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Secularism as Equality: French Islamic Discourses on *Laïcité*

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Abstract: Islamic resistance to secularism is one of the most frequently stated problems in France. This paper addresses this issue as seen by French Muslim discourses. It is argued, here, that French Muslim discourses on *laïcité* are determined by the claim of equal treatment of Muslims and non-Muslims in France. Thus, this paper highlights the importance of the inequality framework and the tendency to give preference to rights over responsibilities in French Muslim discourses on secularism. Seven Islamic works published between 1994 and 2019 by mainstream-reformist Muslim intellectuals and activists will be analysed, showcasing that the general attitude of Islamic leadership in France is to demand the right to difference and equality, a *laïcité* that respects the autonomy and freedom to practice religion, including in the public space.

Keywords: *laïcité*; Islam in France; equality; neutrality; injustice frames

1. Introduction

In the recent thirty years, Islam's challenge to secularism in France has generated a debate of major societal and political significance. *Laïcité* has mostly been discussed amidst controversies which opposed Muslims to various state institutions, ranging from the holding of Muslim prayers in the streets to the clothing worn by Muslim women in public spaces and from violent contestation of freedom of expression, fuelled and even fanned by radical Islamist movements, as in the attack on Charlie Hebdo, to the new policies of the French state to fight the so-called "Islamic separatism".

Muslim attitudes towards *laïcité* fluctuate between resistance, criticism, misunderstandings, denials and contestations. Various French quantitative surveys on Islam and secularism show particularly significant forms of reticence regarding the insertion of Islamic ethics into the French socio-political landscape. Recently, for example, an IFOP survey (March 2021) showed that 52% of Muslim young people are mostly in favour of wearing the veil in high schools.¹ This survey concluded that the majority of young people "prefer a rather minimalist vision of secularism, associating it primarily with equal treatment of different religions".² Another IFOP survey (November 2020) concluded that 57% of young Muslims consider Sharia law more important than the law of the Republic (+10 pts since 2016) while 44% of French Muslims support the law banning the wearing of religious signs in public schools, colleges and high schools.³ Other surveys in France, including the study conducted by sociologists Anne Muxel and Olivier Galland (Galland and Muxel 2018), show similar results.

A plethora of research exists on Islam and secularism in France. To date, micro-sociological works focused on the institutional tensions between Islam and secularism, in schools, public administration, etc. (Lorcerie 2003; Bowen 2006; Göle 2015, 2017). In general, research literature produced by political scientists and political sociologists puts Muslim organisations in the spotlight as political agents who resist state policies with regard to Islam. In this second type of research on Islam and *laïcité*, we learn in particular all the difficulties the French Republic confronts while attempting to impose secularism on Muslims (Roy 2005; Geisser and Zemouri 2007; Frégosi 2008; Seniguer 2009).



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Most studies, however, tend to investigate the question of why “the French don’t like headscarves?” as the French state faces Muslim resistance to *laïcité*.⁴ The other side of the problem, which has received scant attention in the research literature, if any, is “why do French Muslims resist *laïcité*?”. One way to answer this question is to investigate Muslim discourses on *laïcité* produced by Muslim figures of authority in France. Over the period between 1990 and 2020, some 20 texts were written by Muslim theologians, intellectuals and activists on *laïcité*. Some of the authors of these texts are entrepreneurs of authoritative discourse, and their texts turned into milestones in French Islamic literature, feeding critical postures towards secularism in France. Yet, little is known about the content of French-speaking Muslim discourses on secularism as such, and the arguments of these discourses are poorly understood.

In this paper, I argue that French Muslim discourses on *laïcité* are marked by the claim of equal treatment of Muslims and non-Muslims in France. Thus, this paper highlights the importance of the inequality framework in producing Muslim discourses on secularism in France. The central thesis of this paper builds on the work of Sofos and Tsagarousianou, who contend that the narratives of contestation and injustice are central in European Islam, using the notion of “injustice frames” to show how Muslims articulate and share grievances, some of which explain, to a certain extent, the expansion of Muslim charities and jihadi ideology but also the contestation of secularism and militancy against Islamophobia (Sofos and Tsagarousianou 2013, pp. 116–35). The inequality framework refers, therefore, to the emotion of victimhood associated by Muslim figures of authority with a particular interpretation of *laïcité*, staging Islam as an excluded religion in the French Republic. Overall, equality comes into play as a central claim of Muslims in Europe, especially endorsed by Muslim activists in the anti-Islamophobic associations as well as by some states which attempt to put Islam in a position of equality with other religions, promoting policies to diminish economic and social discriminations and to prevent radicalisation of Muslim youth (Maréchal and Djelloul 2022, pp. 124–29).

Seven works will be analysed, written by three entrepreneurs of Islamic discourse (Tariq Ramadan (4), Ghaleb Bencheikh (2) and Latifa Ibn Ziaten (1)), which I selected based on their visibility in the French public space in the last ten years, their recognised leadership within Muslim communities and the cross-referencing of their works in France. By entrepreneurs of discourse, I mean Muslim theologians, intellectuals or activists whose networks of producing and communicating discourse are well-supported and established enough to impact considerable Muslim publics. The three selected charismatic figures of authority have enjoyed or still enjoy influence in their respective communities.

2. Islam and Secularism in the French Context: From the Headscarf Crisis to Islamic Separatism

Since the 1980s, the French state and Islam have challenged each other over the manifestation of religious identity in the public space. The first crisis to be experienced in this respect was the so-called Islamic scarf controversy in Creil in 1989, when Muslim female students were suspended for refusing to remove their head scarves in class; this crisis ended provisionally in 2004⁵ with the veil banned in public spaces, known as the French law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools. The ban on the headscarf explicitly shows the will of the French state to shield secularism against Islam, but implicitly, it displays fear from religion in general and from Islam in particular as Muslim ethnic and social communities became increasingly visible in France (Baubérot et al. 2004, pp. 14–16). As a religious sign of modesty, submission to the moral authority of parents or identification with belonging to Islam, for Muslims, the headscarf did not seem to be a threat against secularism. Therefore, the French law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools was perceived by Muslims and many non-Muslims as well, including Jean Baubérot (prominent French historian and sociologist specialising in *laïcité*) as a discriminatory act against Muslims rather than a protection of *laïcité* (Baubérot et al. 2004, pp. 13–14).

