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Beyond Secularism (Laïcité): Québec's Secularism and Religious Participation in Nation-Building

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Abstract: This article explores the role of religion in nation-building by examining its public dimensions within the evolving context of secularism in Québec. By examining the shift from open secularism, recommended by the Bouchard–Taylor Commission report of *Building the Future, a Time for Reconciliation* (2008), to a more rigid form under Bill 21, the study critiques Bill 21's marginalization of religious minorities and explores the broader tension between state neutrality and religious participation in public life. Drawing on Rajeev Bhargava's concept of "principled distance", the author advocates for a flexible secular framework that balances institutional neutrality with ethical commitments to equity and justice. Through case studies, including the accommodation of Sikh turbans in the RCMP and the United Church of Canada's support for same-sex marriage, the article illustrates how religious engagement fosters bridging social capital and enacts public religion, thereby enriching democratic discourse. This article insists on the limitations of rigid secularism in its dealings with pluralism and proposes that principled distance offers a more inclusive approach, allowing constructive religious contributions to civic life without undermining secular governance. Ultimately, the study promotes a vision of secularism that honors differences and encourages religious participation in nation-building.

Keywords: secularism; Québec Bill 21; religious participation; principled distance; public religion; multiculturalism; intercultural theology; ethno-religious minorities

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1. Introduction

I arrived in Toronto, Canada, in September 1995. From the very first day, I noticed that the Québec Referendum campaign was quite intense. The "Yes" side, led by separatists, advocated for Québec's sovereignty, while the "No" side, supported by Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and federalists, highlighted the risks of separation. The atmosphere was charged with large rallies and powerful emotional appeals. During this period, I began to question whether I had made the right choice in coming here. The country I wanted to be a part of could become fractured, and I could not imagine Canada without the province of Québec. A significant void would exist at the heart of Canada if the separatists won the referendum and established a nation-state. Less than two months later, on 30 October 1995, Québec held a referendum. The question revolved around Québec's sovereignty in relation to Canada. Turnout was high, exceeding 93%, leading to a razor-thin outcome. The result was 50.58% "No" to 49.42% "Yes" (Elections Québec 1995). Consequently, Québec remains a part of Canada; however, the questions of how to manage its sovereignty, along with the complexities of its identity and the rights of religious minorities, continue to linger under Bill 21.

In recent academic discussions on the topic, "*The Challenges of a Secular Québec: Bill 21 in Perspective*", I have observed a lack of insight from a religious standpoint

(Ferretti et al. 2023). It is essential to address the religious perspectives, as it is closely intertwined with secularism. In this context, what role does religion play in engaging with public life within a secular framework? Should it remain a private matter confined to personal concerns, or should it reclaim its public dimensions in the nation-building process? If we examine the public aspects of religion, what might they involve? This article aims to identify the role of religion in nation-building and the public dimensions of religion, particularly within the context of secularism. To achieve this, I will discuss the concept of secularism and its various models. Then, I will outline the evolution of Québec's secularism since the referendum, illustrating various approaches to secularism from open to rigid. Next, I will explore the role of religion and religious participation in the public sphere, which constitutes public religion. Finally, I will propose that Rajeev Bhargava's concept of "principled distance" establishes boundaries between the state and religion, respecting each jurisdiction while promoting principled values of equity in citizenship and freedom of religion.

2. What Is Secularism and Its Models?

Secularism traditionally refers to the principle of separating religion from government institutions, laws, and public policies. It ensures that religious beliefs do not influence political decisions and that the state remains neutral on religious matters. Secularism advocates freedom of religion and belief in that individuals practice any faith or none without interference from the state (Maclure and Taylor 2011, pp. 19–26). However, the implementation of secularism in some modern liberal states in the West has encountered criticism for marginalizing religious minorities. At times, it has been used as a systemic tool to oppress specific groups while ostensibly fostering equality and freedom of religion (Narain 2024). It is important to define the concept of secularism to reflect the current *status quo* in Québec and identify the role of religion in the public sphere.

According to Charles Taylor, the term 'secular' has a complex and ambiguous history in the West (Taylor 2007, 2009). It evokes a dyad that distinguishes two related yet different dimensions of 'time', the immanent and the transcendent, assigning each to separate realms of time and space–a self-sufficient immanent sphere and a contrasting transcendent realm. The term 'secular' originates from its initial meaning, which denotes ordinary time associated with 'worldly' and 'lay'. The second meaning is connected to the term 'religious', referring to a higher realm linked to eternal matters. Within the church calendar, these two times are intertwined and cannot be separated into distinct periods. However, when this dichotomy is established, the two dimensions often disrupt and dominate each other's worldviews. José Casanova argues that religion has always engaged with the 'worldly' and the 'lay', suggesting that the process of secularization[1] is unnecessary. "To secularize–that is, 'to make worldly' or 'to transfer from ecclesiastical to civil use'–is a process that does not make much sense in such a civilizational context" (Casanova 2008, p. 105).

