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## **The Interplay Between Secularism and Religious Decolonisation: the Case of France**

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Universiteit Leiden

# The Interplay Between Secularism and Religious Decolonisation: the Case of France

**Master Thesis**

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## **Abstract**

The banning of religious dress, such as the burqa, has sparked much debate over the last two decades. While secularism is a concept most countries committed to liberal values engage with, at least on the perspective of religious freedom, only some countries have formally applied it. France has been legally bound to secularism since 1905 and strongly maintains this stance, issuing the broadest restrictions on religiosity in public under its *laïcité* model. Although secularism has historically been associated with the Christian tradition, having come out of Enlightenment thought, its modern use seems to affect other religious communities to a greater extent, which has come with much criticism from the affected communities. This paper examines how the application of secularism interplays with the theory of religious decolonisation, in the context of a single-case study analysis of France. Through the use of qualitative content analysis the French government's exposition of their secularism, *laïcité*, this paper has found a negative or non-consequential interplay between both concepts.

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## Introduction

Within the last decade more and more European countries have implemented religious-dress restrictions, such as banning the burqa from public spaces as well as banning girls from wearing hijabs in schools. Some of these bans relate directly to the increase in immigrants from majority Muslim countries since 2015, either from a security or integrative policy perspective (Saiya and Manchanda 2020). Most recently, Gabriel Attal, the education minister of France has made a commitment to banning the popular 'abaya robe' from French schools. After the 2004 ban of the hijab within schools, the abaya robe has gained popularity, as it offers many young Muslim girls and women the opportunity to dress modestly and in accordance to their faith and culture, while not disobeying the ordinances restricting such dress in school (Audureau 2023). This statement has once again reignited the strong discussion around the secular-state model of *laïcité* in France, which dictates a strict separation of religion and state affairs, essentially privatising religion through the implementation of a law formalising secularism in 1905 (Barras 2017, 143). While the French commitment to secularism in public and state affairs is relevant to all religions the country's history plays a significant part in the current retention of secularity.

Religion has played an interesting part in the history of Western Europe. On the one hand, having a significant political and cultural status, with the Catholic Church having had immense control over the political proceedings. Furthermore, the shift away from religion embodied in the Enlightenment tradition led secularisation of thought, making agency and reason the basis of knowledge production and its subsequent export of secularism through colonialism, has created a sense of superiority in the European Christian's ability to overcome their confines of belief (Juergensmeyer 2017, 76; Borup 2021, 166). Thus, cementing this reasonability, as necessary for the modern developed nation state, as a Christian tradition. On the other hand, strong identification with religion has a negative connotation as the shift to the nation-state model relies on the absence of an overarching other commitment above the state-community. There exists this duality, on the one hand the overcoming of the 'irrational' faith from within the Christian tradition, and on the other, the necessity in retaining the identification to the nation-state culture and system and rejecting any religious ties from the system of public order and maintenance. Additionally, the effects of decolonisation and globalisation have created an influx of diversity, as well as cultural and religious heterogeneity in the European nation-state systems in need of accommodating (Juergensmeyer 2017, 80). Pairing this with this conception of secularism being a Christian tradition, as well as the growing number of non-religious people within traditionally Christian European states, other religious thought and expressions are at the forefront of the modern secularisation process (Zuckerman and Shook 2017, 7-8). Thus, effects of secularisation or laws pertaining to overtly religious dress have a stronger affect on non-Christian communities within Europe.

With reference to the Christian tradition of Enlightenment thinking which developed European secularism (Juergensmeyer 2017, 76; Borup 2021, 166) and its seeming conflict with other 'non-

native' religious communities, this paper aims to understand how the theory of religious decolonisation and an applied form of secularism interplay. Using theories such as religious decolonisation, which aim to counter a hierarchy of thought production in religious traditions, will frame the research to reflect on the cause of laws affecting or restricting religiosity, as well as the reason for their implementation and retainment. To conduct this research, this paper will implement a single case study analysis, as the in-depth analysis into the developments and their effects needs to be heavily contextualised to a country's history and relationship to secularism. Furthermore, as most European countries implementing these types of laws are, at least on the nation-state level, only somewhat dedicated to secularism, showcased on the one hand by their lack of theocratic government structure, as well as an overarching commitment of respect for religious freedom of individuals, this paper will utilise France as its case. As previously outlined, France not only has a legal commitment to secularism, but its diverse demographic stemming from its colonial past provides the most suitable basis to analyse the phenomenon with (Clare 2011, 2). Although France is a unique case, examining the most extreme form of applied secularism and its effects on religious decolonisation can help to gain insight on the interaction between these concepts. Understanding how implementing secularism, especially a secularism built upon indivisibility, as is the case with the French model of *laïcité* (Clare 2011), can affect other religious communities within Europe can further its possible application in an ever-growing globalised and diverse Europe. Especially considering the outset of this paper stems from the unrest of the affected communities, gaining insight into how the theories interact in a case study will create an in depth understanding of their applicability with each other and to what extent this approach to understanding secularism can be beneficial in a further applied sense.

This paper will be constructed into three main sections. First, it will analyse the writings of other authors to create a cohesive background in the previously accumulated knowledge on secularism, as well as religious decolonisation. Here, the main theories will be looked at with more detail, to create the framework from which to employ the theories. Secondly, the single-case study method will be explored in context of the overarching research question, utilising qualitative content analysis to gain understanding of the French governments explication of their secularist model, which will be evaluated within the final section - the analysis of the findings.

