rigid and metaphysically bound, it does nevertheless highlight the extent to which a *rationalisation* of religious discourse was critical to the Church's exegesis, understanding and presentation of the debate on the return of religion. Reconnecting faith to reason would not only differentiate Catholicism from other self-oriented religions (Buddhism and Mysticism for example), but it would also provide an intellectual and philosophical foundation for Christianity, cement the relevance of Catholicism in a pluralist society and crucially validate the resurrection of metaphysics and reason as essential properties of religious faith.

The main aim therefore of this chapter will be to analyse the relationship between faith and reason as the cornerstone of the Catholic Church's response to secularisation, and as a key binary that underpins the emergence of the wider phenomenon of the return of religion and the challenges it presents to contemporary French republicanism. From the early 1960s, certain events have left a mark on the Catholic consciousness, let alone the French spiritual landscape. Vatican II set in train a process of change and modernisation that transformed the relationship between the institution of the Church and the way it communicated with its laity. The advances in media technology during the 1980s brought the Catholic Church, in the charismatic and global figure of John Paul II, directly into the living rooms of billions of Catholics worldwide. Other events, no less momentous in their historical significance, have had a more particular impact on the French mindset in recent years. I refer, for example, to the continuing and controversial role of *laïcité* and its recent centenary in 2005, the dramatic fall in Church-going in France after the millennium, the wider decline in faith among Catholics in general in France and the ongoing fractious relationship between Church and State. However, within this broad historical trajectory and as described in the journal *Esprit* and a number of its special issues devoted to key religious events

over this time, I propose to identify certain periods in recent French history (the mid 1980s, 1998 and 2002) as critical to the way religious debate inscribed itself anew in the French consciousness through a direct link between faith and reason.

In the mid 1980s, Gauchet wrote of the 'return of religion' 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' (believer) in the mid 1980s. The 'egalitarian age', coupled with the specificity of the believer, 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 resignify it within a 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. Debray's report to the Ministry of Education in 2002 on religious instruction 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' (believer/witness) and 'savant' (intellectual/bearer of knowledge) and the inextricable links between faith and reason in their production of knowledge with a valid claim for public consumption. By focusing on Debray's report in the final section of this chapter, I want to highlight the rehabilitation of a religious discourse that challenges 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*.

***Esprit*: a history of religious engagement**

In a special issue titled *Nouveau monde et parole de Dieu* in 1967, *Esprit* launched a debate into the relationship between Catholicism and society. This issue was also accompanied by a series of surveys inviting priests and laity to comment on this relationship. Two main concerns emerged which reflected the preoccupations of the time, and which were to go on to be debated over the course of the next half a century. The first was the relationship between the Church and the 'temporal' sphere, in particular the socio-political context of the day. In spite of the split between Church and State under *laïcité*, *Esprit* conveyed the impression that Catholics still sought a spiritual significance to the

Church's engagement with political culture. One interviewee described this desire in terms of a need for the 'reinsertion of Christianity in daily life'.⁹ Another expressed the need to establish a *Christian* politics ('politique chrétienne') as opposed to a neutral political culture that happens to be made up of Christians ('politique des Chrétiens').¹⁰ The backdrop to what was to become known as the vexed issue of the 'théologico-politique' was the volatile socio-political climate of the late 1960s and its aftermath. For Christians with an especially acute social conscience, May 1968 opened up the (fanciful) possibility of a politics founded on Christian principles and values that could arrest the individualistic and rebellious tendencies of a secularism out of control. *Esprit* however makes it clear in its editorial that such a prospect was beyond its more measured focus to re-situate religion less within the imposition of Catholic doctrine and values, and more in the context of 'living of a faith'. By this it meant that religion should reflect and embrace positively the changes in lifestyle, mass communications and individual autonomy that were transforming the socio-cultural landscapes of French people at the time. This desire for religious pragmatism also scotched any idea that the 'théologico-politique' was a pretext for the establishment of an orthodox Christian political order. Editors believed this to be wholly unrealistic. Rather, *Esprit* raised the important idea that faith is not just an abstract, mystical concept but one that requires a sociological dimension in respect of individual action. Specifically, *Esprit's* focus on the 'théologico-politique' reflected a wider debate about the role and function of Christianity (religion) in the 'cité politique' and in culture generally. Under the subtitle 'Y a-t-il une politique chrétienne?', this special issue split the debate into two camps; one claimed that the Church did not make politics and should remain outside the political process, the other argued that Christians can and must engage in 'making politics'. This split was neatly summed up in the expression 'What the Church says' versus 'What Christians can do'.¹¹

While this special issue exercised the intellectual consciences of Catholics in respect of private and public actions and whether they should get involved in political action, it also brought to light another concern about what actually constituted a Christian community. If political commitment was seen to generate division, what was it that kept people and communities together? Clearly, a shared religious faith solidified togetherness but even this, we are told, could not be relied upon. *Esprit* identified problems that undermined Christian faith. Among these were the rise in atheism, the decline in Church-going and the emergence of a phenomenon called the Emmaus syndrome. This referred to the way in

which formal links to traditional religious institutions were being replaced by the informality of quick 'conversions' to spiritual paths devoid of biblical faith and foundation. In a related way, *Esprit* also drew attention to a perception that 'real' faith was the preserve of a religious and intellectual elite, with the rest of the Christian population ill-equipped intellectually to understand the meaning of faith. As a way of challenging some of these perceptions, this particular issue of *Esprit* proposed that faith be reconnected to language and *literally* to the 'Word of God'. In other words, it would become Christian duty to embrace contemporary society equipped with the Word of God:

We should be less preoccupied with adapting the message (of Emmaus), with modernising Church institutions, with taking hold again of history at the point where the Church failed, and act as though we are hearing the Word of God for the first time, and ask ourselves: if evangelisation were to start today, if the Church was to be found today, what would we do?¹²

The editorial went on to propose several hypotheses. By returning faith to its historical roots in the idea of *hearing for the first time*, the Word of God could be seen to cut through the social and cultural barriers that generate misguided perceptions. But if such an approach to faith were so simple, why, it asks, is faith not universally embraced? In other words, if the call to the Word of God has such positive and egalitarian effects, why doesn't everyone respond positively to the call of faith? Michel de Certeau points to several reasons why the 'problem of a mute faith' has stunted Christian evangelisation. On the one hand, 'the word of the Christian bears witness to someone who exists' but this language also 'becomes our life and the ideology of a country that does not exist anymore – or that is no longer ours'.¹³ For De Certeau, the language of faith and Christianity is a paradox because it represents 'a word which was once the affirmation of the existence of someone' but which in turn has become 'a cause of distress and an object out of date: a word that was a form of communication has now become an obstacle to communication and the place of a rupture between us and in us'.¹⁴ The consequence of this paradox for De Certeau is a linguistic mutism, the solution to which is a theory of absence which he defines as a source of truth. De Certeau argues that in any linguistic exchange our interlocutors, like God, escape us. Such a moment of 'weakness' however is also a moment of truth for in

being deprived of others, we experience a form of grace by virtue of an absence from them. De Certeau states:

