

# FRENCH SECULARISM IN DEBATE

## Old Wine in New Bottles

*Véronique Dimier*

Université Libre de Bruxelles / Institut d'Études Européennes

---

By voting for this law (which forbid the wearing of ostentatious religious signs at school) we will follow the courageous precedent of our ancestors who carried out their Republican convictions without pusillanimity. We will be faithful to our tradition which came about during the Revolution (1789). We will give new life to an essential Republican principle, "*laïcité*." We will make France shine in the world amongst those who crave light and who, each day, fight courageously against obscurantism.

Jean-Pierre Brard (Communist Party) in the  
National Assembly, 3 February 2004.<sup>1</sup>

France works towards your emancipation, she wants to transform you into free subjects, able to make use of all the privileges attached to human rights, without any risk for your society. With this objective in view, she sacrifices herself every day in order to provide you with education, and that is why she insisted that her schools should be full. It is not her intention to incite your children to neglect the religion of their ancestors and she does not wish to see them abandon their native languages. Not only does she want to leave you absolutely free in these matters, but she also wishes to satisfy your desires. That is why as soon as the resources of the Commune will permit it, a *taleb* [in Islamic societies a teacher of the Koran] will be attached to the French schools to teach the Koran and the principles of reading and writing in Arabic. But she also wants you to spend more time studying her language and sciences. She prefers not to vote for a law to force you to do it, rather she is relying on your intelligence, common sense and interest. Because she wants your welfare above all, she cannot see the point in using more coercive means to force you to accept her kindness. But she also considers it her duty to prevent you from causing your own unhappiness.

A French schoolmaster addressing the local Algerian  
population, reported in a letter from a French schoolmaster  
to the inspector of native schools in Algeria, 30 October 1890.<sup>2</sup>

These two quotations are drawn from different contexts and moments in time, and they express two different understandings of the French Republican tradition of *laïcité*. As we shall see, these two opposing Republican views have long coexisted. The colonial situation, moreover, often exposed the contradictions of French Republicanism with particular clarity insofar as these contradictions were amplified by the need to deal with foreign populations and cultures. Going back to the colonial past through the 1892 debate on native education in Algeria may help us see the continuity of those conflicting Republican traditions and shed some light on the 2004 debates on secularism.

In February 2004, the Chirac government put forward a draft law concerning the application of the principle of secularism in primary and secondary schools. This law sought to forbid the wearing of ostentatious religious signs (including the Islamic head scarf) at school. Indeed, the “problem” of young girls wearing the head scarf at school has been a recurrent one since the end of the 1980s and has led to long and passionate public debate. Following decisions by school principals to expel some of these girls in the name of secularism, the case was submitted in 1989 to the Conseil d’État, the top administrative court, and a conciliatory approach was adopted.<sup>3</sup> It concluded that anybody could wear religious signs at school, any ban being the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, it was argued that wearing a religious sign was not ostentatious in itself and was in keeping with freedom of conscience. Only provocative behaviour and proselytism could be seen as infringing the principle of secularism and was to be condemned. This led to different local compromises, sources of legal insecurity, and growing discontent. For some it became clear that a general rule had to be adopted through a specific law. In 2004, while the law was proposed, the content and definition of secularism was again discussed at length within the French National Assembly.

All MPs agreed that secularism was at the heart of French Republican identity. As the Socialist Daniel Vaillant (PS) put it in the National Assembly, “Secularism should free the mind of individuals and integrate citizens. It is at the heart of our Republican hearth, fabricated at school.”<sup>4</sup> However, there was some disagreement as to what secularism really meant and as to what Republican identity referred to. To be sure, few would contest the definition given by Jacqueline Fraysse (Communist Party): “Secularism implies an organisation of society based on common values and on respect for individual differences. Secularism means the separation of the Church and the State, respect for religious pluralism, and freedom of conscience. Those progressive values, as inscribed in the law of 1905, made our nation.”<sup>5</sup> It is true that in the French historical context, where the State and Church were separated from 1905, *laïcité* refers to the independence of the Church and the neutrality of the State, while recognising freedom of conscience. Practically speaking, it means that public life and places are strictly separated from religion, that the Catholic religion and clergy cannot be paid through public funds.<sup>6</sup>

That said, those values were interpreted differently. As Daniel Guarrigue of the right-wing Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) put it: “there are several definitions of secularism: there is a strict, closed and militant definition, and another more open conception which is based on dialogue.”<sup>7</sup> Marc Le Fur (UMP) defined these competing definitions more precisely: the first one, which he called “the fundamentalist definition of secularism,” considers that any religious conviction should be confined strictly to the private sphere. The second one insists on tolerance and respect for freedom of conscience in the public sphere as well.<sup>8</sup> Behind these definitions, what was at stake was the “global conception of the State and the Republic, (...) our social contract, which allows each of us to find his or her place in the Republic.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, through that debate two different conceptions of the French Republic and nation, equally present on both sides of the political divide, came to be opposed.

We have explored elsewhere these two conceptions.<sup>10</sup> The first is assimilationist and centralizing. Referring to the Revolution of 1789 as its founding principle, it regards the Republic as “une et indivisible” (one and indivisible) and the French nation as a cultural whole. As part of a militant discourse to be found in arenas like the French Parliament, it has always aimed at inculcating future citizens with Republican values against those of the Church in order to integrate them into the French nation and “civitas.”<sup>11</sup> It also implies a specific method of government: starting from an idealistic and abstract conception of Man as separate from his/her cultural and social background, it consists in transforming him/her into a rational, independent model citizen. The other conception is more pragmatic: it envisages a Republic that is indivisible but respectful of local and cultural diversity, a Republic of compromise. According to some historians, this conception has always been used to implement Republican policies at a local level, as well as to build the nation concretely.<sup>12</sup> It implies methods based on respect for and adaptation to local cultures and circumstances as a means to integrate different groups into a larger political and cultural whole.

