

# Intrinsic conflicts within ethnic and religious issues in France



Jinling Zhang<sup>1</sup>

Received: 5 August 2023 / Revised: 9 August 2023 / Accepted: 10 August 2023 /

Published online: 29 August 2023

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## Abstract

In contemporary France, there are intense conflicts that involve both ethnic and religious issues. These conflicts provide an opportunity to study the many challenges involved in the construction of national communities and the governance of nation-states in the West. In the case of France, the continued exacerbation of the ethnic and religious problems is undeniably rooted in a range of factors both historical and current. However, the fundamental factor is that certain dominant ideologies and their value claims clash with the diverse and pluralistic nature of contemporary French society. To a certain extent, the disciplining on French society from these ideologies has distorted and contradicted it across multiple levels. Closely intertwined with ethnicity and religion, these issues predominantly manifest in the Muslim community. The notion of the “civic nation” in particular persistently excludes the notion of the “ethnic nation”. As a result, Muslims face identity dilemmas as an ethnic minority, leading to ethnic conflicts. Furthermore, in France, religious practices continue to deconstruct secular principles. This results in a crisis of secularism and further exacerbates the dispute between Muslims and indigenous society. These two fundamental ideologies, along with numerous associated conflicts, have profoundly influenced how ethnic and religious issues evolved in France, posing a significant challenge to France’s national identity.

**Keywords** National community · Republican model · Civic nation · Ethnic politics · Secularism

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✉ Jinling Zhang  
zhangjl@cass.org.cn

<sup>1</sup> Institute of European Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China

## Introduction

The cohesion and identity of the national community are central issues in the building and governance of modern nation-states. Moreover, the internal mechanisms of community-building vary among states. This is due to each nation-state having a different historical trajectory and process of how it was built. However, a political identity that is linked to the fundamental values upheld by the nation-state is a crucial aspect of community-building for each one of them. But maintaining a political identity can be difficult in the contemporary world. Countries often struggle with challenges that involve multiple complex factors. As a result, the nation-state has been constantly “rethought, redesigned, and reoriented to respond to the challenges” (Jessop 2007). This has led to ethnic issues within the nation-state framework becoming the most intense political and social topic, and it is especially true for Western countries that contain a large number of ethnic minorities due to immigration. France is one such country. It is home to a large population of ethnic minority groups and confronts many challenges in the areas of ethnicity and religion. These pose significant threats to its building as a republican nation-state. Therefore, studying France is a great way to study the issues that contemporary Western societies face when building national communities and governing nation-states. This paper examines the challenges confronting contemporary Western societies when it comes to governing ethnic and religious issues and national identity. Moreover, the paper reflects on the predicament that cultural and social diversity presents in the contemporary world.

Contemporary French society is grappling with an increasingly pluralistic and fragmented landscape in its national development. Since the second decade of the twenty-first century commenced, France has witnessed frequent terrorist attacks with large-scale casualties, social panic, and vehement protests. The attacks have led to escalating ethnic and religious conflicts and have posed great challenges to the country’s national identity. Many of the perpetrators involved in these terrorist attacks shared close associations with Islam and some people of the Muslim faith in France. This made the latter a target of constant public criticism. Consequently, the already strained relationship between French society and the Muslim community has been further fractured. It has also intensified the disagreements between those who hold secular values and those who follow Islamic religious practices. This series of terrorist attacks serves as a stark manifestation of the exceptionally acute and deeply rooted ethnic and religious conflicts facing contemporary French society. It also highlights the striking isomorphism of the country’s ethnic and religious issues, especially when looking at the Muslim community, a foreign ethnic group. This further underscores the increasingly visible “pluralism” dilemma that France is faced with when it comes to national identity and social governance.

The intricate and conflicted relationship between Muslim minorities and French society is a major issue that France cannot ignore. This conflict is the result of a series of factors both historical and current. Unfortunately, these factors are also continuous and exceptionally complex. These factors include the

complicated historical relationship between France and the Islamic world, the repercussions of France's long-term colonial pursuits, France's continuous absorption of foreign immigrants, the ethnic conflicts caused by racial discrimination against foreign ethnic groups, and the relevant anti-discrimination efforts. But several additional factors come due to problems associated with minority groups, such as the threats to social security and the religious extremism, and the unfavorable situation created by the tendency to "turn all issues into ethnic ones", which is embedded into the interest conflicts and the class fragmentation accumulated as French society evolved. However, these factors are not the sole reasons behind the increasingly dire ethnic and religious problems in France. They may not even reveal the root causes. While many current problems may trigger conflicts, it is important to recognize that they are merely outcomes caused by ethnic and religious issues. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the value propositions that hold critical significance to delve deeper into the underlying reasons.

The fundamental reason for these issues and the challenges to France's national identity can be attributed to the fact that some dominant ideologies clash with the pluralistic reality of French society. Some ideologies' value claims create disciplines in French society that cause distortions and contradictions on multiple levels. These issues are closely related to ethnicity and religion and primarily manifest in the Muslim community. First, under the principles of republicanism, the notion of "civic nation" (*nation civique*) continues to exclude the notion of "ethnic nation" (*nation ethnique*), leading to identity dilemmas for Muslims as ethnic minorities. Second, some religious practices continue to deconstruct secular principles, resulting in a crisis of secularism and further conflicts between Muslims and France's indigenous society. These two fundamental ideologies and the many conflicts associated with them have profoundly influenced how ethnic and religious issues evolved in France. They have posed enormous challenges to the country's national identity.

