Racial Secularism as Settler Colonial Sovereignty in Quebec

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INTRODUCTION

In Quebec, it has been a long time since we’ve decided to separate religion and state.

François Legault,
Premier of Québec (March 2019)

Secularism raises important identity issues in Quebec. As a francophone nation, Quebec defends its secularism as evidence of its distinctiveness from Anglo-Canada and an attachment to its French heritage. Quebec is the site of two distinct colonial regimes (French and British). The French conquest started in the 15th century in the name of its monarchy, and the British conquest was consolidated in 1763 by the treaty of Paris (Leroux 2011, 378). The latter constitutes a political trauma that French Canadians continue to cling to as defining the relationship between white francophones and white anglophones in Canada. This trauma, of one colonial empire losing an Indigenous territory to another colonial empire, is central to understanding contemporary racism and Islamophobia in Quebec. In this context, criticism of Quebec’s secularism and other policies targeting minorities is seen as a threat against Quebec’s francophone identity. A telling example of this dynamic, and one that has caused a media and political uproar, occurred at the Canadian leaders’ debates during the 2021 election campaign. During this live televised debate, the moderator, journalist, and analyst Shachi Kurl (a woman of color), asked Bloc Québécois party leader Yves-François Blanchet (a white francophone man) about his support for Quebec laws that have been strongly denounced by anti-racist groups in Quebec, including the law on secularism (Bill 21). Bill 21, An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State, passed in Quebec Parliament in June 2019. This controversial law prohibits public service workers who exercise authority from wearing religious symbols (e.g., police, lawyers, and teachers) and disproportionately targets Muslim women who wear the hijab.

Kurl’s question created a major national controversy. The host was accused of Quebec-bashing and Premier François Legault declared that “The Quebec nation is under attack.” Blanchet, for his part, felt “a cauldron of insults in the face of Quebecers,” and the Bloc Québécois has repeatedly refused to recognize the discriminatory nature of Bill 21 and systemic racism in Quebec. Finally, the members of the Quebec National Assembly felt the need to vote unanimously to denounce Kurl’s question, and to call for an end to “Québec bashing.” (Lévesque 2021). An interesting fact is that even the political parties that opposed Bill 21 felt that Quebec was under attack. For example, Dominique Anglade, the first Black woman to be the leader of the Quebec Liberal Party, also condemned the “attack” on Quebec and wrote on Twitter that “We are an open, free, strong people…” (Lévesque 2021). What was presented as outrageous during this moment of national uproar was not that Bill 21 discriminates against Muslim women who wear the hijab and other religious minorities in Quebec; rather, it was that Quebec as francophone nation was “targeted” by Anglo-Canadians.
This anecdote is part of a dominant logic of denial of racism and settler colonialism in Quebec, where anti-racism criticism of Quebec’s secularism is often silenced by the colonial narrative of two founding peoples, and their rivalry in the colonial project. Through the political disagreement and battles over Bill 21, the idea persists that Quebec secularism is a marker of the two solitudes, and that anglophone criticism is an attack on Quebec sovereignty (Fleras 2021). The expression two solitudes refers to the cleavages and tensions that exist between the white francophone and anglophone majorities and implies that these tensions are the result of irreconcilable differences and distances between two societal visions and identities: one francophone and the other anglophone. Presenting the debate over secularism as a rift between two solitudes accomplishes two things: first, it refocuses the entire conversation around whiteness by erasing Indigenous people; second, it allows white colonial power to set the conditions of possibility for any critique of racism and colonialism. A large body of literature on anti-racism examines the politics of secularism and Islamophobia in Quebec (Bilge 2013; Zine 2012; Jahangeer 2020; Leroux 2013; Mahrouse 2010; Jiwani 2004). Building on these perspectives, I look at the way secularism participates in reinforcing the sovereignty of the Quebec colonial state, and thus colonialism, by racializing Muslims. As Indigenous scholar Jodi Byrd insists, “Racialization and colonization should thus be understood as concomitant global systems that secure white dominance through time, property and notions of self” (2011, xxiii). Hence, I would like to turn the question toward considering how secularism laws that racialize Muslims inform the sovereignty of the Quebec colonial state as a “given” (Rifkin 2013 in Cornellier 2015, 76). Taking up the idea that secularism is constitutive of the modern state’s sovereign power, as put forth by Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad, I analyze the function of secularism in Quebec, and more specifically Bill 21, in the context of a liberal settler colonial nation distinguished by its particular experience as “colonizer-colonized.” I propose the term racial secularism as a way to illustrate the politics of race and coloniality in Quebec’s practice of secularism. This racial secularism is deployed through various strategies, including the colonial state’s presentation of Islam as a dangerous religion and Indigenous people as existing without religion. I will also provide a socio-historical analysis of the context of racial secularism with regard to two narrative elements: (1) the two solitudes; (2) the French Catholic heritage.

