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Teaching Religion Without Teaching Religion?

Laïcité as a Pedagogical Heuristic for Religious Reflection in Non-Confessional Subjects:
The Case of French Language Education

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Abstract

In dem Artikel wird untersucht, wie religiöse Themen im Französischunterricht an deutschen Schulen didaktisch verantwortungsvoll behandelt werden können – mit Rückgriff auf das französische Prinzip der laïcité. Dieses wird nicht als übertragbares Modell, sondern als heuristische Kategorie der Analyse religiöser Pluralität, weltanschaulicher Neutralität und interkultureller Aushandlungsprozesse im Bildungsraum verstanden. Ziel ist es, religionsbezogene Reflexionskompetenz aus religionspädagogischer Perspektive mit Sprachbildung und politischer Bildung konzeptionell zu verbinden und in eine pluralitätssensible Fremdsprachendidaktik zu integrieren. Der Beitrag entwickelt hierzu eine eigenständige Perspektive, in der laïcité als pädagogisches Deutungsangebot für religionsbezogene Lernprozesse im säkularen Unterrichtsraum fungiert und so Perspektiven auf religiöse, interkulturelle und demokratische Bildung miteinander verstrickt.

Schlagworte

Fremdsprachenunterricht – Laïcité – interreligiöse Bildung – weltanschauliche Neutralität – interkulturelle Bildung

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Abstract

This article examines how religious themes can be responsibly addressed in French-language education at German schools, drawing on the French principle of *laïcité*. Rather than being understood as a transferable model, *laïcité* is employed as a heuristic category for analysing religious plurality, ideological neutrality, and intercultural negotiation processes within educational contexts. The aim is to conceptually connect religion-related reflective competence from the perspective of religious education with language learning and civic education, and to integrate this into a pluralism-sensitive framework of foreign language didactics. In doing so, the article develops an original perspective in which *laïcité* functions as a pedagogical lens for engaging with religion-related learning processes in secular classroom settings, thereby linking religious, intercultural, and democratic education.

Keywords

Foreign Language Education – *Laïcité* – (performative) religious education – Worldview Neutrality – Intercultural Education

1. Introduction

How can religious themes be responsibly and pedagogically addressed in school subjects beyond confessional religious education, particularly within educational contexts shaped by both denominational traditions and increasing religious and worldview pluralisation among learners?¹ Within the German educational context, this dual structure constitutes a key framework condition for didactic reflection on religion in school-based learning. It is precisely within this tension that non-confessional subjects, such as foreign language education, become relevant sites for negotiating questions of worldview diversity, cultural-religious interpretation, and democratic orientation in education. Against this backdrop, French language instruction in German schools serves as a case study, engaging with a cultural context shaped by the principle of *laïcité*.

This article is situated at the intersection of religious education and foreign language didactics. It develops *laïcité* as a heuristic category for analysing how religion is negotiated in non-confessional classroom contexts, with French language education serving as an illustrative case. The aim is to clarify how secularism, neutrality, and religious plurality are articulated in pedagogical discourse and how this can inform both religious education theory and foreign language teaching practice.

Against reductive understandings of secularism as exclusion, *laïcité* is conceptualised as a reflexive analytical lens for examining how religious diversity, neutrality, and cultural negotiation are discursively constructed in educational settings. Grounded in religious education theory, this perspective extends its analytical scope to non-confessional subjects.

Methodologically, the study develops a conceptual framework through a dialogue with selected discourses on *laïcité* and applies it to French language education in Germany. It addresses scholars in religious education, foreign language didactics, and civic education interested in transversal approaches to religion in non-confessional contexts. The article uses this field as an illustrative case to examine how religiously coded discourses are negotiated in the classroom.