In the past, the spiritual authors used to see in 'desolation' and deprivation a grace that obliged one to distinguish God from what was felt or thought, in other words from what was possessed. Today, a new type of deprivation is a 'grace' which obliges us to *distinguish* others (or revelation) from the ideas and presumptions we have of them; this grace reveals the *difference* of others and of God; it manifests the existence of someone else through its resistance and its abstention.¹⁵

For De Certeau, truth (what he calls a 'human truth') and the real sense of language and exchange is to be found in resistance to the idea that others exist and that we are linked to them in order to exist ourselves. This veiled critique of existentialism belies an alternative philosophy based on De Certeau's acknowledgement that it is only by admitting the radical otherness of others and our inability to connect with them that we admit their and our own existences, and the fundamental reciprocity between them and us. He continues:

By accepting *not to identify ourselves according to what they expect from us, and not to identify them according to the satisfaction and assurances that we expect from them*, we will discover the sense of *poverty* which is the heart of all communication. This poverty signifies in fact both the desire which links us to others and the difference that separates us from them. This is the very structure of our faith in God.¹⁶

Faith for De Certeau is forged out of a realisation and an acceptance of the fact that as human beings we are disconnected from one another. This disconnection is however also proof of our link to others. The relationship is therefore one of mutual, if not willless, dependence. The less we invest in humanity, he argues, the more we will discover the poverty of human communication. However, this poverty reinforces both separation from others and our desire for them. In comparing faith in God to this 'union in difference', De Certeau frees faith from traditionally monolithic conceptions of unity, community, truth and obedience and grounds it in the metaphor of linguistic (non-)communication.

While this 1967 issue addressed the specifics of the language of faith against the ideological backdrop of atheism and secularism, the 1971 issue titled *Réinventer l'Église?* extended the debate to take into consideration and question the common language of faith and whether it could command

the full support of Christians. In its editorial, Jacques Natanson identifies a crisis of faith. On the one hand, he claims that this crisis of faith is a language problem which stems from a wider suspicion about religious language and its cultural, social and psychological infrastructures. On the other hand, Natanson points to 'a communitarian aspiration' in Catholic ranks (perhaps an offshoot from 1968) that expresses itself in a critique of orthodox Catholicism and a refusal to recognise its institutions and structures.¹⁷ For Natanson, this communitarian aspiration is indicative of an existential doubt within Catholicism and of a lack of a common language on which all Christians can count. In fact, he compares the linguistic crisis effecting Catholicism in the early 1970s with earlier uncertainties in the mid 1960s in respect of the language of faith needing a social dimension and a political engagement. He states:

If the structures are dead, it is because they no longer allowed one to lead a type of existence demanded by evangelical necessity, as seen for example in the first manifestations of Christian life described by the Acts of the Apostles. If we suspect religious language, it is not only because of the modern critique of language founded on the social sciences. It is also and especially because it is not the language of the people, of a community; it does not express real experience. This is even more the case in respect of liturgical and theological language [...]. It is only from living communities that creativity will spring forth.¹⁸

Natanson believes that communities can bear witness to the 'Word' only by becoming 'places where the Word of God can come to language'. This requires 'a Christian existence that is both communitarian and critical, political and lyrical. Critical communities will only be Christian if they are linked to daily, militant and everyday life, in short only if they remain open'.¹⁹ What is interesting to note here is Natanson's apparent support for the new but politically controversial phenomenon of 'community training camps' that sprang up in France in the aftermath of 1968. These communities were primarily groups of Christian militants formed out of the failure of the Church to reach out beyond its sacramental straightjacket and 'inculturate the world'. Their motivations were political and evangelical. They challenged the official institution of the Church and accused it of missing what they saw as the subversive potential of the messianic message. As hotspots of creative and militant action, they provided a platform on which to take the debate about language and faith to another level, to the emergence of a new *critical* Christian mindset that was not afraid to mix politics (militancy) and religion.

Jean-Marie Domenach elaborates on this theme in his article 'Le spirituel et le politique'. In what reads like a manifesto championing the relationship between faith and politics, Domenach begins his argument with the idea that one cannot exile faith from the political domain; Christianity, he claims, can and must penetrate politics 'by modifying its foundations and its constitutive relations'.²⁰ At the same time, he sounds a note of caution by saying that any *rapprochement* between faith and politics should not be corrupted by 'radical evangelism' leading to a mutual 'love-in' between Church and political orders. On the contrary, Domenach appeals to human and Christian values that underpin political, social and cultural exchange. He highlights the idea that 'values' produce and articulate political ideas. In a direct critique of tax laws, debt, policies on immigration, segregation and pollution, he suggests that the only way of tackling these issues is to 'dare to trust in what is not quantifiable, and in what is dear to all of our lives: namely, friendship, joy, rest, contemplation, sport. These are not luxuries, they are the conditions on which society can be re-equilibrated'.²¹ Domenach's exhortation to 'spiritualise politics' may sound utopian, but it is founded on two main principles. The first is his belief that Christians can no longer justify being disengaged from politics ('keeping themselves pure', as he calls it). The second is his prioritisation of a language of *value* that focuses not on issues or political strategy but 'expresses itself in concrete objects, in groups, in militancy, in the energy of life'.²²

We can see from this early trajectory of religious debate from the 1960s through to the early 1970s that post Vatican II and in the aftermath of 1968, the priorities for Catholic thinkers at this time were to address the decline in religious practice and faith and the rise of secularisation by re-situating and thus re-validating Catholicism within social praxis and political necessity. However, if religious institutions were being seen to fail Catholics, and if the way to rectify this failure was to embrace modernity via socio-political and cultural engagement, then what was unforeseen in this strategy was the diversifying nature of the social itself. By the mid 1980s and the publication in 1985 of the issue of *Esprit* titled *Actualité de la religion*, the familiar themes of a 'deserted language' and the accommodation of politics within a religious framework resurfaced. However, by now the stakes were higher. Secular modernity had embedded itself within the French mindset. Gauchet's seminal study *Le Désenchantement du monde*, heralding the end of religion, was shaking the foundations of religious thinking in France. Most significantly, French politics and society were going through a metamorphosis in which democratic trends towards liberalism and individual rights were encroaching on traditional republicanism, with the consequence

that individualism, private interest and identarian 'belonging' were challenging the hegemony of republican universalism and general interest. The editorial of the 1985 issue of *Esprit* even pondered whether the very idea of alterity (transcendence) needed to be represented, so much had religion as a spiritual force been eroded and displaced to an expression of social immanence. From a religious perspective, this period is particularly important. On one level, the socio-political transformations forced Christianity and French Catholic thinkers in particular to look again at the relevance of institutional and collective expressions of religious belief in an increasingly individualised society. Gauchet's dire prognosis of a future without religion made it a matter of urgency for Catholics not to expect change from a Church that was resistant to change, but to respond directly to 'the private domain of the believer' and to the wider 'individualist logic'. On another level, and this was to prove a constant refrain through the 1980s, the religious 'crisis' produced by modernity would also be a challenge for religious thinkers to listen to the discourse of secular reason and to see in it a catalyst for redefinition and renewal.