This analysis is based on my perspective as an anti-racist Muslim feminist scholar who immigrated to Quebec from Algeria more than two decades ago. Like many people from societies that have been colonized by the French empire, I have a sense of déjà vu when I witness a colonial state unveiling Muslim women in the name of civic values. It is therefore essential to analyze the role of secularism in Quebec, a province that insists on its French heritage, to see how it serves to reinforce the colonial sovereignty of the Quebec state.

SECULARISM AND COLONIALITY

While a detailed literature review on secularism is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that, in the Quebec context, scholarly work has highlighted just how recently the term secularism (laïcité) itself has entered the Quebec political landscape (Milot 2009). Certain authors have also insisted on the discriminatory and racist nature of debates on laïcité (Bilge 2012; Leroux 2013; Mahrouse 2010; Romani et al. 2020). However, barring a small number of exceptions, almost none of the studies produced in Quebec have situated secularism within the colonial settler context. Settler colonialism is largely taboo in mainstream Quebec academia, as it is in Quebec society, and studies on secularism deal more with the questions of religious pluralism and its management. In contrast, I intentionally situate the genealogy of secularism in the colonial and racial violence that characterizes the matrix of modernity/coloniality. As a result, I draw
primarily on critical perspectives that inform us of the close links between secularism and the colonial civilizational agenda of Christian Europe (Anidjar 2006; Asad 2003; Maldonado-Torres 2014, 2008; Mahmood 2017).

The philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres reminds us that if coloniality is intrinsic to modernity, and secularism is a fundamentally modern project, then it is essential to question the colonial charge of secularism (Maldonado-Torres 2008, 367). According to him, by departing from the imperialist Eurocentric postulate that modernity is synonymous with progress, we can track down the technologies of coloniality, particularly in secularist policies. It is therefore necessary to shift the question and ask, “how secularism creatively reproduces imperial discursive structures that have been historically embedded in European Christianity.” (Maldonado-Torres 2008, 361). In other words, what function does secularism play in maintaining and renewing a capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal, and imperialist world system?

These perspectives allow us to break with liberal approaches to secularism that see it primarily as the individuation of belief and a movement toward tolerance that is unique to liberal democracy (Taylor 2007)—beliefs that, in turn, lead to calls for more liberal states. On the contrary, the work of anthropologist Talal Asad shows how secularism is a political project that ensures the sovereign power of the modern state, especially in its capacity to delimit the space of religion. Asad’s (2003) anthropology of secularism allows to apprehend how the secular and the religious are not fixed categories (25) and that the modern division between public and private spaces stems from a Christian understanding of religion, the political ramifications of which allow us to better understand controversies around the visibility of Islam and Muslims in the public sphere. According to Asad, we must see how secular society allows the state to decide what is considered legitimate and illegitimate within the domain of the religious.

Secularism doesn’t simply insist that religious practice and belief be confined to a space where they cannot threaten political stability or the liberties of “free-thinking” citizens. Secularism builds on a particular conception of the world (“natural” and “social”) and of the problems generated by that world. In the context of early modern Europe these problems were perceived as the need to control the increasingly mobile poor in the city and countryside, to govern mutually hostile Christian sects within a sovereign territory, and to regulate the commercial, military, and colonizing expansion of Europe overseas. (Asad 2003, 191)

Building on Asad’s perspective, we must try and see how secularism is used to respond to the problems generated by our contemporary world, such as the “War on Terror,” securitization and the “management” of Muslims in a world dominated by Western imperialism. In line with Asad’s work, Saba Mahmood argues that secularism “is itself a historical product with specific epistemological, political, and moral entailments none of which can be adequately grasped through a nominal account of secularism as the modern state’s retreat from religion.” (Mahmood 2017, 198).

In keeping with Asad’s analysis, philosopher Amer Meziane looks more specifically at how secularism was built in a colonial relation to Islam. by observing secularism as a “colonial gesture,” Amer Méziane rejects the idea that secularism represents a break with Christianity. Instead, he joins with decolonial perspectives and asserts that “[secularization] is neither the simple continuation of Christianity, nor the pure and simple abolition of the residues of a medieval Christian world. It depends on a process of imperialization of the West that is inseparable from its relationship to Islam and to non-European worlds” (Amer Meziane 2021, 14). Also,
and in similar way, an interesting example illustrating Asad and Mahmood’s theorization can be found in what Raberh Achi (2007) has called “empire secularism.” Achi analyzed how the first secularism law in France, the 1905 law known as the Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State, was not enforced in its Algerian colony. For the French colonial state, efforts to control Muslim worship through the creation of an “imperial Islam” or “Muslim clergy,” which would later replace “Indigenous” Islam, allowed it to better monitor Algerian anti-colonial resistance (2007, 49). By offering us a counter-history of French secularism situated in the context of its emergence (i.e., colonization), Achi demonstrates how the French state considered forms of collective organizing through local Islam as dangerous to its project of domination (2021, 131). Different strategies and techniques were subsequently developed in colonial Algeria, considered as Achi notes “a laboratory” for French policy on Muslims, illustrating how French secularism “went hand in hand with the rhetoric of the ‘civilizing mission’ and its main contradiction: the impossibility of proclaiming republican principles while simultaneously pursuing colonial imperatives.” (133). Achi’s perspective is very promising because it allows us to understand how the application of secularism—or its non-application—is dependent on the colonial power.