2. French *Laïcité*: Historical and Educational Foundations

The concept of *laïcité*, frequently translated as secularism, designates a core principle of the French Republic that structures the institutional articulation of

¹ Cf. Schweitzer, Friedrich (2014) 42. Cf. König, Lotta / Schädlich, Birgit / Surkamp, Carola (2022) 123. Cf. Barb, Armandine (2017) 204–222.

religion and public education. In educational contexts, particularly for non-confessional subjects such as foreign language education, this principle can provide a productive analytical lens for examining how religious difference is mediated, translated, and made discussable within classroom discourse.²

2.1 Origins and Development of *Laïcité* in France

The origins of *laïcité* are deeply embedded in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary transformations of the French state. The French Revolution of 1789 marked a decisive rupture with the ancien régime, in which the Catholic Church had held immense social and political power. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (*Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*) enshrined freedom of conscience as a fundamental right, while successive political regimes oscillated between conciliation and confrontation with religious institutions.³ The decisive break came with the enactment of the *Loi du 9 décembre 1905*, which legally established the separation of Church and state. This law not only abolished public funding of religious institutions but also codified the principle that the Republic “*ne reconnaît, ne salarie ni ne subventionne aucun culte*” (does not recognize, pay, or subsidize any religion).⁴

Importantly, *laïcité* emerged not merely as an administrative measure but as a normative project of civic formation. The reforms initiated by Jules Ferry in the 1880s, which introduced free, compulsory, and secular primary education, institutionalized the idea that public schooling should be a space emancipated from religious dogma, dedicated instead to rational inquiry, moral universalism, and Republican values.⁵

2.2 Principles of the Separation of State and Religion in the Education System

The application of *laïcité* in the French educational system is structured around three interrelated principles: institutional neutrality, freedom of conscience, and the pluralistic acknowledgement of worldviews within the framework of republican values. These principles regulate both the permissible presence of religion in school contexts and the pedagogical conditions under which it may become an object of reflection. Teachers and school staff, as representatives of the state, are required to embody institutional neutrality. This does not imply the

2 Cf. Liehr, Günter (2017). Cf. May, Jonas (2020).

3 Cf. Conseil Constitutionnel (1789/2025).

4 Cf. République française – Vie publique (n. d.).

5 Cf. Baubérot, Jean (2024). Cf. Kuru, Ahmed Timur (2009).

absence of personal belief, but rather the suspension of visible religious expression within their professional role. Students, by contrast, retain freedom of belief and may express religious affiliation within the limits of school order and the rights of others.⁶

These principles are codified in key legal and policy frameworks, most notably the 2004 law prohibiting conspicuous religious symbols in public schools and the 2013 *Charter of Laïcité*⁷, which articulates the school's mission to foster critical thinking, civic responsibility, and respect for diversity without endorsing any particular worldview.⁸ Together, these principles define the operational framework of *laïcité* within the French public education system.

2.3 Tensions and Challenges: Debates on Religious Symbols, Neutrality, and Freedom of Expression

Despite its constitutional status, *laïcité* remains a contested and dynamically interpreted principle whose meanings vary across political and educational contexts. A particularly salient dimension of this contestation concerns the visibility of religious symbols in public schooling and the extent to which such visibility is compatible with institutional neutrality.⁹

The debates surrounding the Islamic headscarf, including the 1989 Creil case and the legislative developments of 2004 and 2010, illustrate how questions of religious expression intersect with broader issues of identity, gender, and national belonging in France.¹⁰ From a didactic perspective, however, the relevance of these debates lies not in their political resolution, but in their potential as authentic discursive material for foreign language education.¹¹

In French language classrooms in Germany, such controversies can function as authentic discursive material that enables critical text and media analysis, argumentative discourse, and intercultural comparison, rather than being treated as sociopolitical background knowledge. This requires a pedagogical framing that enables distance without detachment: students are not asked to adopt positions within the French debate, but to analyse how such positions are linguistically

6 Cf. Liehr, Günter (2017). Cf. May, Jonas (2020).

7 Cf. Baubérot, Jean (2024). Cf. Journal officiel de la République française (2004).

8 Cf. République française. Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale et de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche (o. J.). Cf. Baubérot, Jean (2024).