The second major crisis of Islam and secularism in France erupted in the aftermath of the 2012 Toulouse and Montauban shootings, resulting in the murders of three French paratroopers, a French Rabbi and three French schoolchildren (aged eight, six and three), carried out by Mohammed Merah.⁶ This period ended provisionally in 2021 with the French Law reinforcing the respect of the principles of the Republic known as the law against separatism. In 2013, *La Charte de la laïcité*, a charter on strict secularism in schools, was adopted by the Minister of National Education, Vincent Peillon, to assert the French values of secularism to be respected in schools. Muslim associations considered this charter to be a measure of stigmatisation of Muslims because it stresses the ban on religious signs, condemns religious violence and highlights the freedom of religion.⁷ Yet, this charter also rejects discrimination and highlights equality within schools.⁸ It can be said that this charter was a response of the French state to the Islamist terrorist attacks of 2012, although one cannot establish a correlation, let alone a causation link, between lack of adherence to secularism and terrorist attacks.

Between 2015 and 2022, France faced 37 Islamist terror attacks of various scales.⁹ Between 1979 and 2021, 82 Islamist terrorist attacks targeted France killing 330 people.¹⁰ Furthermore, the French security services put on surveillance on 10,500 individuals registered in France for jihadist radicalisation.¹¹ The French state took various political measures to fight radical Islamism in France. One of these measures was to enforce *laïcité* within the institutions of Islamic leadership in exchange for state recognition. Thus, in early 2021, the French state asked the major Islamic organisations in France to sign the Charter of the principles of Islam in France; this document requires Muslim leaders to embrace the principles of freedom, equality and fraternity; rejection of all forms of interference and instrumentalisation of Islam for political purposes, attachment to reason and free will; *attachment to laïcité* and public services; and the fight against anti-Muslim hatred, propaganda and false information.¹² Article 8 of the Charter on *laïcité* requires Muslims to “respect the public order established by law in their religious expression”, especially in the school, “which must be preserved from the evils which affect society”¹³, and to “preserve civil peace and harmony”.¹⁴ Thus, the French state expects Muslims to actively preserve secular order following the same lines already stated in the 2013 *La Charte de la laïcité*.

Since the publication of *La Charte de la laïcité*, French politicians and intellectuals, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, engaged in a debate about the kind of *laïcité* to promote. On the one side, there is the camp of the ‘*laïcité de droit*’ (secularism as a legal process), committed to strict religious neutrality in the public space, and on the other side, there is the ‘*laïcité de contrôle*’ (secularism as a political process of state control), which opposes the expression of religion in the public space. Most Muslim discourses demand a ‘*laïcité de droit*’ that leaves room for Muslims to express Islam publicly. As explained by Philippe Portier, *laïcité* has evolved from legal and separation models to partnership with religious institutions since the 1960s amidst identity claims and security anxieties (Portier 2018). Thus, *laïcité* has taken an ideological turn that largely exceeds the initial spirit of this legal-political tool that is both pragmatic and liberal (Zuber 2020). Several historians and sociologists in France denounce the drift of *laïcité* towards the “stigmatisation” of Muslims and the adoption of right-wing secularism as a falsified version of the 1905 law of separation of religion and state (Baubérot 2014).

A key moment of this debate occurred in 2021, when Jean-Louis Bianco left the presidency of the *Observatoire de laïcité* after eight years of work amidst criticism over the *Observatoire*’s leniency in defending a secularism of control.¹⁵ The law of 24 August 2021 reinforcing the respect of the principles of the Republic (also called “against separatism”) attempted to put an end to this crisis by adopting restrictive measures on funding Islamic associations and the expression of religious opinions in the public space. This law introduces the possibility for prefects to ask for suspension of the execution of a religious act of a community, which would seriously undermine “the principles of secularism and neutrality of public services”.¹⁶ Many Muslims see in this law an anti-Muslim act.¹⁷

3. Equality First: Islamic Discourses on *Laïcité*

The following part of this paper moves on to describe and discuss in detail seven accounts of *laïcité* by three prominent Muslim figures in France (Tariq Ramadan, Ghaleb Bencheikh and Latifa Ibn Ziaten). As previously stated, the French context of Islam and secularism explains the critical attitudes of most Muslim theologians and intellectuals in France with regard to the interpretation of *laïcité* in the current French political system. The Islamic claim of equality over *laïcité* takes proponents of *laïcité* at their word, namely that “*laïcité* is the implementation of the demand for equality in the realm of convictions” (Roy 2007, p. 107).

3.1. Tariq Ramadan: A Liberal *Laïcité* for All

Let us begin with Tariq Ramadan, who was the most prolific Islamic voice on *laïcité* in the recent decades. Ramadan, a Swiss Muslim intellectual of Egyptian origin, was born in Geneva in 1962. His father, Said Ramadan (d. 1995), was the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe, and his grandfather, Ḥasan al-Bannā (d. 1949), is the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, in 1928. Ramadan benefited from a double education. On the one hand, he received an Islamic education at the Islamic Centre of Geneva, which is a religious and political centre of the Muslim Brotherhood, run by his family, becoming exposed to Islamism and the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Ramadan also briefly pursued a traditional curriculum of Islamic knowledge at al-Azhar University in Egypt between 1992 and 1994. On the other hand, Ramadan studied philosophy and French literature in Switzerland, obtaining a PhD in Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Geneva.¹⁸ Between the mid-1990s and 2017, T. Ramadan was a key figure in French Islam, delivering hundreds of lectures and preaches, founding a number of associations and institutes and connecting influential networks of Islamic action and ideas; several allegations of rape and sexual violation in 2017 discredited him within Muslim communities, especially since 2020, when he was charged with rape. Ramadan published over 25 books in French, elaborating his views on *laïcité* in four books: *Les musulmans dans la laïcité: responsabilités et droits des musulmans dans les sociétés occidentales* (1994), *Mon intime conviction* (2009), *Au péril des idées* (2015) and *L’urgence et l’essentiel* (2017).