Theorizing secularism alongside coloniality is a productive way to understand, in the post-racial era, how secularism becomes a form of racial governmentality (Fadil 2016, 2014). As Nadia Fadil reminds us, there is a close connection between race and sovereignty, and secularism becomes one of the languages of modernity that allows for the governing of subjects (2016, 2014) and, more particularly, their racialization. The power of racialization is exercised by the modern state as it asserts and exercises its sovereignty through secularism and a set of practices of exclusion, inclusion, and control. Recalling Giorgio Agamben’s work on state practices of exception, Fadil asserts that, in the Belgian context, face veiling constitutes one of the occasions where “the law and state sovereignty figure as a central source in deliberating over the forms of life that can be considered as fully ‘human’ through a mechanism of selective inclusion and exclusion of the forms of life that can be included within the polis, or within political life.” (Fadil 2014, 261). The power of the sovereign state is biopolitical and punitive, where the life and death of subjects, their freedom and confinement, are determined by the state. In France, secularism is a means of securing the Republic’s power of neoliberal sovereignty, which presents itself as both powerless in the face of neoliberal market violence and the force that protects the nation from the violence of the suburbs and Muslims (Fernando 2013).

Through secularism, the modern state grants itself the power to delimit the boundaries of religion, allowing it to further exert control over specifically targeted populations. Drawing on the work of Asad and Wendy Brown, Eve Haque (2010) points to the distinction between French and Canadian secularism. French secularism attempts to control religious expression and subjectivity (83) while, in the Canadian context, the idea of tolerance is central to understanding the issues of secularism. Indeed, “in a multicultural nation state such as Canada, secularism operates in relation to tolerance to produce a public sphere where the toleration of religious differences – and where that difference is culturalized, hence, multicultural – is a critical element of the national narrative. Yet, a toleration of cultural difference also depoliticizes and fixes essential ‘difference’ which as Brown (2006) shows, is a central function of tolerance as a practice of governmentality” (Haque 2010, 83). In Canada, secularism is then presented as a safe space for Muslim women, away from their community, their religion, and Muslim men (Razack 2008, 300). This is how the Canadian state, a colonial state, becomes the protector of women (Razack 2008, 300).
RACIAL SECULARISM IN QUEBEC

In light of this literature and these reflections, I propose thinking of racial secularism as a gesture asserting colonial state sovereignty. Racial secularism draws on the modern intersection between race and religion (Maldonado-Torres 2014) to maintain white Christian supremacy. This intersection is at the heart of the project of “Discovery,” where “‘Discovery,’ evangelization, and colonization therefore went together hand in hand” (696). Through racial secularism, whiteness and Christianity merge because they are constituted as norms that oppose other races and religions. Indeed, “like that un-marked race, which, in the related discourse of racism, became invisible or white, Christianity invented the distinction between religious and secular and thus made religion. It made religion the problem—rather than itself.” (Anidjar 2006, 62). Razack (2021) points out how the imperial project of white Christian supremacy depends on this figure of the Muslim “terrorist” to fuel white anxieties and fears and to justify invasions and occupations (227). In the case of Quebec, to ensure the power of white francophones, the Muslim Otherness informs that of the Indigenous insofar as it allows the advancement of the settler colonial project. The settler colonial project is also informed by Islamophobia as colonial racism. As Ghassan Hage has identified, this is a form of racism whose practices are structured around two key characteristics: “First, that Islamophobic practices and conceptions of otherness have been molded by the history of colonialism, and second, that they continue to function as a technique of governing racialized people in order to reproduce the basic racial colonial structure that still underlies a large part of the world even in this neocolonial age” (Hage 2017, 27).

The politics of secularism in Quebec (as elsewhere in the West) are driven by this colonial Islamophobia (Bakali 2016; Bilge 2013; Romani 2020). Implicit in it is a gendered and sexual discourse which is inscribed in a long and obsessive history of Western coloniality’s treatment of Muslim women’s bodies (Abu-Lughod 2013; Yeşenoglu 1998). Racial secularism combines the racialization of Muslims with Indigenous dispossession within the imperial formation that is the Americas. As Sohail Daulatzai and Junaid Rana (2018) remind us, “In the Americas, the establishment of an imperial formation that obscured anti-Muslim racism was always in the context of settler colonialism and the violence of chattel slavery” (xv). This seems particularly essential in the Quebec context, where the issue of slavery is hidden and Black Muslims are made invisible. It also reminds us that Islamophobia has multiple genealogies that need to be crossed in order to account for the complexity of the techniques of dehumanization and racialization of Muslims.

