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Conflict in the Classroom: Religion and Republicanism in Algeria and Alsace, 1918–1940

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Abstract

Between World War One and World War Two, successive French governments sought to strengthen the Republic by fostering a sense of patriotism among youths in colony and metropole. Classrooms became battlegrounds where linguistic and religious identities were constructed, resisted and reformed. Comparative case studies of Alsace and Algeria reveal the continuities and contrasts of French policy within France and across the empire. Education policy as created by the Republican government was not uniform throughout the interwar period, but was constantly reformed to meet needs on the ground. By focussing on the way cultural identities were created and recreated, this article seeks to demonstrate how individuals and groups on all sides of the colonizing relationship interacted in education.

France's Third Republic, in place from 1871–1940, witnessed the establishment of the nation's first state-funded primary school system. This education system was far from politically neutral: it was designed to strengthen the Republic by wresting control of education away from religious orders and by universalizing the use of the French language. The imposition of French education inspired considerable resistance in rural provinces and the overseas colonies, where local religious and linguistic culture clashed with French designs. The process of imposition, resistance, and reform will be examined through a case-study analysis of French education in Alsace and Algeria. This comparative approach takes a cue from recent work by Edmund Burke[1] and seeks to place western and non-western history on the same plane in order to reveal commonalities of experience.

This article explores the intersections of religion and education in Alsace and Algeria in order to demonstrate how policy conformed to fit competing concepts of education. The bulk of academic literature on French education has concentrated on the destruction of religious customs by the central government through assimilationist cultural policies.[2] It will be argued, however, that religious custom in Algeria and Alsace influenced and modified the realization of these policies. Far from imposing a uniform secularism on these two regions, the French government had little choice but to reconcile its resolute laïcité with the tenacity of local religious faith.

Alsace and Algeria present an interesting comparison for a number of reasons. In both regions, religion and language set local populations apart from those of interior France and clashed considerably with the Republican ideals of secularism and linguistic unity. In the former, the vast majority of people spoke a German dialect and understood little, if any, of the French language. Furthermore, Alsatians were religiously observant and had not experienced the separation of church and state that occurred in France in 1905. Similarly, most Algerians observed Islamic religious custom and spoke either Arabic or Berber. As in Alsace, the religious establishment in Algeria was often openly hostile towards the French authorities, whose secularism and demands for linguistic unity were at odds with the convictions of most Alsatians and Algerians.

I seek points of comparison between the education projects in Algeria and Alsace in order to situate the imposition of cultural identities as a world historical process. It is important, however, to note that experiences in these two locations were fundamentally different. In Algeria, unlike in Alsace, there was a recognized and emphasized racial difference separating the local population from the French colonizers. Education, like most colonial institutions, was highly racialized. A two-track school system provided two distinct educational experiences: one for European settlers and a small number of Algerian elites, the other

[1] Edmund Burke III, "The Terror and Religion: Brittany and Algeria," in *Colonialism and the Modern World: Selected Studies*, ed. Greg Blue et al. (London: ME Sharpe, 2002).

[2] This is a criticism recently levelled by James McDougall in "The Shabiba Islamiyya of Algiers: Education, Authority, and Colonial Control, 1921–57," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 24:1 (2004), 147–154.

for the Algerian masses. The curriculum at the former was identical to that used in France, while at the écoles franco-indigènes lessons were loosely based on metropolitan curricula, but with a heavy emphasis on agriculture and manual labour. This emphasis, as well as the generally low quality of instruction at the écoles franco-indigènes, made it difficult or impossible for students in this system to gain acceptance to a French secondary school or university.[3] This is a striking difference from education in Alsace, which was designed to facilitate the integration of young Alsatians into French society.