The idea of not opposing modernity and religion but thinking of religion *with* modernity is an idea voiced in this 1985 issue by Hervieu-Léger. In her article 'Sécularisation et modernité religieuse', she begins by saying that the arrival of the 'secular city' under modernity has undermined the power of religion. However, she also suggests that modernity has given rise to new religious movements which in turn contradict the idea that modernity has put an end to religion. What is clear from her initial diagnosis is the fact that religion is still in rude health and in her attempt to understand its constancy in the modern mindset, she offers a dual explanation. The first is that modernity (by dint of its self-sufficiency and secularism) testifies to a 'need for religion' which progress under modernity has temporarily eclipsed. The second explanation is that the widely acknowledged phenomenon of the 'return of religion' is itself evidence of a 'pre-modern regression' induced by political crises and global uncertainty.²³ For Hervieu-Léger, the truth lies somewhere in between these two explanations. This ambivalence leads to a conclusion in which the paradox of modernity is expressed in the form of a question of how a movement (such as modernity) that *ideologically* and *effectively* excludes religion *actually* produces it: 'Modernity', she states, 'abolishes religion as a system of signification and as a generator of human energy, but, at the same time, it creates the space-time of a utopia which, in its very structure, remains in close affinity with religious notions of fulfilment and salvation'.²⁴

On the one hand, modernity is seen to nourish the aspirations of humankind in all its reasoned, imaginative and technological potential. But, on the other hand, modernity is also perceived to be 'in formal connivance with a religious identity' that precedes it and which it cannot shake off. This paradox of modernity is also synonymous with Hervieu-Léger's treatment of secularisation: 'It [secularisation] is no longer the disappearance of religion when confronted with rationality; it is the process of a permanent reorganisation of the work of religion in a society that is structurally incapable of fulfilling the expectations needed to exist.'²⁵

In the following year, *Esprit* published another special issue called *La religion...sans retour ni détour*. It revisited by now some familiar themes but this time within the context of modernity as paradox. The editorial raises the negative influences of secular modernity, with references to the 'aphasia of the believer' and how modernity as the new 'age of suspicion' has divested believers of a language of faith. But as with Hervieu-Léger's comments previously, other commentators come out in a robust defence of the positives to emerge from modernity. Joseph Moingt defends the right of theological research to engage with modernity by highlighting the tradition within theology of embracing scientific research, and its links to understanding culture: 'It is incumbent on theology to enter into a future partnership with our culture'.²⁶ The idea that religion should not be construed as a counter-culture to modernity is developed in more detail under the theme of secularisation. Hervieu-Léger alludes to this in her quotation above, but Schlegel expounds on it in his aptly titled article 'Revenir de la sécularisation'. Admitting, on the one hand, that secularisation is 'irreversible', he claims that this irreversibility does not, on the other hand, signify the end of religion. Rather, he maintains that secularisation installs a new set of relations between modernity and religion. In the same way that Moingt argues that secularisation of thought does not mean a loss of a theological identity or credibility but represents in fact the 'property of Christianity', Schlegel contends that secularisation represents a chance for religion to rediscover its true identity. He argues against the perception that secularisation has eroded religious practice and belief. Instead, Schlegel believes that we have underestimated the capacity of religion to 'invent modern figures to adapt to the novelty of the technological age, and to redefine itself in the form of a postmodern opposition to modernity'.²⁷ For Schlegel, religious pluralism, diversification of belief and individualism represent a new 'plenitude' for secularisation and its links between religion and postmodernity.

I will examine this link between religion and postmodernity in a later section of this chapter. But for the moment I want to follow up some of the immediate implications of Schlegel's article. In a section at the back of this issue of *Esprit* and titled 'Un nouvel espace public', the editors situate modernity's paradox and *positive* secularisation within the wider socio-political context of French 'democratic' republicanism. They cut to the chase in their prognosis for the future. Either the Catholic Church and religion generally risk inexorable disappearance from the ideological map, or they address as a matter of urgency the growing gap between the collective values of the institution of the Church and a changing socio-political culture that is promoting the rights of the individual. As a consequence of this growth in individualism, the editors maintain that belief and religious practice are no longer thought or expressed the way they used to be.²⁸ New forms of socio-political and cultural 'membership' have changed the ways individuals relate to the French republican private/public binary: 'Today, the language of belief passes through the filters of individualism'.²⁹ In a veiled critique of the papacy of John Paul II, the editors also argue, as have Hervieu-Léger, Moingt and Schlegel argued, that simply countering individual values with collective values is not the way forward for Catholicism or Christianity. Instead, they suggest, as Willaime intimated in the opening section of this chapter, that there is a need for a 'theological and philosophical plan – a modern anthropology' which will inscribe itself *inside* modernity and in recognition of 'the great drift towards the individualism of "modern" believers'.

The dilemmas facing the Catholic Church in France at this time are multifaceted. Firstly, there is the question of individualism. On the one hand, Catholicism's reluctance to accept the concept of individualism can be explained within a historical tradition of the *universal* Church and the Christian message of salvation *for all*. On the other hand, this reluctance is set against a democratic swing in French political culture in the mid 1980s which prioritised individual rights and equality of citizenship over conformity to a 'one fits all' republican mould. For Catholicism, individualism, or the tendency to 'fold in on oneself', is tantamount to a dereliction of religious duty, whereas, from a socio-political perspective, it represents freedom of expression and conscience. Secondly, there is the legacy of the separation of Church and State which has left Catholicism politically impotent and subject to narcissism and ideological entrenchment. The absence of any structured affiliation with the political establishment (as in other European countries like Ireland, Italy or Spain) through which to channel its concerns has meant that Catholicism in France and other

religious voices exist in isolation from the political decision-making process. That said, it is also the case that religious institutions occupy a unique space inside republicanism; in spite of their marginalisation from political decision-making, these institutions still command considerable moral and spiritual attention from large swathes of the body politic.

Against the backdrop of these religious tensions, Catholic thinkers in the mid 1980s took advantage of the democratic turn in French politics to advance a new offensive in the Church's negotiation with modernity, its freedoms and the changes in French society. By relocating the figure of the 'believer', formerly arcane and without a voice outside his religious jurisdiction, within a system of democratic integration in which his 'religious' rights demand legitimate recognition alongside everyone else's, Catholic intellectuals sought to articulate a public, social and political 'inscription' to religion in the new democratic dispensation. This strategy was successful in raising the profile of the believer on a public level. It also enabled religious thinkers to establish new lines of communication between religion and modernity/society. We have seen, for example, how Moingt used the debate on the history of theology as an impetus towards a reconciliation between modernity and theology. Martine Cohen in 'Figures de l'individualisme moderne' also restores faith to the idea that the return of religion is not a fear of the future or a world in evolution but a desire to engage with its progress.³⁰ Guy Petitdemange sees in modernity the possibility of a new 'memory dynamic' that will secure the heritage of religion inside modernity.³¹ Jean-Claude Eslin ties the debate neatly to the specific connection between religion and democracy. Citing Alexis de Tocqueville, he argues that the real benefit of religion is that it favours *intuitively* and *instinctively* freedom. 'Religion', he claims, 'instructs the art of being free'.³² However, wary of selling off religion to unfettered democratic *laissez faire*, he also suggests that the 'true' art of being free is only learned through limitation: 'How does religion favour freedom? Paradoxically, not so much by speaking of it but by limiting it'.³³

