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Teaching about religion in France.
The role of works of art and iconography

Isabelle Saint-Martin

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Special Issue

Religious culture and education in 20th and 21st century Europe

Maria Giuseppina Meloni and Anna Maria Oliva (eds.)

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Table of Contents / Indice

Marcello Verga <i>Preface</i>	7-9
Francesca Cadeddu <i>Fighting Religious Illiteracy with Knowledge. Presentation of PARS, Portale di formazione e informazione per il contrasto dell'analfabetismo religioso.</i>	11-18
Federica Candido - Vito Loré - Carla Noce <i>Lost Christianities in textbooks. A case study of the grammar high schools in Rome</i>	19-46
Denis Pelletier <i>Religious history of France and public debate: the "eternal return" of a polemic issue</i>	47-55
Michele Maria Rabà <i>The religious fact between society and politics in the Italian Modern and Contemporary history textbooks</i>	57-74

Isabelle Saint-Martin	75-88
<i>Teaching about religion in France. The role of works of art and iconography</i>	
Aurora Savelli	89-110
<i>Online resources for the history of religion: a look at national history museums and at the House of European History</i>	
Liliana Simeonova	111-117
<i>Academic purges and reforms in the Academy in relation to the studies in Church history in the early stages of Communism in Bulgaria</i>	

Teaching about religion in France. The role of works of art and iconography

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Abstract

The lack of understanding of our cultural heritage was one of the major reasons raised twenty years ago to justify teaching about religions in schools. Though the issue went on to reach other subjects, works of art offer a privileged means by which to talk about how religion affects the lives of people in other civilisations, as they are as concrete as you can get. Taking a look, through examples, at how the place of art as a vector of teaching about religions evolved in the debate can shed some light on the assets and limits of this approach.

Keywords

Education and Religion, Public school and Religious Pluralism, Secularization, Art and Religion.

Résumé

La perte de compréhension du patrimoine culturel fut parmi les premiers motifs invoqués en faveur d'un enseignement des faits religieux à l'école laïque, il y a une vingtaine d'années. Si l'argumentation s'est par la suite appuyée sur d'autres aspects, les œuvres d'art offrent une perspective privilégiée pour aborder, par la médiation d'un support concret, diverses facettes de la dimension du religieux dans une civilisation. Examiner la place de cette référence dans les évolutions du débat, à travers quelques exemples, peut éclairer les atouts et les limites d'une telle approche.

Mots-clé

Education et religion, École et pluralité religieuse, Laïcité, art et religion.

Introduction. - 1. The role of artworks in "Teaching about religion".- 1.1. Relevant symptom. - 2. Tragic result. - 3. Potential remedy. - 4 Art and iconography in school textbooks. - 5. The "desire to see": illustrations in school textbooks. - 6. The illusion of the "illustration": form and meaning. - 7. The illusion of the "document": anachronism and historicity. - 8. Iconophilia and iconophobia: the status of artworks. - 9. The approach through art and the temptation of apologetics. - 10. Conclusion: Art as something not always universal...- 11. Bibliography. - 12. Curriculum vitae

Introduction

Teaching about religion (for non-denominational purposes) may appear, on the

surface, to have been given reduced importance in school curricula. Under French secularism (since the separation between Church and State in 1905) and to some recent laws, such as the 2004 Act on “ostentatious and religious signs” in school life, the French school system could be seen as completely closed to religions. France is indeed one of the very few European countries which do not dedicate a specific class to this question. It is not a subject in itself and there is no specific course about it. However, it would be misguided to think that religious aspects are completely absent from teaching in schools. Arguments supporting teaching about religion have been developed during the last twenty years and have led to the elaboration of new school syllabuses. The foundational report on this topic, Régis Debray’s Report (2002), drew a clear distinction between religion as an object of faith and religion as a cultural object. This report associates symbolic and patrimonial perspectives with the need to improve understanding of the contemporary world and to encourage an openness conducive to tolerance and living together in a pluralistic society. It recommends disseminating knowledge pertaining to the “religious fact” in all disciplines. Since then, the choice made in French education has been to approach religious phenomena through various existing subjects, and especially in History or Literature.

The value and limitations of this choice, which introduces a contextualized approach to religious facts yet is piecemeal and fragmented across programs, have been debated (Borne - Willaime, 2007; Estivalezes, 2005; Gaudin, 2014; Avon - Saint-Martin - Tolan, 2018). After already examining the possibilities offered by such teaching in relation with the issue of citizenship education (Saint-Martin, 2013), it would now be of interest to me, as part of this workshop centred on textbooks, to focus on how images and references to works of art have their place.