9 Cf. Lehmann, Karsten (2024).

10 Cf. Bowen, John (2007). Cf. Asad, Talal (2003).

11 Cf. Baubérot, Jean (2015). Cf. Modood, Tariq (2019).

and culturally constructed. In this sense, *laïcité* becomes a heuristic for examining how religious difference is represented and negotiated in public discourse.¹² More extreme or emotionally charged events, such as the attacks on Charlie Hebdo (2015) and the murder of teacher Samuel Paty (2020), further intensify the pedagogical sensitivity of these topics.

For foreign language education, these cases underscore the necessity of developing structured didactic approaches to sensitive topics, including critical media literacy, perspective-taking, and dialogical classroom formats. They also highlight that religion in the classroom does not appear as doctrinal content, but as a dimension of public discourse that must be interpreted, translated, and critically reflected upon.¹³

2.4 Didactic Potentials of *Laïcité*

Building on the didactic implications outlined above, *laïcité* enables a form of reflective engagement with religious diversity that does not rely on confessional positioning but instead foregrounds critical, dialogical, and interpretative approaches to religion in pluralistic classroom contexts.¹⁴

First, from a religious education perspective, *laïcité* embodies the principle of analytically decoupling religious affiliation from public participation.¹⁵ In didactic terms, this allows learners to interrogate the norms and tensions that arise when personal beliefs intersect with societal expectations. Classroom discussions around French public controversies, such as debates on the visibility of religious symbols, thus become opportunities for normative reflection and comparative cultural analysis.

Second, the French model of secularism invites the development of reflexive competencies, which can be understood as the ability to critically assess and navigate cultural and religious differences: students are encouraged to understand, translate, and critically examine how concepts like religion, neutrality, and identity are constructed across linguistic and cultural contexts.¹⁶ Rather than aiming for consensus, *laïcité* as a pedagogical lens fosters discursive plurality

12 Cf. Bruinenberg, Hemmo / Sprenger, Sanne / Omerović, Ena / Leurs, Koen (2019) 26–47. Cf. Damasceno, Cristiane S. (2021) 1–9.

13 Cf. Winter, Aaron / Mondon, Aurélien (2017) Chapt. 1. Cf. Guerrin, Michel (2020).

14 Cf. Welply, Oakleigh (2020).

15 Cf. Baubérot, Jean (2015).

16 Cf. *ibid.*

and equips learners with tools to engage in complex social debates without falling into relativism or dogmatism.

Third, *laïcité* supports a non-confessional, yet ethically engaged approach to religion in education, which aligns with established concepts of religious literacy and pluralism-sensitive pedagogy in religious education discourse. It legitimizes the presence of religious themes within foreign language instruction not as doctrinal content, but as part of the civic and cultural texture of discourse communities.¹⁷ This positions *laïcité* within broader debates on civic education and intercultural learning.

3. Religious Neutrality as a Challenge in School Education

This chapter explores how religious neutrality can be operationalised as a didactic category in contexts of cultural interpretation in foreign language education.

Religious neutrality in education is a contested concept that is conceptualised differently across educational and didactic discourse. It is commonly understood either as a strategy of avoiding religious references¹⁸ in schooling or as a structured pedagogical stance that enables engagement with plural perspectives¹⁹ in educational contexts.²⁰ In pluralistic societies marked by religious, cultural, and ideological diversity, neutrality is therefore negotiated between exclusionary and dialogical models of educational practice, including questions of cultural and ethical reflection.²¹ Rather than functioning as a fixed normative position, neutrality can be understood as a mediating category that structures how religiously relevant content is selected, framed, and interpreted in educational settings.