During the 2004 debate on secularism, the “assimilationists” insisted that the Republican model of integration, what they referred to as the *Pacte Républicain*, was threatened by, as Michel Charzat (PS) put it, “the weakening of the authority of the State and the fading of the nation as a space for building a common project.”<sup>13</sup> For some, it was the direct result of the policy followed by the “successive governments of this country.” They worked out policies that were meant to respect all cultures, “but which opened the door to a theology of differences, to the praise of singularity. Means have become aims.”<sup>14</sup> For them, the Republic meant assimilation, that is, according to Bernard Carayon (UMP), “the adhesion without resistance and reticence to the human rights declaration of 1789, the nation conceived, as Ernest Renan did, as a common will to live together. ... The Republic is not a permanent negotiation with local specificities, the tolerance for something not tolerable. Its essential

elements are not negotiable. Human rights cannot be put into perspective." ("On ne négocie pas l'essentiel ! On ne relativise pas les droits de l'homme.")<sup>15</sup> For Jacques Myard (UMP) too, "the *Pacte Républicain* is not an '*auberge espagnole*' [a madhouse], it is based on strong principles, it cannot be negotiated."<sup>16</sup> The same idea was heard on the left bank of the Assembly. As Jean Christophe Cambadélis (PS) expressed it, "the idea that everything can be negotiated everywhere and at any time, that any corporatism, any cultural specificity can resist the general interest, this clearly runs against the French subconscious."<sup>17</sup> For all these MPs, the law was seen as a way to strengthen the *Pacte Républicain*, to "reinforce national cohesion,"<sup>18</sup> to keep the school as a privileged place for integration. "The moment has come to launch the Republican hearth again, this machine which creates citizens."<sup>19</sup>

For the "pragmatic Republican," on the contrary, the law encouraged social exclusion and discrimination. Considered as "hyper-secularism,"<sup>20</sup> it was the pure product of a kind of Republican fundamentalism. It gave a "radical vision" of secularism and did not answer the real question: the integration of the Muslim population and its sociological consequences in the cultural and political French landscape.<sup>21</sup> This position was clearly summarized by Jean Marc Nesme (UMP):

Why should we promulgate a specific law that forbids ostentatious religious signs at school while we know that it may be impossible to apply, like the current regulations? ... Why should we promulgate a law that means social exclusion, that will lead to a withdrawal into small communities of a minority of people who refuse to be integrated? Secularism in the strict sense of the word has nothing to do with that law. Secularism has been given a false interpretation in some circles and by some schools of thought that use it to profess or propagate atheism. This is a counter-secularism. In the constitutional sense of the word, secularism means the integral respect for beliefs and religions, not hyper-secularism. Secularism means tolerance, guaranteed by the state. De Gaulle understood it when he said: "the Republic is secular but France is Christian." If the Republic is secular, the society is not. True secularism is one that helps us better to "*vivre ensemble*" [live together]. To make teenagers pure abstraction and schools sanctuaries cut off from reality and the external world is the best way to create a society of irresponsible citizens, who become more and more intolerant and individualistic .... This law sounds like an inquisitorial judgment. What we need is a Republic based on mediation ["*République médiatrice*"].<sup>22</sup>

Daniel Guarrigue (UMP) agreed when he called for "secularism based on dialogue"; this dialogue being indispensable for a policy of integration and within the framework of the European Union.<sup>23</sup> Alain Madelin (UMP) also considered the law as an "easy solution" that could have been avoided. "We should go on practicing what our secular tradition called reasonable compromises [*accommodements raisonnables*]."<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, these MPs refer here to another kind of Republican tradition than that of the assimilationists. Marc Le Fur (UMP) described this tradition accurately when he said that "between the nation and the individual, there are

families, groups, corporate bodies. To ignore it would be to ignore reality and fall into a kind of Jacobinism that is out of date. To feel happy in your family, to feel that your family is part of the nation, is this not the main condition for integration? Our history can prove it. The integration of Catholics into the Republic was not due to the measures adopted in 1905, which enhanced passions, but to the appeasement measures of the 1920s, the Debré laws<sup>25</sup> at the beginning of the Fifth Republic which, at the same time, recognized what the Catholics could bring in terms of education and pacified the relationships between them and the Republic."<sup>26</sup> This Republic of compromise was particularly praised by the MPs of Alsace and Lorraine. Indeed, due to their late integration into the Republic after the First World War, these *départements* have been benefiting from a special status and exceptional local laws. These laws allow religious instruction to be given in schools.<sup>27</sup> According to Armand Young (PS), MP of Strasbourg, "one cannot find better example of the fact that the Republic is not threatened by diversity. On the contrary, it contributes to its strength and richness."<sup>28</sup>

Even more significant were the voices of overseas MPs, representing islands such as Réunion where the population is composed of a mosaic of religious communities whose cohabitation has to be ensured. According to Huguette Bello, MP of Réunion (indépendant), "this law runs against any process of integration in the case of overseas departments. The wiser solution would be to trust the teachers of the island, who have always known that secularism is synonymous with tolerance and freedom. All the political and religious authorities of Réunion have insisted on the uselessness of this law. The minister of overseas territories recommends to implement it in a flexible and clever way. The rector of Réunion promised to close his eyes. We trust him, but who could guarantee us that one day one teacher, through ignorance or recklessness would not ruin all our efforts to find a balance? It would be better not to have any law at all."<sup>29</sup> For all these MPs, it was clear that some regulations implemented in a very pragmatic way would have been a better solution.