## **Literature Review**

Although secularism is a relatively modern concept, its study is varied. Juergensmeyer (2017), Berlinerblau (2017) and Fox (2017) discuss the political impacts of secularism as well as its perceived opposition to religion. While Juergensmeyer and Berlinerblau focus heavily on the effects of the historical roots of secularism, Fox (2017) takes an empirical approach to understand whether a strict separation of church and state must be guaranteed for democratic processes to succeed. Focusing on Western democracies, the study found that although most countries are (through their liberal nature) committed to pluralism as well as a respect for religion and consider themselves secular, are in fact not. Even though the countries mentioned within the study have a

constitutional principle protecting religious freedom and expression, so far as it does not interfere with the maintenance of public order as defined by O'Brien (2016, 146), Fox's (2017) results showcase even those that state a stronger commitment to secularism than others, can only be attributed to match the loosest criteria of political secularism. Furthermore, Fox (2017, 110) states, only France, India and the Turkish government of Cyprus deliberately declare their commitment by use of the term 'secularism' within their constitutions. All three countries define themselves as social and secular Republics, while most other countries only name the state as sovereign.

Within the non-European study of secularism it has been used to argue its relevance in the context of religious freedom. Especially in the Middle-East, in countries such as Iran, secularism as well as secularisation of thought has been used to argue for the liberation and reclaiming of religiousness for women. Similarly, Al-Ali (2000) writes about how the debate surrounding secularism within Egypt is framed against the Western establishment of secularism. Here, the arguments encompass the creation of a contextualised non-European concept of secularism, which can create a context through which feminist activists can argue for religious liberation without the the adversity against the use of a Western concept. Saiya and Manchanda (2020) touch on the idea of women's liberation though their analysis of the security effects of Burqa bans, in which they state that within Europe, the restrictions of veiling are often reasoned through integrative approaches. These arguments encompass that Muslim women are often at the forefront of the debate for and against strict secularism, as their expression of their religiousness is arguably the most visible. Arguments banning the veil or the burqa for the better integration of Muslim women in liberal European societies encompass much of the debate on secularism.

The debate surrounding Muslim women and the secularist measures which affect them is most heavily debated in the French context. The French model of *laïcité*, categorised as secularist-laicist by Fox (2017, 106), is the strongest formalisation of secularism. In this form, religion has no place in the political or even public sphere, categorising religion as a fully private issue. Thus, the legal restrictions of religious expression are not simply "[...] allowed; they are mandated" (Fox 2017, 106). This means the country is obligated to restrict overt religiousness within its public and political sphere through its commitment to the secularist-laicist model. Furthermore, not only is France constitutionally bound to secularism, but the commitment to French secularism is culturally significant to the French nation-state, securing the country's indivisibility as mentioned within its constitution upon this concept (Clare 2011). Clare's (2011) study of the French secularist model of *laïcité* examines the relationship between secularism and the Muslim community within France. Referring to both the colonial context of the country, as well as its own historical ties with the secularisation of the state, Clare (2011) argues that the French identity and its development in diversity and plurality should be reflected in the ever-growing debate surrounding the country's commitment to *laïcité*. She argues for an open dialogue, which includes those most affected by the legal restrictions on religiosity in a modern context, with which they have no historical association. Much of the scholarship on *laïcité* as well as secularism already argues from a perspective of

historical concepts which affect the individual today, examining the post-colonial migrative trends which have affected the country's demographic or the general concept of secularism in context of its Western European roots of thought. Still, there exists a gap in combining such study of secularism with the underlying hierarchal categorisation of religions, as expressed in the modern retention of strict secularism.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The term 'secularism' has its origins in the late seventeenth century, attributed to writer Holyoake, being defined as a contrast to the "[...] churchly or spiritual matters" (Zuckerman and Shook 2017, 2). In its conception the term was not yet political or even held any connotation of value, but rather served a descriptive purpose to signify mundane matters. The following term 'secularisation', quickly becoming a concept of study, aimed to understand why religious institutions were to have influence on the political and worldly matters in the first place, creating the political dimension of secularism. Considering the vast political influence of the Christian Church in Europe in the last 500 years, the secularism which originated within Europe cannot be understood without reference to this Church. As Juergensmeyer (2017, 74-75) outlines, although the term was formalised by Holyoake, its conceptual use came earlier. The Enlightenment period and its thinkers regarded the retention of values and traditions through the Church as problematic, as this should be separate from the social organisation surrounding the values embedded into a society. Within this time, the Church's influence on all spheres of society, especially political and economic, were not limited to purely religious matters. The focal shift was to be set on rational thought as the basis of all non-religious and public issues. Before this separation of religion and the public culture that the Enlightenment thinkers cemented, the term religion was seldom used, as there was no direct need for this binary distinction. Juergensmeyer (2017, 76) outlines, that religion and culture was synonymous and that before the privatisation of one's beliefs, the traditions inherited by the Church were not classified as religious. The terms 'religious' and 'secular' are, in their current uses, new terms, simultaneously creating a new understanding of the public society one lives in.

The historical roots of the concept of secularism and their theoretical origins play a vital role in the context of its modern use. Conferring the conceptual implications of attributing a way of thought to a specific tradition created the perception of a secularism belonging to a post-Christian identity. As the term 'religion' is attributed as a Christian phenomenon, due to the creation of a distinction between the secular and the religious, decisions upon the framework and scope of the concept are tied to the Christian tradition. To go beyond religion and create universally applicable thought through reason essentially binds secularism and the ability to disseminate from 'unreasonable' thought to a Christian identity. Borup (2021) starts his examination of religious decolonisation through the specification of identity politics in which he argues that meaningful mobilisation of politics surrounding the concept of identity can be included within the term. The relevance of this is to place the contemporary focus in political processes on identity, in which he claims the universalist, rational and scientific framework of knowledge production, stemming from the

Enlightenment period, has become synonymous to the Western understanding of knowledge. He states, that Christianity is integral to the Western identity as the rationalisation of knowledge production has come from the Western Christian thinkers, who have gone beyond religious traditional confines (Borup 2021, 166). Thus, he states, in the study and subsequent conceptualisation of religion, the Western Christian religious tradition has been able to overcome knowledge production in purely religious thought, and can produce rational and scientific knowledge, while retaining their Christian identity. This exclusion of other native intellectual communities essentially establishes that objective, rational knowledge is a purely Christian and Western phenomenon (Borup 2021, 171). Thus, Borup (2021, 172-173) argues that the inclusion of authentic non-Western epistemologies is necessary to overcome this identification of valid knowledge production. Furthermore, when considering the restriction this lack of inclusion causes in the interpretation and use of such methods in the construction of further concepts, there seems to be a consistent reproduction of values incapable of change and modernisation in applicability.