3.1 Religious Sensitivity in Foreign Language Teaching – A Transversal Cross-Competence

Religious sensitivity in this article is defined as a transversal pedagogical competence that enables learners to recognize, interpret, and critically engage with religious dimensions of cultural and social life in pluralistic contexts. It is dis-

17 Cf. *ibid.* Cf. Jackson, Robert (2014).

18 Cf. Lösch, Bettina (2020) 383–402. Cf. Grümme, Bernhard (2021).

19 Cf. Domsgen, Michael / Witten, Ulrike (2022) 17–69.

20 Cf. *ibid.*

21 Cf. *ibid.*

tinct from confessional religious instruction insofar as it does not presuppose personal belief or adherence, but instead describes a didactic competence.²²

A distinction is drawn between three analytically separate but related concepts that are often used interchangeably in educational discourse. Religious literacy refers to the ability to recognise and understand religious references, symbols, and narratives in cultural and social contexts. Religious competence designates the interpretative and reflective capacity to engage with religion as a culturally embedded phenomenon, including the ability to compare perspectives and analyse meaning structures. Religious sensitivity, understood as a transversal competence, refers to the pedagogical ability to identify situations in which religious worldviews become relevant in educational contexts and to address them in a reflective, non-confessional, and dialogical manner. Within this framework, this capacity is understood as a key dimension of learners' orientation in plural societies, as developed in religious education theory by Boehme²³, Schambeck²⁴, and Schweitzer²⁵.

A pluralism-sensitive approach refers to a pedagogical stance that acknowledges religious diversity as a constitutive feature of contemporary societies while fostering both respectful and critical engagement with differing worldviews. This understanding aligns closely with concepts of interreligious learning, which aim to use religious plurality as a resource for dialogue and foster sensitivity towards difference.

Post-confessional religious education emphasizes that religious education today no longer depends primarily on confessional affiliation but takes shape as an open, dialogical, and interpretative practice within pluralistic contexts.²⁶ This corresponds to the approach of transversal religious learning²⁷, which integrates religion as a cross-disciplinary theme across various subjects and contexts. Within foreign language teaching, this perspective enables an approach to religion not as doctrinal content, but as a dimension of public discourse.

22 Cf. Domsel, Maike Maria (2024).

23 Cf. Boehme, Katja (2023).

24 Cf. Schambeck, Mirjam (2013).

25 Cf. Schweitzer, Friedrich / Schnaufer, Evelyn / Dubronner, Eva / Schnabel-Henke, Hanne (2024).

26 Cf. Dressler, Bernhard (2020). Cf. Schambeck, Mirjam / Simojoki, Henrik / Stogiannidis, Athanasios (2019).

27 Cf. Schweitzer, Friedrich / Bräuer, Magda / Boschki, Reinhold (2017).

3.2 Models of Neutrality: Between Avoidance and Reflective Engagement

In religious education discourse, the debate over religious neutrality in education frequently revolves around two opposing paradigms. The first conceptualizes neutrality in negative terms, advocating the exclusion of religious themes from public education to protect state institutions from confessional influence. This model, often associated with strict interpretations of *laïcité*, tends to treat religion as a private matter that should not be addressed in public schooling, in order to safeguard state neutrality.

In contrast, a second model conceptualizes neutrality as a form of *inclusive pluralism*. Here, neutrality is understood not as the absence of religion from the educational space, but as the impartial and critical engagement with a multiplicity of worldviews, including those of a religious nature. In this model, neutrality is achieved not by omitting religion, but by ensuring that no single religious or non-religious position is privileged. From this perspective, responsible religious literacy is conceptualised as a key civic competence for democratic citizenship in pluralistic societies, as emphasized in contemporary religious education discourse.²⁸

Conversely, reflective engagement requires pedagogical strategies that foster critical thinking and dialogical openness without lapsing into proselytism or relativism. This distinction is of particular relevance in the German educational context, where prevailing models of neutrality differ significantly from the French *laïcité* framework that this article examines.

The key difference between both models lies not in whether religion appears in education, but in how it is pedagogically framed: either as an external element to be avoided or as a cultural and interpretative dimension of social reality. This distinction highlights that neutrality is not a fixed state but a pedagogical decision space in which different forms of inclusion and exclusion are negotiated.