In order to better elaborate on the articulations of racial secularism, I will propose a brief historicity of different secularist performances in Quebec and offer a more detailed consideration of Quebec’s Bill 21.

BRIEF BACKGROUND

The politics of secularism in Quebec most often adopts the language of national “values” to present Quebec as a “feminist,” “open,” and egalitarian nation. An opposition between the nation—which has the “right values,” the right “civilization”—and uncivilized Muslim women has been a constant element throughout these debates. Before the adoption of Bill 21 in 2019, there was significant pressure to adopt secularism as a solution to the “Muslim problem.” I will briefly recall two key moments: first, what is commonly referred to as the commission Bouchard-Taylor3 (2007-8) and, second, the Charter of Quebec Values in 2014. These two
episodes constitute pivotal moments among the many times in which the presence and visibility of Muslims were debated in the public square and presented as a threat to national identity and values. My purpose here is not to detail these two political moments, but rather to point out that the adoption of Bill 21 is one piece of a longer racial secularist narrative.

In both political moments, when debating the need to unveil Muslim women, First Peoples were excluded from all conversations, while presenting the colonial white nation as “open” and “welcoming” (Carastathis 2013; Cornellier 2016; Schaefl and Godlewska 2014). For example, while Muslims were racialized and subjected to Islamophobic violence during the Bouchard-Taylor commission’s consultations (Bilge 2013), the “Indigenous question” was excluded from the work of commissioners on the grounds that it was a complex issue that required a “nation-to-nation” conversation (Schaefl and Godlewska 2014, 228). It is difficult not to see, in this political choice, an expression of Quebec’s colonial sovereignty through this double gesture: on the one hand, racializing Muslims and erasing Indigenous people by avoiding any acknowledgment of settler colonialism; and on the other hand, the white francophone majority has been authorized to openly proclaim its superiority over racialized Others (Mahrouse 2010).

Another analysis of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission by Schaefl and Godlewska (2014) (which is particularly relevant to Bill 21), discusses Quebec’s social commitment to ignorance as structured by three arguments: 1) the use of the terra nullius narrative to present French settlers as the “true” founders of the nation; 2) the idea that everyone is an immigrant to Quebec; and 3) that the Quebec majority must govern (234-40).

In 2013, the Parti Québécois government proposed Bill 60, known as the “Charter of Values.” This charter established Quebec “values” such as gender equality, state neutrality, and laïcité, as “sacred.” This political moment was very violent for Muslim women, especially those wearing the hijab (Jahangeer 2020). Even though the government lost the election before adopting the bill into law, a strong discourse of sexual nationalism monopolized the debate around secularism, fueling numerous moral panics and the security logic of the “War on Terror” (Benhadjoudja 2017; Bilge 2012). Here again, Indigenous people were erased from the conversation, and this erasure is part of the very logic of settler colonialism.

BILL 21 AND THE ERASURE OF ALL OTHERS

I approach Bill 21 not only through the text of the law, but as part of a discursive assemblage on secularism in Quebec over the last 20 years. I am interested not only in how the law is applied, but in the arguments mobilized to support its application and the socio-political terms of its contestation before the Superior Court of Quebec. As noted earlier, Bill 21 is part of a larger (national and global) context of Islamophobia in which Western colonial forces present themselves as the saviors of Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2013; Razack 2008). However, Bill 21 is the first law in Quebec to make secularism a legal reality.

Following the election of the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) political party in 2018 (a party that claims to be nationalist but not separatist), new Premier François Legault was quick to declare that he would “resolve” the secularism issue. In March 2019, and in a rather simplistic way, Premier Legault presented Bill 21 in a video, posted on his Facebook page, titled “Finally, a bill on the secular nature of the State!” and recalled in an affirmative tone that “this is how we live in Quebec.” (Legault 2019).

Because the CAQ government knew that Bill 21 would almost certainly be unconstitutional, it was adopted by invoking the notwithstanding clause, which allows the government to derogate from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in exceptional circumstances. The CAQ government justified its use of the notwithstanding clause on the grounds that the
“majority of Quebecers” were in favour of this new law, because it reflects “their history and their values,” and that it would bring closure to a debate that it felt was dragging on. Premier François Legault has repeated that the law is “moderate, just like Québécois are” and that there a national consensus existed around it.

Prior to the bill’s adoption, a parliamentary commission was held in which groups and individuals—invited and chosen by members of the National Assembly—could present arguments for or against the law. Unsurprisingly, no Indigenous groups were invited to speak. Instead, the CAQ declared that Indigenous spiritualities would not be affected by Bill 21, since the law only targets religions (Niosi 2019), reproducing the colonial cliché that Indigenous people exist “without religion.” In doing so, the CAQ reproduces the very same colonial idea, dominant since the colonization of Christopher Columbus, that Indigenous people exist without religions and are therefore soulless and necessarily inferior to Christians (Maldonado-Torres 2014, 699).