The reference to overseas territories is interesting here and a flashback to colonial history would have probably strengthened the arguments of pragmatic Republicans, as Manuel Valls (PS) noted in the debate.<sup>30</sup> Indeed colonial territories provided important terrain for the development of the Republican pragmatic tradition,<sup>31</sup> as we will show here through the parliamentary debates in 1892 on primary education for Muslim natives in Algeria, led by Émile Combes and Jules Ferry. Of course the context of the two debates was different: the 2004 debate dealt with an Islamic population born in France (for most of the girls concerned), so these were French citizens whom the Republic sought to integrate into a social, cultural, and political whole. The 1892 debate dealt with native populations in a territory colonized since 1830, still governed more or less directly by Paris, where political rights were reserved for a small white minority of settlers, French citizens. The aim of the Republic was merely to "associate" the rest of the population to her civilizing mission. Still,

in both cases, two conceptions of secularism and the Republic came into opposition. Ironically, these two conceptions could be found in the same Republican leaders of the late 1890s, the most involved as far as the issue of secularism was concerned: Émile Combes and Jules Ferry. Jules Ferry (Republican left), minister of education from 1879 to 1880, then again in 1882, twice President of the Council (prime minister, 1880-1881 and 1883-1885) and senator (1891-1893), is famous for having set up free, compulsory, and secular schooling for all in France.<sup>32</sup> Secular meant here that any religious teaching was dropped from the programs and was replaced by courses in "morals" and "citizenship." Émile Combes, a radical (meaning extreme left) political figure was successively President of the Senate (1894-1895), minister of education (1895-1896), and President of the Council (1902-1905). He is known for his anticlerical policy, which led to the law of separation between churches and the state. As exemplified by these laws, in the context of the consolidation of the Republic as a political regime, Jules Ferry and Émile Combes adopted a fighting approach towards churches. However, as we shall see, in a different context, that of colonized Algeria, where religion was less an enemy to fight than a force to be channelled and controlled, they adopted a more pragmatic approach, advocating that the Koran be taught at school.

### The *Taleb* at School

Algeria was a white colony, that is a colony where French settlers took over the land and established authority through local assemblies in the municipalities. Politically and administratively, Algeria was officially part of France: through the "*rattachement*" (incorporation) decree of 1881, administrative services, previously attached to the governor general, were placed under the supervision of the competent ministries in metropolitan France, which meant that the main decisions concerning Algeria were made in those ministries. This resulted in lengthy procedures and in giving the settlers' representatives in the Chamber of Deputies more power to influence decisions. These were implemented locally under the supervision of the governor general, whose powers were reduced, at least until that system of "*rattachement*" was abolished in 1896.<sup>33</sup> However, this system did not mean that the French laws were applied automatically in the Algerian territory: like other colonies, Algeria had a particular legal regime, especially as far as the native population was concerned.<sup>34</sup> Only French citizens (mainly settlers) could benefit from French courts, laws, and the Civil Code and possess political rights. Natives kept their civil laws linked to Islam and were subjected to a separate penal jurisdiction (through the *Code de l'indigénat*). At first, Jules Ferry's laws on education (1881-1882) were not extended overseas, at least for the native people.

From the 1870s, the Republican policy towards native population and schools had not differed much from the ones followed by previous regimes.<sup>35</sup>

After the conquest of Algeria in 1830, the July Monarchy agreed that it would respect the personal preferences in terms of the Koranic law and religion of the native population. In practice, French authorities considered Koranic schools and Islamic associations a threat to their domination and tried to control and weaken them. Later on, under the Second Republic, a decree (30 April 1851) organized the Muslim religion and integrated it into the state: the mosques were registered, and a Muslim clergy was created, appointed and paid by the French state. In 1850, it was also decided that free French schools would be created for the natives (*écoles arabes-françaises*), where they could learn both French and Arabic (any religious reference being prohibited), but which were different from schools reserved for the white settlers. From 1865 on, Napoleon III tried to strengthen these schools by creating new ones and setting up an institution to train their teachers. However, this policy quickly reached its limits: insofar as these schools were subsidized by the municipalities and met the opposition of the settlers, they did not receive adequate funding. Insofar as their teaching was left in the hands of the Christian congregations, they also met the resistance of the Muslim population. This failure led the Republican minister of education in 1880, Jules Ferry, to reorganize the system. In the decree of 13 February 1883, it was decided that Ferry's laws on education would be extended to Algeria, making primary school compulsory for all, settlers and the native population alike. The *écoles arabes françaises* would be replaced by schools for settlers and natives alike. These schools would be organized on similar lines as the metropolitan ones and paid for through the budget of local councils. Again, the opposition of the settler populations prevented the application of such laws. In 1890 the French parliament cut all subsidies for native schools. As a result, in 1889-1890, only 0.33% of the native population benefited from a primary education.<sup>36</sup>

This situation, like the native policy of the newly Republican regime that in the name of "assimilation" tended to favor settlers at the expense of the native population, was largely criticized in the 1890s.<sup>37</sup> In that context, Senator Jules Ferry proposed establishing a committee to enquire into the social and political situation in Algeria. The committee was to listen to natives and settlers. A delegation headed by Jules Ferry himself was sent to Algeria in 1892 for that purpose and led to several reports, among which were Jules Ferry's on the powers of the governors and Émile Combes' on primary education for the natives and on Muslim secondary education.<sup>38</sup> In these reports, Émile Combes and Jules Ferry showed much interest in Islam and the Koran as the basis of native social and political institutions. They concluded that "our teachers must have the deepest regard for the native religion, that is, for the book that expresses it."<sup>39</sup> Émile Combes even called for a true cohabitation between religion and the Republic in native primary schools. He referred with great enthusiasm to "that school in Sidi Aïssa, where Arabic courses are taught at the French school, and where the French school borrows one of its largest rooms from the Zaouïa [Koranic school] .... When there is such cooperation between

secular education and religious education, how can anyone speak about fanaticism? ... The conclusion of those observations was that French education would not meet any opposition among the Kabyle or Arabic populations, if it respected their feelings and if it was flexible enough in its principles. As for the diffusion and progress of French education, we may, following the reports of our inspectors, hope that they will be quick, if we know how to set up schools which will include institutions in keeping with the spirit of the native races."<sup>40</sup> Among these institutions, Émile Combes included the *taleb*, as assistant to the French schoolmaster.