In a comparative perspective, these models provide the analytical framework for examining how different education systems, including the French and German contexts discussed in this article, institutionalise and operationalise neutrality in distinct ways. This framework underpins the analysis of neutrality as a pedagogical category in foreign language education, particularly with regard to how religiously coded cultural content can be addressed without implying confessional instruction.

28 Cf. Baubérot, Jean (2015). Cf. Modood, Tariq (2019).

3.3 The German Education System: Between Confessional Instruction and Plural School Culture

Germany represents a unique case in the European landscape, combining constitutional guarantees of religious freedom with a publicly funded system of confessional religious education (konfessioneller Religionsunterricht) embedded within the regular school curriculum. Article 7(3) of the German Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) enshrines the right to religious instruction according to the tenets of individual religious communities, while also allowing for the development of alternative models such as non-denominational ethics courses or interreligious education, depending on the federal state (*Bundesland*).²⁹

This structure reflects a historically evolved compromise between church and state, rooted in the cooperative model (*Kooperationsmodell*) of church-state relations. Yet it also poses significant challenges in increasingly heterogeneous classrooms, where many students identify with no religious tradition, belong to minority religions not formally recognized by the state, or experience religion in culturally hybrid forms. In this context, the broader school culture – shaped by general education, school ethos, and extracurricular practices – becomes a critical space in which religious themes may surface, even outside of formal religious instruction, including in subjects such as foreign language education.

Thus, while Germany upholds religious education as a constitutionally protected subject, it must also negotiate the demand for neutrality in contexts where religion is not explicitly part of the curriculum. This requires educators in all subjects to develop a professional ethos that acknowledges religious plurality, engages with religious themes where relevant (e.g., in history, literature, or foreign language instruction), and fosters respect for different convictions without advancing any particular one.³⁰

3.4 A Religious Education Perspective: Neutrality as Reflective Engagement

The pedagogical challenge lies in addressing religion in ways that are both critical and respectful, informative and open-ended.³¹ At the same time, this perspective opens up possibilities for examining religious motifs in literature, ethical dilemmas in philosophy, or the socio-political implications of religious pluralism in civic education. In this view, the classroom becomes a site of lived plurality, where neutrality is not a barrier to religious discourse but its precondition:

29 Cf. Domsgen, Michael / Witten, Ulrike (2022). Cf. Winter, Jörg (n. d.) 1–2.

30 Cf. *ibid.*

31 Cf. Baubérot, Jean (2015).

only by fostering a space in which all voices may be heard without coercion can democratic education realize its commitment to openness, diversity, and critical inquiry.³²

In summary, the challenge of religious neutrality in education lies not in shielding students from religious themes but in equipping them to encounter such themes with intellectual curiosity, ethical responsibility, and dialogical competence across disciplinary contexts. This approach aligns with broader aims of *Bildung* and intercultural competence, and it resonates with emerging frameworks in religious education that seek to bridge the gap between confessional traditions and post-secular realities.

4. Religious Themes in French Lessons: Opportunities and Challenges

French language education is treated as a discursive field in which cultural, linguistic, and religious dimensions intersect in practice. The inclusion of religious themes in French language instruction within the German educational context presents both rich pedagogical opportunities and complex didactic challenges. Far from being ancillary to language acquisition, such themes intersect with broader aims of intercultural competence, ethical reflection, and critical engagement with sociocultural discourse.³³ Given France's pronounced tradition of *laïcité*, which asserts a strict separation of religion and state, the treatment of religion in Francophone texts and societal debates demands a nuanced pedagogical approach – one that neither exoticizes religious phenomena nor suppresses them under the guise of neutrality.³⁴

French lessons, especially in their advanced stages, are uniquely positioned to facilitate reflective encounters with religion not as a catechetical or confessional matter, but as a cultural, historical, and ethical phenomenon.³⁵ In what follows, three central dimensions of this potential will be examined: literature and public discourse as access points, religious diversity as a didactic resource, and the pedagogical negotiation of the tension between *laïcité* and pluralism in the classroom.