Covering this topic, as it relates to France, through iconography alone may seem too confined. But even if this method can only yield partial results (otherwise complemented by other means), the subject does however deserve to be analysed on its own, due to the symbolic value it acquired, time and again, in the debate on teaching about religion.

Indeed, the question of iconography, or rather of works of art in general, surfaces at two levels, recurring almost like a refrain. Firstly, it raises visibility about the ignorance of religious culture that our pupils, and fellow citizens alike, have come to generally. Secondly, one of most severe consequences of this ignorance being the loss of access to a shared cultural heritage, it also appears in measures intended to remedy the deficiency within a secular framework. A review of the arguments behind these levels of thought will shed light on what

is expected of the debate on teaching about religion, which in turn will make it possible to assess the role that textbooks could give to the iconography of these questions.

1. *The role of artworks in "Teaching about religion"*

1.1. *Relevant symptom*

The loss of access to artistic heritage in particular, which is connected with the lack of knowledge about religion in general, appears as the driving consideration in the arguments developed by the Teachers' League (*Ligue de l'Enseignement*) who, at the beginning of the 1980s¹, suggested that the deficiencies in this area be remedied by studying the texts and founding myths of the great religions. This consideration is invoked regularly in the forewords of books written at the time on this issue. The school principal of the *lycée Buffon*, where Danièle Hervieu-Léger developed a series of courses that led to her book *La Religion au Lycée* gave an example that has since become emblematic: a pupil in art class, seeing Mantegna's *Saint Sebastian pierced with arrows*, thought it was made by American Indians (Hervieu-Léger, 1990). In the preface of her book, *Lectures bibliques aux sources de la culture occidentale* (Biblical Readings at the source of Western Culture), Anne-Marie Pelletier (1995) mentions pupils in the galleries of the Louvre commenting about the "baby-sitter" they often see holding a child on her lap... In the classes on art history that I give to first-year university students, some of them, not having any knowledge of Christian culture, are clearly unable to see a dove as a representation of the Holy Spirit in an image of Christ's baptism and there are many other such anecdotes.

As amusing as these examples may be – examples which should not of course be the basis of ready generalisations – they are nonetheless the visible part of a phenomenon to be taken seriously, and are seen as a relatively reliable sign of a loss of religious culture. The objective nature of the inability to grasp the immediate meaning of an artwork (the pre-iconographic and the iconographic states as Panofsky would say, before even dealing with the iconology) (Panofsky, 1967) seems like a dependable measuring device for unequivocally presenting the break with a form of culture that was once shared by a large part of the population, without any special scholastic effort necessary beforehand (in other words, the ability to recognize the figures of Mary, Jesus, the dove of the Holy Spirit, or the martyrdom of a saint on any given painting

¹ This action by the League in 1982 was also an element of another debate, involving the relationship between the public school system and private institutions under contract with it.

used to come naturally). It is not possible to envision analysing a painting in a school environment from a catechistic point of view; that said, the lack of understanding in this area reveals a gap in cultural knowledge that is harder to discern in other areas.

2. *Tragic result*

Once the symptom is identified, its result may not seem that alarming. In a system ruled by *laïcité*, the loss of religious culture, undoubtedly related to waning attendance at catechism (and certainly also to the reduced content of catechism itself, but that is another issue), associated with the diminished influence of religion in families, is not a matter that the school curriculum needs to address directly. However, when taking the artistic dimension into account, these deficiencies, which are only one piece of the traditional humanist culture that is in decline everywhere, take on a universal value and therefore a tragic one. The inability to identify the subjects of a large part of Western art no longer just reflects failing the "final exam" for one's first communion; all of a sudden it means walking around in the Louvre in the same way that one would amble through the Museum of Asian Art (where most of our fellow citizens would be unfamiliar with the episodes of the life of Buddha or unable to recognize the meaning behind his various manifestations). In other words, it means living in a universe of forms and colours that may please the eye but whose themes or formal arrangement are incapable of bearing any sort of message to the spectator on the vision that the painter and his era had of man's place in the universe of relations between the celestial and the terrestrial. How can one then put the revolution of perspective, or that of the subject, into its proper context, if it is all just graphic play without any specific meaning?

