As the twentieth century commenced, a number of school-related incidents caught the attention of the Alsatian press. One case involved a father who enrolled his son in the Mulhouse Mittelschule (a form of advanced primary school). After giving the son’s name and age, the principal asked about denominational affiliation. The father replied, “none,” since the child had not been baptized. The principal then let it be known that this was unacceptable, for according to the law the child had to receive either Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish religious instruction. When the father suggested that it really didn’t matter to him, the principal replied, “No, you are the father, you must choose.” The father responded, “If I absolutely must, then I choose Jewish.” To this the principal inquired, “Is he circumcised? The Rabbi won’t accept him if he is not.” The son, however, had not been circumcised. So the father, exasperated and wanting to end the already overly lengthy interview, agreed to enroll his son provisionally in the Catholic section. Soon thereafter he filed a complaint with the Ministry for Alsace-Lorraine, and when that failed to bring any positive results, the son was transferred into the Protestant section.

Meanwhile, in Lorraine, several fathers had been brought before the authorities because their children failed to attend the religious education provided outside of the schools by the (Catholic) clergy. One father appealed his punishment, a twenty-four hour jail sentence, arguing that since the priest’s instruction was not part of the official school curriculum, it was optional for his sons. But in 1905 the courts held that, although school authorities had no direct influence over parochial education (which prepared youth for confirmation and first communion), the law required children to attend this instruction as long

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1 According to the 18 April 1871 ordinance that introduced compulsory education in Alsace-Lorraine, parents were liable for their children’s attendance; truancy could be punished with fines and/or imprisonment.
as they were of school age. Local officials, thus, had acted properly and the penalties for the truancies would stand.2

These episodes call attention to an important dimension of religion’s role in late nineteenth-century European society, one that the extensive literature on the culture wars has largely ignored. Namely, while ecclesiastical and political authorities across Europe clashed over who should control the schools, the place of religious instruction in the various school curricula remained secure—France excepted—down to the end of World War I.3 During the Kulturkampf, for instance, Prussian bureaucrats purged clergy from the ranks of the school inspectors, but they upheld the number of hours devoted to religious instruction per week in the primary and secondary schools.4 Given the conservative bent to German political culture during the Kaiserrreich, the inclusion of religious education in the German states’ primary school curricula is perhaps not surprising. It reflected a consensus among political leaders—and churchmen—that religious instruction was essential to Erziehung (education, especially in the sense of personal and moral development), which was the principal goal of the German primary school. In other words, teaching religious precepts remained useful for socializing the masses. Yet, even in the secondary schools, the humanistic Gymnasium and the more “modern” and technically-oriented Realschule, the number of hours devoted to religion held constant even when these

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2 These episodes were recounted in the anonymous pamphlet, Der Kirchenzwang in Elsaß-Lothringen von einem Elsässischen Freidenker (Frankfurt am Main: Neuer Frankfurter Verlag, 1909), 11–21. See also the circular from Paul Albrecht, the head of the Reichsland’s Superior School Authority (Oberschulrat) to the district presidents of 3 Oct 1905, which reproduced the text of the Reichsland’s Superior Court (Oberlandesgericht) decision. ADBR 65 D 296, Vol. 5, III 5834/OS 5738.

3 For a European perspective on the conflicts between (the Catholic, particularly) church and state over education, see Nicholas Atkin and Frank Tallett, Priests, Prelates & People: A History of European Catholicism since 1750 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 85–194, passim, as well as Clark and Kaiser, Culture Wars (especially the essays by James McMillan, Els Witte, and Laurence Cole). On the situation in Germany, the standard account is Lamberti, State, Society, & the Elementary School; for France see especially, Ozouf, L’École, l’Église et la République.