Rather than addressing the question of motivations for colonialism, or determining to what extent the Third Republic sought to enact reform rather than maintain domination, I instead focus on how education policy was reformed and transformed in the interwar period. This analysis allows me to compare the experience of two regions whose political status was clearly different but who shared similar struggles in defining cultural identity in the face of imposed education systems. In this way, the colonial history of Algeria is seen as part of the same historical processes that shaped modern European history rather than as something that developed in isolation.[4]

The Third Republic, as a firmly secular government, sought to distance itself from the religious affiliations of previous French regimes. The early imperial incursion into Algeria, however, had a distinctly religious flavour. Colonial apologetics had justified military action in 1830 as a mission to liberate the natives from the oppressive Ottoman regime and to offer to them the benefits of Christian civilization. Charles X, in declaring his desire to carry out a campaign against Algeria, explained to parliament "the resounding redress which I hope to obtain in satisfying the honour of France will, with the Almighty's help, turn to the profit of Christendom."[5] The King's religious zeal seems to contrast with the official rhetoric that promised to respect the Islamic tradition of Algeria. Written evidence of France's goodwill came in the form of a "convention of capitulation" signed by French General Bourmont and the Turkish Pasha on 5 July 1830. This document stated that "the exercise of the Muslim religion shall be free. The liberty of the inhabitants of all classes, their religion, their property, their business and industry shall remain inviolable."[6] The very day the document was signed, French soldiers in Algiers managed to contradict each of these liberties and attacked Algerian people, property, businesses and holy sites with an unchecked eagerness.

From the earliest days of imperialism in Algeria, the French carried out a systematic assault on religious institutions. Mosques in both urban and rural areas were closed on suspicion of harbouring anti-French attitudes. Even more destructive for Islamic institutions was the steady transfer of lands from Algerians to European settlers and the resulting destruction of local religious authority. The French government confiscated communal lands, or hubus, which, in addition to providing financial support for religious leaders, funded Koranic education for Algerian youth and paid for the upkeep of schools. Left with no source of income, Muslim schools had to rely on private funding in order to stay open. This was not easy to come by, and many Koranic schools closed permanently in the first decades of the colonial era. The dismantling of Muslim schools led to a sharp increase in illiteracy, which worsened with time as one generation disabled the next. Several historians of Algeria have argued that Koranic schools were traditionally well attended and that their focus on scriptural readings meant that Algeria in fact had a higher rate of literacy than France in 1830. Although this is difficult to prove or to contest, the confiscation of hubus and the closure of politically-suspect schools certainly left a large hole in Algerian education.[7]

At the outbreak of World War One, French armies entered southern Alsace and remained as an occupying force until 1918. Ever conscious of its image as liberator, the French government was careful not to carry out any reforms to local institutions that could inspire hostility from the local population. The issue of

[3] Fanny Colonna, *Instituteurs Algériens: 1883–1939* (Alger: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1975), 57–58.

[4] Edmund Burke III, "Theorizing Histories of Colonialism and Nationalism in the Arab Maghrib," in *Beyond Colonialism and Nationalism in the Maghrib*, ed. Ali Abdullatif Ahmida (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 20.

[5] Charles X, quoted in John Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 48.

[6] Collection des Actes du Gouvernement Depuis l'Occupation d'Algèr," reprinted in Ruedy, 49.

[7] Donald Schilling and Elsa Harik, *The Politics of Education in Colonial Algeria and Kenya* (Ohio University Press, 1984), 27, and Ruedy, 103.

religious education was particularly sensitive. Alsatians were deeply concerned that a return to France would mean an end to the Concordat between church and state, and by extension, the dissolution of religious education in the province. Throughout the war, however, France assured Alsatians that the religious character of their schools was not open to reform. As in the pre-war period, Alsatian students were taught a minimum of four hours of religious instruction each week. Local teachers were, of course, already trained to teach biblical history and rudiments of the catechism. In classrooms run by French soldiers, a priest, pastor or rabbi was present to handle religious instruction. Although French authorities requested that, whenever possible, religious teaching should be carried out in French, this was rarely followed or enforced.[8]

Promises to respect local religious tradition in Alsace continued in the immediate post-war period. Alexandre Millerand, first as commissaire général of Alsace and then as president of France in 1923, reiterated that Alsatian traditions would not only survive but also flourish under French leadership.[9] In the eyes of many Alsatians, however, France was a threat to local religious culture, particularly in the sphere of education. French public schools had been secularized since 1882, and the French state had not provided financial support for religious orders in almost twenty years. Education was highly centralized, at least officially, and it was nearly impossible for administrators and politicians to imagine how to maintain religious instruction without compromising the values of a republican education. For Alsatians, the concept of separating church and state was as foreign as it was for Algerians. Religion played a very visible role in public life. Moral instruction, by which was meant instruction by religious leaders, was seen as the essential purpose of education. Just as Koranic schools focussed on teaching the scripture of the Koran, schools in Alsace spent much of the day teaching biblical passages in preparation for the holy communion or confirmation. Two visions of education, one rooted in religious instruction, the other in republican citizenship[10], appeared bound to clash as Alsace became more closely drawn into the French hexagon.