It means being ignorant of one's own culture, or at least the formal expressions of Western culture. This break, this inability to see oneself in a "cultural lineage" – to put D. Hervieu-Léger's concept of "devotional lineage" (Hervieu-Léger, 1993) in a different context – is seen as an attainable objective, whereas in its most complete form, that culture was never anything other than the prerogative of a specific social category of pupils, far from the current objectives of 80% of pupils graduating in a given year. The all-encompassing aesthetic value of art becomes an argument free from the suspicion of being religiously motivated, one that collects under one roof a large number of concerns: from the decline in the quality of pupils' schoolwork to the break with their roots... With literature, press articles on teaching about religion resort to artistic examples, again for their value as symptoms and tragic results. The first pages of Régis Debray's 2002 report present their share of examples upfront in

the matter.

3. *Potential remedy*

Consequently, other approaches centre on this area as a means for coming up with a solution. As regards accessing Western art, clarifying the result and putting it into context allows for elements of religious culture to be presented in a mediated and disinterested way. In line with Malraux (1951), we must first remember that most historical artworks and artefacts in museums were not created with such locations in mind, but for religious, devotional purposes – this would include the majority of Egyptian or Greek statuary or altarpieces that are now scattered in several different places. The first museums even had their origins in the offerings left since ancient times by the faithful at pilgrimage sites. Every art history teacher is ultimately confronted by the objective necessity to take into account religious culture in the broad sense of the term, in order to explicate the relationship between aesthetics and faith in the art of the past. This affinity would favour the teaching of religious facts. Using works of art as the basis for one approach to this issue makes it possible to have a physical medium as a starting point. The act of bringing out its meaning allows for objective progress in the analysis of its context, interposing its materiality between the religious theory it represents and the observer's role in that theory. The artwork, this third party endowed with special aesthetic value, again offers a guarantee of secularism in the approach (that which is considered an almost natural fashion). This approach defuses the debate by basing theological concepts on the comprehension of externally observable forms (e.g., Christ in his glory, or dying on the cross, a dove placed precisely between the Father and the Son; whether the Prophet's figure is veiled or not; figurative elements in a Haggadah or pure ornamentation with geometric designs...), rather than within a denominational discourse. Through this mediation, the teaching of religious facts can get to the heart of belief systems and in this way examine how a symbolic system works. It is not enough to just be able to identify the main figures in a work, to notice a hand coming out of the clouds or a tongue of flame, or even to be familiar with the attributes of saints (there are excellent guides for that); what matters is grasping the meaning of the work and the relationship it has to a founding myth. A work like Fra' Angelico's *Annunciation* (1431-1435, Prado, Madrid), reproduced in a high-school textbook, portrays at the same time the Angel and Mary and, in the background, Adam and Eve being cast from the Garden of Eden. This altarpiece associates two scenes that do not seem to have any relationship to each other. Here, the teacher will be able to clarify the connection between abstract notions of Incarnation and

Redemption, and the way Christians see themselves as both having inherited the pages of Genesis and needing to reinterpret them, before a painting that renders the Virgin Mary's *fiat* both visible and intelligible. In the same way, presenting the absence of perspective in Persian miniatures, not as a mistake by the artist but as a refusal to compete with divine creation by giving form to life forces, or perceiving the graphic interactions of a Hebrew manuscript that cause forms to appear without explicitly depicting them, requires an understanding of the motivations underlying a certain style of formal expression.

Of course, a choice like this has its share of problems and some have been pointed out (Ponnau, 1997). Besides the risk of frequent partiality toward Catholicism, the approach via artworks also risks seeing religious systems only as museum pieces or elements of cultural heritage, frozen in an old-fashioned form of expression. Moreover, relying for the most part on fine art may mean neglecting the important role of religious expression in so-called popular culture. Despite these reservations, expressed most often by those who fervently defend the use of iconography in the teaching about religion, it must be recognised that this method is part of a perfectly legitimate line of thinking, which seems to be relatively well accepted by teachers as well as parents (despite the situation, limited in scope yet cited repeatedly, of some parents – strict atheists, Muslims or Jews – refusing to let their children visit religious buildings, usually Christian ones).

4. Art and iconography in school textbooks

Field trips (to museums, religious edifices, etc.) are certainly the best way to implement this teaching method, and this is especially true for studying religious architecture. Nevertheless, the medium used most often, the one available to teachers on a daily basis, remains the school textbook.