## Research methods

The present study focuses on theoretical discussions. The author mainly relied on authoritative documents and research findings published by official or representative institutions. These findings focused on studying the intrinsic logic of the value claims presented by the relevant ideologies and the practical mechanisms that have given rise to the many conflicts closely related to ethnic and religious issues in France. The author examined the history of immigration in France, which provided insights into the identity crises arising from ethnic and religious issues amidst historical transformations. The paper covers the challenges facing the French republican notion of a "nation" concerning its discipline on the pluralistic reality of contemporary French society. The paper also covers the crisis caused by the gradual

deconstruction of secularism. The study was inspired by the author's fieldwork in Lyon, France.<sup>1</sup> Building upon this, the paper aims to explore the internal mechanisms and profound structural reasons behind the ethnic and religious issues in France.

## Results and discussion

### Nation and secularism disciplined by republican principles

The spirit of the French Revolution and republican principles laid the foundation for France as a nation-state (Ma 2012). Throughout its history, the French nation has emphasized its identity as a political community. The resulting notion of a "civic nation" gained prominence over time, whereas the notion of an "ethnic nation" has been progressively marginalized and even stigmatized. This historical process foreshadowed the complexity of the contemporary ethnic issues in France and its resulting dilemma of national identity. At the same time, secularism was fostered by republican principles and slowly transcended the existing Catholic order. In today's France, secularism has become a fundamental value penetrating the very fabric of French society. It guides various religious practices as an organic component of the French national identity.

#### "Civic nation" excludes "ethnic nation"

The French Revolution reinforced the awareness that a "nation" constitutes a political community. Shaped by this understanding, the construction of the French nation particularly emphasizes the principles of the civic nation and refuses to define the French nation and its constituents from an ethnic perspective. As a result, the principles of sovereignty by the "people" and nationalism have slowly taken root in France. The country regards the attributes of a political community as the essence of a "nation". In March 1882, philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Renan delivered a renowned speech titled "What is a Nation?" at the Sorbonne University. He explicitly stated that the fundamental element of a nation is the willingness of its members and their desire to live together (Renan 1882). A nation is a cohesive entity of free, equal individual citizens who voluntarily and rationally organized themselves. This notion of the nation based on a social contract fostered the "civic nation".

The "civic nation" and the republicanism behind it are the dominant ideological constructs of the French nation. They emphasize the voluntary association of individuals who recognize or belong to the nation. In other words, the "nation"

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<sup>1</sup> During a field study on topics including social solidarity in Lyon between 2007 and 2008, the author gradually became aware of the enormous challenges to the internal cohesion of contemporary French society posed by issues of ethnicity. Foreign ethnic minorities, especially Muslims, are particularly prone to conflicts with mainstream French society over questions of identity and religious practices, which have an unignorable impact on the country's national identity.

constitutes the political framework within which these individuals gather. Under the tradition of republicanism, the French nation fundamentally exemplifies its “civic” attribute, emphasizing the identity of its nationals as French citizens. Notably, the “civic nation” rejects the standard of “blood right” (*le droit du sang*). This is also the ideological basis for why France refuses to distinguish its members from an ethnic perspective and to recognize multiple ethnic groups. France has not developed an understanding of the French nation and its constituents from an ethnic perspective. Correspondingly, there are no options related to residents’ ethnic identities in France’s official census data.

Given the isomorphic definition of the French term “nation” as both “peoples” and “state”, the French Republic can be regarded as a political construct that represents a social contract among individuals who share a common will. The notions of a “republic” and its underlying ideology, “republicanism”, are fundamental and inherent to France. The value claims of republicanism (such as liberty, equality, fraternity, and secularism) have become the external characteristics of the French national identity. Article 1 of the current French Constitution stipulates that “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race, or religion. It shall respect all beliefs” (Légifrance 1958).

In the historical development of the French nation, the “civic nation” has been constantly sanctified and exerted profound influence, whereas the “ethnic nation” has been stigmatized (Malakine 2011). The notion of the “civic nation” only emphasizes the civic and political orientation in the construction of a nation. It prevents the notion of the “nation” from being simplified to the dimension of ethnicity or even primordial attributes that solely emphasize blood relations. As such, the “civic nation”, to some extent, neglects the ethnic and cultural diversity among different groups in the construction of a nation. French sociologist Jean-William Lapierre once stated, “Under the creed of a nation-state, the Jacobin ideology of our republic has always denied the diversity of the French population” (Lapierre 1995). One of the results of this is that “the research on intergroup relations has never held an important place” (Lapierre 1995).