In the early 1920s, religious instruction remained officially untouched in Alsatian primary schools. Four hours weekly were spent on religious subjects, taught either by a qualified teacher or by an appointed clerical leader. French authorities did, however, manage to undermine religious influence in schools by replacing Alsatian teachers with instructors from the interior of France. Arguing that the loyalty of German-trained teachers could not be assured, the French fired 921 Alsatian teachers, roughly one in every six, at the end of the war. Most school inspectors were removed or demoted, leaving all positions of power within the education administration in the hands of implanted French officials. Local presses throughout the 1920s decried the influx of French teachers and administrators as an encroachment of secularism and illustrative of France's "colonial" attitude toward Alsace.[11] Teachers and officials from France, trained as they were in the secular school of the republic, were accused of being anti-religious and deliberately undermining the faith traditions of their young and impressionable students. By indoctrinating the youth with laïcise, it was argued, the French were covertly seeking to destroy the religious culture of Alsace.[12]

Removing religious orders from the education system was far more difficult than firing regular teaching staff. Catholic priests and nuns in Alsace were still protected by the Concordat between church and state, and any attempt to take them off the government payroll would be interpreted as an imposition of France's 1905 secularizing laws. There was considerable reason to fear local uprising if confessional schools and teaching orders were banned outright. Instead, teaching orders came under control of the French state, which could monitor their teaching and cap their numbers. Catholic orders were therefore recognized as an important link between France and the Alsatian population, and maintaining an amicable

[8] Stephen Harp, *Learning to be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation Building in Alsace and Lorraine, 1850–1940* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998),181.
[9] Ibid.,183.

[10] Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 336.
[11] Samuel Goodfellow, *Between the Swastika and the Cross of Lorraine: Fascisms in Interwar Alsace* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), 23.
[12] Heimatbund, "Lettre des Member Catholiques de Comité Central de la Ligue des Alsaciens-Lorrains (Heimatbund) à Sa Sainteté le Pape Pie XI (Strasbourg, 24 janvier 1927)," reprinted in Oscar de Ferenzy, *La Vérité sur L'Alsace* (Paris: Librarie Bloud & Gay, 1930), 453.

relationship with them was a powerful way to instill patriotism among the Catholic masses in the newly incorporated province. Furthermore, as Stephen Harp has argued, most French governments of the interwar period saw utility in state control of religious schools. In France, the secularization laws had led to the blossoming of a system of private religious schools completely out of the realm of state control. In Alsace, the French government continued to exercise authority over religious education.[13] This allowed the central government to emphasize lessons on French culture and nationalism that could offer a competing alternative to religious-based identity.

The seizure of hubus land in Algeria left religious establishments in the colony with no means of financial support. The French Ministry of the Interior, wishing to dissuade hostility and recognizing that French-friendly imams were powerful political allies, began funding mosques out of the colonial budget in 1843. This gave French authorities tremendous power over the religious establishment, enabling them to decide who could act as spiritual leaders and teachers to the Algerian faithful. It also allowed the French to determine how many religious leaders would serve the public, perhaps as a way to limit the role of religion in the day-to-day lives of the colonized. The decision to financially support an "official Islam" was purely pragmatic: The cost of funding, and therefore controlling, Muslim establishments was minimal in comparison to the cost of allowing them to operate freely.[14] Just as in Alsace fourteen years later, the separation of church and state so central to republican philosophy was not to be applied to Algerian society.