The secularization process creates another dyad: true versus false or necessary versus superfluous. In western history, this dichotomy has contributed to the separation of state and religion; religion remains in the "private zone" and cannot interfere with public life (Taylor 2009). In his *magnum opus*, *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor argues that secularism does not merely signify the absence of religion but represents a transformation in how individuals experience and engage with both belief and unbelief. He challenges the conventional view of secularism as simply the separation of church and state, instead offering a broader historical and philosophical perspective. Secularism marks a shift from a society where belief in God was nearly universal to one where multiple worldviews coexist, necessitating that belief itself be consciously chosen rather than assumed granted. In this immanent frame, individuals may not perceive themselves as porous to spirits but rather

as self-contained agents without reference to transcendence. In this shift, however, people feel the tension between the immanent worldviews and the longing for transcendence. This tension creates a dilemma termed "cross-pressures" by Taylor, where individuals may oscillate between belief and unbelief or experience the pull of both. In this secular age, the challenge lies in utilizing social imagery to accommodate transcendental longings against the backdrop of an immanent understanding of worldviews in nation-building.[2]

Various forms of secularism exist in western liberal states. According to Rajeev Bhargava, secularism is a broad concept that encompasses different models of the relationship between religion and the state (Bhargava 2019). Countries have adopted diverse approaches to secularism shaped by their historical, cultural, and political contexts. Here, I will explore key models of secularism, including the French model of laïcité, the American, liberal (European) accommodationist secularism, and the (Canadian) multicultural model.

The French approach to secularism, known as laïcité, stresses a strict separation between religion and the state. Religion is seen as a private matter, and public institutions must uphold strict neutrality. Consequently, France prohibits religious symbols in public institutions, including schools and government offices. This model is intended to ensure that religion does not influence state affairs and vice versa (Bhargava 2019; Modood and Sealy 2021). The recent Québec model, embodied by Bill 21, closely mirrors the French approach.[3]

The American model is founded on the principle of separating church and state while permitting religious influence in public life. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees that the government neither establishes a religion nor restricts its free exercise. Unlike the French model, the American approach does not impose limitations on public expressions of religious belief. This model seeks to balance religious freedom with state neutrality, although discussions persist regarding the role of religion in politics and education (Bhargava 2019).

Liberal (European) accommodationist secularism, unlike that of France, does not enforce a strict separation of church and state. Instead, states maintain neutrality while accommodating certain religious practices. Some countries provide state funding for religious schools but reject the full establishment of religion in governance. They recognize religious holidays and permit the display of religious symbols in public spaces. This model aims to balance secular governance and religious inclusion, although challenges arise in addressing religious diversity and integration (Bhargava 2019; Modood and Sealy 2021).

Some countries, such as Canada, adopt a multicultural secularism model that recognizes and accommodates religious diversity within a secular framework. Canada permits religious expression in public institutions, except in Québec, while ensuring that no single religion dominates public life. This approach fosters inclusivity and respects religious identities while upholding state neutrality. Nonetheless, managing religious pluralism presents challenges, particularly regarding religious accommodation in public service.

Secularism manifests in various forms, shaped by historical, socio-religious, and political contexts. Some models advocate for a clear separation between religion and the state, while others embrace a more flexible approach. This diversity within secularism highlights the ongoing conversation about balancing religious freedom with state neutrality, especially in regards to accommodating minorities. In the next section, I will explore open secularism, providing insights into the complex relationship between religion and the Québec government within the broader Canadian context.

3. Open Secularism

Canada is a distinctive country that embraces various approaches to secularism. This is particularly evident in Québec, which once reflected 'open' secularism and now practices

'rigid' secularism. In Québec, before adopting rigid secularism, open secularism was recommended, as outlined by the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, commonly known as the Bouchard–Taylor Commission (referred to as the Commission hereafter). As the federal government began developing new policies, such as integrative multiculturalism, in the late 2000s, Québec sought an appropriate model or policy to manage its diversity and reflect its unique cultural, political, social, religious, and linguistic contexts. In 2007, after a series of highly publicized incidents concerning cultural accommodation for various heritage and religious minority groups in the province, then-Québec Premier Jean Charest announced the formation of the Bouchard–Taylor Commission.

The Commission's report clarified why Québec needs an intercultural model instead of the federal multicultural one. For the Commission, multiculturalism lacked an integrative dimension. Consequently, Bouchard and Taylor recommended that interculturalism reconcile ethnocultural diversity with the continuity of the French-speaking core and the preservation of social ties. According to the Commission, interculturalism is a "policy or model that advocates harmonious relations between cultures based on intensive exchanges centered on an integration process that does not seek to eliminate differences while fostering the development of a common identity" (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, p. 287). However, similarities existed between Québec's and the federal concepts of integrative multiculturalism; the aim of both policies was to promote the integration of minority cultures into a majority one (Cho 2025, pp. 29–38). While Québec's interculturalism aimed to produce and sustain its majority cultural heritage and language in the province to ensure its survival as a minority culture in Canada, it also emphasized respect for other cultures within the province (Taylor 2009).[4] The Commission faced the challenging task of maintaining a balance between preserving its founding culture and language while also allowing for the expression of various cultures in the province.