While the “civic nation” holds a prominent position, it does not negate the existence of “ethnic” attributes within the French nation. The bonds between the French people are formed not only through political agreements but also through shared language, territory, history, beliefs, customs, and modes of thinking. These are all representations of their “ethnic” characteristics. In addition to the ethnic attributes of the French nation as a whole, there are distinct ethnic characteristics within the French nation. As a political community, the French nation cannot conceal the reality that various ethnic groups exist in its national composition. Minority groups have long been a part of French society and have contributed to the construction of the French nation in different ways. From an ethnic perspective, the contemporary French national composition can be divided into two categories: indigenous groups and immigrant groups. The former contributed to the construction of the French nation in its early stages, while the latter reflects the reality that contemporary France is a multi-ethnic country. According to Robert Castel, France has long been a country with ethnic and cultural diversity, and it will become even more

pluralistic in the future (Castel 2007). As American anthropologist David Levinson stated, contemporary France is a socially heterogeneous society in terms of ethnic attributes, with more than 100 ethnic groups from around the world accounting for 85% of the French population (Levinson 1998). As France's minority population continues to grow, it has led to substantial changes in the original ethnic structure within the French nation. Its increasing ethnic diversity has raised concerns among the indigenous society regarding national and state identity.

### Secularism: the cornerstone of French republicanism

The concept of secularism (*laïcité*) originated during the French Revolution. It advocates for freedom from the constraints of the church and religion. Therefore, French secularism not only proposes the separation between state and church but the separation of political power and religious power as well. Furthermore, it underscores the non-religious nature of national politics and public life. As a component of republican values, secularism became a guiding principle of French society during the Third Republic. During that time, it deeply ingrained itself within the administrative systems. It has become a fundamental principle of both the French republican school and national education (Leyva 2015).

The Law on Separation of the Churches and the State promulgated in December 1905 (*Loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Églises et de l'État*) is a milestone of the French secularism movement. It further clarified, in law, some of the principles of secularism. These principles included: protecting religious freedom and equality of all faiths before the law, seeking the separation of state and church, and safeguarding the secular public order from religious interference (Légifrance 1905). While the 1905 Law was promulgated in France, the secular State did not intend to promote atheism as it promised to protect the freedom of belief for all individuals. But it did propose that religion should remain in the private sphere and that the non-religious nature of the public sphere should be preserved. In this context, the public sphere encompasses first schools, which were regarded as primary institutions for the dissemination of knowledge and the cultivation of rationality (Mau-champ 2006).

Overall, French secularism contains three fundamental principles and values: (1) freedom, meaning faith freedom and the freedom to express one's beliefs within the framework of respecting public order; (2) separation, meaning that public institutions and religious organizations are separated and the state refrains from recognizing or subsidizing any religious sect (*culte*); (3) equality, meaning everyone is equal under the law regardless of their beliefs or the faith they follow. According to the official interpretation provided by the Interministerial Committee for Secularism (*Comité interministériel de la laïcité*), which is responsible for coordinating secularism affairs in France, secularism is not an opinion among others but the freedom to have an opinion. They go on to state that secularism is not a belief but the principle that allows for various beliefs while respecting public order (Comité interministériel de la laïcité (The Interministerial Committee of Secularism) 2022).

Secular values can be found across Europe and are not unique to France. Nonetheless, France is one of the few countries that expels all religious references from

the political arena and the power symbolic system. Secularism is also considered the foundation of the French Republican contract (Mauchamp 2006). According to a survey conducted by Viavoice in 2020, 78% of respondents believe that secularism is a component of French identity (Viavoice et Observatoire de la laïcité (Viavoice and Observatory of secularism) 2021).

As a historical product of opposition to the Catholic Church and one of the institutional cornerstones of the French Republic, secularism enjoys widespread social consensus in France. But it has never had a clear and singular definition during relevant historical movements, particularly concerning the implementation of secular principles. Although the 1905 Law held considerable legislative significance during the French secularism movement, the many norms it established cannot be equated with the principles of secularism. These norms do not represent the entirety of secularism and are not solely related to issues of secularism. Furthermore, although France incorporated secularism into its constitution in 1946, there has never been systematic legislation on the principles of secularism. This was a foreshadowing of France's current problem: It is a struggle to regulate religious practices while standing on the principles of secularism.

### **The ethnic identity excluded and its dilemmas in practice**

In French history, the “civic nation” effectively incorporated the native ethnic diversity in France. It even included many European minority groups that came to France during the late nineteenth century up until the early twentieth century. However, the non-European minority groups that flooded into France after World War II have not been well assimilated or acculturated within its republicanism. They have not been truly accepted by French society. Some view them as unable to be fully integrated into the French nation. As demanded by political correctness, those with French citizenship among these groups are not denied their status as French nationals. However, they are still perceived as outsiders, the “other”, on an emotional level. The persistence of this situation has further fractured the internal unity of the French nation and its society.

### **Identity dilemmas facing foreign ethnic minorities in France**

Around the world, ethnic phenomena manifest in different forms, but they are fundamentally linked to two major themes: recognition and belonging (Delannoï 2005). In France, foreign ethnic groups also confront the political predicament of these two themes. French scholar Ariane Chebel d'Appollonia noted that becoming a citizen does not mean that one is no longer discriminated against, nor does it necessarily lead to the recognition that one has fully become a member of the national community. Despite their legal status, the challenges persist for foreign immigrants who have attained citizenship in their adopted country. They frequently face suspicion regarding their national identity and endure rejection and exclusion due to being perceived as “foreigners” (d'Appollonia 2015).