When considering the outset of religious decolonisation, the concept of decolonisation itself needs further examination. Nye (2019, 5-8) categorises decolonisation as, on the one hand, a 'changing' of thought, speech and action "[...] through a radical engagement with a plurality of voices and perspectives that have been historically marginalised and silenced" (Nye 2019, 5). On the other hand, he classifies it as a political agenda which aims to confront existing inequalities, economically but also epistemologically. Similarly to Borup (2021), he argues that colonialism itself is deeply connected to the 'rationalisation' of the primitive, aiming to civilise and secularise those who believe in the mystic. Thus, Western colonialism informs the development of peoples through an interaction with secularism, which places dependency on religious and traditional cultural expression in a subordinate position to those that separate religion from their civilisation. Quijano (2007, 168-189) goes further, classifying 'Western imperialism' as the developed modern character of 'Western colonialism'. In this sense, not only is the imposition of epistemological and social domination an imposition from the outside, but rather a consistent domination of internal social groups, through access to political, economic and social power. Additionally, he argues that the conflation of Western culture, secularity and power exported, as well as retained internally, through colonialism gave the Western or European culture an aspirational value. 'Social totality', which Quijano (2007, 175) explains as having control over setting the standard of social, economical and epistemological values requires the idea of an 'other'. Without casting something as lesser, the idea of a superior production of civilisation would cease the ability to dominate and subjugate. Thus, in his examination of processes of decolonisation, the freedom to choose and produce culture and society, uninhibited by inequality and domination, are at the forefront to overcoming "[...] the prison of coloniality [...]" (Quijano 2007, 178).

Finally, as religious decolonisation arises from the exclusion of non-Christian productions of knowledge, subsequent actions derived thereof are equally excluded from being viewed with an evaluation of reasonability, as per the standard of secularisation. As Clare (2001, 20-21), engages



with such actions in connection to religious expression, she outlines that Christianity in itself is a religion with “[...] emphasis on inward belief [...]” (Clare 2011, 20), whereas other religions, mentioning Islam and Judaism, have a more outward expression of their belief. In essence, the actions to showcase one’s belief encompass more than one’s conscience, rather taking a significant place within tradition and culture, forming into something more than just belief. The establishment of reasonable thought production based on Christianity, with lack of consideration for such outward expression, reiterates this understanding of the primitive, unable to stand above their transcendental commitments, neglecting however, the broad involvement of such commitments through simple mundane actions. Thus, the exclusion of thought productions with differing expressions of their belief overlooks possible differences which results in inequalities of access and action.

In evaluation of these themes, the creation of a social standard based on Western modes of being and thinking, the root of religious decolonisation theory lies in the creation of an ‘other’ which is inferior to the power holder designating what pertains to such categories. While traditional decolonisation theory includes social and economic factors as the base of its classifications, religious decolonisation focuses mainly on the epistemological factors, focussing on action as a secondary correlative. Although it is informed and contextualised through its social affects, the theory itself focuses on the conflation of a cultural identity, Western Christianity, to superior knowledge production. Simultaneously, the group attributed with this superiority created the idea of an inferior, unable to generate thought from reason, separating traditional modes of being from knowledge production. Thus, only a certain identity is considered as capable to disseminate thought from being, which in religious decolonisation theory is decided upon by said identity. The exploration of a legal commitment to secularism and its affects on the concepts outlined within the theory of religious decolonisation is expected to add a further understanding to the interplay between the two theories. Adding ‘legal obligation’ in adherence to secularism concerning the debate will add a further perspective, which considers the modern iterations of secularism within the nation-state model.

## **Methodology**

### **Case selection and methodology**

As outlined previously, the theory of religious decolonisation seeks to overcome the exclusion of non-Christian voices in the ability of rational thought production, and separation of the religious and the secular in connection to a fully formalised account of secularism. In this context, by understanding one specific and cohesive formulation of secularism extensively, this paper aims to utilise an explanatory single-case study method to examine the interplay between formalised secularism and its modern expression on the decolonisation of religious thought and culture, which impacts the application of laws pertaining to these areas on influence. Yin (2009, 18) defines a case study as “[...] an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context [...]”. He continues, stating that the use of a case study method is

especially relevant when the outcomes culminating in the research of a phenomenon are dependent on the contextualisation of the case. Similarly, Priya (2021, 95) states that a de-contextualised case study does not prove value within case study methods, as the analysis is dependent on the in-depth examination of an event, social unit or phenomenon. Within the methodology of a single-case study, Priya (2021, 96) identifies three main forms - descriptive, explanatory and exploratory. While descriptive forms of case studies aim to elaborate on a phenomenon in detail, and exploratory forms focus on the identification of further research, the explanatory model aims to understand the factors which led to the phenomenon. Therefore, “[t]he primary focus of such a case study is to explain ‘why’ and ‘how’ certain conditions come into being” (Priya 2021, 96).