Of all the Islamic institutions supported and controlled by the French government, the madrasas were the most strategically important and their cooption by the French inspired considerable hostility among the Muslim population. Madrasas, of which there were three in Algeria, were Islamic secondary schools that trained the elite for positions of leadership in the religious and political life of the country. They had existed long before the arrival of the French, but the face of education in these institutions was drastically changed by the colonial power. For every Algerian teacher there was a corresponding French instructor, thus allowing for a bilingual education and for constant surveillance of curriculum, students and teaching personnel. Students were accepted into madrasas based on the loyalty of their family, not necessarily for their intellect, piety or credibility among the Muslim population for whom they would be leaders.[15]

The public school system in Algeria, unlike the madrasas, maintained the French secular ideal: there was no religious instruction included in the primary school curriculum for Algerian students. This may seem somewhat surprising in light of the fact that the French government provided financial support to French-friendly mosques and effectively controlled the madrasas. Algerians themselves requested religion in school because, like many Alsatians, the majority of Algerians did not recognize the benefit of a secularized state. They remained dubious of French schools precisely because of their perceived anti-religious nature. There were suggestions made by prominent Muslims that French schools could attach themselves to pre-existing Koranic schools, thus attracting a broader range of students and allowing both systems to flourish. The proposal was, however, wholly rejected: the official line was that religious instruction in public schools was "une dérogation à un principe fundamental de la législation scolaire française: le principe de la laïcité."[16]

In keeping with the secular nature of French education, the textbooks of the écoles franco-indigènes contained very little reference to religion, and what was mentioned was rarely positive. An examination of primary-level readers, which were more or less based on superficial descriptions of the Algerian lifestyle, reveals that Islamic practices and institutions were not considered useful or appropriate material. Algerian culture is instead explained through clothing, food and typical occupations.[17] The standard history textbook used in the final year of Algerian public school contains a small section on Mohammed and the birth of Islam as its sole reference to the Muslim faith. A 150-word description provides a very basic understanding of the prophet, his teachings and the Koran. The text explains how the Arabs engaged in a holy war across Africa and into Europe, finally halted by the victorious

[13] Ibid., 195.
[14] Ruedy, 101.
[15] Ibid.
[16] M.F. de Paemelaere, "Rapport sur l'Algérie," *L'Adaptation de l'Enseignement dans les Colonies: Rapports et Compte-Rendu du Congrès Intercolonial de l'Enseignement dans les Colonies et les pays d'Outre-Mer, 25-27 Septembre 1931* (Paris: Henri Didier, 1932), 25.
[17] See, for example A. Davense, *Les Premières Lectures de Mamadou et Bineta* (Paris: Librairie Istra, 1930).

Francs in 732. In what is now Algeria, the author elaborates, Arabs forced the indigenous Berber population to adopt Islam or face either death or exile. According to the text, "sous la domination arabe, l'afrique du Nord ne connut pas la paix et l'ordre que les Romains lui avaient assurés pendant cinq cents ans."[18] It is telling that the only discussion of Islam in Colin's history textbook is one of violence and oppression, emphasizing peace and stability as hallmarks of Western imperialism. Colin's textbook, in teaching this version of history to Algerian youth, demonstrates France's policy to undermine Islamic and Arabic identity in the colony.

Textbooks used in Alsatian schools generally avoided religious topics. This is not surprising as four hours per week were dedicated to religious education and officials probably saw little need for including it in the core subject areas. The textbook most frequently used for French instruction at the primary level was Bruno's *Le Tour de France par Deux Enfants*. By far the most popular reader of the Third Republic, the *Tour de France* had two editions: one which predated the 1905 law separating church and state, and one revised edition brought out in 1906. It was this second one, cleansed of any references to religious practices or heroes, that was shipped in large quantities to teach the young generation of Alsatians about French language and culture. Interestingly, by this time the reader was declining in popularity elsewhere in France, replaced by more modern texts.[19] The book, featuring two orphans from Lorraine, was seen as ideal reading material for Alsatians even while it was considered outdated for other French students. This is probably because *Tour de France* was written as part of the early-republican effort to create a sense of patriotism and to combat the cultural authority of the Catholic Church – goals very much at the forefront of education policy in Alsace. The message of the book is clearly articulated through the words of the young protagonist André, as he successfully stops an argument over whose province is the finest in France:

> 'Alors, pour nous mettre en accord, disons donc que la France entière, la patrie, est pour nous tous ce qu'il y a de plus cher au monde.' 'Bravo! Vive la France! Vive la patrie Française!'Dit d'une même voix le petit équipage.[20]

Mona Ozouf and Hans Siepe have argued that in the 1906 edition of *Tour de France*, religious values were translated into republican values in order to create what has been termed a "church of the republic."[21] Jean-Michel Bardos, who wrote the epilogue to the centennial edition in 1977, explained "Dieu expulse, la patrie peut occuper toute la place."[22] This was of particular importance in Alsace, where the continuation of religious education was seen as potentially jeopardizing to the cultivation of "Frenchness" in the province. Where the earlier edition thanked God for certain accomplishments, such as the night the boys spend on Mont Blanc, the later edition praises France for the beauty of the mountain. The term mère France is often used as a substitution for Dieu as the boys give thanks for their safe journey and praise the wonders they see around them.[23] In this way, textbooks used in Alsatian schools served to quietly instil some of the goals of the republican education project while still allowing religious instruction in public schools.