As early as 1994, Tariq Ramadan published *Les musulmans dans la laïcité*, the most influential Islamic book on *laïcité* in France to date. Therein, Ramadan put forward the idea that, in the Muslim tradition, a harmony exists between the power of the State and the authority of religion as well as between religion and science. However, the domains of politics, science and religion remained autonomous and evolved in a different and more harmonious history in Islam compared to Christian Europe. Such differences in the relation between religion and public life can be seen in the daily practice of Islam (collective prayers, almsgiving, pilgrimage, etc.), which implies expressing religion in the public space (Ramadan [1994] 1998, pp. 77–126). Ramadan infers from this historical outline the right for Muslims to be treated as communities with a different history than that Europeans had with the Church.

In *Les musulmans dans la laïcité*, Ramadan maintains that “the neutrality of the secular space is not in danger if we accept differences and if we adopt an indifferent attitude towards religions in the public space. There could be a danger if we encourage exclusions or compartmentalisation because in the long run it produces exactly the opposite of the desired effect.” (Ramadan [1994] 1998, p. 208). Ramadan adds that the current application of *laïcité*, whether ill-intentioned or well-intentioned, “casts anathema in the name of neutrality and declares a war that creates its own trenches” (Ramadan [1994] 1998, p. 208). That is, *laïcité* wages a societal war against Muslims, pushing them to isolate and reject French society. Ramadan calls for an open *laïcité* which revises its rigid separation between religion and public space to include the way Muslims live differently in the nexus between private and public spaces, as they express these differences in their claims about wearing the headscarf, for instance, while respecting the spirit of *laïcité*, which is open to affirmed identities and mutual recognition (Ramadan [1994] 1998, pp. 213–17).

Thus, Ramadan centres his argument on the right to difference and the obligation of the French state to equalise between religions. Islam's presumable difference from other religions (Christianity, in particular) should make the French state reconsider how it perceives religion and public space so that Muslims are treated as they are, since their religious identity involves also public expressions; failing to do so means punishing them for their difference and discriminating against them. To equalise between religions, the French state ought to seek a way of positively co-existing with Muslims practicing their religion in the public space, thus reshaping the strict neutrality in religious public expression.

In his *Mon intime conviction* (2009), Ramadan shifts the focus of his argument and claims that "nothing in *laïcité* was opposed to a free and autonomous practice of Islam" (Ramadan 2009, p. 162). He advocates the strict application of the French law on secularism (1905), "in its letter and spirit, in an egalitarian way for all citizens, Muslims or not" (Ramadan 2009, p. 162). He then distinguishes between the 1905 law on separation of the state and church, and the current *laïcité*, which is in his view a sectarian and fundamentalist form of secularism, the purpose of which is the rejection (and the hope of disappearance) of religion (Ramadan 2009, p. 162). Ramadan believes that such secularism is dogmatic, adopted by militant atheism, and that this ideology "hides something", namely its will to colonise religions (Ramadan 2009, p. 162).

Six years later, Ramadan debated *laïcité* with the French prominent sociologist and philosopher Edgar Morin in their book *Au péril des idées* (2015). Ramadan made a distinction between *laïcité* (*separation of state and church*) and *laïcisme* (the ideology of secularisation of society). Ramadan embraces *laïcité* as a product of Renaissance, humanism and separation of powers, which aims at "the institutionalization of religious diversity through the autonomy and neutrality of the state to protect a public space based on the acceptance of diversity and the universal so that religion would not have the last word on politics, and the diversity of beliefs, thus preserving the freedom to think and/or believe" (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 17). Conversely, Ramadan maintains that *laïcisme* has transformed *laïcité* into "a full-scale attack on religion and its presence in society, a means to remove the visibility of religion from public life" (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 17).

In *Au péril des idées*, Ramadan further develops the view that *laïcité* is a historical process of separation of Church and State against "the ideology that uses the means of secularism to combat religion" (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 17). While state secularism preserves diversity in the public space, militant secularism closes this space and disqualifies religious thought. This is all the more the case, Ramadan asserts, when militant secularism targets Muslims and accuses their visibility in public life of calling into question the neutrality of the public space (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 17). Thus, Muslims are taken as troublemakers whose presence brings back the religious when it was thought to have disappeared from the public space (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 18).

Ramadan makes another distinction between secular thought and secularist ideology. By secular thought, he means "the founding principle of separation of powers without wanting to make religion disappear, defending diversity and neutrality of space" (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 18). Conversely, secularist ideology is "militant anti-religious thought which established itself as a new religion excluding all others, with its dogmas, its principles, its rituals and even its excommunications" (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 18). Behind secularist ideology, Ramadan sees militant atheism, the purpose of which is to end the era of religion and its visibility (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 18). Accordingly, Muslims are but challenges to this secularist ideology through their claims about the headscarf, the mosques, the minarets, the oriental "Muslim" names, etc. (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 18). It is not Muslims' fault, Ramadan sustains, that they preserve religious visible signs and that this visibility refuses to disappear or to be annihilated for the source of the problem is neither Islam, nor Muslims, nor even religions, "but a misunderstanding of secularism" (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 19).

Ramadan reiterated in *Au péril des idées* what he uttered in his *Mon intime conviction*, namely that "Muslims have no problem with the application of secularism (as strict separa-

tion of state and religion) in its letter and in its spirit, completely and equally but have a problem with its current application as a kind of entrenched fort, a machine for exclusion" (Ramadan and Morin 2015, pp. 20–21). This is, however, a change from his initial position, which was to criticise the strict separation of state and religion, calling rather to an open secularism, more flexible with regard to expressing religion in the public space. In both cases, his demand for equality and inclusion of Muslims in French society did not change.