Interculturalism in Québec was not the first approach; rather, it was one of several methods aimed at integrating diverse cultural heritages into a dominant one (Taylor 2009). Since its inception in 1971, the goal of federal multiculturalism has been to incorporate various cultural heritages as a means of nation-building. Québec's interculturalism embraced the central tenet of federal multiculturalism: integration. How, then, does Québec's interculturalism differ from federal multiculturalism? The Commission introduced the concept of secularism without offering a precise definition at the start of their report; however, they later provided context and dedicated Chapter VII to the topic, entitled "The Québec System of Secularism".

The Commission recommended that Québec expand and clarify its model of 'open secularism'. Instead of simply refraining from endorsing religion or limiting religious expressions in the public sphere, the Commission sought to emphasize the protection of religious freedom within the framework of open secularism. Four principles define the Commission's interpretation of open secularism and its promotion through the notion of interculturalism. These principles are: (1) the moral equality of individuals, which acknowledges the equal moral worth of each person; (2) freedom of conscience and religion; (3) state neutrality toward religions; and (4) the separation of church and state. Bouchard and Taylor specifically address the first two principles. In their definition of open secularism, they assert that it "recognizes the need for the State to be neutral (statutes and public institutions must not favour any religion or secular conception) but . . . also acknowledges the importance for some people of the spiritual dimension of existence and, consequently, the protection of freedom of conscience and religion" (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, p. 140). Unlike rigid secularism, such as the French model (laïcité), which relegates religion to the private domain, open secularism offers an opportunity for reconciliation through

reasonable accommodation of specific religious practices in the public sphere. Under particular guidelines, the display of religious symbols in public institutions is allowed. For example, ordinary citizens in certain public roles may wear religious symbols, while others, such as judges, are prohibited from doing so in order to maintain the appearance of neutrality during a trial.

However, nine years after the release of the Bouchard–Taylor Commission report, Taylor publicly revised his stance on the recommendation that individuals in coercive state roles, such as judges, be prohibited from wearing religious symbols (Taylor 2017). Initially, he endorsed this measure as a political compromise intended to ease public tensions following discussions on reasonable accommodation. Over time, however, he began to view this restriction as unnecessary and harmful. He noted that the original proposal had been misrepresented, as the distinction between coercive roles and other public sector positions had blurred in public discourse, resulting in broader and more arbitrary restrictions that unfairly targeted daycare teachers and educators (Taylor 2017). The debates surrounding secularism and Québec values contributed to the stigmatization of religious minorities, particularly Muslim women, leading to increased hostility and even acts of aggression. Ultimately, Taylor opposed the adoption of laws, like Bill 21, advocating instead for an inclusive approach to secularism that does not marginalize minority groups (Authier 2019).

Open secularism recognizes the reality of religious diversity and aims to integrate the rich tapestry of cultural heritages into Francophone culture. Québec's view on religious diversity differs from that of federal multiculturalism. In the federal model, each cultural heritage retains the right to uphold its values within the bilingual framework and is encouraged to contribute to the wider society. Although religion is regarded as a private matter, it is still accepted in public life. Likewise, open secularism strives to reflect this religious diversity and promotes reconciliation among various religious and non-religious groups by advocating for freedom of religion and conscience, thus facilitating integration into its French-speaking core. However, while the principle of secularism should be upheld, complete religious neutrality is not necessary in all areas of public life.

4. Rigid Secularism

In contrast to open secularism, rigid secularism seeks to eliminate any religious influence from governance, law, and public spaces, as exemplified by the French model (laïcité). Québec's Bill 21 particularly underscores this approach through policies that prohibit religious symbols in public institutions and exclude religious considerations from state affairs. Bill 21, officially titled "An Act respecting the laicity of the State", prohibits certain public employees from wearing religious symbols while on duty. It has ignited a great deal of debate across Canada, especially regarding religious freedom and the rights of religious minorities. Introduced by the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government, led by Premier François Legault in March 2019, the law aims to strengthen Québec's secular identity by forbidding public sector employees in positions of authority–such as teachers, police officers, judges, and government lawyers–from displaying visible religious symbols at work (Québec National Assembly 2019). The rationale behind Bill 21 is to maintain state neutrality and uphold the principle of secularism, or laïcité.

Following the standard legislative process, Bill 21 was officially adopted on 16 June 2019, with a vote of 73 to 35. The law took effect immediately, although a grandfather clause permitted existing employees in affected positions to continue wearing religious symbols. However, new hires in the public sector were subject to the ban. To safeguard the law from constitutional challenges, the Québec government invoked the "notwithstanding clause",[5] a mechanism that enables governments to override certain provisions of the Canadian

Charter of Rights and Freedoms for a renewable period of five years. Despite this, Bill 21 has confronted a great number of legal challenges. Scholars argue that it discriminates against religious minorities and violates fundamental rights, especially against Muslim women who wear head coverings (Di Matteo 2024; Narain 2024). In April 2021, the Québec Superior Court, however, determined that certain provisions of the law affect the enforcement of the Québec government. Civil rights organizations have since appealed the ruling, and the Supreme Court of Canada has agreed to hear the constitutional challenge against Québec's Bill 21 (Canadian Civil Liberties Association 2025).