A survey conducted by the French polling agency Ifop in 2018 showed that 60% of respondents believed that, due to differences in values and challenges in coexistence, France could no longer accept foreign populations. Almost the same number of respondents believed that accepting foreign populations had a negative impact on French identity and social cohesion (Ifop 2018). It is apparent that ethnic minorities, as representatives of pluralistic entities, are facing an increasingly narrow social space in France. This lack of genuine “recognition” stems from some kind of collective unconsciousness in French society, mainstream society rejecting the “ethnic identity” concerning matters of national identity. This is particularly evident where ethnic attributes that cannot be assimilated are concerned.

Foreign immigrants, especially those of non-European descent and their descendants, have not been extensively involved in the historical formation of the French nation. As such, they are not truly regarded as members of the French nation by the French people on an emotional level. Therefore, their status as members of the French nation is incomplete, and their citizenship in law does not necessarily translate into genuine emotional recognition. As the largest ethnic minority group among non-European minorities in France, the Muslim community not only demonstrates a strong sense of ethnic “otherness” but also expresses a strong desire for equality and actively engages in identity politics. Consequently, they have become a special “target” in the numerous ethnic conflicts occurring in France. On top of this, the identity politics movement among different ethnic groups, which has persistently sought recognition, further exacerbated internal divisions related to ethnicity within the country.

In his research on Canadian multiculturalism, political philosopher Charles Taylor pointed out that to build a country for everyone Canada must acknowledge and accept the plurality of the ways of belonging. And ethnic identity is important in various ways (Taylor 1991). Anthropologist Harald Eidheim argued that an ethnic identity holds significant relevance in relationships between people with both contrasting identities and similar identities (Eidheim 2021). Clearly, in a multi-ethnic country, the identification of each individual (especially for ethnic minorities) with their ethnic group is an indispensable intermediary for realizing nation-state identity. According to American scholar Steven Grosby, one is born into an ethnic group in a similar way to how one is born into a nation, and both ethnic group and nation are often perceived as being “natural” relations (Grosby 2017). Such relations highlight the special attribute of ethnic identity as the transitional state of the national identity, especially for the ethnic minority groups that initially immigrated to the country.

The above logic also applies to the interpretation of the French people’s national and state identity. In the French context, different individuals and groups belong to the political community of the French nation in different ways. Foreign ethnic groups especially rely on ethnic identity as an intermediary carrier. In other words, the identity of French citizens to their ethnic groups, especially for those who are members of foreign ethnic groups, is of indispensable importance to their state identity.

For ethnic minorities, the “unrecognized” status often has a destructive impact, making it difficult for them to attain genuine equality in political, economic, social, and cultural affairs. They perceive the many injustices they encounter in the real



world as “ethnic issues”, further deepening the divide between ethnic minorities and mainstream society. Moreover, in the political propaganda by the far-right in France, foreign ethnic groups are portrayed as being estranged from present-day France and the “culprits” of various social welfare problems and internal social solidarity crises. In this sense, racism represents the driving force behind the deterioration of ethnic and religious problems in France. The “anti-racism” trend and actions are then seen as the cause of the problems that arise.

Identity exists always on two levels: “internal identity” and “external identity”. This means that identity is not only a matter of self-awareness and belonging but is also partially shaped by recognition from others. As scholar Charles Taylor noted, “Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (Taylor 1995). Therefore, the “non-recognition” of ethnic minorities in France can be primarily attributed to the misrecognition present in French society.

This state of “non-recognition”, the fact that foreign ethnic minorities are not fully regarded as part of the French nation, inflicts harm on those with French citizenship. As Taylor argued, this is a form of oppression, “imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (Taylor 1995). Taylor’s proposition of “the politics of recognition” still holds significance today because “due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people” but “a vital human need” (Taylor 1995). In France, ethnic minorities have not expressed any clear political demands concerning the concept of a “nation”. However, the absence of recognition for their ethnic identity does have an impact on their sense of belonging to the French nation. The unfulfilled need for recognition has contributed to the escalation of conflicts related to ethnicity and religion in France. Therefore, accepting the country’s ethnic diversity and effectively integrating this reality into the framework of the French Nation and Republic represents a major challenge. This cannot be overlooked when it comes to the future construction of the French nation-state.

### **Muslims: The key to France’s ethnic issues**

The central issue of contemporary ethnic conflicts in France lies in the “non-recognition” of ethnic identity. This creates pressure for many minority groups in terms of identity, leading to conflicts on multiple levels. Consequently, ethnic minorities (especially non-European immigrants and their descendants) are becoming the focus of contemporary ethnic issues in France. Muslims in particular are the key to France’s ethnic issues. Compared with other foreign ethnic groups, Muslims seem to have more conflicts with mainstream French society. This is especially true when it comes to issues related to religion and secularism. Muslims are often criticized by French mainstream society for rejecting secular principles, and they are often accused of lacking the willingness to integrate into French society.

There is an inherent contradiction between Islamic culture and the mainstream values of contemporary French society that is difficult to reconcile. At the very least, Muslims generally believe that France has not adequately guaranteed cultural

diversity and embraced multicultural values. They believe there is an intolerance directed towards Islamic culture. Conversely, the mainstream discourse in French society suggests that the Muslim community has not adhered to the principles widely accepted under the French Republic system, such as secularism, the separation of church and state, and equality under the law. This has led to a series of social and economic problems. Moreover, Muslims exhibit an obvious sense of “community withdrawal” (*repli communautaire*), with their loyalty to a particular group prioritized over their allegiance to the republic (Stasi 2003). This is spoken of as unacceptable in the mainstream discourse. Some Muslim religious practices are seen as a challenge to secular values and a provocation to French republican principles. These practices are considered a refusal to integrate into the French nation. According to a survey conducted in 2021, 68% of the French people believed that Islam is a threat to French identity (Ifop 2021).