5. The "desire to see": illustrations in school textbooks

But this is precisely where one problem lies. Independently of any issues relating to religious topics, school textbooks have undergone an inflation of pictorial content over the past few decades, giving a much larger importance to images in course structure, sometimes to the detriment of the text. Composed in the form of double pages, illustrated for the most part, the presentation of ideas relies more and more on documents (texts or pictures); the book becomes a kind of directory that the teacher consults in order to support or illustrate what he or she says.

The history of textbook illustrations is not the main subject here, but an

historian's approach cannot completely ignore its role. In the long history of the development of the illustrated book, images for educational purposes take their place alongside the frontispieces of the *Lives of Famous Men* and the inset portraits displaying the heroes' features... In the 1890s, when the techniques of mechanical reproduction allowed for a significant increase in the number of illustrations in school textbooks, these illustrations were mainly pictures of kings, ministers and military commanders, giving life to a vision of history dominated mostly by leaders... These images were accompanied by cheap renditions of historical events, based on the paintings decorating the halls of Versailles.

Of course, the teaching of history, filtered through the Annales school, is no longer limited to the lives of individuals. Yet the desire to see images of heroes, a completely legitimate desire, still motivates many iconographic choices. Proof of this is the layout of one particular high-school textbook, where each section is prefaced by an inset portrait of some representative figure of the period studied. Apparently, the portraits of Cesar or King Louis XIV do not seem to pose the same problems as the choice of an inset portrait of Christ for the chapter on the origins of Christianity. Il est nécessaire de préciser les codes de représentations du portrait royal même si ces portraits se réfèrent bien à une personne physique et gardent la trace d'un visage précis. It is necessary to specify the codes used to represent a royal figure, even though the portrait is of an actual person and documents a specific face. But it is not possible to approach the representation of Christ in the catacombs of Callixtus, without knowing the meaning given to this figure flanked by the Alpha and the Omega. In the same way, the icon of the Christ illustrating the chapter on Byzantium supposes that the notion of incarnation be specified (Boespflug, 2008). And what can be said about the portrait of Averroes in a junior-high textbook accompanying an article on Arab philosophy? Only that this detail of a painting from the Florentine *Quattrocento* has only the slightest connection to the person represented. On the other hand, it has a great deal to say about how he is portrayed in Western culture... What the book doesn't show is that the work from which this face is taken is one of the many variations on the theme of Thomas Aquinas trampling heresies underfoot... ("Averroes" is one of the dejected figures at the bottom of the painting; it is in no way a portrait of him!)

6. *The illusion of the "illustration": form and meaning*

The previous example proves, if any proof is necessary, that teachers cannot simply let the pupil's immediate reaction decide how images should be used, and that what they say in class remains essential for putting images into context,

images that are never self-explanatory. Even a simple portrait, at first glance the easiest form of iconography to discuss, reveals more than just the hero's appearance... All image creation involves making choices and interpretations. Illustrations in textbooks cannot go without commentary from the teacher, any more than the stained-glass windows and sculptures in cathedrals could be left to the illiterate faithful to be treated as something like comic strips, despite generalisations of this kind still made by some junior-high school textbooks. To understand these artworks, both their artistic forms and the religious facts represented must be put into context, to provide a counterpoint to the medieval sermons and the orally transmitted religious culture that were once instilled in those who visited cathedrals.

Here, "understanding" works of visual art means understanding them from an artistic perspective – despite all the rhetoric applied to them, artworks do not "tell a story," they "show". This means not so much "reading" them as "seeing" them. But although the number of successful applications of this approach should not be underestimated, two things can undermine the use of artworks in the teaching of religious facts. Firstly, works are sometimes only considered from a formal perspective: one high-school textbook devotes a whole section to the Renaissance, including many works on religious subjects, but the only focus of analysis is the role perspective plays in them. Secondly, artworks may be reduced to their subject: a work is seen only for what it is supposed to represent, not for *how* it represents. Every painting of the Annunciation has something to say about the story of Luke and the Incarnation, but each one says it in an entirely different way. Reduced to a theme, to a pure equivalent of the text, the work becomes transparent, as though someone indifferent to its materiality were gazing upon it, someone who only saw it as an illusory "illustration".