His idea on that issue was apparently widely shared: as early as 1880, the same proposal had been put forward by Henri le Bourgeois, one of the officials sent by Jules Ferry to Algeria to enquire into the situation of native education.<sup>41</sup> Auguste Burdeau, in charge of reporting for the budget in 1892, former chief of staff for Paul Bert when the latter was minister of education, also defended the idea in front of the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>42</sup> Last but not least, Charles Jeanmaire, at that time rector of Algiers, supported it with great enthusiasm; he also insisted that French teachers and their native assistants respect the beliefs of their pupils and their parents.<sup>43</sup> In order "to exert any beneficial and efficient action, assistants need to be trusted by their Muslim peers. They will lose their confidence if they do not pray, if they drink alcohol, and do not observe Ramadan. If they respect the prescriptions of the Koran, they will have great authority to speak in the name of France and teach our morals."<sup>44</sup> In sum, the issue was not so much to convert the schoolboys and girls to the Republican principles of secularism, as to convert their teachers to Islam. How could this be reconciled with Republican principles? "One should be careful with these so called doctrines that prevent any program or progress."<sup>45</sup> If the minister of education at that time, Léon Bourgeois, did not go that far in his conclusions, he nonetheless came to back the idea of a *taleb* at school when Émile Combes' report was discussed in the Senate. Following Émile Combes' advice, he insisted that it was better to be cautious and pragmatic on such a sensitive issue.<sup>46</sup> Because it was clearly "a contradiction in our legislation ... would it not be imprudent and awkward to adopt a general rule? It would be rather wise to decide for or against the nomination of the *taleb* at school after considering the local circumstances"<sup>47</sup> and to leave it to the judgment of local administrators.

The same conclusions were advanced on the twin issues of obligation and education of girls. The decree of 1883 had rendered schools compulsory for all, but left the implementation of such principles in Algeria in the hands of the governor general, who in turn proved lax on the matter. As Émile Combes noted: "Obligation only exists on paper."<sup>48</sup> According to the latter, the reasons were to be found in the inaction of the local French administration, the hostility of the settlers in the municipalities, and, although least of all, in the indifference or resistance of the families. This resistance, he said, was due less to resentment of French education than to "poverty and igno-



rance."<sup>49</sup> As in rural France, children had to help their parents in the fields or in domestic tasks.<sup>50</sup> The idea, then, was to convince parents through material incentives like bonuses and jobs to send their children to school. The presence of the *taleb* was only one means among many that could help in "attracting the children."<sup>51</sup>

Sending girls to school was a more delicate issue to solve, as it ran against the very status of women in native Algerian cultures. Most reports sent by the native authorities to the senatorial commission did not mention that issue at all, and the only ones that did disapproved of it. Members of the Senate delegation had a mitigated point of view. Following visits to children's homes where girls were educated, they concluded that "you had to wait for customs to change before envisaging such education."<sup>52</sup> The risk indeed was to produce uprooted, educated girls who would later on be unable to reintegrate into their own society, get married, and have a position. Émile Combes supported the opposite position: "I think that in order to diffuse our language and ideas efficiently, in order to reach the mind and the heart of the native race through primary education, we need to include both genders in our propaganda, we need to organize education for boys and girls in parallel and simultaneously,"<sup>53</sup> all the more so because girls are future mothers who will later pass on what they have learned to their own children, and send them to French schools. Émile Combes quoted the example of sheik Mohamed-Naït-Abdesslam, who sent his daughter to the French school and was proud of her success: "thanks to him, school has become the best place of propaganda for our ideas."<sup>54</sup> As shown by Julia A. Clancy-Smith, Koranic schools could be the best place for resistance to the French authority, especially when directed by women saints like Lala Zaynab.<sup>55</sup> Bringing women to French schools was certainly one of the best ways to ensure control of the whole society in the future. According to Émile Combes, educating them was also the first and main condition for the society to evolve, for "barbarian, immoral and degrading customs,"<sup>56</sup> as far as women were concerned, to disappear. "National customs treat them like cattle. They are subjected to a shameless trade. They are only worth the estimated price they represent."<sup>57</sup> The Republic could not be an accomplice to such "child trafficking." Creating schools for girls and legislating on the age of marriage were the only ways to improve the conditions of women.

This position, however, was linked to the conviction that "the religion had nothing to do with that trade in children, and I am certain that I am not the only one to think that way, considering what I have read on the subject ... What is at stake in selling children are not religious principles or rituals, but merely voracious interests."<sup>58</sup> Interestingly enough, as in the 2004 debate, the whole point was to find out whether marital customs and the obedient position of women came from the Koran or whether it was just the remnant of a patriarchal society that needed to evolve. Nevertheless, insofar as the issue remained a matter of controversy, Émile Combes followed Charles Jeanmaire's

advice that “we would be wrong to make a decision through a general rule; this is a matter of circumstances and places ... In sum, the creation of schools for girls should first be done at random, according to events and goodwill and without any plan.”<sup>59</sup>

This pragmatic Republican discourse did not raise any objections in the Senate. Neither did Jules Ferry’s report, which proposed that on sensitive issues “the collaboration of the local [Muslim] clergy should be sought.”<sup>60</sup> Consequently, the decree of 18 October 1892 on native primary education adopted the same pragmatic position as Émile Combes’. It insisted that “the freedom of conscience of schoolboys and girls should be formally guaranteed in any private or public school; children cannot be forced to adopt practices that run against their religion.”<sup>61</sup> As advised by Émile Combes, the issue of the *taleb* at school, like the sensitive issues of obligation and education for girls, was left to local judgment and experimentation; in other words, it could vary according to circumstances.

One had to wait for Émile Combes’ report on secondary native education to be considered in the Senate in 1894 for this pragmatic Republicanism to be criticized, especially by representatives of Algerian settlers. The arguments put forward by those representatives were typical of Republican assimilationist discourse. In the name of the French civilizing mission, they proposed to respect the native religions as long as they could be confined to the private sphere. “Islam has to be purged of any political content. Justice, education and administration must be secularized for the benefit of progress.”<sup>62</sup> This was seen as the best way to get the native population “adapted to our civilized laws” to inculcate Republican morality. The methods advocated here by Gerente are typical of the assimilationists: to force a population to abandon its own customs and tradition in order to adopt French “civilization” and transform Algerian peasants into Frenchmen, or rather an ideal type of Frenchman.