In response to such criticisms, Muslims have defended themselves by submitting different views on secularism and the separation of church and state. They emphasize that some of their practices are cultural rather than religious, which aim to preserve their ethnic cultural heritage. To many Muslims, Islam and secularism are compatible. In 2017, the Muslim Institute of the Grand Mosque of Paris (*Institut Musulman de la Grande Mosquée de Paris*) issued the *Proclamation of Islam in France (Proclamation de l’Islam en France)*. This offered an interpretation of secularism from the standpoint of the “neutral state” and asserted the compatibility of Islam and secularism (Institut Musulman de la Grande Mosquée de Paris (Muslim Institute of the Grand Mosque of Paris) 2017). From this perspective, it is believed that the tension between secularism and Islam will endure and is marked by conflicts arising from fundamental positions and principles.

In reality, there exist significant individual differences in how foreign ethnic groups integrate into French society. While some are well integrated into French society, others may find it to be more difficult, and a few have even developed negative or even hostile attitudes toward French society. The primary challenge is that the problems that arise from the failure to integrate into French society are largely linked to Muslims. It should be noted that the growing inequality in contemporary French society further reflects the living difficulties and injustices faced by certain people (Zhang 2020). This phenomenon underscores distinctive ethnic characteristics. In other words, foreign ethnic groups are the most severely affected by inequality, and Muslims are at the forefront of this issue, highlighting the intersection and isomorph of the country’s social and ethnic issues.

French-born Muslims are deeply influenced by ideas such as freedom and equality. A small fraction of their population responds strongly to criticisms against Muslims, and some even retaliate. This exacerbates the conflicts between the Muslim community and mainstream French society, creating a vicious cycle. Even in present times, some still use the term “immigrant” to refer to ethnic minorities, including Muslims. This disregards the fact that many of them hold French citizenship or were born as French citizens. The incomplete status of Muslims as members of the French nation contributes to a sense of alienation, which prevents them from recognizing the French national identity. This in turn reinforces their identification with their ethnic minority group and may even lead to separatist tendencies.

## The crisis of secularism in contemporary France

Secularism is experiencing a crisis of deconstruction, which has continued to provoke conflicts involving religious issues. Muslims are a key cause of such conflicts. Before the late twentieth century, secularism in France maintained a normal order of beliefs and religions, but as the Muslim population gradually expanded, the increasingly visible Islamic religious practices became difficult to reconcile with French secularism.

## The continued deconstruction of secular values in contemporary France

Over the past century, the religious landscape in France has been significantly restructured. Indigenous European religions represented by Catholicism have experienced a general decline in French society, which reflects the success of the secularism movement. Despite that, as France faces the rising influence of the non-indigenous religions represented by Islam, the French people are beginning to feel that secularism is phasing out in society. The ongoing social changes have reshaped the social environment in which secularism exists. This presents unprecedented challenges to the country's secular practices, which have never been legally defined.

As a cornerstone of republican values and political philosophy, secularism is one of the standards and measures for unifying the pluralistic cultures in contemporary France. This is particularly true for governing religious practices among foreign ethnic communities. However, perhaps the several generations of people who built the French Republic did not anticipate that these secular values, having existed for over a hundred years, are facing a kind of continuous process of deconstruction in contemporary French society. The key factor leading to this crisis lies in the Islamic religious practices and customs of Muslims. In France, Muslims have not strictly limited their religious practices to the private sphere but instead have demonstrated worrying visibility in the public sphere. This issue, "the return of religion to the public sphere", was described by French scholar Jean-Paul Willaime in his book of the same name (Willaime 2008).

A thorough analysis of both the 1905 Law and the historical process of promoting secularism in France since the late nineteenth century indicates that the proponents of the law did not share the same stance. Essentially, they held two different views. One camp aimed to eradicate the domination religions had of the public sphere, advocating anti-clericalism in politics. The other camp sought to affirm the state's neutral position among different religions to guarantee religious freedom (Blanc 2015). The two sides had different motivations and reasoning for supporting the separation of church and state. Though the separation of church and state was the objective outcome of their endeavors, the two camps differed in their specific demands. The former endeavored to free the state and the public sphere from the dominance and constraints of the churches and religious authorities. The latter aimed to keep the state away from individual religious beliefs and guarantee religious freedom for individuals. In other words, the former sought to defend the secular nature of the state and the public sphere, while the latter aspired to safeguard religious freedom.

The two sides coexisted during the legislative bargaining in the parliamentary debates at the time, but ultimately the proponents of religious freedom gained the advantage. This led to the elevation of religious freedom as the central focus within the legal texts. It should be noted that from a secularist perspective, the 1905 legislation was not comprehensive. It focused solely on the separation of church and state and failed to accurately and fully reflect the whole secularism ideology advocated in French society at the time. The term “secularism” (laïcité) even did not appear in the legal texts. The law primarily targeted the Catholic Church and its influence and had little mention of other religions. Moreover, limited by the historical context, the legal texts failed to fully clarify the principles of secularism in certain respects like issues related to dress codes and the public sphere. Amidst the enormous social changes that ensued, the first camp mentioned above gained more consensus over time. This contributed to the formation of the secular order. However, the ambiguities in the 1905 Law regarding the presentation of secularism led to ongoing debates and challenges in contemporary France.