Supporters of Bill 21 contend that requiring public servants in positions of authority to refrain from wearing religious symbols promotes impartiality. The legislation seeks to uphold the religious neutrality of public institutions and protect citizens' freedom of conscience by prohibiting government employees in official roles from displaying religious symbols. Some assert that Québec possesses the democratic legitimacy to define its own model of secularism, distinct from Canada's multicultural approach. Others contend that, in Canada, freedom of religion is often interpreted too broadly, allowing religious norms to intrude upon public institutions, whereas Bill 21 aims to reinforce state neutrality (Rocher 2023, pp. 19–39). Advocates also view Bill 21 as part of a broader historical movement toward secularization, which includes previous initiatives, such as establishing a secular education system and deconfessionalizing Québec's school boards. The law is perceived as a continuation of the province's efforts to separate religion from public institutions (Labelle 2023, pp. 105–26).

Bill 21 remains a highly contentious topic in Québec. Proponents argue that it embodies Québec's distinct approach to secularism and maintains neutrality in public entities, whereas opponents contend that it marginalizes religious minorities, notably Muslim women in hijabs, Sikh men in turbans, and Jewish men in kippahs. Many Muslim women perceive themselves as particularly singled out, as the law significantly impacts their representation and limits their job prospects. Cities and provinces beyond Québec have condemned the legislation, leading to protests both within and outside the province. The discussion surrounding Bill 21 is ongoing, with continued legal and political conflicts likely influencing its future.

So far, I have examined two perspectives on secularism in Québec. The rigid secularism established by Bill 21 represents a significant departure from open secularism. As mentioned above, open secularism emphasizes the importance of the state's institutional neutrality while permitting individuals in public roles to express their religious beliefs, provided they maintain professional impartiality. For instance, a teacher wearing a hijab or a Sikh officer donning a turban would be acceptable in this context, as personal beliefs do not disrupt institutional neutrality. The Commission highlighted reasonable accommodation, promoting dialogue to make a balance between majority norms and minority rights. It advocated for open secularism, asserting that secularism should promote embracing rather than eliminating cultural identities (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, pp. 137–38).

Both models reflect Québec's unique history and identity, highlighting the tension between individual rights and national ideals. As Québec navigates its evolving identity, these differing approaches illuminate the ongoing challenge of defining secularism in a pluralistic society. However, both have their shortcomings. Open secularism emphasizes reasonable accommodation for religious diversity with the goal of integrating religious minorities into the French-speaking core. This approach is notably distinct from the ideal of interculturalism, which respects differences regardless of cultural and religious backgrounds (Cho 2025). While open secularism underscores reasonable accommodation for religious diversity, it can be implemented in ways that unreasonably oppress religious minorities, potentially leading to an increase in cases involving judges and nursery teachers.

Rigid secularism, enforced by Bill 21, prohibits religious symbols in public sector roles, infringing on individual rights and disproportionately impacting religious minorities. This approach fosters social exclusion and raises legal and ethical concerns, particularly regarding the use of the notwithstanding clause to override Charter protections. What is needed is a more balanced approach—one that upholds state neutrality while safeguarding individual freedoms and fostering an inclusive society in which all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs, can fully participate in public life without undue restrictions. What, then, are alternative ways to embrace individuals from religious backgrounds? How do individuals from various religious backgrounds contribute to community building, if at all, by participating in the functioning of the state while maintaining their identities?

5. Religious Identity and Religious Participation

Many liberal multicultural states, including Canada, have implemented policies to manage diversity based on secularism, which asserts that religion is a private matter and that the state maintains a neutral stance towards religions; at least in theory, it expresses no negative attitudes toward them. Canadian multiculturalism typically echoes this notion of secularism; indeed, policymakers have developed multicultural policies founded on the secularization hypothesis.[6] However, findings from the consultations of the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) of the Federal Government (Canada Policy Research Initiative 2007) and recent statistics on multicultural diversity challenge the widely held belief that religion will eventually diminish as a significant influence in modern society[7] (Canada Statistics 2022).

Religion flourishes in Canada, with many individuals still identifying with a faith (Canada Policy Research Initiative 2009; Bibby et al. 2019, pp. 173–200). Although attendance at mainstream Canadian churches is declining, significant growth is observed among major minority religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Many of these have more than doubled their number of adherents over the past two decades (Canada Statistics 2022). In major urban centers across Canada, including Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal, diverse cultural heritages are clearly evident; Canada's religious landscape is evolving. Consequently, shifts in the cultural, social, and religious dimensions of society are inevitable. In these developments, religious identity plays a vital role in community building.