### Which Republican Methods?

Indeed, what was at stake in the debate were the very methods to use in dealing with native people at a time when the colonial conquest was almost over and when the question rose as to the best way of governing colonized populations with the minimum material and human resources possible. The debate was not specific to Algeria: it embraced all colonies acquired by France in the late nineteenth century in Africa and Asia. It was part of a move from the assimilation policy towards a new policy known as “association,” officially consecrated by the Ministry of Colonies in 1905 and whose aim was to ensure “the evolution of the natives within their traditions.”<sup>63</sup> Assimilation, namely the idea of transforming natives into Frenchmen sharing the same “civilization” and the same political rights as French citizens, had been partly implemented in the small colonies acquired by France in the previous centuries,<sup>64</sup>

but showed its limits when applied to huge territories where the native population was predominant and would outnumber metropolitan citizens. In the case of Algeria, the partial administrative assimilation of the territory through the system of *rattachement* had clearly resulted in giving most power to the settlers while depriving the native population of their rights, as Ferry noted in his report. Assimilation (in its cultural and political aspects) was also very much criticized at that time by those, especially settlers, who considered that its aims were impossible to achieve: influenced by the racialist theory of the time, they argued that the cultural gap was too wide between the French and the native races to be filled in one day. "It is impossible for the Muslim spirit to get close to the modern spirit of our time."<sup>65</sup> "Between him [the Arab] and us there are barriers which would be useless and even dangerous to break down."<sup>66</sup> Indeed, political assimilation meant in the long term the end of privileges for the French settlers in Algeria. This concern explained and justified their demands for restricting the education of natives to more practical and professional training.

Those such as Jules Ferry and Émile Combes who still believed that the aim of assimilation was possible and desirable directed their criticism toward the methods assimilation implied. Still influenced by the positivist, evolutionist, and ethnocentric theories of the end of the nineteenth century and animated by a firm belief in French superiority, they believed that all humans had an equal chance to climb the ladder of progress and to reach the last step, namely French civilization. They had no doubt that France had to help other peoples to climb the ladder more quickly, in sum to continue her civilizing mission. It was hoped that local cultures would in the long term disappear by themselves. Meanwhile, and this was the lesson Jules Ferry brought from his mission in Algeria, you had to deal with them: "To assimilate Algeria, to give her the same institutions, the same laws, the same political guarantees, the same rights, is a very simple way of seeing things, which can easily seduce the French mind. This policy has had both good and disastrous influences on the history of our great colony ... However, today, after some years of experience, we need to be courageous enough to recognize that French law cannot be transplanted everywhere without adaptation, that these laws do not have the magical virtue of transforming peoples in one day, that social backgrounds everywhere resist and defend themselves, and that in any country we must take into account the past to build the present."<sup>67</sup>

This discourse clearly departed from his views in 1884 when as prime minister he advocated the assimilation of the "inferior races" of the world in order to justify French expansion overseas and convince the Chamber of Deputies to vote a budget for it.<sup>68</sup> By 1892, his position and the issue at stake were quite different: his main task was to analyze the situation of the native population and make concrete proposals as to their administration. The ultimate aim he had in mind was the same (to civilize), but the question he raised now was how to do it. His answer was clear: the methods implied by assimi-

tion were not satisfactory. In his mind, assimilation meant the imposition of a foreign culture, in other words, methods based on force and coercion, while he advocated methods based on influence, persuasion, and respect for local cultures. This was precisely the idea behind the new concept of "association" and its basic principle, "the evolution of the natives within their traditions."<sup>69</sup> Respecting native customs and religions was not an aim in itself here, as it was hoped that they would disappear in the long term. Rather, it constituted a pragmatic method of government based on knowledge of native society, social observation, and experience rather than on a priori conceptions and great ideals, such as those of the 1789 Revolution. In practice, it meant to grasp the mechanisms of native societies, their desires, fears, and interests in order to use them and reach the desired objective. It was a way to influence and persuade rather than coerce, a means to control and "associate" the native to the civilizing mission. "The moral conquest, the progressive civilization of the natives must take another form than that of assimilation .... One can change the natives by inculcating one's language, ones' ideas, but also by respecting their religion, their civil laws and rights to property."<sup>70</sup>

In their respective reports, Émile Combes and Auguste Burdeau concluded in the same way: "Considered as a group, the natives are profoundly subject to their religion and their representatives. No authority has as much power of influence on them. If we ever want to succeed in directing their minds and feelings, we can only hope that their religion will disappear or that, through small changes, it could accommodate our main ideas, those of neutrality of the State in religious matters, of moral equality between genders, of the ceaseless progress of human reason and civilization. Meanwhile, we must show some interest in their religious life in order to understand their evolution and have a real grasp of them."<sup>71</sup> The aim was the same as assimilation: to bring the natives closer and closer to what was considered as the civilizing standard. This aim was even clearer when it came to girls' education. As we already noticed, the objective of Émile Combes was to improve the conditions of women: there was no reason to exclude half the population from the French civilizing mission. He clearly wished to weaken and undermine what were considered immoral practices. Still, even in that case, pragmatism and caution were advocated. Indeed, "we may meet some resistance, offend some feelings; our work can only succeed if we proceed with method, patience and gentleness, if we can penetrate the mind through persuasion."<sup>72</sup> As far as pedagogical methods at school were concerned, Émile Combes advised to avoid replicating those of the metropole. According to him it was necessary "to adapt teaching to the needs and state of mind of the native population."<sup>73</sup> However, this adaptation was limited by the fact that the teaching he envisaged was in French. Some historians, moreover, have shown that the education programs effectively implemented following Émile Combes and Jules Ferry's reports were very much copies of their French versions, with some adaptations required by the colonial context,<sup>74</sup> as evidenced by the programs

in history and morals annually published in the *Bulletin universitaire de l'Académie d'Alger*.