Eslin's suggestion that religion exercises a controlling influence over democracy and freedom has its roots in the Christian tradition. Specifically, the setting of limits to freedom is clearly informed by Catholic doctrine and theology. John Paul II discussed the issue at length in his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* in which he claimed that humankind's genuine autonomy ('*rightful* autonomy') is confined to the truth of revelation; in other words, 'although each individual has a right to be respected in his own journey in search of the truth, there exists a prior moral obligation, and a grave one at that, to seek the truth

and adhere to it once it is known'.³⁴ From a Catholic perspective therefore, any potential conflict between religion and freedom resolves itself on the side of an *a priori* adherence to Christian truth and revelation. And yet, in practice and within the public/private binary system of French republicanism, such a resolution can compromise the full integration of the Christian believer within French society. The options therefore are twofold; the believer continues to 'practice' his religion in a state of relative passivity and subservience to the general interest and republican universalism. Alternatively, by dint of his belief, he is forced to embrace a religious communitarianism which confirms his social exclusion and which also runs contrary to his universal Catholic ethics. In short, the downside of the democratic 'egalitarian age' for Catholicism is that as a specificity that seeks socio-political accommodation within the oxygen of democracy, it not only lacks the political channels through which to pursue such demands but, more fundamentally, it is forced to live with the dissatisfaction that its real *raison d'être* resides elsewhere.

The presumption therefore that socio-political democratisation could have been a form of salvation for religion in the 1980s is undermined and in fact seriously dented by the changing climate of the late 1990s. The very title of *Esprit's* special issue on religion in 1997, *Le temps des religions sans Dieu*, heralds a different, postmodern age in which even the political has been atomised and relativised. This change in political context is accompanied also by a shift in religious emphasis; the 'return of religion' has given way to the 'emptiness of religion', which in turn has been replaced by 'religion in the plural'. In his article 'Indépassable religion', Eslin charts this shifting religious trajectory. His thesis is that religion, conceived as an event of the past, has been invalidated after the collapse of messianism. The same invalidation, he argues, applies to religion as a future of hope. With the simultaneous autonomisation of religion and politics under postmodernity, Eslin claims that we occupy a present in which hope as a 'religious truth' is an illusion, and in which 'the climate of the times is one of neo-stoicism'.³⁵ He adds also that postmodernity has had the effect of undermining 'a classical articulation of religion and politics defined by the duality and the dual symbolic authority of Church and State'.³⁶ In its place is a 'liberalism without frontiers' which Eslin describes as a postmodern individual spontaneity that can do without tradition, roots, community or institution. Postmodernity, it would appear, has borrowed and nurtured the perception of religion in the 1980s as an expression of a legitimate right ascribed to private interest. But in the process it has taken this privatisation to a new level, to the extent that religion is

now measured exclusively in terms of an 'action on to oneself', a 'practice', an 'art of living' or a 'rule of life', as opposed to a body of knowledge ('wisdom') with a past, a tradition and intellectual and philosophical properties. While the effect of this new 'Godless religiosity' on French public space poses new problems for the capacity of *laïcité* to control the secular,³⁷ Eslin's focus is on the private expression of this new religiosity (in which he includes Buddhism, Mysticism and Jehovah's Witnesses) and its non-transcendental, non-metaphysical and self-oriented ethos.

The paradox of secularisation

From the mid 1980s, the trend towards the privatisation of religion ('return of the private') had been growing. However, while democratisation in the 1980s produced a new vision for the 'integration' of religion against the backdrop of modernity where religion had been officially banished from the French secular landscape, postmodernity advanced the privatisation of religion against a different backdrop altogether, one where religion had been rehabilitated and granted equal status to all other spiritual, ethnic and sexual specificities. *Esprit*, in one of its surveys carried out for the 1997 special issue, makes reference to postmodernity's effect on the 'relativisation of Christianity' and the emergence of 'religion à la carte'. Shoring up this postmodern vision is ongoing secularisation which is seen to endorse the freedom to choose religious options and formulate new existential and practical orientations of belief. As such, it would be inaccurate to rehearse a common misconception that secularisation is responsible for the decline of religion. Secularisation, like modernity, has been subject to a paradoxical process and one of the first aspects of this paradox has been to scotch the myth that secularisation is anti-religion. In the current debate on *laïcité* and secularisation, Olivier Mongin and Jean-Louis Schlegel make this abundantly clear in their joint article for *Esprit* in June 2005. They dismiss the temptation to prove collusion between official *laïcité* (an ideology) and secularisation (a sociological phenomenon). The co-authors highlight the fact that *laïcité* is afforded an official *habitus* which they define in the form of a public allergy to ostentatious religious signs. Secularisation, on the other hand, is characterised no longer as a loss of the religious but as a 'dissemination [of religion], a flowering, an individualisation, a bricolage, a redeployment of bits and pieces for celebratory, aesthetic and reactionary effect – which in all cases is without any real anchoring in a tradition, without a conscience and without a desire to belong, in short with communitarian links'.³⁸

The second key point in respect of the paradox of secularisation is that the aforementioned process of 'dissemination' has actually redefined religious specificity in what we could call a postmodern, hyper-democratised France. In a twofold argument, Willaime argues that secularisation nourished the idea that modernity had left religion behind, with the secular having replaced religion. But, as he goes on to say, it is now the 'secularisation of secularisation' that is characteristic of postmodernity, a turn of phrase that he defines in terms of the association of hypersecularisation and a certain return of the religious.³⁹ In other words, for Willaime, modernity as such has not ended with postmodernity. It is more the case that modernity has been radicalised and problematised and in the process a new set of cultural conditions for the contemporary resurgence of religion has come about. Olivier Roy, again in the context of recent debates on secularisation, points to the positives in this process. Dismissing the assumption of religious erosion, he states that secularisation 'entails necessarily a redefinition of religious belonging [...]. It entails a reconstitution of religious identity as a minority identity. It entails the disappearance of social evidence for religion and the explicit obligation to define oneself as believer (or non-believer)'.⁴⁰ In effect, as we will see in a later chapter with Vattimo's concept of Being as Event emerging out of secularisation (which he claimed to be the essence of Christianity), Roy and other religious thinkers argue that the return of religion is only relevant and in fact only makes sense against the backdrop of secularisation. This argument advances the idea of a 'recomposition of the religious' *beyond* the institutions of State and Church and *within* civil society. Recent religious debate in France has veered towards this issue of secularisation, primarily in response to the presence of Islam and the specific problems it poses for *laïcité* in respect of the way Muslims demand religious recognition in the public space. The secularisation of public space is a non-negotiable given under *laïcité*, and thus to seek religious inscription within it is problematic for all religious believers because it blurs the fundamental boundary in the republic between private and public expression. But beyond these statutory reasons, it may be worth asking why secularisation itself has become the focus of recent intellectual and religious scrutiny. Clearly, the return of religion in France, or to be more accurate the return of religiosities, has raised questions about the separation of Church and State and the relevance of *laïcité* in a France and Europe that are increasingly globalised. If *laïcité* is being challenged by greater Islamic integration and wider demands for religious recognition, and if religious institutions (Christian mainly) are no longer representative of the ways individuals are experiencing belief and faith, then we need to look at the question of religious

authority, and the nature of the relationship between religious institutions and believers.