For the first five years after the war, education in Alsace remained as an uneasy truce. French teachers were still streaming in from the interior and their lessons and textbooks were often criticized for their secularity, but religious instruction remained in the curriculum. In 1924, however, the climate of negotiation came to an abrupt end with the national electoral victory of the cartel des gauches under the leadership of Edouard Herriot. Soon after assuming the role of Prime Minister, Herriot gave a speech to the Chamber of Deputies articulating his plans for the full reincorporation of Alsace into the French state:

> Le gouvernement est persuadé qu'il interprétera fidèlement le voeu des chères provinces enfin rendues à la France en hâtant

[18] Edgar Colin et al, *L'Algérie: Histoire et Géographie, A l'Usage des Cours Moyens et des Classes de fin d'Études* (Alger: Baconnier Frères, 1949), 56–58.
[19] John Strachan, "Romance, Religion and the Republic: Bruno's *Le Tour de France par Deux Enfants,*" *French History* 18:1 (2004), 99.
[20] G Bruno, *Le Tour de France par Deux Enfants* (Paris: Librairie Belin, 1906), 194.
[21] Robert Gildea, *Education in Provincial France, 1800–1914: A Study of Three Departments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 254.
[22] Jean-Michel Bardos, "Epilogue," in G. Bruno, *Le Tour de France Par Deux Enfants* (Paris: Librarie Belin, 1977), 317.
[23] Hans Siepe, "L'Imaginaire Histoire dans *Le Tour de France par Deux Enfants*," *Storia della Storiografia* 14 (1988), 160–180.

> la venue du jour où seront effacées les dernières différences de la législation entre les départments recouvrés et l'ensmble du territoire de la République. Dans cette vue…en ménageant le intérêts matériels et moraux des populations, d'introduire en Alsace et en Lorraine l'ensemble de la législation républicaine.[24]

The introduction of "l'ensemble de la législation républicaine" was a clear attack on the religious culture of Alsace. Napoleon's Concordat between church and state, which had been abolished in France in 1905, was no longer to apply to the two reclaimed provinces. Although these laws were to have broad effect, including the cessation of state salaries for religious orders, the focus of discontent among both clergy and the general public was on the defence of religious education.[25]

Within Alsace, particularly rural areas of the province, Herriot's legislation was bitterly contested. The application of anticlerical laws triggered a wave of protest, with 50,000 demonstrators arriving in Strasbourg to demand the preservation of confessional schools and teaching orders.[26] The protestations against Herriot's reform reached a peak in early 1925. Bishop Ruch, a fierce defender of confessional schools, organized a province-wide school strike in March of that year. He urged parents to keep their children home from school until the government in Paris recognized their rights to control the education of Alsatian youth. Many local priests assumed leadership roles in the strike, encouraging young members of their congregations to remain at home and reassuring their parents that such a move was for the benefit of their children's moral education. Across Alsace, particularly in the rural areas, classrooms were left almost empty on strike day.[27] Within a month, due in part to this intense public pressure from Alsace, Herriot's government fell from power. The new Prime Minister, Paul Painlevé, recognized that the sensitivity of the education question was such that imposing secular schooling ran the risk of alienating Alsace from France. Favouring long-term integration over ideological uniformity, the Painlevé government abandoned the secularizing legislation and allowed the Concordat to remain in place in Alsace. [28]