Ideally, however, the process of civilization should not be imposed from above, according to this view. It had to evolve from the society itself. The role of the state was mainly to guide that evolution, to convince the native populations that it was necessary and important for their well-being. And of course to be able to convince, you first had to "be willing," as Combes put it, "to know the institutions and customs of the natives, penetrate them, assimilate their ideas and little by little, like a teacher, direct their ideas, through a slow evolution, until they resemble ours, guide their institutions to the point where the difference between theirs and ours will be so thin that we could speak of assimilation, but not an assimilation through law, made in one day, but a progressive assimilation through education."<sup>75</sup> "This is the best guarantee of our success."<sup>76</sup> Auguste Burdeau also insisted that "the only way to raise the native on the ladder of progress, was not to merely impose our laws on him, in a way which suits the French people. On the contrary, we need to extract the spirit of those laws and lead the natives toward them, starting from their own institutions toward institutions that are more like ours, while taking as much time as needed to accomplish this work."<sup>77</sup>

Keeping the *taleb* at school was the best example of that pragmatic method of control and government based on a kind of sociological approach, "dominated by the lessons of experience."<sup>78</sup> In his reports, Émile Combes only made his position clear after he exposed all the social elements attached to the problem concerned. These elements were gathered by his own team on the spot, through surveys with education professionals and reports from the native authorities. He insisted that the question of the *taleb* at school was still a matter to be discussed among professionals, even though the majority of those he met were in favor of it. In the same way, those who were against it justified their position not on principle but on sociological grounds. Alfred Rambaud, for example, the former head of Jules Ferry's cabinet, did not advise it for the Kabyle populations. After a long description of the social and political organisation of the Kabyle, he concluded that "those populations only adopted Islamic practices in so far as they were compatible with their ideas and customs,"<sup>79</sup> and consequently they did not wish to keep a *taleb* at school. Describing the ideal schoolmaster, he insisted that "the native spirit was the main object of his survey, and this survey was day to day work." In sum, "you need to know all the peculiarities of the native customs to avoid offending the colonized and to have any hold on them."<sup>80</sup> That is why on the issues of obligation and education of girls, most MPs would agree with Émile Combes that one had to be cautious and use the influence of local native authorities and instruments like the *taleb* when possible: "In Algeria like in certain parts of France, religious practices lead schoolboys and girls to neglect school ... Thus our idea is to bring religion to schools. This would reassure the families and would persuade them of the benefits of French education."<sup>81</sup> This

was also the best way to control Islam efficiently. August Burdeau clearly recognised it: thanks to the *taleb*, "Koranic teaching, far from superseding ours, would be much better subordinated and controlled than at the Zaouïa."<sup>82</sup>

The parallel made with metropolitan France is here omnipresent and one may wonder whether the same methods were not advocated and used in France to implement secularism. It is true that the context was different. Even though Émile Combes did not hesitate to compare the "aptitude of our Cevenol and Auvergnat children"<sup>83</sup> with those of Algerian children, the comparison had limits deriving from the political situation of Algeria and the subjected status of the native population. One could not be more explicit than Charles Jeanmaire: "we should not overestimate the similarities... Natives are French subjects. It will take years and years for them to be in a situation where they could expect to become citizens; consequently we do not have to train them as citizens, namely to teach them their rights and duties. There are ideas and feelings that we need to develop in young French children, but that it would be absurd to raise in the natives' mind."<sup>84</sup> French programs could be copied but had to be adapted to that colonial situation.<sup>85</sup>

That said, a similar pragmatic and sociological approach was used by the Republicans in France itself to turn peasant children into French citizens. As shown by Jean François Chanet,<sup>86</sup> many regulations from the end of the nineteenth century invited schoolmasters to use and respect local cultures and languages. Schoolbooks celebrated the French provinces and their customs. Republican morals and French language were taught, of course, but the idea was that to be able to explain what France and the Republic were, you first had to make these concepts intelligible, that is, you had to integrate them into the day to day experience of the children. National identity could only be built through local identities and institutions, some of which were religious. As for religious practices, Jules Ferry defended the right for priests to preach in schools and the lending of school buildings for religious teaching. He proposed that "duties towards God" should be kept in school programs and the crucifix be maintained on school walls.<sup>87</sup> According to Jean Baubérot, Émile Combes himself originally ruled out any separation between church and state, because "you could not erase the past fourteen centuries with one stroke."<sup>88</sup>

The methods he then advocated, based on compromise and experience, contrasted with the combative approach that he would use in the 1905 political debate about separating church and state, when Republican principles that were then considered universal were brandished and used to crush any Catholic opposition, to consolidate the newborn Republican regime.<sup>89</sup> When confronted with social reality, and the need both to implement laws in different contexts and to control society, Émile Combes, like Jules Ferry, left his anti-clerical discourse behind to adopt a more conciliatory and pragmatic approach.

The application of the 1905 law to Algeria again evoked this pragmatism.<sup>90</sup> In Parliament, discussion of the law pitted those who wanted the strict application of the law in the name of the Republic against those who wanted that

law to be adapted to local circumstances. In the end, the decree of 27 September 1907 extended the main clause of the 1905 law on secularism in Algeria but included exceptional measures. These measures envisaged that the governor would be able to grant clergymen temporary salaries for a transitory period. This ran against the very principle of secularism and came to be a means to placate the most loyal Muslim subjects and through them Algerian society.<sup>91</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, as in 2004, a pragmatic Republican discourse and methods of government based on the knowledge of social reality, on respect for local cultures and religion, on “the always fragile and revived appreciation of the situation on the ground,”<sup>92</sup> came to the fore. This approach ran against what is considered as the typical Republican perspective, assimilation. The fact that influential Republican leaders such as Émile Combes or Jules Ferry could go from one approach to the other depending on circumstances makes us doubtful as to what “the true Republican tradition” is. As Daniel Guarrigue has asserted, “nobody has the monopoly of the Republic.”<sup>93</sup> The Conseil d’État followed one of these traditions when it decided in 1989 that the issue of the head scarf at school should be handled with caution and pragmatism by the schoolmasters and principals. The recent law that aimed at forbidding any ostentatious religious signs belongs to the other tradition. For the time being, the latter prevails: indeed, the law was voted by a large parliamentary majority. However, it includes provisions for dialogue before any sanction. It also envisages that the school principals will be responsible for interpreting the law, that is, for judging whether a religious sign is worn in an ostensible way or not. Both Republican traditions, in short, remain in play.