In this respect, it is my contention that secularisation, in its paradoxical and disseminating manifestations, displaces the foundation of a religious 'authority' to a range of individual 'convictions' that are determined by their own moral and religious horizons. Secularisation skews the return of religion towards a different set of parameters whereby religious authority is renegotiated and made commensurate with the individual 'freedom of the believer'. In the light of this and the recent centenary of 1905, the issue of authority, both of Church and of *laïcité*, has come in for stinging criticism in a series of articles published in *Esprit* during 2005 and 2006. I draw attention to one interview in the 2005 March issue between Stanislas Breton and Jean-Claude Eslin. Titled 'L'autorité religieuse: entre foi et Église', both commentators rehearse a familiar argument concerning the origin of religious authority, questioning whether it is located in 'enunciative authority' (literalism, Word of God), 'institutional authority' (doctrine) or 'interpretative authority' (interpretation). They juxtapose two possibilities. Either the Church must 'reduce the authority of the Word of God' in order to make it 'adapt to more pragmatic and political demands', or Christians must embrace a plurality of authorities (spiritual, scriptural, institutional, interpretative, etc.). Eslin proposes that diversity is actually a process of enrichment, not because of proliferation of choice and the cultural benefits of relativism, but precisely because 'it [diversity] returns us to a foundational authority which, by remaining absent to us, authorises our freedom'.⁴¹ This is a view that echoes that of De Certeau in the context of his theory of the mutism of belief. In other words, Eslin, in an interesting twist to conventional thinking on secularisation as an authority-free zone, defends the diversity of religious traditions and experiences (which secularisation promotes) because paradoxically it invokes a return to an absent *authority*, in his case a metaphysical Christianity.

The views of Eslin are worth closer attention. If we have established that secularisation functions paradoxically in the way it engenders the return of religion, then Eslin's paradoxical idea that diversity and dissemination are liberating agents of authority casts a new light on the relationship between institution and believer. For Eslin, and let us be clear, diversity only hides the fact that there is a vacancy at the heart of secularisation which, for him, can only be filled by a return to the authority of Christianity; diversity *per se* is meaningless. However, in the absence of Eslin's foundational authority in Christianity, we are presented with the possibility of an authority located in absence/loss or in diversity itself. For

editors of *Esprit* over the years, this is the starkest and bleakest of alternatives, the possibility of the return of religion without meaning, nostalgia or culture, a new phase in religious history that is ready to start all over again from scratch. And yet, these fears may be unjustified. If it is the case that the much-vaunted proximity between secularisation and the return of religion is a ruse to re-institute doctrinal monotheisms, then our suspicions are well founded. But, given the consensus across most commentators on this debate thus far, it is clear that secularisation has facilitated a rethink of the relationship between institutional authority and believer, not to the extent that the former is bypassed altogether, but more to the point that authority itself can be seen to be self-generative, indeed that authority can also be founded in loss and in forgetting:

Forgetting is completely contrary to vacancy, for in each instance, it throws us and opens us to preoccupation with what lies before us [...]. There is in this forgetting of the past also something providential, where it reveals itself as authentically founding [...]. There is thus indeed a loss that founds us and this loss only gives and gives us. Access to the truth takes place only according to forgetting, overcome but not abolished, and thus the *parousia* of the truth is for us never either plenitude or coincidence.⁴²

In short, this recent positive spin on secularisation (with its emphasis on human choice, historicity, contingency, the non-metaphysical, the absence of transcendence, the need to confront progress and evolution, the embrace of culture and modernity as intrinsic elements in a holistic response to the return of religion) is indicative of two significant trends. Firstly, secularisation has contributed to the re-invention of a context in which religion is produced in postmodernity, including the ways in which religion is practised. Secondly, and crucially, secularisation remains faithful to the search for a religious authenticity *despite and by virtue of* its embrace of eclecticism.

From modernity to postmodernity: a critical overview

When Gauchet coined the phrase 'the return of religion' in 1985, the impact then and afterwards was profound. It provoked waves of debate in the pages of *Esprit* through the 1980s, 1990s and today. In the special issue *Le temps des religions sans Dieu* in 1997, Eslin couched this return within a 'postmodern universe of unlimited individual rights, self-interest, comfort and well-being', in short 'the return of privacy'.⁴³ For him, the return of

religion ushered in an era not of religious tradition but of a crisis of Christianity in modernity. According to Alain Touraine in the same issue, secularisation had manufactured a new and different religious subject, one that had been undone by modernity and delivered to the fragilities of individualism and communitarianism.⁴⁴ Touraine goes on to say that the traditional *religious* subject had been surpassed by a new *political* one for whom the 'sacralisation of the social' had become the new religion of society. Pierre-Olivier Monteil highlights 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 Boureux in the same issue) draws attention to the idea that relativism does not imply the end of belief. While belief 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 'metabolisation' and 'substitution' in secularisation,⁴⁵ with the promise of its refinement in the longer term.

This representation of postmodernity and the way it appears to have displaced religion across the socio-political canvas is in direct contrast to modernity's dialectic with religion in previous decades. In the issue of *Esprit* in 1985 titled *Actualité de la religion*, the editorial asks its readers if, in the struggle against the fracturing effects of secular 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* (*La religion... sans retour ni détour*) also addresses religious displacement by proposing that religion might have a more constructive role at the conjuncture between individual and collective freedoms.⁴⁶ It would seem that in the mid 1980s, the ambiguity of the term 'return of religion' crystallised the nature of the relationship between modernity and religion in France. This was a relationship characterised primarily by conjunctures between the individual and the social, past and present, 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 postmodern relativism and secular modernity. The first is the invariant that religion is an eternal property of the mind and that, by implication, belief remains an unfulfilled absolute even in a hypersecularised, postmodern context. This, as we have seen, is Monteil's conclusion. The second is the perception that secular modernity, in its pursuit of freedom of conscience, had in fact quarantined the believer, compromised

his affinity with a religious community and obstructed the transmission of a collective religious heritage.