This paper will employ an explanatory single case study design. Through this form of analysis the intricacies of a case reveal what has led to the outcome one means to examine and evaluate. The case this paper will examine the interplay between secularism and religious decolonisation with, is the country of France. As mentioned within the literature review, France is one of the only countries world wide which exemplifies a constitutional commitment to secularism (Fox 2017, 110), presenting an extreme and unique form of the phenomenon worth investigating (Yin 2009, 47). In this case, the current legislature is heavily dependent on the country's history and national identification with the concept of *laïcité*. Understanding an applied form of secularism from a legally defined commitment, rather than a broad commitment through values of liberalism demonstrated in other European countries, creates a stronger case from which to analyse the effects. Due to the relevance of Enlightenment thinking, not only in the concept of secularism, but also in the process of decolonisation, as well as its prevalence within European identity of the nation-state model, the country through which best to encompass these categories is France. Not only is it a secular republic (Fox 2017, 110), as well as having been a colonial power of countries with predominantly non-Christian religions, but its diverse demographic and ongoing introduction of restrictive legislation on the basis of *laïcité*, the French secularist model, makes the country most suited in this analysis. Furthermore, while there are other countries, which have a secularist constitutional commitment (Fox 2017, 110), no other country has implemented such rigorous public restrictions based on a native tradition such as Western Enlightenment-led secularism. Additionally, the continuous developments, exemplified in the banning of the abaya robe, and their current effects and relevancy on the discussion surrounding the French model of *laïcité*, create a timely incentive to investigate their interplay with religious decolonisation. Finally, as secularism as a concept is not limited to France, understanding its most extreme application in connection to religious decolonisation can help to create a frame upon which to infer further research on the topic of religious decolonisation.

Although the case study method is a methodology within itself, Kohlbacher (2006) explored how utilising a qualitative content analysis (QCA) can be a “[...] useful tool for analyzing data material in case study research” (Kohlbacher 2006, 25). Not only is QCA able to grasp the complexities within the social phenomena examined within case study research, but it does so through its

structured and comprehensive approach to data evaluation. Kohlbacher (2006, 27) goes further stating that QCA “[...] offers a rule-based, theory guided method for analyzing [...], just in the way it is required by the principles of case study research”, which is especially relevant when utilising a variety of data material. He ends his exploration of the two methods stating that with regard to the arguments made for the combination of the two methods the internal validity and reliability will be enhanced. Therefore, this case study design will utilise a qualitative content analysis to ensure the data materials are analysed appropriately to give a reliable evaluation of the interplay between secularism as it is presented in France and the theory of religious decolonisation.

### **Sampling and Operationalisation**

As this paper is focused on the application of secularism from a governments perspective, this paper will gain its data from available documents issued by the French government pertaining to its perception of the concept of *laïcité*. Understanding secularism and its policy implications from the state’s perspective, through engaging with their own interpretations of *laïcité* and cross examining it with the main themes presented in religious decolonisation theory, will enable this case study to examine the effects such a theory has on the country’s legal commitment. Although the outset of this paper comes from continual criticism of the communities currently affected most strongly by the laws issued in commitment to *laïcité* (Audureau 2023) this paper will not focus on analysing the debate surrounding *laïcité*, as the main aim is to understand the interplay between both secularism and religious decolonisation embodied within the constitutional framework and legislature of the French government. Analysing the stances of various groups and communities would exceed the scope of this paper, as well as limit the understanding of both theories, as this research intends to analyse how such a legal commitment engages with another theoretical approach to policy making on religious matters and religiosity, rather than the debates made between the affected groups. Thus, through utilising the government’s own understanding of their stance, as well as their statements and laws pertaining to the concept of secularism, the data collection and evaluation is contained within an accessible and topical scope.

The operationalisation of the data collection and subsequent analysis will take the form of an inductive development of codes. QCA consist in the creation of categories, either in an inductive or deductive process, to codify the textual data and create employable categories upon which to evaluate the outcomes within the analysis process of the paper (Kuckartz 2019). As the available data is unstructured and based on the government’s explication of the concept, gaining data will be dependent on the accessibility of documents and statements. Thus, the sampling of the data will consist of a snowballing method. Upon finding the first documents a context-driven further collection of documents will help to structure the available sources. All utilised documents will stem directly from the government’s websites or be linked to from the government, as the information gathered should represent the government’s perspective. Thus, the secularism as presented through the edicts and documents of the French government will use a data-driven or inductive development. Utilising data-driven developments will aid to code “[...] until saturation

occurs” (Kuckartz 2019, 184-185), as well as systematising the codes made from the materials. As the edicts and documents of the French government on their secularism are in need of systematisation as well as needing to create a cohesive understanding of the concept itself, the inductive approach of QCA is necessary. Finally, within the analysis part of the research the categories of codes will be cross examined, to position them into the categories and concepts outlined within the theoretical framework upon which to investigate the interplay of the theory and the concept, as informed by the research question.

In the data collection process, 56 documents were sampled to which 65 codes were applied, 21 of which are sub-codes of the 44 main ones. The coding and data collection process was finalised, when no new codes were applied regularly and the existing codes substantially fulfilled the applicability within the data coding, reaching saturation. After examining the codes, 4 subsequent categories were made out of the codes with the highest application throughout the documents — ‘Public Sector’, ‘Freedom’, ‘Expression of Belief’ and ‘Constitutional Principles’. The remaining codes were evaluated based on relative co-occurrence, and filed into the categories. First, the category ‘Public Sector’, with 22 codes and 7 sub-codes (see Table 1 in the appendix), pertains to all codes with relevance to and mention of the public sphere, as well as a significant coefficient or high co-occurrence. The highest used codes within the category, (see Table 2), are on the one hand mentioning either the spacial parameters of the public space or certain actions and permissions by the state. The second category ‘Freedom’, with 9 codes and 6 sub-codes (see Table 1), encompasses mentions to the assurance of certain freedoms through *laïcité*, as well as ways to ensure them from being endangered. As seen through the more salient codes within this category, such as ‘Security and Public Order’, targeting mentions of a limitation in some freedoms in assurance for the retention of others (see Table 3). The third category ‘Expression of Belief’, in contrast to the previous category, encompasses actions. While ‘Freedom’ concerns more the holding of beliefs, this category focusses on the action and expression of those beliefs. Finally, the last category ‘Constitutional Principles’ not only relates to specific mentions of the constitution or singular constitutional principles, but also the recounting of the values of the Republic of France.