According to Paul Bramadat, "Throughout Canada and the rest of the world, religion continues to have an influence on social, cultural, and even economic and political spheres and as such is not, and never has been, a strictly private affair" (Bramadat 2009, p. 6). He argues that religion is not limited to the private sphere; rather, significant minority religions are shaping Canada's future. Historically, religious identities have acted as powerful catalysts for change in the religious, political, and cultural landscape of Europe, especially during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Québec's open secularism indicates that religious identity remains important; people prefer to express their religious identities openly, presenting their faith-based beliefs as contributions to the community. For instance, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. both brought their religious beliefs into the public sphere; their visions for a new community challenged and permanently transformed the political landscape. Individuals from diverse backgrounds rallied behind Gandhi and King's ideals of non-violent civil disobedience and the racial justice movement; their aspirations continue to resonate in many lives today. Supporting this, Amy Gutmann notes, "Religious identification seems to be one of the strongest and most persistent sources of mutual identification known to humanity" (Gutmann 2003, p. 33).

Furthermore, Gutmann asks, "Is religious identity special?" (Gutmann 2003, pp. 151–91). There is a sense that religious identity plays a distinct role in both everyday life and politics. Some advocate for its special consideration in the public sphere, while others argue that

religion should be separated from this realm due to its potential to incite violence and intolerance against others. Gutmann contends that even though religious identity is not unique, the ultimate ethical commitments of nonreligious and religious people alike are special and should be treated as such by democratic governments (Gutmann 2003, p. 154).[8] She asserts that the state owes special regard to the ethical commitments of individuals, whether religious or secular, as ethical agents and that, accordingly, religious individuals must respect democratic laws and the individual conscience upon which democratic justice relies.

Will Kymlicka, an influential Canadian philosopher of multiculturalism, would respond negatively to Gutmann's question, as his reasoning diverges significantly from hers. He argues that while state neutrality is essential for justice, according to liberal thinkers, this is insufficient. He argues for an *absolute* separation between state and church to prevent the implicit and explicit promotion of any particular religion. "Liberals have firmly endorsed the principles that states should not only avoid promoting religion for non-neutral reasons relating to controversial conceptions of the good, they should avoid promoting it *at all*, even for neutral reasons of efficiency or social harmony" (Kymlicka 2002, p. 344; his italics). He posits that regarding religious or ethnocultural diversity, a robust principle of "benign neglect" should support a firm divide between state and church to prevent any policies that favor one religion over another.

The strict separation of state and church, along with the benign neglect of any specific religion, represents a pragmatic approach grounded in historical wisdom. History demonstrates that when tensions between the state and the church arise, the simplest solution is to sever their ties. However, this strategy may, as Gutmann suggests, dissuade the ethical commitment of religious conscience to the common good. Moreover, the benign neglect of religion in the public sphere may, as indicated by the Bouchard–Taylor Commission, undermine freedom of conscience and religion. The Commission argues that an outright ban on religious conviction in the public domain silences the voices of those whose religious commitments shape their participation in public life. Consequently, the state's benign neglect of religion in the public arena and its insistence that religion remain confined to the private sphere may diminish what Robert Putnam refers to as "social capital" for the advancement of the nation (Putnam [2000] 2020).

Putnam argues that religious participation is a crucial aspect of social capital. In his terminology, physical capital refers to valuable physical objects, while human capital pertains to the attributes of individuals. In contrast, social capital pertains to established connections that link individuals to shared values or concerns. Social capital comprises social networks adhering to specific values, such as norms of reciprocity and trust within society. For Putnam, social capital is closely linked to 'civic virtue'. When civic virtue is embedded within a dense network of reciprocal social relations, a society fosters a strong sense of connection among its members. Consequently, he asserts, "Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America" (Putnam [2000] 2020, p. 66). He observes that social capital can be maximized or minimized according to how it is used.

In order to clarify how society increases social capital, Putnam analyzes its two dimensions of social capital: "bridging" (or inclusion) and "bonding" (or exclusion). These generate different relationships with varying outcomes; bridging results in positive social capital, while bonding leads to negative social capital. Bonding social capital tends to be inward-looking, reinforcing exclusive identities and homogeneous groups (e.g., ethnic fraternal organizations), whereas bridging social capital is outward-looking and includes individuals across diverse social divides (e.g., the civil rights movements, and ecumeni-

cal and interreligious organizations). Furthermore, the dynamics between bonding and bridging dimensions are not static; they represent an ever-evolving reality.

Putnam further explores how the aspects of bridging and bonding social capital evolve. In his essay, "E Pluribus Unum", he examines the impacts of immigration and ethnic diversity on social capital. He finds that, in the short to medium term, immigration and ethnic diversity challenge social solidarity and hinder the development of social capital. However, in the medium and long term, successful immigrant societies foster new forms of social solidarity and mitigate the negative effects of diversity by cultivating new, more inclusive identities. These diversifying societies nurture a broader understanding of "we" (Putnam 2007). Putnam outlines how bonding social capital *can* transform into bridging social capital and discusses the relevance of his thesis to religious participation:

Americans have more or less deconstructed religion as a salient line of social division over the last half century, even though religion itself remains personally important. In fact, our own survey evidence suggests that for most Americans their religious identity is actually more important to them than their ethnic identity, but the salience of religious differences as lines of social identity has sharply diminished. As our religious identities have become more permeable, we have gained much religiously bridging social capital, while not forsaking our own religious loyalties (Putnam 2007, pp. 160–61).

