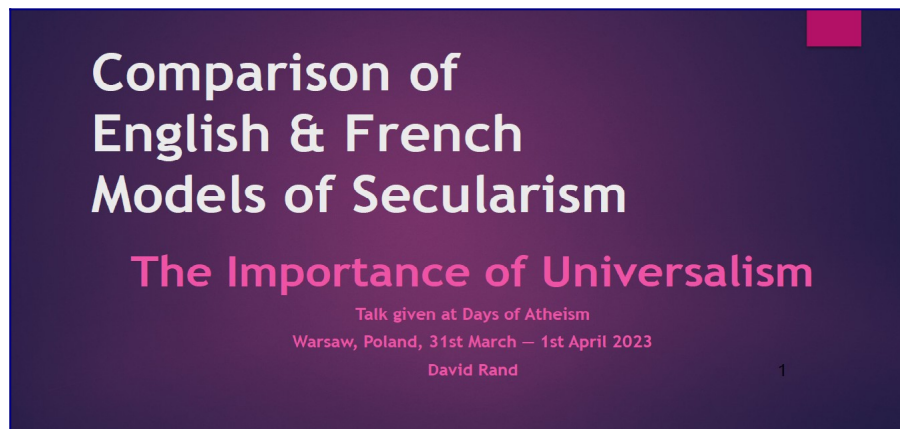


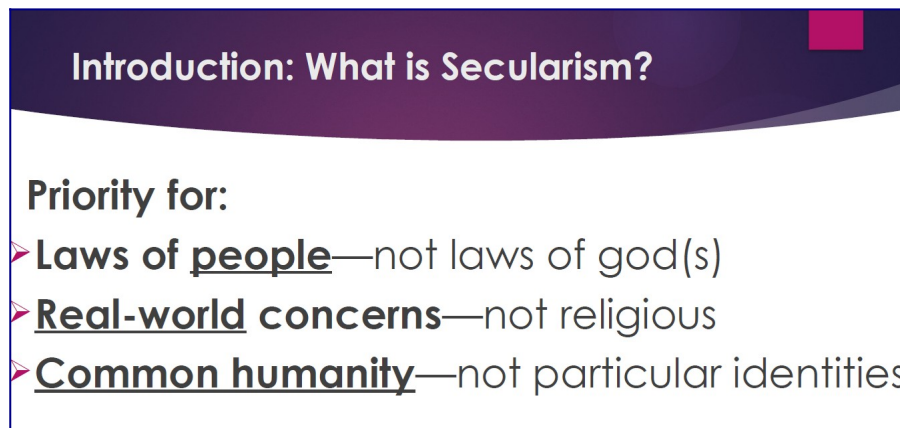
# Comparison of English and French Models of Secularism and the Importance of Universalism

David Rand

*The following presentation was given by the author at Atheist Days 2023 in Warsaw, Poland, an event organized by the [Kazimierz Łyszczyński Foundation](#) in collaboration with the [Fundacja Wolność od Religii \(Freedom from Religion Foundation\)](#).*



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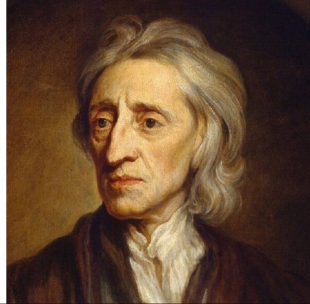
What is secularism? I suggest a few basic principles that we need to take into account to find a good definition.

- The laws of people must take precedence over laws of god.
- Real world concerns must take priority. Not religious obligations.
- Our common humanity, what we have in common with other humans, must take precedence over our particular identities such as racial identity or religious affiliation or whatever.

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## John Locke and Religious Tolerance

- Weak Religious Neutrality
- Rejection of Catholics
- Prejudice against atheists



In the English speaking world, philosopher John Locke is an important reference for secularism. He promoted a form of weak religious neutrality—that is, neutrality between different religions—in order for them to tolerate each other, but he did not extend that tolerance to Catholics. Furthermore, Locke was very prejudiced against atheists, whom he said could not be trusted. So his religious tolerance was very limited.

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## US Constitution

- 1789: Article VI  
No religious test for public office
- 1791: First Amendment
  - No State religion
  - No law may prohibit free exercise of religion

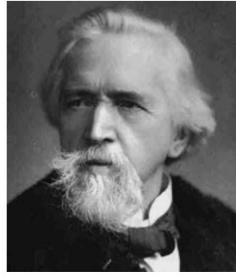


In the American Constitution, there is an article which says that there should be no religious test for public office, a good step towards secularism. The First Amendment declares that no law may establish a State religion. However, this does NOT mean separation between religion and State. It also says that no law may prohibit the free exercise of religion. This may sound good, but it is too open-ended, like absolute freedom of religion with no limitation. Freedoms often need to be limited in order to protect others.

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## George Jacob Holyoake and Secularism

- **1851: Invented term “Secularism”**
- **Prejudice against atheists**
- **Disagreements with National Secular Society founder, atheist Charles Bradlaugh**



In Great Britain, the term secularism was invented by George Jacob Holyoake. Like Locke, he was prejudiced against atheists. His colleague Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society, was a very outspoken atheist and they had serious disagreements on that issue.