32 Cf. Jackson, Robert (2014) 45. Cf. Lovat, Terence (2022) 147–156.

33 Cf. Röhl, Stefanie / Baumert, Britta (2019).

34 Cf. Schweitzer, Friedrich / Bräuer, Magda / Boschki, Reinhold (2017).

35 Cf. Winter, Jörg (n. d.).

4.1 Literature and Societal Debates as Didactic Approaches

Francophone literature and public debates provide access points through which religious themes become visible as part of cultural, ethical, and political meaning-making in language learning contexts. From the existential explorations of Albert Camus³⁶ and the metaphysical poetics of Paul Claudel³⁷ to the postcolonial reflections of Assia Djebar³⁸ and Leïla Slimani³⁹, literary texts in the French tradition often probe religious experience, critique institutionalized religion, or stage the interplay between belief and unbelief. Such works do not serve to promote a particular faith, but rather invite learners to engage with religion as a formative element of identity, conflict, and meaning-making, while simultaneously developing interpretative and discursive competences in the target language.

Beyond literature, public debates in French media and politics, such as discussions surrounding the visibility of religious symbols in public schools (e.g., *l'affaire du voile*), or broader public discussions of religion and secularism in the Republic, offer authentic and linguistically rich material for foreign language learning and critical engagement.⁴⁰ When appropriately contextualized, such debates can be introduced in the classroom through opinion pieces, interviews, legal texts, and audiovisual media. This allows students not only to engage with the rhetorical, ideological, and ethical dimensions of religion in the public sphere, but also to analyse argumentative structures, discourse strategies, and linguistic representations, while critically reflecting on mechanisms of stereotyping, marginalization, and the reproduction of prejudice.⁴¹

It is crucial, however, to approach these topics with both didactic and linguistic sensitivity. Without critical framing, these kinds of materials risk reinforcing orientalist tropes, cultural essentialism, or forms of othering. Critical engagement with such content requires more than its mere presentation; it demands careful framing and structured dialogue. Rather than avoiding controversial issues, foreign language education should consciously address them in ways that are didactically structured and religious-education sensitive. From a didactic standpoint, such content is not merely thematic material but an opportunity for language learning and discursive competence, including argumentative precision

36 Cf. Camus, Albert (1991).

37 Cf. Claudel, Paul (2005).

38 Cf. Djebar, Assia (1993).

39 Cf. Slimani, Leïla (2020).

40 Cf. Bowen, John R. (2007).

41 Cf. Domsel, Maïke Maria / Krahn, Annika / Yağdı, Senol (2026).

and intercultural comparison. These materials foster critical reflection from multiple perspectives.

4.2 Religious Diversity as a Resource for Intercultural and Ethical Reflection

Intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education includes the capacity to engage with religious worldviews as constitutive elements of cultural meaning-making and worldview diversity in communicative contexts. In the Francophone world, histories of colonisation, migration, and globalisation have produced societies marked by pronounced religious plurality.⁴²

Engaging with this diversity in the French classroom allows students to confront unfamiliar perspectives, explore the intersections of religion and identity, articulate ethical positions about tolerance, freedom of belief, and social cohesion, and express these reflections in the target language. In this context, religion is not approached as dogma but as *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld), as lived experience that informs art, memory, conflict, and aspiration.⁴³

For example, units on Francophone countries such as Senegal⁴⁴, Lebanon⁴⁵, or Québec⁴⁶ may address how Catholic, Muslim, and indigenous religious traditions co-exist or conflict within specific cultural milieus, while simultaneously expanding learners' vocabulary and discourse competence related to religion and society. These explorations offer opportunities to develop not only language skills but also ethical judgment, dialogical openness, and a recognition of the religious dimension of human culture – a dimension often underrepresented or stereotyped in secular educational contexts.