Suppose this argument about the significance of religious identity and the potential for increasing social capital through religious participation beyond American borders is valid. How does religion enhance bridging social capital? In what ways do religious citizens engage in civic life, enabling religious imagination to foster social capital in nation-building?

6. Engaging with Secularism Through Principled Distance

To reflect on these questions, which Putnam does not explore in-depth, I draw on Gutmann's concept of "two-way protection", which embraces the religious identities of citizens in the public sphere. Before Gutmann introduces her "two-way protection", she critiques two specific views of secularism that she aims to challenge: (1) the impermeable rigid separation, in which a tall wall exists between religion and politics, and (2) one-way protection, where the state upholds religious freedom while prohibiting political interference by religion (Gutmann 1999). She then argues for the necessity of transitioning from rigid separation and one-way protection to a modified form of "two-way protection", which not only ensures the freedom of religion, shielding it from politics (the first way of protection) but also protects the political views of religious citizens in the public sphere (the second way of protection). Two-way protection is dedicated to safeguarding the religious freedoms of individuals while simultaneously protecting the democratic state from the political influence of churches (Gutmann 2003, p. 33). She explains that in two-way protection, religion is shielded from the state, and the state is shielded from religion, with neither protection being absolute, as pushing either to its extreme would undermine the other (Gutmann 2003, pp. 187–91).

Indian political theorist Rajeev Bhargava goes beyond two-way protection to promote the idea of "principled distance", which suggests that religion and state can interact to achieve the common good (Bhargava 2009, 2010, 2019, 2023). Principled distance, a reimagined version of secularism, does not require a complete separation between state and religion, as seen in two-way participation; instead, it establishes a *distance* that allows the state to remain impartial towards both religious and secular citizens, regardless of the context's demands or its potential advantages or disadvantages. This notion of *principled* distance sets boundaries between state and religion that recognize the jurisdictions of each, including the 'principled' values of equality of citizenship and freedom of religion.

When the two components are combined, 'principled distance' acts as a compromise or balance in sharing life with others. Bhargava states:

The policy of principled distance entails a flexible approach on the question of inclusion/exclusion of religion and the engagement/disengagement of the state. This means that religion may intervene in the affairs of the state if such intervention promotes freedom, equality, or any other value integral to secularism. Equally, the state may engage with religion or disengage from it, engaging positively or negatively, but it does so depending entirely on whether or not these values are promoted or undermined (Bhargava 2010, p. 97).

This model of "principled distance", which may encompass the "two-way protection" discussed by Gutmann, provides an alternative to Québec's open and rigid secularism and Canadian multicultural secularism. It promotes principled distance, allowing the state and religion to intervene in each other's affairs and uphold core values such as equity, freedom, justice, and peace. In a diverse society, however, various religious and secular organizations often hold conflicting views on justice and morality, creating a challenge for the state to consistently uphold principled distance. In this regard, under principled distance, the state and religion need to dialogue in order to collaborate to advance these social objectives. Here are two case studies to elaborate on principled distance.

6.1. Case Study 1: The Accommodation of Sikh Turbans in the RCMP

In Canada, a significant example of principled distance in secularism is observed with Sikh officers in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Traditionally, the RCMP enforced strict uniform regulations that prohibited religious headgear, such as the Sikh turban. This rule effectively prevented Sikh Canadians from serving unless they renounced a core belief of their faith (Delara 2025). In 1989, Baltej Singh Dhillon challenged the traditional RCMP uniform policy by applying to the RCMP commissioner, prompting a crucial renegotiation of secularism in practice. While it initially sparked debate, with some asserting it violated state neutrality, the government acknowledged that "open secularism" must not infringe upon religious freedom (Mann 2020).[9]

Bhargava's principled distance rejects both strict secular neutrality, which could have supported the ban, and uncritical religious accommodation, which might prioritize tradition over equality. Instead, the RCMP's decision illustrates a contextual balance. The state acknowledges inequalities. This accommodation does not endorse Sikhism but recognizes the turban's significance as a non-negotiable religious practice. It preserves Sikh identity without privileging it, maintaining the state's neutrality while fostering inclusion. For a Sikh man, tidy, unshorn hair symbolizes respect for God; thus, the turban is vital to religious practice (World Sikh Organization of Canada n.d.). For Dhillon, religion is not merely a private matter; his faith may assist him in fulfilling his duties in the public sphere. Religious identity is essential to Dhillon's sense of self (BC Historical Federation 2021). The RCMP upholds uniform standards–such as specifying turban colours and styles–to promote professionalism, illustrating that accommodation need not undermine institutional integrity (Canada National Security and Defence 2024). The Sikh turban case within the RCMP exemplifies principled distance in action. It demonstrates how the state can negotiate religious diversity by balancing critical engagement with respect for autonomy–an approach that enhances secularism by making it more inclusive. In multicultural societies, this adaptability serves as both a strength and a democratic necessity, ensuring that secularism evolves to reflect the lived experiences of its citizens. As Bhargava reminds us, the goal is not the purity of separation but ensuring religious freedom and recognition through thoughtful, context-sensitive engagement that promotes complex values of equity, liberty, and fraternity in a specific context (Bhargava 2023, pp. 73–74).