Only for a brief period under the Popular Front government of 1936 was the question of religious education revisited. Like the cartel des gauches, the Popular Front, as a Radical-Socialist-Communist coalition, found it difficult to reconcile the idea of Alsace being part of the French Republic while still allowing its children to be indoctrinated with religious education. In July of 1936, Léon Blum and his education minister Jean Zay introduced an additional year of primary education across France, requiring students to attend school until age fifteen. In Alsace and Lorraine, however, a further mandatory year was added three months later in order to compensate for time lost to religious and German instruction. Although state schools across the country were to receive additional funding to offset the cost of the extra year, the Chamber of Deputies voted 382 to 200 to withhold any financial support for religious schools in Alsace or elsewhere. As a further attack on confessional schools, the Blum government decreed that any schools willing to phase out religious instruction would not have to add the additional year. One outspoken critic of religious education argued that such a move would provide the necessary incentive to draw students away from confessional schools and into the public system.[29]

To enforce this new law, the government imposed fines on Alsatian parents who took their children out of school before age sixteen. Hardest hit were agricultural and working-class families, who were predominantly Catholic, and who relied on their adolescents to share in the family's work. They were neither willing to lose another year of labour nor to give up on religious instruction. Many departments subsidized parents for not following the law, thus negating the incentive of the levied fines. When the Blum government fell from power in 1937, its successor realized that the extra year of schooling was impossible to coordinate or enforce, and it was quickly dropped as legislation.[30] Subsequent French governments have continued to uphold the Concordat between church and state in Alsace and to provide funding for the confessional school system.

The post-war period in Algeria offers a complementary illustration of how classrooms became

[24] Edouard Herriot, quoted in Jean-François Chanet, *L'École Républicaine et les Petites Patries* (Paris: Aubier, 1996), 266.
[25] Harp, 193.
[26] Harp, 193.
[27] Goodfellow, 24.
[28] Harp, 194.
[29] Chambre des Députés, *Journal Officiel des Débats Parlementaires*, 16th Legislature (1936), 1683–84.
[30] Harp, 195.

the focal point for political and cultural negotiation in the Third Republic. The French began an ambitious school-building program in 1920 that continued in the following decades. Although the number of Algerian students in the French education system rose considerably in the decades after World War One, from 33,000 before the war to 100,000 in 1938, this was still only a small fraction of the school-age population.[31] Furthermore, this education was limited to Algerian boys: there were very few options for girls in either Koranic or French school systems.[32]

Since the French could not meet demands for education, they had little choice but to allow Koranic schools to fill this gap. In order to exert some control over these schools, a number of regulations were introduced in the interwar period to restrict the influence of religious education in the colony. Koranic schools were supposed to operate only in the evenings and on weekends, so that they were not in direct competition with French schools for the recruitment of students. Despite the shortage of schools serving Algerian students, the French routinely shut down any Koranic school that attempted to teach during school hours and within the three-kilometre limit of an école franco-indigène. These closures predominantly affected urban and semi-urban areas where French schools were more numerous, forcing families to choose between a French education or none at all.[33] By allotting Koranic schools a secondary role in education, French educators were attempting to minimize the cultivation of a Muslim identity among urban Algerian youth. The influence of Islam on this segment of the population became a central concern of the French administration in the 1920s, as Algerians grew increasingly restless under colonial rule.[34]

Despite the efforts of the French Ministry of Public Instruction, Islamic education continued and thrived during the interwar period. While there is little doubt that the civilizing mission aimed for the assimilation of Muslim Algerians into European culture, this undertaking was, on the whole, unsuccessful. Despite the adversity of the colonial situation, Islamic education survived French encroachment and, in many ways, thrived as an alternative to the European school system. The demand for education could not be met by French schools alone, which opened up a market for traditional and reformed "free schools."[35] Until the late 1920s, Muslim education remained the domain of traditional Koranic schools, which continued to flourish until post-independence. In the early 1930s, as a response to the growing desire for "modern education," several free school systems developed as hybrids of religious and secular pedagogy. These schools offered places of learning for students who could not or would not fit into the franco-indigène system, who wanted an education that was simultaneously "westernized" and Muslim.[36]

The Islamic reform movement, led by the Association of Reformed Ulama, was the organization most active in the field of education.[37] The reform ulama believed that public engagement and education were essential to the revitalization of Algerian culture. Beginning in 1931, they began constructing a reformed Koranic education system that attracted 10,000 students by 1939. Reflecting the fact that leadership of the movement was drawn primarily from among the elite of Algerian society, the reform ulama had great respect for the intellectual achievements of the European world. The curriculum at their free schools included literature, history, mathematics and science as well as the traditional emphasis on Arabic language and scriptural reading. Religious teachings emphasized a purified and "scientific" examination of sacred texts, pious leaders and Islamic history. Although Algeria was the focus of scholastic lessons, the ulama stressed that Algeria was part of the Muslim world and fostered a sense of Islamic identity that went beyond nationalism.[38]