## **Analysis**

### **Results**

The category ‘Public Sector’, being the largest category out of the four, includes some of the most relevant codes within the data overall. The highest applied code ‘Public Sector: Schools and Children’ at 6,78% overall. While the other two ‘Public Sector’ codes, ‘Public Sector: Employees’ and ‘Public Sector: Private Individuals in Public’, make up the third and fourth highest applied codes within this category, the second highest applied code is ‘Neutrality’, at 4,78% application overall. Additionally, ‘Neutrality’ has its highest co-occurrence with the code ‘Public Sector: Employees’. As showcased in Table 2, 45,52% of times when the public space was mentioned it related to either schools or children, while the other sectors within the public space were respectively only mentioned around roughly 25-30% of the time. Thus, although ‘Neutrality’ had

the highest convergence with the mentions of people employed by the state, and representing the state, almost half of the issues raised concerning the public space pertained to the application of *laïcité* in schools or with regard to children.

Codes	Overall appliance (in %)	Co-occurrence to the Category Code (in %)
Public Sector: Schools and Children	6,78 %	45,52 %
Neutrality	4,78 %	59,69 %
Public Sector: Employees	4,48 %	30,10 %
Public Sector: Private Individuals in Public	3,63 %	24,38 %

*Table 2: Category ‘Public Sector’ - Relevant codes*

Within ‘Freedom’, the second largest category, ‘Freedom: Freedom of Conscience’ is the highest applied code. At 4,67% application to the data overall, it showcases significantly higher application than most of the codes within this category. However, although the other three highest applied codes of the category do not surpass the 4% mark (see Table 3), they all reveal a staggering co-occurrence with the category code itself. The code ‘Limitation’ has a convergence with ‘Freedom’ at almost 60% with regard to the times it was applied. Thus, while freedom of conscience is a significant pillar in the data, as seen through the high number of applications of ‘Freedom: Freedom of Conscience’, half of the mentions to a form of freedom exists with a reference to a limitation. Similarly, ‘Equality’ and ‘Security and Public Order’, the other two highest applied codes in this category, were applied around 50% of the times in connection to the category code ‘Freedom’. Therefore, although freedom of conscience, as well as the term ‘freedom’ itself, were highly relevant within the data, the application thereof was often seen with a code pertaining to a kind of limitation.

Codes	Overall appliance (in %)	Co-occurrence to the Category Code (in %)
Freedom: Freedom of Conscience	4,67 %	48,09 %
Security and Public Order	3,97 %	47,66 %
Equality	3,52 %	53,68 %
Limitation	3,00 %	58,02 %

*Table 3: Category ‘Freedom’ - Relevant codes*

The third largest category, ‘Expression of Belief’ contains a smaller number of codes than the other three (see Table 1). However, two of the codes within the category have a high significance to the overall application within the data. ‘Expression of Belief: Clothing and Signs’, is the most applied

code within this category, as well as surpassing the 4% mark in application overall. Over half of the times there was a mention to an expression of belief, it pertained to either clothing or signs (see Table 4). The code 'Prohibition', which is the second largest of the category at 3,89% overall application, only has a 30% convergence with the mention of an expression of belief. However, while it is significantly less than the former code, it is still significant. Thus, the mention of an expression of belief was referring to clothing or signs over 50% of times, while a third of the time it was tied with a prohibition of some sort.

Codes	Overall appliance (in %)	Co-occurrence to the Category Code (in %)
Expression of Belief: Clothing and Signs	4,41 %	55,87 %
Prohibition	3,89 %	34,74 %
Expression of Belief: Unspecified	2,30 %	29,11 %

*Table 4: Category 'Expression of Belief' - Relevant Codes*

The category 'Constitutional Principles' is the smallest of the four, being comprised of more infrequent codes. However, while the highest code is used only half as much as the highest code over all, it still carries a significance of 3,52% in overall application. 'Republicanism', therefore is a key consideration in reference to any principles of the constitution or French values. Although the category pertains to constitutional principles, the highest code within it references all indirect mentions to the constitution, or values seen as equally significant, within the data. Interestingly, the second most frequent code of the category, 'Constitutional Principles: Undecided', was applied in direct reference to the constitution with vague reference to any specific principles. Thus, both the indirect and direct but vague references to constitutional principles are the highest referred to codes within the category (see Table 5). To contextualise this evaluation; further codes of the category specifically refer to certain constitutional principles, thus signifying that within the data, a broad and vague mention of 'constitutional principles' overall was preferred over the mention of specific principles.

Codes	Overall application (in %)	Co-occurrence to the Category Code (in %)
Republicanism	3,52 %	45,26 %
Constitutional Principles: Undecided	2,52 %	37,57 %
Constitutional Principles: Citizenship and Civil Rights	1,45 %	21,55 %
Constitutional Principles: Indivisibility	1,41 %	20,99 %

*Table 5: Category 'Constitutional Principles' - Relevant Codes*

Finally, as listed in Table 1, some codes have a very limited application in consideration of other codes. While they may not showcase a significance as high as other codes, their categorisation into the categories remains important. The four categories, although distinct, have a strong connection when contextualising the data, as will be done in the following interpretation of the results. However, although the categorisation of codes was sometimes at a close margin, there is a pattern within the data relating back to the same four concepts, as seen through the establishment of the categories. Therefore, the interpretation and discussion of the results will systematically apply context to the results, building the concept of *laïcité* from the perspective of the French government, and subsequently discussing it with regard to the theory in the same respect.

### **Interpretation and Discussion**

Regarding the outset of this paper, understanding the interplay between the theory of religious decolonisation and an applied form of secularism, the interpretation and discussion of the results will be split into two parts. The first being an interpretation of the French government's understanding of their own model of secularism (*laïcité*). In this section, it is important to create a grasp upon which to employ the theory. Outlining the most prominent concepts and their meaning through the four main categories, will aid to keep a systematic and coherent interpretation of the concept. The second part of this section will employ the theory of religious decolonisation and its main concepts onto the outlined perspective.