6.2. Case Study 2: The United Church of Canada's Support for Same-Sex Marriage

This is another example of principled distance, which provides a nuanced framework for understanding the relationship between religion and the state. It allows for flexible engagement, enabling interactions between religion and the state that promote justice, equity, and freedom while maintaining institutional boundaries. This approach is particularly relevant when examining how progressive Christian groups, such as the United Church of Canada, have championed social justice issues–especially their early support for same-sex marriage starting in 1988 (Squire 1991). Understanding how principled distance applies to the United Church highlights the importance of religious engagement in advancing democratic values, social inclusivity, and human rights within a secular framework.

The United Church has been at the forefront of progressive religious activism since its inception in 1925. In 1988, it became one of the first Christian denominations to formally affirm the full participation of openly gay and lesbian individuals in ministry (United Church of Canada 1988). This decision was followed by ongoing advocacy for LGBTQIA+ and Two-Spirit rights, culminating in support for same-sex marriage long before its legal recognition in Canada in 2005 (Canada Parliamentary Information and Research Service 2005). Unlike many traditional religious groups that advocate for a strict separation between religious and secular values, the United Church embraces an inclusive theology that aligns with broader democratic principles of equity, freedom, and justice. In this way, it demonstrates how religious institutions can actively shape public policy while respecting state neutrality. This involvement reflects Bhargava's concept of principled distance, which does not mandate a rigid separation between religion and the state but allows for flexible interaction based on ethical and equal rights considerations.

By maintaining a principled distance, the state avoids using secularism as an exclusionary force; instead, it ensures that all voices, including religious ones, can participate in public discourse (Young 2006). By supporting same-sex marriage, the United Church did not aim to impose its views on other religious traditions; rather, its intent in engaging with the democratic process was to advocate for equal rights. Its progressive stance helped shift public opinion and provided a religious counterpoint to conservative Christian groups who was opposing same-sex marriage. Its advocacy contributed to the eventual passage of Bill C-38 in 2005, which legalized same-sex marriage in Canada. This aligns with Bhargava's notion that religious groups can influence public policy, as long as they do so in ways that respect society's pluralism and uphold principles of justice and equity. The United Church's advocacy for same-sex marriage illustrates how principled distance fosters a constructive relationship between religion and secular governance. By participating in public debates on marriage equality, the church operated within a secular framework without seeking preferential treatment. Instead, it contributed to the broader moral discourse surrounding human dignity and rights.

6.3. Public Religion

The case studies presented challenge the assumptions of rigid secularism, which demands a strict separation between religion and state. In contrast, they demonstrate that religious institutions can enrich the ethical foundations of democratic societies. While rigid secularism often seeks to exclude religious perspectives from legal and political discourse, the model of *principled distance* enables the inclusion of religious voices in ways that serve the common good, ensuring policies benefit all citizens regardless of their beliefs. This approach allows religion to move beyond the private realm and participate in public life, aligning with what Casanova terms "public religion" (Casanova 1994). Although this article is grounded in Bhargava's framework of *principled distance*, Casanova's work elucidates its sociological implications. His notion of public religion complements

rather than competes with Bhargava's model, illustrating the potential for constructive engagement between religion and the public sphere. As Casanova contends, "We need to go beyond the secularist discourse of separation and beyond the public sphere of civil society to address the real issues of democratic politics around the world" (Casanova 2008, p. 106). Public religion, in this sense, not only contributes to the moral discourse of democratic societies but also challenges religious communities to embody secular democratic values such as gender justice.

Casanova's central thesis revolves around the concept of "deprivatization"—the process through which people of faith and religious institutions reassert their presence in the public realm. He contends that public religion can enhance democratic deliberation when two conditions are met (Casanova et al. 2009, pp. 7–8): institutional differentiation (which means that religion does not seek state control through self-limitation) and dialogical engagement[10] (where religious arguments are subject to critique and can be framed in shared ethical terms). He suggests that secular and religious voices should engage in mutual dialogue when they share common concerns for the common good. Public religion addresses the moral voids in secular liberalism by offering visions of justice and equity. Despite being secular, movements, like "Black Lives Matter" and Indigenous sovereignty and land rights, utilize religious networks and their engagement to rally for racial justice and Indigenous rights, illustrating this synergy. Public religion encompasses how religious traditions and organizations engage in public debates, influence policy, and mobilize social movements. This involvement is not restricted to theocratic or fundamentalist movements; instead, it includes a broad spectrum of religious engagement, such as advocating for democracy, peace, and human rights. Furthermore, public religion does not necessarily contradict the principles of secular governance. Instead, it can serve as a moral voice in the public sphere, advocating for ethical considerations in political and social life, as demonstrated by the United Church's involvement in human sexuality.