For Ramadan, the only way for Muslims and non-Muslims to live together in France today is "to apply secularism fully, with a view to equality, justice and openness" (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 183). In his view, what is at work in France is not the classical-liberal *laïcité* of the early twentieth century, which is positive, open and respectful of diversity but a narrow, restrictive, cowering, fearful, dogmatic and non-negotiable way of thinking about secularism, especially in public institutions of education (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 183). Consequently, the new *laïcité* has "adopted a restrictive definition of neutrality and, more seriously, of the notion of freedom of conscience to counter the new visibility of Islam" (Ramadan and Morin 2015, p. 183).

In 2017, Ramadan published *L'urgence et l'essentiel*, a second debate that opposed him to Edgar Morin. In this book, Ramadan calls to adopt "a less ideological interpretation of secularism against religion and more egalitarian and normative towards religions, all religions" (Ramadan and Morin 2017, p. 151). French fundamentalist secularists, Ramadan continues, "are perverting secularism, using it as a weapon against religions and above all as a weapon to stigmatize Islam" (Ramadan and Morin 2017, p. 151). Therefore, the optimal scenario for Muslims would be that the French state applies secularism for everyone and without discrimination (Ramadan and Morin 2017, p. 151). The problem, then, lies in the dogmatic and fundamentalist readings of secularism and their anti-Islamic agenda as they strive to eliminate any religious visibility of Muslims in the public space. Ramadan condemned the French state because it failed to "apply *laïcité*, equally to all religions, making it an instrument that disparages Islam as if Islam had an intrinsic problem with secularism" (Ramadan and Morin 2017, p. 150).

It is hard to accept the premise that Ramadan wants to ensure respect for secularism (Ramadan and Morin 2017, p. 171). His view is rather instrumentalist and should be understood as an Islamic quest for autonomy within French society equally to other religions. His criticism of the French *laïcité* as applied today stems from what he perceives to be inequality and discrimination against Islam, whose visibility challenges the French state. It is also difficult to follow his call for the application of the classical-liberal *laïcité* of early twentieth century. Secularisation has transformed French society in the last hundred years and changed in the process; there is no way to turn back the wheel of time.

In general, Ramadan evolved from demanding an open *laïcité*, which includes Muslims with their different history of relations between religion and politics, to emphasise the cleavage between a liberal and militant *laïcité*. Beginning with his book *Mon intime conviction* (2009), his position consists of uttering a double critique of the current *laïcité* as applied by the French state: 1. It is anti-religious rather than neutral, aiming at eliminating any expression of religion in the public space contrary to the classical doctrine of secularism of separating state and religion as stipulated in the 1905 law. 2. It discriminates against Muslims because it targets them specifically through a series of new laws on religious signs in schools and the public space, hindering their rights to express their religious identity and to practice their religion. Thus, according to his account, Muslims are victims of a fundamentalist *laïcité*, while the French state fails to protect their rights as citizens.

A missing link in Ramadan's argument is the responsibility of Muslims to acclimatise to *laïcité* as other religions did in recent times. In a public space shared by all citizens of various faiths, it is also an obligation for every religion, independently from the demands made by militant secularists or the French state policies, to respect other religions, philosophies and opinions in the public space.

3.2. Ghaleb Bencheikh: *Laïcité, Freedom and Equal Treatment*

Ghaleb Bencheikh is a Franco-Algerian Islamologist and a widely recognised reformist and Sufi intellectual and leader. El Hocine was born in 1960 in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia); he is the son of Sheikh Abbas Bencheikh el Hocine, rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris from 1982 to 1989. He holds a doctorate in physics, graduated from the University of Paris 6 in 1990 and has also studied philosophy at the University of Paris 1. He is the author of numerous books, including *Petit manuel pour un islam à la mesure des hommes* (Bencheikh 2018), *Le Coran expliqué* published in 2018, *Juifs, chrétiens et musulmans: «Ne nous faites pas dire n'importe quoi!»* (with Philippe Haddad and Jacques Arnould), published in 2008, *Lettre ouverte aux islamistes* (with Antoine Sfeir published in the same year and *La laïcité au regard du Coran* published in 2005. Bencheikh developed his ideas on *laïcité* in two books: *La laïcité au regard du Coran* (Bencheikh 2005) and *Petit manuel pour un islam à la mesure des hommes* published in 2018. Moreover, he produced and hosted the programme *Questions d'islam* on the radio station France Culture and presented the programme *Islam* on France TV on Sunday mornings from 2000 to 2019. He is a member of the *Conseil des sages de laïcité* as well as a guest speaker at colloquia and conferences in France and abroad, often on the subject of secularism as it relates to the problems of Muslims today. He is also President of the World Conference of Religions for Peace–France. On 13 December 2018, he was elected President of the *Fondation de l'Islam de France*, where he succeeds Jean-Pierre Chevènement. The *Fondation de l'Islam de France* is one of the leading state organisations entrusted by the French state to shape Islam in France.¹⁹

In *La laïcité au regard du Coran*, Bencheikh blames Islamism for spreading the “false idea” that Islam is religion and state (Bencheikh 2005, pp. 35–38), arguing that the separation of worldly and spiritual orders has been validated in Islamic political history since the beginning of Islam; the Koran itself being the basis of secular neutrality as it does not preach any political doctrine (Bencheikh 2005, p. 57) was the condition for the emergence of a double authority: the spiritual authority of the Prophet and the worldly authority of the rulers (Bencheikh 2005, p. 60). This premise is quite different from Ramadan's, who although distinguishes political power from religious authority argues for an active role of religion in the public space and does not see Islam as only a spirituality. Bencheikh goes further and negates any “Islamic legislation” since all legislation is positive and human crafted by jurists out of their interpretation of religious texts and adaptation to various historical contexts (Bencheikh 2005, pp. 75–83). Bencheikh also calls Muslims to reject the punishment of apostasy and to embrace religious freedom as principle (Bencheikh 2005, pp. 85–109). Conversely, Bencheikh considers *laïcité* as a facilitator of co-existence in pluralist societies, criticising the evolution of *laïcité* into a doctrine that claims to replace or compete with religions (Bencheikh 2005, p. 117). For him, as long as *laïcité* ensures that political power is neutral and does not interfere in religious affairs and religious affairs do not intervene in politics, Islam and *laïcité* can be compatible (Bencheikh 2005, p. 117). Eventually, Muslims in France should be given time to adapt to *laïcité* the same way the Catholic Church took time to become used to it (Bencheikh 2005, p. 118).