7. The illusion of the "document": anachronism and historicity

Just as the notion of "illustration" is a complex one, and just as the connections between artworks, texts and dogmas of any religion are never direct, never pure visual translations, but often intertwine subtle references to whole networks of textual and visual traditions, the same is true of the notion of the "document". In the past decade, the training of teachers, particularly in history and French, has been enhanced with courses on the use of iconographic "documents". They know that the illusion of "evidence" is a great one, in the area of religious facts as elsewhere. But this illusion proves to be particularly damaging in courses on the history of religions when documents are used without any concern for their historical context. In the 90s, classes on early Christianity were often illustrated by paintings from the Renaissance, and there were still textbooks that used

works from the past (the Middle Ages for example) in chapters on modern-day Christianity. The image of religion as an unchanging whole that is behind such choices stands in the way of putting religious facts in their historical context, which is necessary in order to approach them from a secular perspective. There has been real progress made in this area, but the risk remains. A painting of the catacombs or a Byzantine mosaic are probably a more relevant choice for accompanying a text on the origins of Christianity than an artwork from the 17th century, but it should not obscure the fact that it is just as much a second-hand account of the biblical event itself as the later work.

What role does modern art play in these questions? Its lack of importance in the iconography of school textbooks is above all tied to the fact that religions are considered mainly in relation to their origins rather than their role in the modern world. When current events are discussed, religions are presented more often as causes for wars and division than as facts of culture. Is it necessary to stress that a large part of the money devoted to publicly commissioned artworks in France is still allocated to religious buildings? After all, Le Corbusier's architecture, Matisse's way of the Cross in Vence or, more recently, Buraglio's one at the Church of Saint-Germain des Près (Paris) are no less "true" than a cathedral or an early altarpiece. The relationships of distance and closeness that these works maintain with the religious community that commissions them and accepts them, independently of the artist's beliefs, also deserve to be put into context and analysed (Saint-Martin, 2003).

8. Iconophilia and iconophobia: the status of artworks

Finally, there is the main criticism levied at teaching religious facts through the use of art: the risk of favouring Christianity, more particularly post-Tridentine Catholicism. If we are referring to the bulk of Western art, the objection is valid, but it neglects many other aspects. Firstly, the reproductions in textbooks are not limited to paintings and drawings; much space is also devoted to the analysis of religious buildings and architecture, elements that concern all religious traditions. Secondly, this objection is often based upon confusing "the production of images with religious subjects" with "the use of images in different aspects of the religion". Of course, there is a connection between the two; it would be specious to deny it. That said, if too much is made of the association between iconophilia and iconolatry, or between religious iconophobia and rejection of figurative art, the result is summary judgments on the prohibition of images in the Jewish and Muslim worlds, even in

Protestantism², that a simple consultation of art history textbooks refutes outright!

How can we overcome this difficulty? Unfortunately, it does not need to be overcome for Judaism, whose art and iconography have almost no place in school textbooks. The reason for this is probably not just the cautious attitude of publishers, convinced that they would never be able to find artworks that do not violate the prohibition of graven images, but also the place of Judaism in the school curriculum. It is discussed in connection with Antiquity (the original Hebrews) and especially in relation to the Holocaust. Medieval and modern Jewish life is almost completely absent from historical overviews, and with it all the objects that it has produced: many manuscripts and household objects decorated with abstract forms but also with figures³. Alongside the views of the desert or the manuscripts of Qumran, the association made in several textbooks between a work of the 20th century (Marc Chagall: *Moses receiving the Tables of the Law*, 1966) and the chapter on the Hebrews is founded upon the commendable concern for identifying what remains of a culture in the present day, illustrating these pages by a work from an artist "of the Jewish faith," as the legend states. This example shows that in addition to the questions accompanying the "document," what the teacher could say is essential to give form to the density of history and make his or her pupils conscious of the distance between an inspired work from a Russian artist of the 20th century, who does not of course renounce his faith, but who nonetheless recognises that part of his style which comes from centuries of Western art and from the Jewish cultural traditions of Central Europe, which are quite separate from the ancient tale of Moses. The image is no more anachronistic than an illustrated medieval Hebrew manuscript would be, but it requires just as much complex work to put it into the right context regarding the Commandment prohibiting graven images, which has been interpreted differently depending on the period, despite the categorical nature of the prohibition on any image of God.

On the other hand, the chapter in the high-school textbook on Islam is typically full of illustrations, presenting some teachers with a dilemma. How can they talk about the origins of Islam using illustrations from Persian or Turkish manuscripts that were made several centuries later? The anachronism of such an image (which admittedly is almost never noticed) is not what

² Those episodes of iconoclasm that took place should not obscure the role of images and the arts in the Protestant world; see Reymond, 1999, and Cottin, 1994.