The parliamentary hearings that preceded the passage of Bill 21 constituted a performance of coloniality in Quebec (Benhadjoudja and Celis 2020). This performance was perhaps most obvious in the scene of a group of white male settlers debating among themselves, in the politically charged chamber of the National Assembly, the danger that Muslim women pose to “our children” by becoming their teachers (119-25). Muslim feminist scholar Khaoula Zoghlami notes that those most discriminated against by Bill 21, Muslim women wearing headscarves, were the least consulted at these hearings even though they were the main focus of the discourse. The strategy focused on opposing good Muslims to bad Muslims as a way to exonerate whiteness. It was primarily the voice of the “native informants,” or what Zoghlami calls “endo-orientalists,” that was privileged. These informants are the figures of Muslim women who often consider themselves “liberated” from Islam thanks to Western values. They are celebrated in the West as “good Muslim women” and serve to support whiteness and Islamophobia, as claiming that Bill 21 is a tool to protect Muslim women and a gateway to Quebec citizenship (Zoghlami 2020, 201-4).

Bill 21 was strongly opposed by Muslim and anti-racist groups at the Quebec Superior Court. Complainants included the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM), the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) and Ichrak Nourel Hakn, a young Muslim woman wearing a headscarf and studying to become a teacher. However, the CAQ has consistently denied the discriminatory nature of this law. For example, when Fatemeh Anvari was no longer allowed to work as a teacher in an elementary school in the small town of Chelsea in western Quebec, there was a strong mobilization by parents and students to denounce this injustice. In contrast, Premier Legault’s response was to criticize the Western Québec School Board for hiring a Muslim woman who wears a hijab (Chouinard 2021). The Premier’s response makes it clear that, not only is Islamophobia normalized, there is a real dehumanization of Muslim women and an active will to exclude them by the law on secularism. Justice Marc-André Blanchard, who ruled in the Quebec Superior Court’s Bill 21 case, said: “All these people who aspire to one of these jobs find themselves faced with the following dilemma: either they act according to their soul and conscience, in this case their beliefs, or they work in the profession of their choice. It is easy to understand that this is a cruel consequence which dehumanizes those targeted” (Cherry 2021).

Violating the fundamental rights of citizens is a power that the secular sovereign state grants itself, and this is what Talal Asad (2006) explains when he recalls that “The dominant position in the debate assumed that in the event of a conflict between constitutional principles the state’s right to defend its personality would trump all other rights. … The headscarf worn by Muslim women was held to be a religious sign conflicting with the secular personality of the
French Republic.” (500) Under this law, processes of dehumanization and racialization operate through the sovereignty of the colonial state that defines both religion and non-religion, and who are those categorized as having a religion, versus those who do not. Indeed, on the one hand, this law frames Islam as a dangerous religion and unveils Muslim women; on the other hand, it considers that First Nations people have no religion, and thus continues the colonial project of eviction of Indigenous peoples that began with the “Discovery of the Americas.”

The CAQ government, like most advocates of secularism, has repeatedly stated that this law represents Quebec’s “distinction” and serves as an affirmation of its sovereignty. In fact, the preamble to the law states: “AS the Québec nation has its own characteristics, one of which is its civil law tradition, distinct social values and a specific history that have led it to develop a particular attachment to State laicity;” (preamble of Bill 21). This preamble reflects the idea that Quebec has an “attachment” to state secularism, an idea that is largely contradicted by the work of Micheline Milot. The Quebec sociologist and specialist in secularism has shown that secularism only recently appeared in Quebec’s socio-political landscape. It is primarily a nationalist discourse, by actors such as the Bloc Québécois and the Parti Québécois, that believes secularism should protect Catholicism as a religious “heritage” and part of the collective identity of Quebecers (Milot 2009, 62). We quickly understand that this collective identity is of white French-Canadians, since Indigenous peoples and minorities (racial and religious) are excluded from the outset.

In this sense, Bill 21 responds to a call for the protection of Quebec’s whiteness by stipulating a historical attachment to secularism. It is in the same spirit that the minister responsible for this law, Simon Jolin-Barrette, declared

> Quebec, a distinct society, can and must mark its difference in its management of religious pluralism. The model it intends to adopt is unique and specific to Quebec, faithful to its values and its history. As democratically elected parliamentarians and accountable to the population, we have a duty to respond to the concerns expressed over the past two decades and to translate the popular will into a pragmatic and balanced response. This is what Bill 21 does and why it has received so much support. We believe that the Parliament of Quebec is the most appropriate forum to find social and political compromises that are more in keeping with the values we all hold dear. (Assemblée nationale du Québec 2019, emphasis added)

So, what is this distinction that Quebec claims? In order to understand the politics of racial secularism as they play out in Quebec, it is essential that we situate our analysis within the socio-history of the province’s settler colonialism. Quebec is a French-speaking province with a distinct status within Canada. While an exhaustive socio-history of the province is outside the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless important to give an account of the main narratives that structure the national context in Quebec.