Bencheikh's *Petit manuel pour un islam à la mesure des hommes* starts with a similar premise to that uttered in *La laïcité au regard du Coran* (2005): that the crisis of modern Islam is caused by the intermingling of religion and politics. That is why secularism is vital. However, he seems more balanced between his critique of Muslims and of the French *laïcité* in his later book than in his earlier one. In *Petit manuel pour un islam à la mesure des hommes*, Bencheikh understands *laïcité* as the common framework of any reference to a transcendence that allows all citizens, as members of the City, to freely choose their metaphysical orientations (Bencheikh 2018, p. 103). Thus, *laïcité* ensures the organisation of the city is a neutral and exclusively human enterprise. Bencheikh also adopts a concept of secularism as a legal principle without ideological thickness or doctrinal density, borrowing from Aristide Briand the following formula: “secularism is a law that guarantees the free exercise of faith as long as faith does not claim to dictate the law” (Bencheikh 2018, p. 96). He insists a great deal on the neutral character of secularism

as a condition for individual freedom of expression, whether from an ethical, religious or convictional point of view, to allow the free exercise of worship in compliance with the legislation in force and guaranteeing the fact of believing or not believing but, above all, of being able to change belief (Bencheikh 2018, p. 97). However, similarly to Ramadan, Bencheikh is wary of secularism of combat and of the total desacralisation of human life (Bencheikh 2018, p. 100).

For Bencheikh, there is no reason to approach *laïcité* as a problem of incompatibility or compatibility between Islam and secularism since secularism is a principle of neutrality; the latter is always compatible with Islam for it is a legal principle that only needs to be applied (Bencheikh 2018, p. 42). Previously, Bencheikh argued for the compatibility between Islam and secularism from the history of Islam and from across the various modern experiences of Muslims. In his *Petit manuel pour un islam à la mesure des hommes*, he not only denies the relevance of the problem of compatibility/incompatibility between Islam and secularism but also considers secularism to be the ideal horizon for all Muslim societies (Bencheikh 2018, p. 109). Bencheikh deems it unnecessary to justify secularism in Islam theologically (which is logical after all). Yet, he does not hesitate to announce that a form of secularism existed in Islam as early as the seventh century when the Umayyad Empire was born as a political power distinct from religious authority (Bencheikh 2018, p. 75). Bencheikh still believes that the lines between the temporal and the sacred in Islam are quite clear, following Olivier Carré's thesis in *L'Islam laïque: ou le retour à la grande tradition*, that Islam was secular most of the time, which many Islamologists would probably argue against (Carré 1993, p. 62).²⁰ One of the arguments that could undermine this thesis is that, even if religious and political elites were distinct most of the time, Islamic empires applied Islamic law as state law and hired religious authorities as judges and governors, and therefore, it cannot be said that the temporal was separate from the sacred.

Bencheikh seems to be torn between the ideal and the reality of *laïcité*, with the ideal being his belief in secularism as a neutral space and citizenship as an end in itself, which is compatible with a spiritual Islam. As he puts it, "the ideal of *laïcité* is that of equality between all citizens, freedom, particularly of conscience, and above all the guarantee of the exercise of religion" (Bencheikh 2018, p. 103). As for the reality of *laïcité*, it is that of the refusal of many Muslims to accept secularism, which paradoxically feeds the followers of militant secularism. It is too simplistic to think that secularism is rejected in Muslim communities in France and in Muslim societies only because of Islamic fundamentalism and political demagoguery, as Bencheikh asserts (Bencheikh 2018, p. 109). The political and religious history of Muslim societies (including the relationship between elites and authority figures) diverges from the political and religious history of France and European societies; this presupposes distinct societal demands on the relationship between religion and politics.

In contrast to his earlier thoughts on *laïcité* (Bencheikh 2005) in which the focus was on the responsibility of Muslims to adhere to philosophical modernity, recently, (Bencheikh 2018) Bencheikh moved to clearly strike a balance between the difficulty of *laïcité* to include Muslims and the uneasiness of the latter to embrace *laïcité* because of the Islamist influence. Bencheikh underlines *laïcité* as freedom, which Ramadan does not do although both agree to consider it as a framework of neutrality and equality between citizens and religions. Ramadan and Bencheikh differ only in the attitude they require from Muslims; while Ramadan asks them to proudly participate as Muslims in the French society, without adhering to secular or liberal thought, Bencheikh is critical of some of Muslim traditional beliefs and practices and requires Muslims to embrace secular and liberal thinking in order to live in a secular society. Both Ramadan and Bencheikh generally take a position in favour of an equalising liberal *laïcité* that is neutral and inclusive of Muslims rather than anti-religious and anti-Islamic. In contrast to Ramadan who is embedded with the idea of an autonomous Muslim society (under the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood), even in France, Bencheikh pushes for a French society in which Muslim spirituality is but a dimension of citizenship.

3.3. Latifa Ibn Ziaten: *Laïcité* and the Right to Difference and Equality

Latifa Ibn Ziaten is a French-Moroccan activist, born in 1960 in Tétouan in northern Morocco; she has lived in France since 1977. Ibn Ziaten is the mother of Imad Ibn Ziaten, the first soldier assassinated in Toulouse by the terrorist Mohammed Merah in 2012. That same year, she founded the Imad Association for Youth and Peace, campaigning against Islamic radicalisation through educational and solidarity projects that try to decompartmentalise part of the isolated Muslim youth which refuses to integrate in the French society. Ibn Ziaten has published three books: *Mort pour la France* in 2013, *Dis-nous Latifa, c'est quoi la tolérance?* in 2016 and *Laïcité et islam: mission possible?* (together with R. Adnani and J. L. Bianco).²¹

Latifa Ibn Ziaten perceives secularism as an instrument capable of guaranteeing the freedom of beliefs and opinions as well as the difference of identities and the equality of citizens before the law (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 13). She maintains that each country has its own history and reason for endorsing secularism in its constitution or not (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 44). She refuses to recognise the Christian religion as a value in the European Constitution; she does not accept either the idea of a privileged relationship between the French Republic and the Catholic religion and demands cultural and spiritual diversity as well as the neutrality of the State in order to ensure freedom and equal treatment to different religions (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 58). Additionally, Ibn Ziaten believes that secularism can secure the proper coexistence of diversity and pluralism in France (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 75).