4.3 Negotiating the Tension Between *Laïcité* and Religious Pluralism

For educators, the task is to present *laïcité* in its historical depth and ideological complexity, without either idealizing it or reducing it to a form of secular dogmatism.⁴⁷ Building on the historical framing above, *laïcité* can be further specified as a contested model of secular governance. Didactically, this involves not only historical explanation (e.g., the 1905 law separating church and state) but also a

42 Cf. König, Lotta / Schädliche, Birgit / Surkamp, Carola (Eds.) (2022).

43 Cf. Meyer, Karlo (2019). Cf. Willems, Joachim (2020).

44 Cf. Seck, Abdourahmane (2013) 300–309.

45 Cf. Baytiyeh, Hoda (2017) 546–559.

46 Cf. Tiflati, Hicham (2021).

47 Cf. Fernando, Mayanthi L. (2014).

critical engagement with current controversies and their broader implications for democratic coexistence.⁴⁸

Students can be invited to compare the French model of *laïcité* with the German model of church-state cooperation, thereby gaining insight into differing conceptions of neutrality, tolerance, and public religion.⁴⁹ Classroom discussions may also explore how *laïcité* functions as both a unifying republican principle and a contested cultural norm, particularly in light of migration, decolonial critique, and the resurgence of identity politics.⁵⁰

Students can thus develop a nuanced understanding of how secularism and pluralism interact in different educational and cultural contexts. From a religious education perspective, this highlights the need for informed, critical, and dialogical engagement with religion in educational settings.⁵¹

5. Didactic Approaches for a Reflective Engagement with Religious Issues

Addressing religious themes in French language classrooms requires a didactic framework that integrates methodological precision with intercultural and worldview-sensitive reflection. Given the sensitivity of religious themes – especially within the framework of *laïcité* – educators are challenged to foster spaces of reflection that neither relativize nor polemicize, but rather cultivate dialogical maturity and critical thinking. This chapter explores three interrelated dimensions of such a didactic framework: methodical approaches within French instruction, interdisciplinary linkages, and the specific competencies foreign language teachers must develop to facilitate reflective religious engagement.

5.1 Methods for French Lessons: Discussions, Text Analysis, Role-Playing

These methodological approaches are particularly significant when religious meanings emerge implicitly within non-confessional learning contexts. Text analysis, when methodically guided, offers a powerful entry point into religious discourses, enabling students to decipher implicit theologies, social tensions, or ethical dilemmas embedded in literature, journalistic writing, or audiovisual media. For example, when engaging with the principle of *laïcité* in contemporary French society, learners may be invited to examine contrasting conceptions of

48 Cf. Baubérot, Jean (2024).

49 Cf. Robbers, Gerhard (2019) 109–124.

50 Cf. Laborde, Cécile (2008).

51 Cf. Fernando, Mayanthi L. (2014).

religion in the public sphere and to position these within a comparative framework that includes their own educational and cultural contexts.

Such analysis, however, must be complemented by interactive formats that allow learners to articulate and negotiate their perspectives. Structured classroom discussions, based on carefully selected prompts and anchored in a climate of mutual respect, can serve as laboratories for civic reasoning and intercultural understanding. Role-playing exercises, in which students adopt the voices of historical or fictional figures, encourage empathy and decenter monological thinking.

Didactic scenarios might, for example, involve a simulated debate on the ban of religious symbols in French schools or an interpretative conversation between literary characters with differing religious identities. Such formats enable learners not only to engage linguistically but also to analyse how religious meanings intersect with public discourse and social values.⁵²

5.2 Interdisciplinary Perspectives: Linking with Ethics, History, and Political Education

From a religious education perspective, religious themes cannot be meaningfully addressed in isolation; they demand contextualization within broader socio-historical and ethical frameworks. For this reason, interdisciplinary cooperation – especially with ethics/philosophy, history, and political education – is not an optional enrichment but a structural necessity.⁵³