Roger Hutchinson asserts that religious participation in public spaces fosters vibrant debates on social issues and public policies (Hutchinson 2001). He advocates for the involvement of theologians and religious leaders in public discussions about not only social issues and policies but also religious doctrines and beliefs that may conflict with justice, equity, and freedom. In this context, we can anticipate and encourage greater religious participation in public spaces by cultivating social capital, engaging in constructive interreligious dialogue, and participating in public policy discussions aimed at achieving societal ideals within the framework of secularism.

7. Conclusions

This study highlights the complex interplay between secularism and religious participation in nation-building, particularly in the context of Québec's evolving secular framework. By examining models, such as rigid secularism (exemplified by Bill 21) and open secularism (as proposed by the Bouchard–Taylor Commission), the article reveals a critical tension: while secularism aims to ensure state neutrality, rigid interpretations risk marginalizing religious minorities and stifling the social capital that diverse communities inherently possess. Québec's shift from open to rigid secularism underscores the challenges of balancing collective identity with individual rights, especially in a pluralist society where religious diversity is both a reality and a resource.

The critique of Bill 21 illustrates how rigid secularism, by enforcing strict separations between religion and state, undermines religious freedom and alienates minority groups, particularly Muslim women. In contrast, Rajeev Bhargava's concept of "principled distance" offers a nuanced alternative, advocating for flexible engagement between the state and religion to promote equity and justice. Case studies, such as accommodating Sikh

turbans in the RCMP and the United Church of Canada's support for same-sex marriage, demonstrate that religious participation, when framed through principled distance, can enrich democratic discourse without compromising secular neutrality. These examples affirm that religious identities, when integrated as "public religion", contribute to bridging social capital, fostering dialogue, and reinforcing shared civic values.

Ultimately, this article argues that secularism does not exclude religion from the public sphere. By adopting a model of principled distance, states can navigate the complexities of pluralism and facilitate meaningful engagement with religious voices in nation-building while upholding the democratic principles of equity, freedom, and justice. This approach not only respects the spiritual dimensions of individuals' lives but also strengthens the fabric of civic life, ensuring that secularism serves as a tool for inclusion rather than exclusion in an increasingly pluralistic world.[11]

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Notes

1 The meaning of secularization is a *process* of "creating an awareness of divine presence in all spheres of society against attempts to confine God's work to the church", whereas secularism is a "replacement of a religious world horizon with a worldview where science, technology and especially economy are given a divine role to define what life is about and where epistemology and ethics are limited to these areas". See (Gerle 2003, p. 35).

2 In a secular age, individuals may experience what Northrop Frye called "double vision". Frye's critical framework refers to the ability to perceive simultaneously two distinct levels of reality: the immanent and the transcendent. In other words, people envision the world we create within the world we live in (Frye 1991, p. 24).

3 The main difference is that *laïcité* focuses on institutional neutrality, while Bill 21 extends to individual public employees and directly limits their religious expression in the workplace.

4 The history of Québec in Canada presents a theme of integration that significantly differs from the national perspective. In 1971, Trudeau's multicultural policy granted French the status of an official language. However, this created considerable tension between the French majority and the anglophone and immigrant communities in the province. The Québecois continued their efforts to preserve their culture and language to thrive as a minority at the federal level, but the anglophones and other ethnocultural minorities faced external challenges as outsiders in the region despite having a long history of residency there.

5 The "notwithstanding clause" in Section 33 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a unique and controversial provision in Canada's Constitution. It allows federal or provincial governments to temporarily set aside specific fundamental rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Charter while enacting laws.

6 The influential social thinkers of the nineteenth century, such as Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Freud, all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society.

7 In 2021, nearly 1.8 million individuals in Canada—representing approximately 4.9% of the population identified as Muslim. This represents a significant increase from 2001, when Muslims constituted just 2.0% of the population. A similar trend has been observed among other religious communities. In 2021, nearly 830,000 people, or 2.3% of the population, identified as Hindu—more than double the 1.0% recorded in 2001. The Sikh population also experienced substantial growth, rising from 0.9% in 2001 to 2.1% in 2021, with about 770,000 individuals reporting Sikh affiliation in the 2021 Census (Canada Statistics 2022, pp. 13–14).

8 Gutmann concludes that religious identity is not special, "although conscience, more generally understood as the ultimate ethical commitment of individuals, is special". She continues, "Since religious identity is not the only source of binding ethical commitments, democratic governments cannot defer only to religious conscience without discriminating among citizens" (Gutmann 2003, p. 34).

9 The term "open secularism" differs from the concept outlined by Bouchard and Taylor in their report. It represents a model of secularism that allows for the public expression of religious identities while maintaining state neutrality. This concept stands

in contrast to "closed secularism", which seeks to strictly separate religion from public institutions and limit visible religious expressions in official contexts.

[10] The term, which I borrow from Raimon Panikkar, serves as a method for collaborating across differences and learning from others. To engage in dialogical dialogue, one must step beyond oneself and transcend personal boundaries. Genuine dialogue involves opening oneself to another, allowing the other to speak and reveal their "myth", which remains unknown to the individual due to its familiarity and self-evidence (Panikkar 1979, p. 242).

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