**MAKING SENSE OF QUEBEC’S RACIAL SECULARISM IN A SETTLER COLONIAL CONTEXT**

*Two Solitudes or Supremacist Rivalry?*

Polls conducted prior to the adoption of Bill 21 show that a strong majority of francophone and Catholic Quebecers supported it, while anglophones were overwhelmingly opposed (Meunier and Legault-Leclair 2020). Some analysts have presented the differing reactions to
Bill 21 between anglophones and francophones as an expression of the “two solitudes” (Buzzetti 2021; Fleras 2021). Additionally, when the law was challenged in the Quebec Superior Court, Justice Marc-André Blanchard ruled that the law could not be applied to English school boards. In fact, Canadian law is such that no province can interfere with the language rights of either anglophones or francophones. As a result, the notwithstanding clause couldn’t be applied to the English-speaking minority in Quebec.

This idea, that a difference in secularist approaches is rooted in linguistic and cultural differences between two peoples (one French-speaking and one English-speaking), brings the colonial myth of the “two founding peoples” to the forefront, and invisibilizes the colonial violence against First Peoples. The narrative of two solitudes is promoted by colonialism and, as Himani Bannerji (2000, 92) argues, “The Anglo-French rivalry therefore needs to be read through the lens of colonialism.”

Also, linguistic politics in Quebec and Canada are primarily racial politics (Haque 2012). According to Darryl Leroux (2013), understanding the particularities of the politics of race in Quebec requires one to pay attention to the way whiteness is constructed through its account of the “double colonization” (55) and the ways in which British colonization racialized French Canadians. Corrie Scott (2016, 1284) notes that this racialization bears many similarities to the case of the Irish and recalls how Lord Durham presented French Canadians as an inferior and insufficiently civilized race. The fact that French Canadians were discriminated against and despised by the English crown is already well documented, as is the process of assimilation that was initiated and promoted. That being said, there can be no symmetry between this racialization and discrimination and the reality of peoples colonized by the Europeans or the reality of slavery experienced by Black people. As Julie Burelle (2019, 12) writes:

If the French Canadians could be demoted from their alpha status through the humiliation of defeat, they nevertheless retained a capacity for mobility that others, namely Indigenous peoples and black individuals, did not possess in relation to whiteness. In other words, the French and the British were both capable of being settlers because they belonged, to various degrees perhaps, to the same category of so-called civilized Europeans, even if one party had defeated the other. They occupied the same structural positioning, which came with access to whiteness.

The most common narrative about this experience of dual colonization tends to romanticize the history of French colonization as a “good conquest” and a period of peaceful alliances and exchange with Indigenous peoples (Leroux 2013). As is the case throughout Canada, the colonial settler project in Quebec functions through white mythologies (Razack 2010, 2). These carry a narrative of innocence about Turtle Island as an empty territory (terra nullius) and European settlers as bringing civilization, freedom and democracy (Razack 2010, 3). In particular, this mythology presents French colonists as brave individuals with humanistic characters (Leroux 2013, 53; Scott 2016, 1283), in direct contrast to the violent British colonization. This narrative presents Quebec as a site of “anti-colonial” resistance, a nation that fought and survived British colonialism, and denies its own colonial project (Cornellier 2017).

In this narrative, colonial harms are the responsibility of British colonization alone (and now the Canadian state). This strategy allows for a colonial amnesia and a distortion of history that erases the reality of French colonialism. It fabricates an image of the British colonizer, and their English Canadian descendants, as the sole true colonizers, contrasted with the figure of the French settler as pacifist (Leroux 2013). In the wake of a historical narrative that pits “white Canada” against a Quebec that sees itself as the “white N* of America” (Cornellier 2017), the
historical antagonism between English Canada and Quebec also translates into a white supremacist rivalry. This rivalry becomes a founding element in the formation of Quebec and Canada, occulting racial domination and racial violence. As Himani Bannerji asserts: “These then are the two solitudes, the protagonists who, to a great extent, shape the ideological parameters of Canadian constitutional debates, and whose ‘survival’ and relations are continually deliberated. And this preoccupation is such a ‘natural’ of Canadian politics that all other inhabitants are only a minor part of the problematic of ‘national’ identity. This is particularly evident in the role, or lack thereof, accorded to the First Nations of Canada in the nation-forming project.” (Bannerji 2000, 92).

Positing colonialism as the fundamental relationship between the two nations allows us to ask different questions about this majority/minority relationship. Their competition is structured around each nation’s capacity to assert its colonial sovereignty over the territory and lives of the First Peoples. This common expression, of the “two solitudes,” could instead be replaced by its darker side: the “two white supremacies.” In other words, the founding narrative presents the founding of Canada through two colonial projects: the British and the French. Immigrants are invited to submit to one of the two supremacies, either through the politics of multiculturalism in Canada or through a francophone national identity in Quebec. Within this duality, anti-Black racism, colonization, and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples persist (Cornellier 2015, 2016; Mugabo 2019; Haque 2012).