#### The French model - *La laïcité de la république française*

As mentioned in the results section, the category 'Public Sector' is most prominent when understanding the French government's framing of *laïcité*. The restriction on religion appears only within the shared public sector, the sphere where the state has a right to intervene set orders on its population. As showcased through the sub-codes of the category 'Public Sector', there are specifications on persons employed by the state, as well as a strong focus on public schools and their students. People embodying the state through work in public institutions are strictly bound to neutrality, as seen through the co-occurrence of 38,01% of the code 'Public Sector: Employees' and 'Neutrality'. 'Neutrality' specifies the non-affiliation and subsequent non-expression of belief, whether political or religious. Similarly, the code 'Impartiality' has its highest application in relation to the code 'Public Sector: Employees' at 42,10% of times in its application. This showcases the need for public servants to not only be neutral in their outward expression of their own beliefs, but also to the beliefs of others, allowing for the impartial treatment of the users of such services. Similarly, people who do not represent the state through their employment per se, but rather through performing an act within a position which may temporarily endorse a public service, are bound to the imposition of neutrality and impartiality, as represented through the code 'Public service mission' and its high co-occurrence with the code 'Neutrality'. This extends especially to the expression of belief through religious clothing or signs. While employees are naturally bound by this, through their embodiment of the state, the code 'Public Sector: Schools and Children'

contextualise this phenomenon within other parts of the public sphere as well. In 23,5% of times it was applied, the issue of schools and children was paired with the mention of clothing or signs. The issue of clothing and signs, which are forbidden in an ostentatious representation within schools, is signified by the high convergence of ‘Prohibition’ and ‘Expression of Belief: Clothing and Signs’.

As ‘Expression of Belief: Clothing and Signs’ is a highly applied code within the data, its contextualisation within the concept of *laïcité* must be explicit. First, connecting it with the code ‘Prohibition’, which already showcases relevance to the former code, through being within the same category. As is visible in the co-occurrence between these codes, there is a significance between religious clothing and signs and their contextualisation within schools, in connection to ‘Prohibition’. As seen within employees of the state, there is a strict commitment to neutrality, on the basis of their employer, which minors have within the state operated public sphere they are placed within – schools. Thus, the imposition of prohibitions is less challenging, guaranteed through the public nature of the space in which public schools reside, as well as the individuals subjected to prohibitions in this sphere being minors and therefore not having the same access to their full civil rights. The code ‘Public Sector: Private Individuals in Public’ helps make this distinction clearer. As represented by a lower convergence with both ‘Prohibition’ and ‘Expression of Belief: Clothing and Signs’, the state’s imposition of dress-specific restrictive laws on persons acting as private individuals within the public sphere is constrained. Thus, they are allowed to express their religious affiliation more visibly. Not only is this guaranteed by their rights as citizens, but through the French state’s commitment to freedom of conscience and freedom of expression. However, while private individuals can visibly express their religious affiliation they are the group most affected by limitations based on security or public order considerations. This is exemplified through their high co-occurrence with ‘Limitation’ and ‘Security and Public Order’, at 27,55% with the former and 32,65% with the latter. The further correlation of a limitation based on a reason of security and public order is represented by the respective code, ‘Public Sector: Private Individuals in Public’, being the highest converging one for both. Thus, although private individuals in the public sphere are not strictly bound to neutrality as employees are, unless they are acting within a public service mission, or explicitly prohibited to express their religious affiliation visibly (as students are), they are the populations group most likely to only be *limited* in their expression on grounds of security and public order.

The code ‘Security and Public Order’ is quite broad in its application, as it is not always clear on which grounds prohibitions or limitations are set. Within the data, the code was applied most, either to specify that the wearing of facial coverings, such as a burqa, violated security aspects, or to set specific limitations on dress or other forms of expression, as a result of hygiene or practicality reasons. These include private companies’ internal specifications (when applicable and justifiable), as well as reasons of practicability when relating to performing a certain duty, which is constricted by the specific expression of belief. Although the code refers primarily to practical aspects of the expression of belief, and the freedom thereof, it subsequently had a high co-occurrence with the



code 'Freedom of Conscience'. 'Freedom of Conscience' was applied when there was specification of the respective right, prominently in combination with 'Freedom of Expression'. However, this convergence is the result of the limitation of the latter freedom, as illustrated by the previous paragraph. Thus, it is frequently related to the retention of freedom of conscience in the loss of the expressive freedom. Furthermore, the highest convergence of 'Freedom of Conscience' is 'Equality'. 'Equality' was applied at mentions of the equality between citizens, including and specifically mentioned — gender-equality. The code's significance is showcased by it accounting for 3,52% of all code applications (see Table 1). The relation between 'Freedom of Conscience' and 'Equality' is relevant, as it illustrates the French government's commitment to both themes. The exposition of *laïcité* here is reliant on every citizens freedom to believe, or not to believe, which is represented with the constitutional commitments, and which may not be undermined by someone's freedom of expression under any circumstances. Thus while freedom of conscience is guaranteed, in constraint of the freedom of expression, it is argued in connection to the equality between citizens.

'Constitutional Principles', represents the codes most related to such constitutional commitments. Codes such as 'Democracy', 'Living Together' or 'Diversity', although relatively low in application, relate to concepts which either refer directly to the Constitution, or do so through the relation to the specified codes pertaining to it. 'Republicanism' however, as mentioned within the last section (see Table 5), is highly relevant in understanding the governments consideration of their Constitution, affecting the constitutional principle of *laïcité* heavily. Generally, the code 'Republicanism' was applied at the mention of the republic structure itself, or mentions of the French Republic's values. These values included familiar themes such as, fraternity, unity, equality and secularity. As a further correlative factor, both 'Republicanism' and 'Attacks on Secularism' have high convergence with the code 'Public Sector: Schools and Children', explained by the refocusing of educating young people about the values of the Republic, which results from perceived attacks on secularism — an essential republican and constitutional principle.