The 1905 Law, with its profound historical significance, carries two different value claims. Even today, different camps still emphasize their stances and reasoning. When it comes to the two value claims, most people in mainstream French society support the first camp, while Muslims are primarily proponents of the second camp. Specifically, when confronted with secular principles, Muslims argue that the state should refrain from interfering in religious affairs. For instance, they have pointed out that the state should not introduce legislation to prohibit Muslim women from wearing veils in public places. In contrast, mainstream French society maintains that the law should protect the public sphere from religious interference. For example, the state should pass legislation to strictly prohibit anyone from wearing conspicuous religious symbols in public places, including Muslim headscarves, Jewish yarmulkes, Christian crosses, and so on. This difference in understanding and demands has created numerous obstacles for Muslims to face when trying to integrate into French society. It also makes it difficult for France to govern the practices of the Islamic faith under Secularism (Zhang 2019).

In French history, secularism allowed for the effective governing of Catholic religious practices, but it struggles to account for the impact of Islamic religious practices on the public sphere in contemporary times. While the 1905 Law seemingly reflects the state’s impartial position regarding religious beliefs, the state cannot evade its duty to protect the public sphere from religious influences. In France, the principles of secularism are not inherently contradictory to religious freedom. Moreover, it is widely recognized that the separation of church and state is not a weapon against religion. On the contrary, it enables peaceful coexistence among different religious beliefs (Zhang 2010). It is noteworthy that the secularization of French society is not a gradual process where the church adapts to a relative reduction in its social impact. Instead, with the support of anti-clerical political forces, secular political powers will leverage political means to compel religions to withdraw from the public sphere and diminish their political and social influence (Shen 2007). In this regard, the state cannot be absolved from its responsibility to maintain the non-religious nature of the public sphere and must not tolerate any religious intrusion into secular principles. For advocates of secularism, one of the key roles

of the 1905 Law is to ensure the state will keep religious practices from disrupting public order (Direction de l'information légale et administrative (Bureau of Legal and Administrative Information) 2022). From this perspective, the state can't remain neutral when faced with religious intrusion on public order. It is just based on this perception that the Law to Reinforce the Respect of Republican Principles (*LOI n° 2021-1109 du 24 août 2021 confortant le respect des principes de la République*) enacted and implemented by France in August 2021 (Légifrance 2021) aims to prevent the impact and disturbance to social cohesion by religious practices in France. This reinforces the punishment for violations of the fundamental principles of republican values.

During the author's fieldwork, many interviewees stated that the secular principles upheld by French society protect individual religious freedom, but that each person's religious practice should be strictly confined to the private sphere. The so-called "right to religious freedom" should not be used to infringe upon the secular nature of the public sphere. Doing so would violate the rights of others. So, in French society, the religious practices of some Muslims and their insistence on religious and cultural customs pose a challenge to the secular principles of public life. These challenges come in varying degrees but continue to generate social conflicts.

While secularism faces challenges from the rising influence of religions, particularly Islam, a major topic of debate is the so-called "neutrality of the state". The 1905 Law does not explicitly mention "state neutrality". The understanding of "state neutrality" is derived from Article 2 of the 1905 Law, which states that the Republic does not recognize, remunerate, or subsidize any religious sect (Légifrance 1905). This provision primarily implies that the state treats all religions equally, without favoring any particular sect, which is actually a manifestation of ensuring religious freedom.

Yet, the definition of "state neutrality" can be expanded to suggest that the state may not intervene in religious affairs even in the face of religious intrusion on public order. Taken this way, the Article would contradict the secular principles that France strives to uphold. But the 1905 Law does not specify that the state cannot intervene in cases of religious intrusion on the public sphere. In other words, the state cannot remain neutral when confronted with such cases. According to Article 1 of the 1905 Law, the Republic guarantees the free exercise of religion subject to the sole restrictions enacted hereafter in the interest of public order (Légifrance 1905). This indicates that the state cannot ignore instances of religious intrusion that disrupt public order. The state bears the responsibility and obligation to protect the non-religious nature of the public sphere. This is why French authorities explicitly state that "secularism cannot be reduced to state neutrality" (Stasi 2003). Based on the 1905 Law, the so-called "state neutrality" is primarily a reference to the neutrality of public services, which means that users of public services should not be subjected to religious discrimination. It also means that public service providers may not express their religious inclinations (Sauvé 2016).

It is important to understand that, when it comes to secularism, republican values are constantly expected to take precedence over religious freedom. Secularism does not make concessions to any religion's encroachment on public life. The so-called principle of "state neutrality" can be exploited by certain religious groups to accuse

the state or government of infringing upon their “religious freedom”. It can be used to justify people’s attempts to extend their religious practices, which should strictly remain within the private sphere, to the public sphere. In this regard, it is vitally important for France to clarify the essence of the “state neutrality” principle through legal means to uphold its secular principles and address the so-called “secularism crisis”.