In her view, Muslim youth in France does not understand the definition of secularism and thinks that it only concerns a part of the French population (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 16). According to Ibn Ziaten, Muslim youth believes that the French state does not take Islam into account and so it feels rejected, associating *laïcité* with dismissal of Muslims (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 16). Ibn Ziaten asserts that this perspective is wrong since “secularism is for everyone, including for Muslims and the French Republic should consider individuals as citizens above all, regardless of their religious or convictions, and this is what makes it possible to live in France together on an equal footing” (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 36). As she puts it, “undermining secularism in any political process would alter our common good” (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 16). She adds that “the State must remain religiously neutral to prevent discrimination. It is important, especially since the terrorist attacks that have affected the French people, and sometimes divided them; it is important to find solutions that unite them and allow them to live together, in peace, and that the motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* be a true call to a fairer nation” (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 38).

Ibn Ziaten emphasises diversity and equality as the basis of building a tolerant French society. Thus, she asserts that “equality goes through this spirit of balance despite the differences. France, from its secular spirit, still has a long way to go to achieve tolerance. Harmony within this nation requires an effort to accept our differences” (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 18). Consequently, the solution for her is not to ban the expression of Islam in the public space but to allow all religions the expression of their faiths in dress, food, etc. (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 18). This is the way, according to her, to achieve recognition of differences, and in this manner, “everyone would gain recognition through their differences, without locking themselves into a community spirit or feeling frustrated that their needs cannot be met” (Ibn Ziaten et al. 2019, p. 18).

In a similar manner to Ramadan, Ibn Ziaten infers from Muslim cultural difference the right to express religiosity in the public space and considers the rejection of the Muslim exception in this regard as exclusion. Her discourse differs from Ramadan and Bencheikh in that it is rights-based and does not claim any theological or historical justification about Islam. She is worried about *laïcité* as a tool of exclusion if used to discount Muslims from showing their religious identity in the public space. In her perspective, Muslims, as a social group, ought to have the right to be equally treated and granted the right to live as Muslims in French society. Equality for her means to be included in the social fabric as citizens/Muslims; *laïcité* is the process which makes that possible through neutrality

(and so Muslim citizens are accepted as they are). Her argument is also significantly different from those made by Ramadan and Bencheikh in that she does not criticise militant secularists or Islamists. She still believes in the French State as an institution capable of securing neutrality and equality for Muslims.

In sum, whereas Ramadan is concerned with the application of a strict neutrality of the secular state in respect to religious affairs in line with a classical liberal sense of *laïcité* and Bencheikh tends to highlight the role of the secular state as guarantee of religious freedom, Ibn Ziaten underlines diversity and the right of Muslims to difference in a plural French society, which then justify Muslim claims about expressing religion in the public space. However, the three Muslim leaders discussed here share a key discursive feature, namely that they stress the element of equality. Ramadan demands a liberal *laïcité* to protect Muslims from discrimination in the public space. Bencheikh believes *laïcité* allows Muslims to live their religion equally to all other citizens. Finally, Ibn Ziaten perceives *laïcité* as a recognition mechanism of differences granted to all, including to Muslims.

4. Limits: The Roots and Contradictions of the Equality Frame

These seven Islamic discourses are deeply impacted by twentieth century reformist Islamic thought and left ideologies. In particular, left ideologies shaped Muslim claims in Europe, to a great degree, with regard to injustice frames.²² However, the equality narrative faces the contradiction between the quest of equality with other communities in the French society and the claim of Muslim identity exception (in regard to relations between religion and state). In the following two subsections, I elaborate further on these elements.

4.1. The Roots of the Equality Frame

The equality frame, which explains the resistance of reformist-mainstream Muslim discourses to *laïcité*, has historical, ideological and sociological roots. Due to a lack of space, I focus briefly on a few sociological and ideological elements which flow at the upstream of these discourses. Let us begin with the sociological elements. The second generation of Muslims in France, which provides the majority of leaders in Islamic organisations today, were socialised and raised in the 1970s and 1980s. This period was particularly marked by the strong domination of French political discourse and life by the Socialist Party. Thus, the socialist F. Mitterrand's presidency (1981–1995) is the symbol of this context in which state rhetoric and policies were in part stoutly associated with social democracy, while at the same time, immigrants were depicted by the French left (the Socialist and Communist Parties) as victims rather than new citizens with rights and obligations. The Left approached the youth of immigrant background through social assistance and education, claiming to defend them as victims of biases of race and class who should be protected as vulnerable communities (Fischer 2018, pp. 115–17). Accordingly, injustice began to frame articulated and shared grievances in local contexts among Muslims (Sofos and Tsagarousianou 2013, pp. 118–27).

With regard to ideological elements, one major factor to take into consideration is that numerous Islamist groups and ideologues settled in Europe as refugees from Egypt, Syria and Tunisia in the 1970s and 1980s, opening mosques and cultural associations (Maréchal 2009, pp. 49–73). These Islamist groups and ideologues themselves took with them their grievances as victims of authoritarian regimes and “persecuted Islam”, spreading it among their new audiences in France. This happened at the same time that the Left was modulating discourse amongst Muslim youth in France on victimhood. Furthermore, Islamism itself was deeply influenced by socialism and Marxism; since the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, Islamism developed first as a movement of protest and social frustration against unfair policies of the British colonisation and the corrupted monarchy that inherited the British legacy. The resentment of Islamist ideologues for capitalism and colonialism is best formulated in the two triumphant Islamist ideologies of Sayyid Qutb and Khomeini. Their ideologies still feed generations of Muslims in the Muslim world and in the West (Hendrich 2018, pp. 51–221). There is more to Islamist

resentment; Islamism rails against the imperialist West for destroying Muslim states and societies in the 19th and 20th centuries and for disrupting the Muslim civilisation since then (Ferro 2010, p. 120).