Analyzing and situating secularism within this rivalry allows to understand how criticizing Quebec’s secularism is seen as an attack on the nation. By following Jodi Byrd (2011) who states that racialization and colonization intertwine and consolidate white power, it is this white power that is being challenged by the anti-racist critique of Quebec secularism. Challenging Quebec’s racial secularism disrupts the power and sovereignty of Quebec colonial state, particularly in terms of its ability to racialize minorities and compete with its colonial rival; Anglo-Canadian coloniality. However, from an anti-racist perspective, the question of whether Quebec is more or less racist than Canada is irrelevant. Instead, an anti-racist analysis reveals how these regimes of racism, as two forms of colonial sovereignty, interact and produce even more racism for Indigenous people, Black people, and people of color. Indeed, the two nations (Québec and Canada) are in solidarity when it comes to uniting against Indigenous peoples, where we see “the two solitudes glare at each other from the barricades in an ongoing colonial war” (Bannerji 2000, 92). Above all, anti-racist discussions shouldn’t focus on the French Canadian experience, but on the experience of dispossession and slavery of Indigenous and Black people by both British and French empires on Turtle Island. In other words, the British conquest of the French was an inter-imperial problem, which undoubtedly accentuated the violence against Indigenous and Black people.

French Colonial Catholic Heritage

Historian Catherine Larochelle has highlighted in her work how school curriculums in Quebec have, thanks to racism, consolidated a white Canadian identity based on a narrative that presents the nation as a “surviving victim” (Larochelle 2021, 22). This whiteness is expressed through the narrative of the surviving victim, while maintaining a particular link with France (Leroux 2010) where a colonial nostalgia structures narratives about the French colonists. There is thus a turn towards France and away from English Canada and the United States (Bouchard 2013, 10-11).

Historian Gérard Bouchard explains how a narrative of Survivance (survival) has been promoted by the French-Canadian elite, and operates through a sense of exceptionalism, racial
purity and cultural homogeneity (Bouchard 2013, 10). This narrative centers “la survivance” as the foundation of the French Canadian nation and suggest that Quebec is still the victim of English dominance. This victimization serves to undermine racism and promote whiteness and francophone identity.

This narrative also deploys a set of techniques by which Quebec places itself within the continuity of the French colonial empire, the “mother country” (Bouchard 2013, 10) to then revive its colonial sovereignty. It is within this framework that the nation endows itself with fiction and distortion (11) to respond to the anxiety of disappearing. Bouchard explains it as follows:

Those references filled the political discourse, the school textbooks, the novels, the historical writings, and the Church preaching. Besides, the celebration of France, still the mother country, was paramount (despite its having abandoned the young, imperiled nation abroad). The French Canadian nation was cast as being a legacy of, and in continuity with, France and its prestigious cultural past (according to a well-known frame, French Canada was a little France in North America). This strategy was an easy way to provide the small nation with a rich symbolic foundation, to substantiate its distinctiveness, and to alleviate its anxieties. (2013, 11)

Within the “surviving victim” narrative that shapes Quebec’s nationalism, the church has exercised a high level of social control by playing a conservative role to preserve a French Canadian identity. With this in mind, we are able to better understand and situate Quebec’s secularism within its Catholic and French heritage. Indeed, Quebec’s secularism is characterized by its strong affirmations of the province’s French and Catholic heritage, what many scholars have called a catho-laïcité. This can be seen in the manner in which the State grants itself the political-theological power to define and stabilize “religious signs” (Asad 2006). Also, as mentioned earlier, race and religion are inextricably linked (Maldonado-Torres 2014), and stabilizing religion is a way to stabilize race as well. For example, symbols of Catholicism are read as a legitimate white heritage, a way of affirming one’s history and identity. Moreover, Section 17 of Bill 21 provides for a “dubious religious symbolism” (Dabby 2020, 240), as it creates an exemption allowing institutions to preserve their religious—and therefore Catholic—heritage. Minister Jolin-Barrette also defended the need to preserve Quebec’s Catholic heritage and culture during parliamentary debates. This idea has been a constant among politicians since the beginning of the debate on secularism. Politicians, like Jean Charest (former Premier of Quebec) and Bernard Drainville (the Minister responsible for the Charter of Values), have supported the need to maintain the crucifix that sits in the National Assembly. Milot (2009, 70) has noted the irony of this attachment to the crucifix, as it was installed in 1936 by Maurice Duplessis, the most conservative premier in Quebec’s history and best known for his repressive policies, corruption, and alliance with the Catholic Church which qualified his era as “the great darkness” in Quebec historical and cultural texts. The crucifix was finally removed, but was instead placed in the hallway outside the National Assembly. Nonetheless, upon his appointment as minister, Jolin-Barrette warned that he intended to protect Catholicism: “Crucifixes are part of the history of Quebec’s heritage. We do not intend to remove them from the courthouses.” However, following significant pressure, the government conceded to the idea that it would be possible to move the crucifixes, but that this would have to be studied case by case (Lajoie 2019).