### The serious repercussions of the secularism crisis

Amidst the rising Islamic influence, the relative balance between the state and religion/church that has been maintained for over a century is being reshaped. Secular principles have, to some extent, lost their ability to discipline religious practices in contemporary France. This has resulted in a state of anomie. A survey conducted in October 2019 revealed that 78% of French people believe that the French secular model, derived from the 1905 Law, was in danger. This view was prevalent across social classes, generational groups, and political camps. 61% considered Islam incompatible with French values (Gattegno 2019).

In the late 1980s, French society, having been advocating secularism for a long time, had just begun to experience a renewed influence of religion, primarily Islam. With the emergence of far-right political movements, particularly the National Front (now renamed the National Rally), Muslims gradually became the main target of the growing xenophobia in France. Furthermore, the concerns expressed openly by far-right politicians about the Islamization of France spread throughout the country.

As Islam becomes increasingly visible in French society, it is natural for some individuals to develop negative sentiments towards it due to religious differences. Despite that, under the premise of religious freedom, advocated and maintained by secularism, religious diversity would not serve as a justification for overt opposition towards Islam in France. The primary cause of the conflict between Islam and French society lies in the impact of Islamic religious practices on the laws of the Republic and the secular nature of the public sphere. According to a survey conducted by Ifop in 2020, 38% of Muslims believed that Islamic law (Sharia) was more important than the laws of the French Republic. 57% of young Muslims (ages 15–24) held this same view (Ifop 2020). In French Society today, some Muslims have exhibited religious extremism. This has caused extreme harm. It also exacerbates the tensions between the two sides and intensifies peoples’ concerns about the influence of Islam in France. Religious radicalism and extremism are particularly prevalent among the younger generation of Muslims. A survey in 2016 showed that 50% of young Muslims refused to accept many of the contemporary French values (Lannegrace 2016). French scholar Jean-Louis Harouel argued that, in the early twentieth century, many anti-clericalists believed that Catholicism posed a threat to the Republic, but today, Islam threatens the institutions of the Republic and France itself as a carrier of civilization and history (d’Ornellas 2019).

There is a clear difference in how these two religions have impacted French society. This is because the various measures of the 1905 Law that regard the separation of church and state were formulated within the framework of secularism vs. Catholicism. The presence of other religions was not fully considered, particularly

the presence of those which are not indigenous to Europe. This led to unforeseen issues when secularism encountered Islamic practices. One example is the matter of dress code. Islamic law contains provisions on clothing. But “there is no Catholic way to dress”, so the 1905 Law has no articles covering it (d’Ornellas 2019). This legal ambiguity led to debates on clothing between French secularism and Islam. This triggered intense conflicts between the Muslim community and French society during legislative initiatives in 2004 and 2010, both of which concerned religious clothing. The failure to effectively translate secular principles into specific legal frameworks with defined norms for corresponding social practices has directly contributed to the crisis the country now faces.

The spirit and value claims of French secularism were gradually established through a long history of struggles against the Catholic Church and its religious influence. Despite that, they have failed to take deep roots in the minds of contemporary foreign ethnic communities, particularly Muslims. And Islam has not experienced any extensive, profound secularization movement. Consequently, certain Muslim religious practices intrude into the public sphere. This has convinced the defenders of French secularism that the principles of secularism have been violated and that the concept itself is facing a major crisis. As a result, there have been many harsh criticisms and responses against these religious practices. Some Muslims perceive these accusations as hatred toward Islam and as attacks on Muslims as a whole. Given that racial discrimination does exist in French society, it is undeniable that the criticisms and responses mentioned earlier can be intertwined with discrimination against Muslims (who represent a foreign ethnic community). Nevertheless, a prevailing view is that the criticism of certain Muslim religious practices that affect the public sphere is not directed at their identity as believers of Islam. Instead, this criticism is directed at the violation of secular principles and not specific to the religion. Based on the author’s observations from his fieldwork, rational criticisms expressed by French society toward Muslims focused mainly on their violation of the many principles of French republicanism and the disruption of the fundamental republican order. People were particularly concerned about the religious customs and practices that seriously disrupt the secular nature of the public sphere.

The aforementioned criticisms may seem exaggerated to some French citizens, but they are not without foundation and reflect real social concerns. However, the Muslim community perceives the matter differently. For some Muslims, their daily religious practices are an expression of their Arab-Muslim culture. They simply wish to practice and preserve their ethnic cultural traditions and religious beliefs, and they want to do this without conflicting with mainstream French society. This self-defense argument aligns with a statement made by former French Prime Minister Manuel Valls. He said that “millions of French Muslims live according to their faith. They may not even participate in religious ceremonies, but they do recognize themselves within the Arab-Muslim culture” (Valls 2018). It is based on this logic that many advocate greater understanding and support for Muslims.

However, many people do not accept this defense. They emphasize that Muslims living in French society have the right to identify with and practice their traditional culture (including religion). However, they also maintain Muslims have an obligation to respect and uphold the fundamental principles of the political community to

which they belong or of the host country they reside in. This is an essential premise, and this obligation does not conflict with their cultural and religious demands. It has been argued that Muslims cannot selfishly prioritize their community identity and cultural demands above the fundamental principles of the nation and state, which form the political community of France. These arguments and divergences in perception have persisted between mainstream French society and Muslims for many years, seemingly without any definitive solution. Moreover, the constant conflicts between mainstream French society and the Muslim community have encouraged each side to criticize the other. From each side's perspective, the resulting criticisms being levied against them reinforce the legitimacy of their demands. Consequently, more severe ethnic and religious conflicts are triggered, creating a vicious cycle.