Thus, resentment against the imperialist West formed an ideological alliance between leftists and Islamists. Karagiannis and McCauley identified two purposeful “master frames” in outlining the shared elements in the production and mobilisation strategies by Leftists and Islamists. These are the master frame of anti-globalisation/anti-capitalism and the master frame of anticolonialism/anti-imperialism. The authors assert that there is overlap between these two frames and the underlying aim of both is to target the West “choosing one or another to approach the particular audience it is addressing.” (Karagiannis and McCauley 2013, p. 174). As they put it, the Master Frame of Anti-Globalization/Anti-Capitalism “has certain components (e.g., fight against social injustice and exploitation, North-South divide, dominance of Western multinationals) which can be appealing both to adherents of political Islam and revolutionary Marxism.” (Karagiannis and McCauley 2013, p. 174).

The master frame of Anti-Colonialism/Anti-Imperialism describes “a perpetual battle between the industrialized North (Western democracies) and the underdeveloped South (the rest of the world) [for] the control of resources.” (Karagiannis and McCauley 2013, p. 176). In summary, both frames emphasise the West’s inherent links to unjust world, capitalism and globalisation, and the inevitable clashes that emerge from the irreconcilable conflict between the two entities, both perceived as homogeneous.

We also know from the research of Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues that, on the scale of values, the Left tends to score well with regard to care and fairness but very poorly on the values of authority, in-group identity and purity (Haidt et al. 2009, p. 1033). On the other hand, Islam is a religion that scores high on care and fairness but also highly on the values of authority, in-group identity and purity.²³ Thus, an initial misunderstanding arises as the Left discards the values of loyalty and identity while Islam strongly fosters these values in its adherents, although interest in fairness is a common ideological field between the Left and Islamic ethics.

For example, Tariq Ramadan’s thought about victimhood and equality was shaped by his action in early 1990s within *L’Union des jeunes musulmans*, a youth Muslim organisation in Lyon, close to the Muslim Brotherhood, and which emphasised social justice as a militant voice of the working class of immigrant background (Berman 2010, pp. 172–73). In parallel, T. Ramadan was an active militant in the altermondialist movement (close to the Trotskyist radical left)²⁴. Ramadan’s project was to construct a Muslim counter-culture to defend and strengthen the mainstream Muslims (Berman 2010, p. 148), an objective he shares with transnational Islamic organisations, including the Muslim Brotherhood.

Although usually a contested concept among academics, Islamo-leftism in France (islamo-gauchisme) has been a highly debated issue for over 20 years now; this neologism gained much momentum in the years 2019–2020 as the French government and media started to widely and ambiguously adopt it. What gives some reality to Islamo-leftism is that the anti-islamophobia associations that usually highlight the narrative of injustice against Muslims qua Muslims receive support from leftist organisations including within French leftist major political parties and the European Union funding networks.²⁵ Yet, the French state and many French intellectuals are increasingly critical of the liberal American perspective on race, ethnicity, gender and religions and its exaltation of “victimized” group rights over the collective interest. They seem to be particularly worried that an alliance between cultural wokeness (which originated in black, feminist, immigrant and transsexual communities in the US) would integrate Islamic claims of justice into its agenda, adding more tension to an already explosive relationship between the current French government and Muslim communities.

4.2. The Contradiction between the Quest of Equality and the Claim of Muslim Identity Exception

The discourses analysed here take for granted that Islam is different from other religions and, therefore, needs a special treatment than the approach the French state takes with other religions. They claim (somewhat rightly when put in Muslim contexts) that Islamic ethics is as concerned with public space as it is with private space. If such is the case, I see a contradiction here between demanding equality and special treatment at the same time (arguing from the particular relationship between religion and politics in the history of Islam). One can understand that Islamic ethics require communities and individuals to act out religiosity in public space (commanding right and forbidding wrong would be the religious concept that describes such social ethics) in Muslim contexts where states are not secular, and state and religion are closely related. However, in secular contexts, such as the French society, it seems problematic from the point of view of the French state and society to re-negotiate the secular pact because of Islam's different relationship to politics in Muslim contexts. A specific treatment of Islam would open the gate for other religions to renegotiate *laïcité* by virtue of specificity of each religion and philosophy.

It follows that, unless Muslim reformist discourses decide to seek compromise on Muslims publicly expressing religiosity, the clash with *laïcité* is inevitable. The Islamic reformist discourses tend, in general, to make requests about *laïcité* and do not contribute to protecting the secular regime by giving any concessions. The reformist Islamic discourses on *laïcité* advocate progressive claims, especially social justice, but are still influenced by the rhetoric promoted by Islamism, which thinks that the secularisation of the public space means a threat to Islam, Islamophobia and discrimination. For example, the prohibition of the headscarf in the public space displays a contradiction between the equality frame and the belief in Muslim exceptionalism. Mainstream Islam demands authorisation of the headscarf in public schools because it is a sign of Islamic ethics and an expression of diversity, which should be respected by virtue of progressive values. However, the headscarf is also a symbol of modesty and indignity of the women's body, as promoted by Islamist rhetoric (although for many women, modesty can be expressed without the headscarf). Thus, the Islamic position on the headscarf challenges *laïcité* in the public space and gives justification for hardcore secularists in France to maintain the prohibition. Without taking an ethical turn on religiosity in the public space and a compromise on Islamic ethics in the French context, reformist Muslims will face a deadlock.