Finally, the data showcased significant utilisation of the codes pertaining to either education about secularism, or trainings for professionals on the implementation of secularism. Equalling to 5,93% of all code applications, the incentive for a training of public servants, as well as further educating the population on secularism holds notable weight within the data. However, surprisingly, there is no significant direct co-occurrence between trainings and education on secularism and the code 'Modernity or Modernisation of Principles'. This code although only applied 27 times, showcases a one-time convergence with the code 'Trainings for Professionals', and although higher than the former, occurs simultaneously with 'Education about Secularism' only 14,81% of the time. Its highest convergence is the code 'Implementation', which indirectly situates the code within the two previously mentioned ones, as they have a higher co-occurrence with the latter code. Thus, although modernisation is relevant in the implementation of secularism, the education and training thereof seemingly relies on the principles enshrined within the constitutional bounds.

### Religious decolonisation and *laïcité*

In relating the theory of religious decolonisation to the results of the analysis, it seems appropriate to start with the outset of the theoretical framework — secularism. As seen in the theoretical examination, the focus on the separation of Church and State, as done through the Western Enlightenment tradition, lies at the base of the theory of religious decolonisation. The retention of the post-Christian Western identity is especially pertinent within the construction of it. Equally, the analysed data resulted in the codes ‘Historical Recount’ and ‘Enlightenment’, which were applied when there was mention of the Enlightenment thinkers arguing against blind belief and for the secularisation of thought and politics, as well as any relevant historical retelling as such. While there was acknowledgement of secularism coming out of the Enlightenment tradition, there was a lack of understanding of the subsequent effects on the othering of differing thought productions. However, it is necessary to note, that the explicit mention of the religious decolonisation theory’s negative understanding of the context surrounding secularism, Enlightenment and othering being represented within the current application of the same concept is unlikely. Furthermore, the code ‘French Identity’ confirms the mobilisation of a Western or specific identity to the concept of secularism, which would subsequently be weighed higher to other knowledge productions (Born 2021, 166). The code itself has its highest co-occurrence with the code ‘Republicanism’, again defining the specifics which make secularism and retention of the concept a main objective of its re-education of the republican values.

Going further in the construction of the theory, the transferable claims from decolonisation theory engage with othering and the domination of the social standard, coined by Quijano (2007 175) as ‘Social totality’. Here, there is focus both on the adaptation of one’s culture and values to the social standard set by those in access of the power structures of a society, as well as the call for an inclusion of historically marginalised perspectives in the reshaping of thought, speech and action (Nye 2019, 5-8). Beginning with the identification of the historically marginalised, whose perspectives are in need of serious consideration. Relying on Clare’s (2011, 62) engagement with the still prominent social inequalities between citizens from previous French colonies, especially French Muslims, and the non-colonised social groups, the data and the subsequent codes showcase no specification of an engagement with a plurality of voices in the explication of the concept of *laïcité*, as identified through Clare (2011).

However, with regard to the relevance of equality, the republican values and constitutional principles of civil rights, drawing on the constitutional passage utilised most in employing these codes seems appropriate. Article 1 of the French Constitution of 1985 dictates:

*“France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs. It shall be organised on a decentralised basis. Statutes shall promote equal*

*access by women and men to elective offices and posts as well as to position of professional and social responsibility.”*

The specification of equality before the law, referring to all pertinent identity markers with respect to the theory of religious decolonisation, is one of the foundational principles of the French constitution. Thus, although there is no specific engagement with marginalised voices in the context of *laïcité*, equality is both retained in its application to all religions as well as in the use of public services, guaranteed by the impartiality of employees to all users. Nevertheless, it would simplify the theory of religious decolonisation and the existing inequalities between marginalised groups and the dominant one, to claim that mere equality before the law guarantees an equal outcome. The basis of the including of voices relates to the access to power, which in the lack of equitable solutions and contextualisation of needs can result in further inequality.

Referring once again to Clare (2011, 20-21), the lack of recognition within the data in the difference between religious expression in the main religions present in the data can cause biased policies. She argues, that while Christianity relies strongly on inward belief, that Islam and Judaism are more action based belief systems. Thus, while not wearing a religious symbols for Christians may be less grave, it significantly limits the opportunities provided to others. Considering the mandated neutrality of employees within the public sector or the state, the access to positions of political power can be severely restricted, for Muslim women for example. Thus, in an attempt to include a new perspective to positions of power, one must either relinquish their preferred expression of belief or conform to the ‘Social totality’ (Quijano 2007, 175). Gaining access to positions of power, as demanded by the theories of religious decolonisation, becomes significantly more difficult in correlation to such restrictions. This is especially relevant when considering the example of Muslim women, who may choose a veil or hijab as their preferred expression of belief, as the code ‘Equality’ was not only applied in cases of equality before the law, but specifically also to the government’s commitment to gender equality. The sub-code ‘Stigmatisation or Discrimination: Protection from discrimination’ outlines mentions where the implementation of *laïcité* is expected to or is necessary to protect persons from discrimination, including the discrimination based upon gender. Pairing this with the code’s high co-occurrence with ‘Equality’, both of which have been framed by the government as specifically referring to gender in their objectives, it seems the provision of gender equality and protection from the discrimination thereof only pertains to one group – the one which already has access. The focus on the overarching retention of ‘French republican values’ are not only maintained but also promulgated through trainings aimed to revitalise the populations knowledge thereof.

The introduction of possible trainings were separated into three codes. ‘Trainings on Citizenship and Secularism’, ‘Trainings for Public Professionals’ and ‘Education about Secularism’. The first refers to mentions where the necessary qualifications for citizenship are to be more strongly centred around such values. The second focusses on the commitment to implement trainings and

dossiers of *laïcité* within every state representative institution, to which employees can refer with their questions, as well as designating these trainings to employees to be knowledgeable in applying *laïcité* in situations of uncertainty (Synthèse du 7e rapport annuel de l'Observatoire de la laïcité 2019-2020). The final educative measure pertains mostly to an engagement to reeducate children on *laïcité*, as well as the republican values in need of revitalisation, as showcased through the adoption of a law reinforcing respect for the principles of the Republic (Journal officiel de la République Française, 2021). However, in consideration to the necessary inclusion and effective change required by the theory of religious decolonisation, reintroducing the principles possibly causing more inequality than equitable solutions to promote equal outcomes seems inconsequential.