## Conclusion

France has long relied on republicanism to integrate its indigenous ethnic diversity and the ethnic attributes of "outsiders" that continue to join the French nation. This ideological framework is part of the country's dominant values and has shaped the French nation. However, as non-European ethnic groups continue to grow in size, the Republican principles have failed to demonstrate their previous effectiveness in integrating and acculturating ethnic diversity. Instead, they triggered a series of ethnic conflicts and posed significant challenges to France's national identity. France has grappled with the limited assimilative capacity of republicanism ever since the first half of the twentieth century. At the same time, doubts have emerged about the loyalty of minority groups to the French nation, particularly the loyalty of non-European ethnic groups. In this context, France's primary concern is that immigrant communities cannot be assimilated into the existing republican tradition. This situation reflects a growing division within the construction of France's political community (Noiriel 2007).

The secularism crisis facing France is a profound reflection of a fundamental question in the conflicts between French society and Islam: Which should take precedence, religious freedom or republican values? Mainstream French society prioritizes republican values, and religious freedom is guaranteed only on the premise of respecting those principles. However, in contemporary France, the priority of republican values has not been well upheld or practiced.

From a global perspective, Islam has not experienced any profound secularization movement. So, Muslims living in France may not fully appreciate the historical value of secularism as the cornerstone of French republicanism. As such, they may lack the boundary of "taboos" in religious practices and the awareness that "religious practices should not interfere with public life". It is an inevitable trend in the development of modern human society that secular power prevails over religious power. While France has established secular values, it has also created conditions for religious freedom. And the influx of immigrants has contributed to the religious diversity of the country. However, the secular values that triumphed over Catholicism have encountered difficulties in integrating Islamic religious practices in the contemporary era. Moreover, as there is little experience in its historical heritage to



lean on, France must seek new approaches to solve these difficulties with the pluralistic development of modern society. To build and maintain its national identity, France must help Muslims embrace secular values and must enshrine the ideology and principles of secularism into laws and social norms through legislation.

The stance toward cultural diversity is an essential and inherent dimension of discussions about ethnicity and religion. France has long recognized the value of cultural diversity, but its practice of protecting cultural diversity emphasizes the attributes within the social category. These attributes include such as social class, age, sexual orientation, and health conditions. These have been the focus of their protection rather than the commonly perceived ethnic and religious diversity. As such, due to the lack of ethnic attributes, this notion of cultural diversity in France seems to embody more Republican values. Though the country is home to pluralistic ethnic groups with a growing population, France has not implemented any genuine multiculturalist policies (Zhang 2012). This can be attributed to the perception, as highlighted by French anthropologist Milena Doytcheva, that multiculturalism is perceived as a threat to republicanism (Doytcheva 2011).

In 1993, France first proposed the concept of “cultural exception” during trade negotiations with the United States (Gournay 2010). Subsequently, France actively promoted the adoption of the *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001) and the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005). France has remained a strong advocate for protecting cultural diversity on the international level. In reality, however, France has a double standard when it comes to internal and external affairs. Externally, France actively advocates and practices the preservation of cultural diversity. This is done to preserve the distinctiveness and prominence of the French language and culture worldwide. Internally, the country exercises a discriminatory type of cultural diversity. This means that France protects certain forms of cultural diversity selectively while vehemently rejecting others, especially ethnic diversity. It is precisely this double standard that further exacerbates the country’s ethnic and religious conflicts.

In the 1990s, the Council of Europe formulated the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (1992) and the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities* (1994). Despite its active commitment to European integration, France has not ratified the two international agreements in its parliament. This indicates that France might be concerned about the risks associated with identifying and acknowledging regional or minority languages and ethnic diversity at the European level. Recognizing the ethnic attributes of a nation’s composition might deconstruct the French nation and lead to fragmentation.

France has addressed matters of diversity while deliberately avoiding the question of ethnic diversity. This is essentially an evasion of the crisis facing modern human society. Ethnic diversity is an undeniable reality in the contemporary world, and its acknowledgment ought to be treated as a fundamental epistemology and value. Ethnic diversity can be integrated within the continuous construction of nation and state, and genuine social cohesion can only be achieved through the true recognition of such diversity. Influenced by the republican tradition, France’s “double standard” (treating cultural diversity differently for internal and external affairs) has consequences that go beyond the erosion of equality and fraternity. It also further

compresses the cultural and social space for foreign ethnic groups' identities. This prevents people being French citizens issued from ethnic minorities from obtaining fundamental guarantees of their status as members of the French nation and exacerbates their disconnection from the French nation and state.

**Acknowledgements** Not applicable.

**Authors' contributions** The author, Jinling Zhang, conducts all the research and writing, and read and approved the final manuscript.

**Funding** This paper is a phased result of the Major Project of the National Social Science Fund of China "Research on the Contemporary Dilemma and Governance of French Multiculturalism" (16BMZ096).

**Availability of data and materials** Not applicable.

## Declarations

**Ethics approval and consent to participate** My informants were well-informed about the purpose of the research and utilization of the same data being collected and they willingly participated in this research process.

**Consent for publication** Not applicable.

**Competing interests** I have no competing interests.

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## Comments

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