VÉRONIQUE DIMIER is assistant professor in political science at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. She has published *Le Gouvernement des colonies: Regards croisés franco-britanniques* (2004) and several articles in *West European Politics*, (27,5, November 2004), *Journal of Contemporary European History* (13-1, 2004), *Itinerario* (28-1, 2004), and *Public Administration* (84,2, 2006). She’s currently completing a book on “Recycling Empire: the institutionalization of a European aid bureaucracy, 1958-1998,” which deals with the role of former French colonial officials in setting up the General Development Directorate within the Commission of the European Community.

## Notes

1. Jean-Pierre Brard, *Journal Officiel de la République française: débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (3 February 2004, third session), 16.
2. *Bulletin Universitaire de l'Académie d'Alger* (1890), 419-20.
3. Jean-Claude Willaime, "Le Conseil d'État et la laïcité," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 41 (1991), 38. See also on those debates: Jean Baubérot, "La laïcité française entre histoire et devenir," *Administration* (1993): 104-11; Dominique Julia and Jacques Legoff, "La laïcité dans l'histoire," *Le Débat* 58 (1990): 20-37.
4. Daniel Vaillant, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (3 February 2004, Second session), 4.
5. Jacqueline Fraysse, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (3 February 2004, Second session), 13.
6. Law of 9 December 1905: The Republic ensures the freedom of conscience. It guarantees the freedom of worship under the sole restrictions specified below, in the interest of the public order. ART. 2.- The Republic does not recognize, nor subsidize any religion. Consequently, from the first of January following the promulgation of the current law, any expenses linked to the services of religion would be dropped from the budget of the State, of the Department and of the municipalities. Only expenses linked to chaplains and that purport to ensure the freedom of worship in public institutions like schools, hospital, jails and asylums will be inserted in those budgets.
7. Daniel Guarrigue, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 52.
8. Marc Le Fur, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (3 February 2004, third session), 37.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Véronique Dimier, "For a 'diverse and indivisible' Republic? Experience from the colonial past," *Journal of Contemporary European History* 13 (2004): 45-66; "Unity in Diversity: Contending Conceptions of French Republicanism," *West European Politics* 27 (2004): 836-53.
11. Yves Deloye, *École et citoyenneté: L'individualisme républicain de Jules Ferry à Vichy, controverses* (Paris: Presses FNSP, 1994); Eugène Weber, *La Fin des terroirs: la modernisation de la France rurale, 1870-1914* (Paris: Fayard, 1983).
12. Hubert Pérès, "Le village dans la nation française sous la Troisième République: une configuration cumulative de l'identité," in *Carte d'identité: Comment dit-on nous en politique?* ed. Denis-Constant Martin (Paris: Presse FNSP, 1994), 211. Philippe Veitl, *Les Régions économiques Clémentel et l'invention de la région des Alpes Françaises* (Thèse de Doctorat en Sciences Politiques, IEP Grenoble, UPMF, Grenoble II, 1992).
13. Michel Charzat, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 23.
14. Bernard Carayon, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (4 February 2004, second session), 16.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Jacques Myard, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 28.
17. Jean-Christophe Cambadélis, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (4 February 2004, second session), 10.
18. Christian Decocq, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 25.
19. Charzat, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 23.
20. Guarrigue, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 16.
21. Jean-Jacques Descamps, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 14-15.



22. Jean-Marc Nesme, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 20-22.
23. Guarrigue, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 16.
24. Alain Madelin, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (3 February, third session), 30.
25. Law of December 23 1959 gives private religious schools the possibility to conclude agreements with the French state, that is, to receive subsidies from the French state.
26. Le Fur, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (3 February, third session), 37.
27. Jean Baubérot, *Histoire de la laïcité en France* (Paris: PUF, 2000), 97.
28. Armand Young, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 8.
29. Huguette Bello, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (3 February, third session), 7.
30. Manuel Valls, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 10.
31. Véronique Dimier, *Le Gouvernement des colonies: Regards croisés franco-britanniques* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2004).
32. Free school for all was organized by the law of 16 June 1881. It was the main condition to render primary school compulsory until the age of 13 (law of 28 March 1882).
33. Algeria was again put under the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior, with the governor general resuming his powers. Jean Claude Vatin, *L'Algérie politique, histoire et société* (Paris: Presses FNSP, 1983).
34. French laws could include a final article stating that it was applicable to Algeria, sometimes with certain restrictions, or that it was not applicable. If no specification was given within the law, the President of the Republic could adopt a decree that extended the measures of the law to Algeria. See Arthur Girault, *Principes de colonisation et de législation coloniale*, vol.3 (Paris: Sirey, 1921), 221.
35. Ali Ajgou, *L'Enseignement primaire indigène en Algérie de 1892 à 1949* (Thèse de doctorat d'histoire, Université d'Aix-Marseille, 1990).
36. Émile Combes, "Rapport Combes sur l'instruction primaire des indigènes," *Documents parlementaires* (Paris: Sénat, annexe no. 50, 18 March 1892).
37. Charles Robert Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France (1871-1919)*, vol.1 (Paris: PUF, 1968), 443-46.
38. Jules Ferry, "Rapport Ferry sur l'organisation et les attributions du gouvernement général de l'Algérie," *Documents parlementaires* (Paris: Sénat, annexe No 8, 27 October 1892); "Rapport Combes sur l'instruction primaire des indigènes"; Émile Combes, "Rapport Combes sur l'enseignement supérieur musulman," *Documents parlementaires* (Paris: Sénat, annexe no. 15, 29 January 1894).
39. "Rapport Combes sur l'instruction primaire des indigènes," 253.
40. *Ibid.*, 240.
41. Henri Le Bourgeois, *Rapport d'inspection générale sur la situation de l'enseignement primaire* (Académie d'Alger, Paris : Imprimerie Nationale, 1880), 68 and subsequent pages.
42. Auguste Burdeau, "Rapport Burdeau pour le budget de 1892," *JO, Chambre des députés, document* (18 July 1891), 653.
43. Charles Jeanmaire, *Plan de scolarisation* (Alger: Imprimerie Officielle, 1892), 114-18.
44. Charles Jeanmaire, "Conseils pédagogiques," *Bulletin Universitaire de l'Académie d'Alger* (1890), 260.
45. Charles Jeanmaire, "Observations from the rector of Algiers," 114.
46. Léon Bourgeois, *JO, débats parlementaires, Sénat* (5 April 1892), 483.
47. "Rapport Combes sur l'instruction primaire des indigènes," 240.
48. *Ibid.*, 246.
49. *Ibid.*, 237.
50. *Ibid.*, 246.