In collaboration with history classes, French instruction can illuminate the genealogies of *laïcité*, the legacy of the French Revolution's anticlericalism, or the colonial entanglements of religious missions. Through links with political education, students can critically explore questions of democratic pluralism, religious freedom, and identity politics in contemporary France and beyond. Ethical education, in turn, opens avenues for discussing existential questions – such as suffering, justice, and the good life – that are often inflected by religious traditions and can be fruitfully addressed through literary or philosophical texts.⁵⁴

From a didactic perspective, this interdisciplinary entanglement does not compromise the linguistic integrity of French instruction; rather, it enriches it by situating language within meaningful contexts of human concern. It also models for

52 Cf. Byram, Michael (2021).

53 Cf. Lehmann, Karsten (2024). Cf. Hacieminoğlu, Esra / Yıldız, Neslihan Göksoy (2022). Cf. Osbeck, Christina (2023) 103–119.

54 Cf. Gaudin, Philippe (2017) 93–106.

students the interconnectedness of knowledge domains and fosters competencies of transfer, comparison, and multi-perspectival analysis.⁵⁵

5.3 Religious Education Competencies for Foreign Language Teachers

While French instructors are not expected to possess formal theological training, a foundational religious literacy is indispensable for responsibly navigating religious content in the classroom. In terms of foreign language didactics, this can be understood as an extension of teachers' professional competence in dealing with culturally sensitive content, similar to competencies required for addressing topics such as migration, identity, or political conflict in the target language. Teachers should be able to recognize and contextualize religious references, identify potential moments of misunderstanding or conflict, and mediate discussions in a way that acknowledges both personal convictions and collective norms of respectful dialogue.⁵⁶

Joint training modules, interdisciplinary planning, or co-taught units can support foreign language teachers in developing the reflective, dialogical, and intercultural competencies necessary for dealing with religious themes. Moreover, the integration of selected religious education concepts – such as multi-perspectivity, hermeneutical openness, or the distinction between belief and worldview – can enhance the pedagogical repertoire of language instructors without transgressing subject boundaries.⁵⁷

This underscores the importance of linguistically and hermeneutically attentive teaching practice in dealing with worldview-related content.⁵⁸

6. Conclusion and Outlook

The analysis of French *laïcité* in the context of foreign language education has demonstrated that secularism functions not merely as an institutional principle of church-state separation, but as a historically contingent and contested framework through which religious difference is continuously negotiated in public education. Its pedagogical relevance lies precisely in the productive tension between the aspiration to institutional neutrality and the persistent cultural visibility of religion in educational discourse.

55 Cf. Byram, Michael (2021).

56 Cf. Lehmann, Karsten (2024).

57 Cf. *ibid.*

58 Cf. *ibid.*

Rather than treating *laïcité* as a transferable normative model, this article has conceptualised it as a heuristic lens for making visible the implicit processes through which religion, neutrality, and education are co-constructed. In doing so, it extends the analytical reach of religious education theory into non-confessional subjects, where religion emerges not as doctrinal content but as a dimension of discursive meaning-making.

This perspective aligns with broader shifts in understandings of religious literacy in plural societies. What is required is not only knowledge about religious traditions, but also the capacity to analyse how religious and non-religious world-views are framed, positioned, and made operative within institutional and pedagogical contexts.

Future research should move from conceptual clarification toward empirical and classroom-based operationalisation. In particular, it is necessary to investigate how learners actually engage with religion-related discourse in foreign language education, and how teachers navigate tensions between neutrality, plurality, and interpretative openness in situ. Comparative studies across educational systems would further illuminate how different regimes of church–state relations shape pedagogical practices and classroom discourse.

Ultimately, the heuristic value of *laïcité* lies not in providing resolution, but in sharpening analytical sensitivity. It foregrounds the contingent boundaries through which religion becomes visible or invisible in education, and thus renders these boundaries available for pedagogical and theoretical reflection.

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