In 2003, *La Revue du MAUSS* devoted a special issue to this debate on religion titled *Qu'est-ce que le religieux?* The arguments played out in *Esprit* in the mid 1980s and in subsequent special issues are rehearsed in this issue of *La Revue du MAUSS* and specifically in an exchange of articles between Gauchet, Alain Caillé and others. Gauchet, in particular, revises his original thesis. He replaces the celebrated 'return of religion' with the phrase 'coming out of religion' ('sortir du religieux'). This shift reflects his perception that postmodernity has *finalised* the end of religion as a 'structure', 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 outside of religion and within what he calls the new universals of science, technology, politics and the judiciary. However, in a second separate article titled 'Quelle conception politique de la religion?', Gauchet appears to qualify this representation of religion by defending 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 'way religion has structured human communities'⁴⁷ and of how religion has not only instructed the individual in subservience to power but also created the ambition within the individual to pursue 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 Debray in *Le Débat*, the latter responds to Gauchet on this point by claiming that to opt out of religion is tantamount to opting out of history. In stressing the permanence of religion in the world, Debray 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 'anterior-centred' focus of religion to the 'future-centred' 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 sacred as an 'identity'.⁴⁸ It is a theme developed by two other contributors to *MAUSS*. Jacques Dewitte conceptualises the return of religion 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: 'inherited religious language, elaborated over the course of the centuries is without doubt the best access we have to

truth and it would be unreasonable to deprive oneself of it'.⁴⁹ This 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. Willaime extends this use of the sacred to a defence of religion as 'a symbolic actuality', and as a '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.⁵⁰

We can see from this very brief outline that, for the period of *les trente glorieuses*, religion occupied what could be described as its natural place in the modern, secular and republican space – in other words, a private function of free thought. Postmodernity 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 religious belief 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 will see now, politically, for its reinsertion into the domains of secularism and postmodernity.

The 1986 special issue of *Esprit* 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 return of religion. Secondly, this return 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 'modernity = enlightened secularism'.⁵¹ Schlegel was adamant that *laïcité* was here to stay, indeed 'an irreversible fact'.⁵² But, critically, this irreversibility did not imply that *laïcité* could not and should not change. The challenge, as described by Schlegel, was to invent 'revolutions of the believable' that would eternalise the notion of belief as a constant thorn in the side of *laïcité*. However, more than this, the 1986 special issue 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 'democratic individualism' of the believer. This new-found status was set in:

a time when it appears that the crisis of the State, which is first and foremost a body of collective norms designed to group individuals

around common values, imposes the invention of new forms of collective deliberation that take into consideration individual demands. This is not to imply that *laïcité* has lost its authority, that political autonomy is being questioned, or that the separation of Church and State is under threat; rather, it suggests that public life is no longer determined by collective values (a republican ethics for example) according to which the individual or the citizen organises his choices and takes decisions.⁵³

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 'Êtes-vous démocrate ou républicain?'⁵⁴ 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 believer 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 later in the case of Catholicism, was to assume doctrinal and theological dimensions. What had changed, however, was that this discourse was now being resignified in the light of a different socio-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: 'secular society does not invoke the emptiness of religion but its fullness'.⁵⁵ Petitmange, as we have seen, is more specific in his identification of a different trend in religious thinking 'whose dynamic is memory' and whose language, while not of this world, 'must operate in this world'.⁵⁶ In its editorial, the search for a new 'identity for itself ... theologically and philosophically' is carefully balanced against 'a Christian grammar' that respects the cultural, historical and aesthetic Christianity of the past. However, this duality between forging a new religious identity and an obligation to bow to the historical legacy of Christianity produced, I would argue, an immobilism that characterised the believer in the mid 1980s. He was caught between a

new religious 'right to speak' gifted to him by democratisation, and a dutiful self-imposed 'aphasia' inherited from the past. I would suggest that this immobilism not only stunted the progress of a new 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 privatisation of religion reveals that individualism is not solely a product of modernity and postmodernity, but is also a symptom of Christian oppression, which in turn has 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 a crisis of its own making as 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 has been filled by the fracturing effects of postmodernity. In the process, the lines of transmission by which faith, religious traditions and knowledge were traditionally acquired have become blurred. It is against this backdrop of an embryonic religious 'identification' in the mid 1980s and its apparent malfunction in the 1990s and beyond that a current crisis in the transmission of belief and faith has emerged.⁵⁷ And yet, faced with this religious implosion, I would argue 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 papacy of Benedict XVI. While this strategy has angered and alienated many progressive 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 contemporary France.

Laïcité and democracy

The resignation of the European Minister for Justice Rocco Buttiglione in 2003 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.⁵⁸ Buttiglione's situation also echoes recent debates in *MAUSS* between Gauchet and Caillé, and in *Le Débat* between Debray and Gauchet about the complexity of the ever-present and thorny relationship between religion and politics. 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: 'Politics institutes. Religion does not. It is institutionalising'.⁵⁹ Caillé is less categorical and advocates a closer affiliation between religion and politics.⁶⁰ 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*, 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. He opposes the view of other political scientists, notably John Rawls and Richard Rorty, who claim that democratic participation effectively excludes religious reasoning.⁶¹ One could say that the *laïque* tradition in France resembles the Rorty and Rawls models. However, we have seen recently that the *affaire du foulard* in France 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. 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.⁶²

The criteria according to which the French republic in secular modernity has confined religion to a private expression are being reassessed. As a private and exclusive practice, religion under republicanism knew its place and the limits of its functionality. But with the emergence of individualist, mobile, non-institutional and non-intellectual 'religiosities', the boundaries between public and private expression are less clear and the role of *laïcité* in regulating these boundaries has been brought into question. Even in the context of Catholicism, I think it would be misleading to paint a picture of complete secular objectivity in a *laïque* but Christian, Catholic France, where Vatican encyclicals and letters from Bishops are read aloud regularly at Catholic Mass on Sundays. Similarly, as our brief historical analysis has demonstrated, the Catholic Church (with and without the imprimatur of the Vatican) has a tradition of defending religious/political alliances. In one of its recent letters⁶³, 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. And crucially, it defends the right and duty of the believer to intervene in political decisions that undermine Catholic faith and codes of morality. In particular, the Vatican challenges the legitimacy of *laïcité* by contesting its separation of 'civil and political autonomous space' from 'religious and ecclesiastical space'. In so doing, it defends what it sees as the inextricable link between 'living and acting politically'.

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*.⁶⁴ Intimating Debray's subsequent report to the Ministry of Education on religious instruction 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 and discrimination within secularism. As a consequence, the debate on the role and future of *laïcité* has intensified today. Schlegel and Mongin advocate a complete overhaul of the 'culture

of *laïcité* in preference to what they see as the current state of immobilism and the dangers of communitarianism.⁶⁵ Nicolas Sarkozy, the new President, is in favour of maintaining the absolute separation of Church and State, but has expressed a willingness to enter into dialogue and new relations between religious bodies and the State, even to the extent of courting controversy by using public monies to fund religious institutions. His concern that political instability and wider disenchantment are the products of a religious vacuum is indicative of the importance of religion in French cultural life, its impact on the nation's well-being and of the urgent need to re-evaluate *laïcité* in the light of social change.⁶⁶ Roy confirms this prognosis in his claim that the goalposts for *laïcité* have now changed. He asserts that religion, whether sanctioned by *laïcité* or not, has become 'integral' in modern-day France, part of the nation's 'public being'. For Roy, religion represents a new form of belonging, not ghettoised or compromised, but *integralised* in such a way that 'we have two juxtaposed spaces that are no longer separate: the believer lives his religion in the same space as the non-believer, but he inhabits this space differently'.⁶⁷

Régis Debray: 'teaching religion is *not* religious teaching'

In an earlier part of this chapter, I argue that one of the main ways Catholicism (under recent papacies) has risen to the challenges of secularism has been to elevate reason in the articulation of faith, and in the process dispel a misconception that faith is based on irrational belief and human insecurity. One of Catholicism's key strategies in this regard has been to take reason away from the hold secularism has exercised over it and re-appropriate reason for its own theological purposes. It is in the context of this wider debate that I want to bring this opening chapter to a close by focusing on a related issue that goes to the heart of current conceptions of French *laïcité*.