51. Ibid., 247.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 258.
54. Ibid., 260.
55. Julia A. Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Popular Protest, Colonial Encounters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
56. "Rapport Combes sur l'instruction primaire des indigènes," 259.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., 47.
60. *Archives of the Senate: procès verbaux manuscrits de la Commission Sénatoriale de l'Algérie*, vol. 1 (1891-1892), 16 January 1892.
61. Decree, 18 October 1892, *Journal Officiel, Lois et décrets*, 5055. On this decree which organized primary native education until 1949, see Ageron, *Les Algériens musulmans et la France*, 466. This decree envisaged a specific native education the organization of which was placed under the supervision of the governor. Each local council would have to set up enough schools to provide education for native boys (girls were not considered). Schools would be compulsory only in the local districts designated by the governor. The application of that law was facilitated by a budgetary law of 1892, which increased the subsidies to local districts for native education.
62. See the intervention of Gerente, senator of Alger (representing the democratic left): *JO, débats parlementaires, Sénat* (18 June 1894), 333.
63. Raymonds Betts, *La Doctrine coloniale française entre 1890 et 1910: De l'Assimilation à l'Association* (Thèse de doctorat, Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Grenoble, 1955); Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Dimier, *Le Gouvernement des colonies*.
64. Caribbean islands, the Indian trading posts and four communes of Senegal, where the native population was given the same political rights as French citizens.
65. Lesueur, Senator of Constantine (Union républicaine), *JO, débats parlementaires, Sénat* (18 June 1894), 336.
66. Clarisse Coignet, "Question d'enseignement: les écoles indigènes en Algérie," *Revue Bleue politique et littéraire* (April 1890), 439. See also the position of L. Jacques, Senator of Oran, *JO, débats parlementaires, Sénat* (2 March 1891), 153.
67. "Rapport Ferry."
68. *JO, Chambre des députés*, (23 July 1884), 1811. On Ferry and his colonial policy see Charles Robert Ageron: "Jules Ferry et la colonisation," in *Jules Ferry fondateur de la République*, ed. François Furet (Paris: Édition de l'EHESS, 1994); "Jules Ferry et la question algérienne en 1892 d'après quelques inédits," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 10 (1963): 127-47.
69. Dimier, *Le Gouvernement des colonies*.
70. Jules Ferry, *JO, débats parlementaires, Sénat* (6 March 1891), 191-92.
71. "Rapport Burdeau," 654.
72. Émile Combes, *JO, débats parlementaires, Sénat* (5 April 1892), 483.
73. Ibid.
74. Hubert Desvages, "L'enseignement des musulmans en Algérie sous le rectorat Jeanmaire: le rôle de l'école," *Le Mouvement social* 70 (1970): 109-137.
75. Émile Combes, *JO, débats parlementaires, Sénat* (5 April 1892), 483.
76. Ibid., 480.
77. Auguste Burdeau, *JO, débats parlementaires, Chambre des Députés* (4 December 1891), 689.
78. Léon Bourgeois, minister of education, *JO, débats parlementaires, Sénat* (5 April 1892), 482.

79. Alfred Rambaud, "L'enseignement primaire chez les indigènes musulmans d'Algérie, notamment dans la Grande Kabylie," *Revue pédagogique* (Janvier-juin 1892), 26.
80. Alfred Rambaud, "Un de nos pionniers en Afrique, E. Sheer," extract of *La Revue bleue* (6 May 1893) reproduced in the *Bulletin universitaire de l'académie d'Alger* (1893): 170-86. Sheer, who had been a schoolmaster, was nominated general inspector in 1884 by Jeanmaire.
81. "Rapport Combes sur l'instruction primaire des indigènes," 237.
82. "Rapport Burdeau," 653.
83. "Rapport Combes sur l'instruction primaire des indigènes," 239. Children from Cévennes, Auvergne, provincial France.
84. Note by Charles Jeanmaire on an article by Donain, "Enseignement de l'histoire," *Bulletin de l'enseignement des indigènes de l'Académie d'Alger* (1894), 23.
85. Desvages, "L'enseignement des musulmans en Algérie sous le rectorat Jeanmaire."
86. Jean François Chanet, *L'École républicaine et les petites patries* (Paris: Aubier, 1996).
87. See Jean Baubérot, *Vers un nouveau pacte laïque* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 192; Jean-Marie Mayeur: "Jules Ferry et la laïcité," in *Jules Ferry fondateur de la République*, 151 ; Jean-Marie Mayeur, *La Question laïque: XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 51; Jean-Michel Gaillard, *Jules Ferry* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 453.
88. Baubérot, *Vers un nouveau pacte laïque*, 53. Baubérot, *Histoire de la laïcité en France*, 49-52. The law of 1882 allowed a day per week for religious teaching to be given outside schools. In the new programs, "duties towards God" were part of moral instruction. A circular dating from 1882 stated that the *préfet*, representing the Republic at the local level, should decide case by case and depending on the wishes of the population, whether or not to maintain the crucifix on school walls. In a letter to all schoolmasters (27 November 1883), Ferry insisted that they should avoid any Republican dogmatism. Only a pragmatic approach "could help the new Republican school to win the support of the population."
89. Baubérot, *Histoire de la laïcité en France*, 69-72.
90. Vatin, *L'Algérie politique*; see the work of Raberh Achi (Thèse de Doctorat, Aix en Provence, in process).
91. Baubérot, *Histoire de la laïcité en France*, 89.
92. Julia and Legoff, "La laïcité dans l'histoire," 36.
93. Guarrigue, *JO, débats parlementaires, Assemblée nationale* (5 February 2004), 16.

Copyright of French Politics, Culture & Society is the property of Berghahn Books and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.