The colonial administration was extremely careful in its dealings with the reform ulama and their system of free schools. According to official policy, France was supposed to respect the right of Algerians to

[31] Alf Andrew Heggoy, "Education in French Algeria: An Essay on Cultural Conflict," *Comparative Education Review* 17:2 (June 1973), 185–86.
[32] Ruedy, 105.
[33] Heggoy, "Arab Education in Colonial Algeria," *Journal of African Studies* 2:2 (Summer 1975), 154–156.
[34] Heggoy, "Education in French Algeria: An Essay on Cultural Conflict," 184.
[35] Allan Christelow, "Ritual, Culture and Politics of Islamic Reformism in Algeria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 23:3 (July 1987), 261.
[36] Said Ali Alghailani *Islam and the French Decolonisation of Algeria: The Role of the Algerian Ulama 1919–1940* (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2002).
[37] Christelow, 261.
[38] Ibid., 169–71.

conduct the religious and moral education of their children. It was recognized that any movement to curb the influence of the religious reformers could result in significant popular unrest.[39] At the same time, the reform Koranic schools were in direct competition with French-run primary schools and paid little attention to French regulations concerning their hours of operation and location. Many of the free schools were within the three-kilometre limit of a franco-indigène school and all operated during regular school hours. Beginning in the early 1930s, the Ministry for Public Instruction threatened repeatedly to close down schools that did not conform to these laws. The ulama, knowing full well that the French would face enormous resistance if they were to act on these threats, continued to disregard regulations governing Koranic education. Laws were then introduced requiring fifteen hours of French instruction per week in all Koranic schools. This rule, too, was ignored. Although most ulama were fluent in French, they often refused to speak it and certainly rejected teaching it to their students as a matter of principle. The colonial government had little choice but to allow these transgressions, not only out of fear of protest, but also because the reformed schools were educating an increasing number of Algerian children who would not have otherwise found room in French classrooms.[40]

The secularism so central to French public education policy did not apply to Algeria's religious population because attempting to limit the influence of Islam was recognized as a dangerous strategy. French authorities instead sought to limit the reform ulama's contact with the broader Algerian population outside of their primary schools. As previously mentioned, the colonial government allowed a breach in the separation of church and state through its financial support of French-friendly mosques and imams. A 1933 circular declared that any religious leader connected with the Association of Reformed Ulama was not permitted to preach from the official pulpit—and many unofficial mosques had been forced to close for financial reasons.[41] Although this exacerbated tensions between the co-opted religious sects and the "unsanctioned," it did little to quell the influence of the reform ulama. Their system of Koranic education grew throughout the colonial period, reaching a peak of 50,000 students by 1950. The Association did not survive the War of Independence, but the puritanical Islam it preached exerted tremendous influence on the post-war cultural terrain of Algeria. The ulama slogan "Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, Algeria is my fatherland," recited by students at the reform Koranic schools, became the official motto of the Algerian Republic.[42]

Local protest against secularizing education certainly had a powerful effect on the education systems created in interwar Alsace and Algeria. Although the ideology of laïcité was considered a central tenet of French republicanism, political expediency allowed for a reinterpretation of this principle to suit local contexts. The French government, always conscious of nationalist and autonomist agitation, was hesitant to incite hostility through perceived attacks on the religious establishment. At the same time, allowing religious schools to exist outside of the French system was recognized as a potential threat to central authority. The classroom could be the site of much anti-French sentiment, particularly if that classroom emphasized its spiritual nature in contrast to the secular French state. By monitoring and even controlling Koranic and confessional schools, the French government hoped to influence the sort of cultural identity that was cultivated in the classroom. Local populations, through their ongoing resistance to French education ideals, also sought to influence the sort of cultural identity fostered in the classroom. The result was a flourishing of local religious culture that significantly altered the practice of education policy during the Third Republic.

[39] Christelow, 257.
[40] Heggoy, "Education in French Algeria: An Essay on Cultural Conflict," 188.
[41] Ruedy, 135.
[42] Ibid.