In 2002, Debray submitted a report to the Ministry of Education titled *L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque*.⁶⁸ In very general terms, the report made a case for the teaching of religion in French 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-goers are growing up in a non-religious context where they know little about their country's religious traditions. As a result, the report claims that their knowledge of the present and future is severely impoverished. Among the report's 12 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 and religion', and 'philosophy of laïcité and history of religions') to be taken by prospective 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.⁶⁹

It comes as no surprise that Debray's report was not well received by secularists. However, his report needs to be evaluated within the broader context we sketched earlier of a theological religious discourse, a boundary-free postmodernity, and how religion might become a natural and reasoned ally of *laïcité*. The report involves a subtle and complex argument, democratic and republican in direction, and weaves a labyrinthine path between the virtues of *laïcité* and their simultaneous erosion. It 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. Religious knowledge 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.⁷⁰ This identification is an important element 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. Former Pope John Paul II, arguably the most philosophical of recent Pontiffs, wrote extensively on this link. His 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* is a pivotal document for several reasons. As a precursor to Debray's report, it addresses the issue of the return of religion from the position of Catholicism. In this respect, it sets the tone and the manner in which Catholicism was to respond to the critical theological issues of the day. The encyclical opposes radically the pervasive trend towards historicist, pragmatic and eclectic philosophies of religion which seek to displace religion from its metaphysical and absolutist 'truths' and relocate it in reality, culture and language. A year after its publication, Moingt, writing in *Esprit*, underlined the importance of the encyclical by saying that it restored a philosophical status to Catholicism and demonstrated the philosophical and theological interdependence between faith and reason in the Catholic tradition. And while Moingt also exposes some of the problems with the encyclical's exclusive and absolutist conceptions of truth and autonomy, he still acknowledges its

essential significance and the way it embeds Catholicism in a tradition of rational thought, cause and effect and their salvific justification.⁷¹

Fides et Ratio establishes a twofold order of knowledge, natural reason and divine faith; 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 dispense 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'.⁷² Debray's report invokes reason in its defence of teaching religious knowledge but Debray is quick to dismiss any suggestion that the rational justification for teaching religious knowledge in French schools is designed to undermine *laïcité* or secular modernity. 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. On the contrary, as readers, we are made aware that Debray wants to cultivate their connection; to link religious knowledge to the objective 'transmission of knowledge' in *laïcité* is a rationale that *laïcité* will have difficulty eschewing.⁷³

The tradition of linking reason to revelation is well established. Reason is used 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 and Catholic rationale, Debray is able to advance his theory that religion cannot be excluded from *laïcité* on the basis that it cannot participate in the *rationally controlled, public transmission of knowledge* in the republican school: 'To relegate religious knowledge from the rational and publicly controlled transmission of knowledge encourages a pathology of control rather than one of healthy relations [...]. To abstain is not to cure'.⁷⁴ 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 need for a separation between religious faith and general knowledge, and specifically, that the instruction of knowledge in the republican school should be free from any possibility of 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 'religious ignorance'. An equally worrying concern is what he calls the 'culture of extension'. This refers to a form of 'knowledge' that is achieved through overexposure to the media and television 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 of extension' or through culture as a 'cumulative continuity'.⁷⁵ 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 religious instruction is linked positively. By means of this conceptualisation of knowledge, Debray wants to erase the presupposition that faith and knowledge cannot co-exist in *laïcité*:

In the same way that the wise man and the believer do not invalidate each other, so the *objective* approach and the *confessional* approach should not compete with each other, providing the two can exist and prosper simultaneously [...]. There is sufficient proof that the two can co-exist in any one individual (an interpreter can be a critic).⁷⁶

Debray's argument for the co-existence between wise man ('savant') and believer ('témoin') is at the heart of this report. But as an idea it also reaches out to previous debates in this chapter on the spiritualisation of politics, on the role of the believer in a democracy, on 'Christian praxis' and on the politics/religion axis in general. We should not forget, of course, that this co-existence is played out in the school and personified in the school 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 dual and incongruous emphasis on 'free thought' and 'the suppression of personal convictions'.⁷⁷ Debray articulates this dilemma of the teacher in *laïcité* as follows: 'Allowing a doctrine or a reality to be known is one thing, promoting a norm or an ideal is another thing altogether.'⁷⁸ The critical issue, for Debray, comes down to the transmission of 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 ('internal') discourse; cloistered and self-referential, it is a discourse without external referent or need for public dissemination. It is further defined by its self-worth and its intellectual consciousness and it is a discourse cultivated by the believer. On the other hand, there is knowledge that is defined by the fact that it is a common, shared knowledge. For Debray, this is objective (wise) knowledge, approved and standardised by *laïcité* and by the school as having a valid public function 'at introductory, intermediate and advanced levels of the teaching curriculum'.

Debray charges *laïcité* with constructing a purity of knowledge. One-dimensional, selective and homogeneous, *laïcité* is perceived as defending the incompatibility of religious knowledge with a knowledge fit for public consumption. It is a perception grounded on two controversial notions, firstly, that religious 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.⁷⁹ But the relative pros and cons of *laïcité* are relative to one's location on the political spectrum. *Laïcité* can be viewed either *democratically*, that is where the school is seen as a mirror image of civil society⁸⁰ or from a republican perspective in which case society resembles the school as a space of public and private separation.⁸¹ Debray takes a different approach. For him, the debate has more to do with knowledge and how *laïcité's* claim to objectivity is founded on the idea that religious belief compromises this objectivity on the grounds that belief is an irrational discourse. Debray, in the tradition of Catholic theology, contests the artificial construction of a divided (private/public) knowledge by claiming metaphorically that these two representations of knowledge are 'the two blades of the same pair of scissors'.⁸² John Paul II was more precise in his summary of this dialectic: 'CREDO UT INTELLEGAM'.⁸³ And Benedict XVI has reinforced the indivisibility of rationalist faith ('Fides quaerens intellectum') in his 2008 speech at Ratisbonne where he sides with the Pascalian interpretation of the faith/reason binary, summed up in the phrase: 'The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing at all'.⁸⁴