The Islamic mainstream discourses would have been more relevant to French society as a whole if Muslim intellectuals and theologians had sought for an ethical solution to the problem of the headscarf in the public space. To put it differently, religious traditions have different manners of showing modesty in the public space (to mark identity), but then, if all religious communities take their practices of modesty literally in the public space, the latter would be a place of marketing different identities rather than building a shared society. That is why it makes sense to adapt the spirit of modesty (and of Islamic ethics in general) to the appropriate norms and practices of modesty in a given context.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, the aim was to assess seven Muslim discourses on *laïcité* produced by three influential figures of Muslim authority in France (Tariq Ramadan, Ghaleb Bencheikh and Latifa Ibn Ziaten). This study has shown that equality is pivotal to Muslim arguments against or for secularism. Tariq Ramadan pushes for a liberal *laïcité* for all that applies the 1905 law, which separates religion from state without endorsing anti-religious policies or targeting Muslims with a series of policies (the ban on the headscarf, etc.). Ghaleb Bencheikh takes *laïcité* as an opportunity for Muslims to practice religious freedom but, at the same time, calls the French state to accept religiosity in the public space. Ibn Ziaten highlights the Muslim right to difference and inclusion in French society in the name of a neutral *laïcité*.

The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that Muslim reformist discourses on *laïcité* are generally right-oriented; that is to say, little interest is shown in the

duties and responsibilities of Muslims in adapting to the secular French society. Instead, Muslim leaders contest the current application of secularism in the French state as discriminatory and stigmatising for Muslims. Claims of diversity, difference and freedom are thought to be solved if the state treats Muslims and non-Muslims equally yet accept the Muslim identity claims in dress, street praying, etc. However, the seven discourses analysed here did not show awareness of the contradiction between the claim of equality and the belief in the Muslim identity exception.

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Notes

- 1 «Droit au blasphème», laïcité, liberté d'enseignement ... Les lycéens d'aujourd'hui sont-ils «Paty»? <https://www.ifop.com/publication/droit-au-blaspHEME-laicite-liberte-d-enseignement-les-lyceens-daujourd'hui-sont-ils-paty/> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 2 *Idem*, see note 1.
- 3 Le rapport à la laïcité à l'heure de la lutte contre l'islamisme et le projet de loi contre les séparatismes. <https://www.ifop.com/publication/le-rapport-a-la-laicite-a-lheure-de-la-lutte-contre-lislamisme-et-le-projet-de-loi-contre-les-separatismes/> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 4 In reference to Bowen's book *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves*.
- 5 Only in a temporary manner since in 2010 (the integral veil crisis) and 2019 (the Burkini crisis) the French state clashed with Muslims again over women's dress.
- 6 Mohamed Merah. <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/mohamed-merah> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 7 Charte de la laïcité: le CFCM regrette trop d'"allusions" à l'islam. https://www.lexpress.fr/education/charte-de-la-laicite-le-cfcm-regrette-trop-d-allusions-a-l-islam_1279887.html#Zh19OMZ8fZtGWyMm.99 (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 8 Charte de la laïcité. <https://www.education.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2020-02/charte-de-la-la-cit-a4-43565.pdf> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 9 Les attentats islamistes dans le monde 1979–2021. <https://www.fondapol.org/etude/les-attentats-islamistes-dans-le-monde-1979-2021/> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 10 *Idem*, see note 9.
- 11 Fiches, S. la surveillance des Renseignements qui alimente le débat politique. https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/fiches-s-la-surveillance-des-renseignements-qui-alimente-le-debat-politique_1847110.html (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 12 Charte des principes pour l'islam de France. <https://www.cfcM-officiel.fr/presentation-de-la-chartre-des-principes-pour-lislam-de-france-au-president-de-la-republique/> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 13 *Idem*, see note 12.
- 14 *Idem*.
- 15 Jean-Louis Bianco: «Ceux qui dénaturent la laïcité sont ceux qui en font un outil antireligieux» https://www.lemonde.fr/religions/article/2016/01/19/jean-louis-bianco-ceux-qui-denaturent-la-laicite-sont-ceux-qui-en-font-un-outil-antireligieux_4850032_1653130.html (accessed on 20 August 2022). Jean-Louis Bianco: «Une laïcité de contrôle risque de s'imposer». <https://www.lagazettedescommunes.com/741516/jean-louis-bianco-une-laicite-de-contrôle-risque-de-simposer/> (accessed on 20 August 2022). La laïcité: un concept, deux interprétations. https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/01/19/quel-debat-autour-de-la-laicite_4850049_4355770.html (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 16 Tout savoir sur le déferé-suspension laïcité. <https://www.lagazettedescommunes.com/810618/tout-savoir-sur-le-defere-suspension-laicite/> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 17 Séparatisme: manifestation à Paris contre les «discriminations anti-musulmanes». <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/separatisme-manifestation-a-paris-contre-les-discriminations-anti-musulmanes-20210214> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 18 <https://tariqramadan.com/elements-de-biographie/> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 19 Ghaleb Bencheikh El Hocin. <https://fondationdelislamdefrance.fr/ghaleb-bencheikh/> (accessed on 20 August 2022).
- 20 Carré argues that similarly to Christianity Islam accepted the separation of state and religion, but modern Islamism deviated from this line and attempted to establish an Islamic state.
- 21 Latifa Ibn Ziaten. <https://association-imad.fr/latifa-ibn-ziaten/> (accessed on 20 August 2022).

- ²² It is also true that right wing ideologies influenced Islamism with regard to totalitarian perceptions of the state and society as well as attitudes towards modernity).
- ²³ Tamim Mobayed, Religious Differences Across Moral Foundations. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/12/religious-differences-across-moral-foundations/> (accessed on 27 September 2022).
- ²⁴ Sylvain Besson, A Paris, Tariq Ramadan scelle l’alliance entre l’islamisme et les altermondialistes. <https://www.letemps.ch/societe/paris-tariq-ramadan-scelle-lalliance-entre-lislamisme-altermondialistes> (accessed on 27 September 2022).
- ²⁵ Lorenzo Vidino, The Rise of “Woke” Islamism in the West. <https://www.hudson.org/research/17804-the-rise-of-woke-islamism-in-the-west> (accessed on 27 September 2022).

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