³ Even though the prohibition on representing God is still respected, this is not true of the prohibition on images of faces, whose enforcement varies depending on the era and the place. See for example Sed-Rajna, 1995 and Jarassé, 2006.

presents the greatest hindrance to how pupils may see it; the main problem is the status of the work. Here, we confront an essential part of any teaching method involving visual art. Before it is an image reproduced in a textbook, an artwork is first an object: painting or fresco, architectural element or sculpture, manuscript, liturgical object... and this object has a function, a status... How was it perceived? Was it a venerated manuscript or a profane work that one could casually flip through? Was it placed in a religious edifice? For what rites was it intended: worship, hand use, processions?

In fact, what differs most from one religion to another is the status associated with works of art, more than their production as such. There should probably be more precise details here on Islam, taking into account not only different movements within it but also specific eras and regions. Nonetheless, the Koran prohibits worship of images, not images themselves⁴. So there are no paintings or drawings to be found in mosques and they play no role in religious rites, but there is an abundance of illustrated profane manuscripts dealing with religious topics, elements from the Koran, or legends such as the mystical voyage of Mohammed. If the production of images in Islam was important in the Persian, Indian and Ottoman worlds especially, and remains much rarer in the Arabian Peninsula, to think that all images of Islamic subject matter are illicit is to lend credence to a purely Wahhabi interpretation of images, which is only one out of many ways to see the issue among the variety of schools of Islam.

9. The approach through art and the temptation of apologetics

Approaching religions through art makes it possible to take the middle of the road into their symbolic systems, while avoiding a representation of religious facts that is limited to religion's role in conflicts, division and the rejection of the outside world by some groups. But one should not go too far in this direction and make what those who favour a strictly secular and neutral attitude see as the opposite mistake: presenting only the beautiful side of religion and thus tending toward apologetics, treating religions as a privileged source of artistic expression. But here again, this argument fails to take the diversity of artistic expression into account, and those wishing to examine the less glorious elements of religions have a wealth of material at their disposal, as it is well-known that formal beauty and ethical righteousness do not always go hand-in-hand. The figure of the blindfolded Synagogue is one of the most beautiful statues decorating the cathedral in Strasbourg, but it is also an opportunity to

⁴ Prohibitions on images come mostly from the Hadith. There is a wealth of literature on the subject; see Grabar, 1987; Naef, 2004.

see an expression of medieval anti-Semitism, where Judaism is contrasted with the Church, that has become the *Verus Israël*. The violence of the Wars of Religion was portrayed in mass-produced engravings and pamphlets in a way that may be too sensitive for class presentations, but one can still add the striking effect of the group of sculptures on the Church of the Gesù in Rome representing the triumph of religion over heresy (17th century), which could be used as an introduction to a discussion on tolerance. But other objectives have been added to the process of addressing the lack of religious culture and the cultural expectations of twenty years ago: how to live with others as a community, and how to accept others through learning more about religions. This should not just mean tolerating the ideas and opinions of others, but also being able to distance oneself from one's own beliefs, a skill that is a characteristic of both the capacity to think and the commitment to ideals. This does not mean appeasing conflicts by only presenting the aesthetic and artistic expressions of religious culture; it means situating the material and physical signs of these expressions through the use of artworks, in order to understand the issues involved.

10. *Conclusion: Art as something not always universal...*

Of course, the connection to be made is not an easy one! And when we know how to put a Christian painting, a miniature from a Hebrew or Islamic manuscript, or a work by Chagall in their proper contexts, what do we do with the image of a God who sometimes resembles Jupiter? Becoming aware of such complexities is essential.

Taking an approach to cultural heritage into account requires a stance toward religion that sees it not just as metaphysical, as an unchanging doctrine, but also as a set of practices and symbolic relations that are deeply rooted in the lives of generations who have devoted themselves to these realms of belief in different ways. Works of art bear witness to the different levels at which they are received, each level having its own mode of interpretation and adaptation; they give full expression to their place in a historical continuum. Art should be accessible to all (this is not the place to discuss the perception of beauty per se), and the use of artworks in teaching religious facts shows that it is necessary to recreate their respective universes of meaning in order to understand them fully, but this cannot be inferred solely from spontaneous perception. The place of artworks in school textbooks should take this into account without glossing over the possible drawbacks of a method that still has the same limitations as other approaches from the perspective of objectivity and secularism (*laïcité*), and runs the same risks of misinterpretation, anachronism or reductionism.

Art still offers an effective means to engage students on developments in religious sensibilities and the symbolic dimension of religion. This is especially conducive to the discovery of a common heritage that belongs to all believers, agnostics or atheists alike.

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12. *Curriculum vitae*

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