Debray proffers his alternative model of indivisible knowledge, intimating that for *laïcité* to oppose the rational link between believer and wise man would indicate intolerance and discrimination. In short, Debray appeals to the democratic credentials of *laïcité* to accommodate the instruction of religious knowledge with an argument that seeks to make *laïcité* more *laïque* than it already is. What Debray understands by religious knowledge and its specific role in *laïcité* reaches a climax towards the end of the report. He puts *laïcité* on its well-established pedestal, with freedom of conscience in pride of place. But he challenges *laïcité's* definition of liberty by suggesting that liberty has a responsibility (in the interests of 'human experience') to safeguard young people and future generations from 'religious illiteracy'.⁸⁵ In effect, Debray appeals directly to the principle of freedom of conscience in *laïcité* to validate the study of religion, by

underlining his perception that *laïcité* and religion are not opposites. 'How can one', he asks, 'not see the study of religious knowledge as a principle of *laïcité*?'⁸⁶ Debray goes on to reinforce his argument by allaying the fears of suspicious *laïcs* through an appeal to belief *and* reason. Religious 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 and the triumph of 'light over darkness'. To reject this association is, for Debray, to invoke a form of *laïcité* that is 'scarred by the conditions of its birth'; in other words, a *laïcité* that sees religious belief as a 'folly', and a *laïcité* that is steeped in a culture of 'militant anti-religious fervour'.⁸⁷ Instead, Debray argues for the inclusion of the study of religion in schools on the dual grounds that it is a principle of *laïcité* (freedom of conscience) and that belief (faith) is linked rationally and intellectually to self-understanding and the meaning of salvation (in other words self-knowledge and human knowledge in general).

In the first instance, Debray appeals to the democratic tendency in *laïcité* which, he claims, has its origins in the early foundations of the republican school: 'To teach in this fashion is to recapture the golden age of republican and secular law that began with the establishment of an independent section of the school in 1886 with the unique purpose of studying *in a non-theological way, religious phenomena*' (my italics).⁸⁸ In the second instance, he highlights the inextricability of the relationship that can exist between believer and wise man, and how its opposition and denial is tantamount to intellectual fascism. 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 or partial inflection. But it is a subtle compromise because, for Debray, the term 'religious phenomena' 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 secular readers by saying that there is no need for modernisation or democratisation of *laïcité*. Instead, it is a question of 'resources' and of *laïcité* being 'refounded, rejuvenated, reassured in itself and in its own values'.⁸⁹ In defending the 'republican' traditions of the French school, we might ask with justification 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 'phenomenon') in *laïcité*, an argument that *laïcité* has thus far been unwilling to countenance.

Within religious circles, Debray's report has been naturally well received. Roy has welcomed the debate as part of a wider reevaluation of religion within *laïcité*.⁹⁰ Diana Pinto sees the report as a step in the right direction but argues that more needs to be done from a republican perspective to make *laïcité* 'a space of welcome and non-exclusion'. She states: 'It is not a question of understanding religious knowledge as though religion were a biological or psychic given. Rather, it is a question of entering into a dialogue with religious realities in all their historical and cultural richness.'⁹¹ Sarkozy has been less enthusiastic in his response to the report and has raised some concerns about the effects on teachers of forcing them to teach religion in schools. He also has reservations about the critical aptitude of school children to discern the difference between religious knowledge as 'phenomenon' and 'religious instruction'. Other commentators have responded in detail to the report in the way they address specifically the critical issues of the study of religion as historical discipline and in the context of the transmission of knowledge. Xavier Boniface, for instance, endorses the report's historical focus. Citing Debray, Boniface states: 'Religions have a history [...]. To talk about a historical context, without reference to the spirituality that energises it, is to run the risk of taking the life out of that context.'⁹² In a thesis that broaches the study of religion from three historical perspectives ('history of the Church', 'history of religions' and 'religious history'), Boniface defends the *historical* significance of the study of religion in schools on the basis that history is seen as part of a methodology in which the development of knowledge (in its analytical, comparative and disciplinary expressions) is the primary intellectual objective. The fact that the subject taught happens to be religion is ultimately besides the point.

Jean-François Barbier-Bouvet shares many of Debray's concerns about the culture of television zapping and illiteracy and their effects on school children. He also highlights the trend towards postmodern relativism, 'self-spirituality', 'the logic of efficacy' and immediate gratification (the 'religion of the present' as he calls it) which militate against the reception of knowledge as a cumulative, substance-based and historical process. Barbier-Bouvet's principal concern is the fear of 'misrecognition' which he defines in terms of a breakdown in the mechanism (mainly linguistic) by which knowledge is transmitted. Even established categories of acquiring

knowledge (books, study, research and apprenticeship), he claims, are being replaced by new categories of instant knowledge access (the Internet for example). The consequences for religion, according to Barbier-Bouvet, are equally stark where instant 'salvation' is seen to be attainable without an understanding of religion as a 'construction and organisation of knowledge'.⁹³ Clearly, Debray's and Barbier-Bouvet's theses are addressed to different audiences, one to the political establishment, the other to the academic and religious community. However, their conclusions are the same; religious *ignorance* is not only a failure on the part of the institution of the school but a function of a wider crisis in the transmission of knowledge. On an optimistic note, both infer that this state of affairs can be changed through, as Debray intimates, a reconciliation between history and religious knowledge. Barbier-Bouvet concurs:

If you transmit history without knowledge, you reduce religious culture to a simple reminiscence, to a dead culture, to a methodology, and you bypass what is essential. If you transmit knowledge without history, that is if you approach religion without memory, you leave people open to the manipulation of their own emotions, you weaken their resistance to gurus and underground 'psycho rituals'. In truth, the real challenge in the transmission of a religious culture is this: to manage to hold the two ends of the chain at the same time.⁹⁴

As *Esprit* has been the main research resource for these issues and for this chapter, it seems appropriate to return to a recent article in this journal as part of my conclusion. Philippe Capelle and Henry-Jérôme Gagey also 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 the reciprocity between faith and reason, the authors rise in part to the challenge of Debray's report, which is to answer the question whether one can, in an educational environment, be a university Professor and a believer at the same time? The authors are keen to underline the fact that one can teach 'religious phenomena'⁹⁵ 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 'the rational and publicly controlled transmission of knowledge' (which is the criterion by which *laïcité* is seen to operate in the school), religious belief (Catholicism in particular) has a legitimate, objective and intellectual rationale that justifies its equal 'transmission' as knowledge in the school.⁹⁶ The crux of the debate therefore is not about whether belief and religion should be private concerns under modernity or postmodernity, or whether they prejudice public knowledge, but about whether belief *constitutes* a knowledge and whether it can be defined rationally.

Capelle and Gagey call for new spaces of 'objectivity' removed from the 'single and official voice' of *laïque* objectivity. But they also call for a rethink of the concept of knowledge. Debray's articulation of knowledge as the union of wisdom and belief (two parts of the same scissors) is reinforced by Capelle and Gagey who state that to be a university Professor and a believer constitutes 'an indispensable dialogical element'.⁹⁷ Debray and these co-authors reject the apartheid of knowledge in the republican school. It is seen to promote a '*laïcité* of incompetence'. By contrast, they see in faith, belief and religious instruction a tradition of religious *knowledge* grounded in Catholic theology and philosophy, and in a current socio-political context that promotes the democratisation of this knowledge in the form of a '*laïcité* of intelligence'.