The question of Catholicism as a heritage to be protected has always been a major issue in debates about secularism and national identity in Quebec. Distinctions between Islam and Catholicism have usually surfaced in a way that reinforces the idea that Islam, as racialized
religion, is dangerous, while Catholicism, implied as the religion of the majority, and therefore white, can only be a positive part of Quebec’s collective identity. This idea is essential to ensuring the sovereignty of the state because, as Asad explains, “the reading of uncontrolled religion as dangerous passion, dissident identity, or foreign power became part of the nation-state’s performance of sovereignty.” (2006, 498).

Even if many Quebecers acknowledge the violence that the Catholic Church could enact, it is something they consign to the past. Similarly, while Catholicism is sometimes criticized in Quebec for its excessive conservative control of society, very few condemn the Catholic violence against Indigenous people. Instead, they seek to minimize Catholicism’s involvement in sexual violence toward Indigenous children in residential schools. The idea that Catholicism is a part of Quebec’s collective identity is normalized by many Quebec intellectuals using the term “cultural Catholicism” (Lemieux 1990). For example, during the debate on reasonable accommodation, the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal, a nationalist Catholic association, insisted that Catholicism be recognized as a spiritual heritage for Quebec (Leroux 2013, 63). While Catholicism once played an essential role in asserting a French Canadian identity against anglophones (Zubrzycki 2016, 4), this identity is, today, being constructed against Muslims. As Geneviève Zubrzycki has argued, the Quebec state has consistently worked to maintain Catholicism as “a collective good, [that is] resacralized through the notion of cultural patrimony.” (2016, 168).

Indeed, as Holly Randell-Moon (2013) asserts in the Australian context “When we declare the state to be secular but with a Christian heritage and culture, what are we saying about the origins and function of the state? … how far can secularism be interrogated until we begin to push up against the stolen land, the ground if you will, on which these issues are negotiated and contested in political and theoretical terms?” (364). According to Randell-Moon, who draws on Charles W. Mills’ seminal work The Racial Contract (1997), the Australian colonial state labelled itself as secular without breaking with its “racial, religious and cultural precepts of British colonial law” (Randell-Moon 2013, 355).

To ask the same question of Quebec is to bring up the reality of Catholicism as a colonial and racial religion. In a very similar way as Australia, Quebec’s secular state preserves its Catholic heritage as a colonial tool and hides its whiteness. Racial secularism allows the state to racialize other religions (in this case Islam), to ignore other religions (of Indigenous peoples), and to normalize and whitewash Catholicism.

When Quebec claims to be secular while protecting Catholicism as part of its heritage and collective identity and adopting an Islamophobic law, it is because it conceives the Quebec subject as a Catholic subject. And, as Razack (2021) rightly points out, a “Christian subject who feels racial hostility towards Muslims is above all a colonizer” (226).

CONCLUSION

Although not directly addressed here, racial secularism is also a capitalist tool. Hage (2017) shows how colonial settler societies are built on constant pillage. As such, racializing and “domesticating” the Other (Muslim) is related to this ongoing pillage and extractivism (Hage 2017, 29-41). We must also understand racial secularism in this sense, as part of the multiple dimensions of the racial capitalist project, which Western modernity has initiated.

Having said that, the particularity of Quebec is in how the national narrative is rooted in victimhood and survival, thereby presenting itself as a nation colonized by Canada. The dominance of this narrative, in turn, makes anti-racist and anti-colonial conversations impossible. On the one hand, Bill 21 contributes to ongoing efforts to sabotage anti-racist discourse
in certain francophone spaces, since any criticism is considered an attack on the nation’s identity and sovereignty. On the other hand, like all other colonial settler societies, Quebec relies on widespread white ignorance as a tool to sustain colonialism and racial violence. A tragic example of this can be seen in the denial of racial violence following the terrorist attack on a Quebec City Mosque in January 2017 by a white Quebecois man (Mahruse 2018). This act of extreme racial and Islamophobic violence was considered by politicians and many members of the white majority as an isolated case. One might have expected the Quebec government to abandon its secularist plans at this point to combat Islamophobia. Instead, despite this attack, Bill 21 was adopted two years later and has further institutionalized racism and Islamophobia in Quebec.

ENDNOTES

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2A “grandfather clause” was attached to this law, meaning that people who were already in their jobs did not lose them.

3This national commission, whose official name is Quebec’s Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, was chaired by philosopher Charles Taylor and historian Gérard Bouchard.

4The CAQ government subsequently appealed the ruling and won its case. Today, all school boards must comply with Bill 21.

5Turtle Island is the name given to North America by several Indigenous peoples.

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