Furthermore, returning to the last point made within the previous section, there seem to be modernisation incentives, as well as trainings for the proper handling of situations in which applied secularism is necessary. However, unless there is significant inclusion from the groups which are not part of the post-Christian Western identity, the enforcement of equal but inequitable educations and trainings could be provided, which would not concur with the themes outlined within the theoretical framework. Considering the code 'Education about Secularism' has its highest co-occurrence with the code 'Public Sector: Schools and Children', a sphere in which ostensible expression of belief is prohibited in the name of critical thought and freedom of choice, the lack of inclusion or equitable solutions, as mandated within religious decolonisation theory, showcases a negative interaction. Finally, this is cemented, as seen in the most recent prohibition of dress, the abaya robe, which is still debated in its ascription of religious significance. The French Muslim Council dispute this, thus rather classifying it as being a form of dress from another tradition in which Islam is a prominent religion (Audureau 2023). However, one can argue that not all traditions from a culture with a predominant religion are necessarily religious, as the French government itself critically explores in an example with regards to Christmas trees within schools, arguing for a historic and critical examination of the religiosity of the symbol to gather a conclusive grasp of the current and historical relation to religion and its modern implications (Vademecum 2023, 69-70).

In relation to theory of religious decolonisation, the data does not present significant positive interaction. Although, the themes of equality and inclusivity are both included in the aims of the policies and theory, the overlap between the two conceptions varies strongly. From the perspective of religious decolonisation, the lack in awareness and equity within the conception of laws based of religions which differ substantially in their expression and origin, as well as the overarching application of a Western post-Christian concept without proper inclusion of further perspectives defies the main themes of the theory. However, with the engagement of the modernisation of the principles, as well as the implementation of trainings for professionals and education about secularism, the space for inclusion still exists.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has aimed to understand how a theory based on the inclusion of marginalised thought production interacts with an applied form of secularism, the very basis of the exclusion of non-Christian thought productions. The French government's extensive categorisation of their form of secularism (*laïcité*) and the subsequent coding thereof showcased an either negative or non-consequential interaction, within the results section. While there is a general overlap of themes, presented by a call of equality from the perspective of religious decolonisation, illustrated through the themes of inclusion and access to the setting of the social standard, the exposition of equality within *laïcité* focuses more on civil equality. Equality before the law, as well as gender equality are at the forefront in restricting all religions from expression. However, this showcases the lack of inclusion necessary to achieving the equality called for by religious decolonisation theory, which requires equity before legal equality. Finally, although there is opportunity for the future and a positive interplay between the two concepts, as showcased through the government's ability to engage with Christian religious symbols critically, as well as the focus on the expansion of education about secularism, these steps need to be met with caution. If not implemented in an equitable and inclusive way they could cause a more negative outcome, with regard to the perspective of religious decolonisation theory. As the most recent restriction has focused on an item of clothing of a minority group, as well as being a controversial choice regardless of the group it originates from, the prognosis for a rapid change into the theoretical claims seems unlikely.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Categories, Codes and Frequencies**

Name	Description	Frequency (code/ category)	Further codes and respective total frequencies
Public Sector (Employees, Private Individuals in Public, Schools and Children)	Within the public space; relating to comments and issues raised with regard to employees, private individuals in public spaces or specifically schools and children	14,9% / 46,29%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attacks on Secularism (0,89%)</li> <li>- Communitarianism (0,33%)</li> <li>- Dialogue (0,93%)</li> <li>- Education about Secularism (2,82%)</li> <li>- Emancipation (0,67%)</li> <li>- Enlightenment (0,15%)</li> <li>- Exception (3,52%)</li> <li>- Exclusion (0,11%)</li> <li>- Impartiality (0,70%)</li> <li>- Implementation (2,22%)</li> <li>- Modernity or Modernisation of Principles (1%)</li> <li>- Neutrality (4,78%)</li> <li>- Practicing Faith (2,78%)</li> <li>- Promotion of Laïcité (0,67%)</li> <li>- Proselytism (1,85%)</li> <li>- Protection (0,59%)</li> <li>- Public Service Mission (2,59%)</li> <li>- Sanctions (1,37%)</li> <li>- Tension Regarding Religious Matters (0,30%)</li> <li>- Trainings on Citizenship and Secularism (0,33%)</li> <li>- Trainings for Public Professionals (2,78%)</li> </ul>
Freedom (Freedom of Choice, Freedom of Conscience, Freedom of Expression, Freedom Undecided)	Relating to the ability to pursue action or belief; Freedom conceptually as a right	9,71% / 25,98%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Equality (3,52%)</li> <li>- Historical Recount (0,82%)</li> <li>- Individualism (0,70%)</li> <li>- Limitation (3%)</li> <li>- Popular Sovereignty (0,19%)</li> <li>- Security and Public Order (3,97%)</li> <li>- Separation of Church and State (2,52%)</li> <li>- Stigmatisation or Discrimination (1,56%)</li> </ul>
Expression of Belief (Clothing and Signs, Prayer and Places of Worship, Unspecified)	Relating to the mention of an action of expression of belief; ability not to express; provision of rights thereof	7,89% / 14,16%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Affiliation (1,19%)</li> <li>- Funding and Subsidies (1,19%)</li> <li>- Prohibition (3,89%)</li> </ul>
Constitutional Principles (Citizenship and Civil Rights, Fraternity, Indivisibility, Undecided)	Relating to mentions of constitutional principles; Article 1 of the French constitution; Provisions guaranteed to each individual by the French Constitution	6,71% / 13,57%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Common Good (0,78%)</li> <li>- Decline in Support for Secularism (0,07%)</li> <li>- Democracy (0,85%)</li> <li>- Diversity (0,93%)</li> <li>- Living together (0,41%)</li> <li>- Monarchy and Church (0,07%)</li> <li>- Republicanism (3,52%)</li> </ul>