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## The French Revolution

- **1789: Declaration of Rights of Man & Citizen**
- **1791: Declaration of Rights of Women & Female Citizens (Olympe de Gouges)**
- **1795: Stop financing religion**
- **1801: Napoleon & Concordat**



Marie Olympe de Gouges

In the French speaking world, the French Revolution made major progress towards secularism, with the Declaration of Rights of Man & Citizen. Another Declaration extended those rights to women, but unfortunately was not adopted at the time. The revolutionary government put a stop to financing religion, but in 1801 Napoleon came to power and restored funding to the Catholic Church. That was eventually extended to Protestants and Jews, so at least the extreme religious intolerance of the old French monarchy was not restored.

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## Republican Secularism (*laïcité*) & 1905 Law of Separation

- Term *laïcité*, from ancient Greek *laos* = common people.
- Called “Republican secularism” in English.
- 1905: *Loi de séparation des Églises et de l’État*
  - Article 1:
    - Guarantees freedom of conscience.
    - Guarantees free exercise of worship, but may be restricted.
  - Article 2: No money for religions.

In French, the word *laïcité*—or “republican secularism”—is from the ancient Greek word *laos* meaning the common people, so we see universalism in the origin of that word. In 1905, the Law of Separation between Churches and State, was adopted, probably the most important secular legislation ever. It guaranteed freedom of conscience, which includes freedom of belief, non-belief, thought, political opinion, etc. It also guaranteed free exercise of worship, but stipulated that it can be limited in the interest of public order, as it should be. Another provision of the same law withdraws all public money from religion.

## Comparison of Two Models of Secularism

English-speaking world:	French-speaking world:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No separation</li> <li>• Privileges for religion</li> <li>• Universalism not respected</li> <li>• Lockean pseudosecularism, = weak religious neutrality</li> <li>• Freedom of religion ranked above other freedoms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separation principle explicit</li> <li>• Religion on par with political or philosophical convictions</li> <li>• Universalism, equality of citizens, female/male equality</li> <li>• Freedom of conscience is fundamental</li> <li>• Freedoms not always absolute</li> </ul>

Summing up the two models, we see that there is no separation principle in the English model, but it is declared explicitly in the French law of 1905. The English mentality is to grant privileges for religions, whereas in the French speaking world, religion is not privileged, but placed on the same level as other convictions, such as political and philosophical. The English model, where universalism is not respected and freedom of religion is placed above other freedoms, I do not even call it secularism but rather Lockean “pseudosecularism.” In the French model, freedoms are not always absolute and freedom of conscience is fundamental, as it should be.

## Bans on Religious Symbols & Face-Coverings in Civil Services & Public Schools

- Necessary for religious neutrality & separation
- Both physical installations & State employees
- Prevent proselytism. Require professional ethics.
- Law of the land over religious rules
- Bans in many European & African countries
- Example, France: ban for school pupils:  
Very beneficial for daughters of Muslims



One of the requirements for secularism is that religious symbols be banned both on government buildings and on State employees when at work. If civil servants wear symbols on the job, that is a form of proselytism and a violation of professional ethics. Such bans exist in many European and African countries. In France, there is one ban in particular which goes much further than other countries, banning pupils from wearing religious symbols at school. It has been very beneficial for daughters of Muslim parents, greatly improving their academic performance. This is not surprising, as the hijab is a form of religious segregation and very harmful. Imposing the veil on children is child abuse.

## Religious Expression versus Political Expression

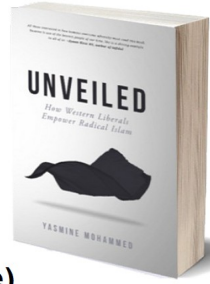
- Quebec: Bill 21 imposes religious neutrality. Public Service Act imposes political neutrality.
- Ontario: Judge disciplined for wearing MAGA (Trump) hat in court
- Canada: political neutrality of civil servants, similar to Quebec
- Illinois Republican Party v. J. B. Pritzker (Seventh Circuit Court, 2020)  
Confirmed religious exemption to limit on size of gatherings.

Both the Court and opponents of Bill 21 grant priority to religious expression over political.

Let us compare religious and political expression. In Quebec, in Canada, there is a secularism law, Bill 21, which imposes religious neutrality in the civil service and has met with enormous opposition. There is another law, the Public Service Act, which imposes political neutrality in the civil service, to which no-one objects. Many governments have similar rules imposing political neutrality on civil servants and nobody complains. In Illinois, a recent court decision confirmed that religious gatherings—but not political ones—are exempted from the rule limiting gathering size during the pandemic. In other words, religion gets a free ride. Both the US court and opponents of Quebec's secularism law grant priority to religious expression over political.

## Religious Practice Often MUST be Limited Examples: To protect children

- Teaching creationism
- Denying blood transfusions
- Depriving children of music
- Imposing Ramadan
- Imposing veil on girls
- Corporal punishment based on parents' religion (Yasmine Mohammed's experience)



In reality, religious practice should be limited, for example, to protect children from their own parents' religion. Teaching creationism in schools, denying blood transfusions, depriving children of music, imposing Ramadan or the veil, all these are unacceptable. You may be familiar with Yasmine Mohammed's book *Unveiled* in which she talks about being raised in a pious Muslim family and being physically beaten by her stepfather. She complained to authorities and eventually to court, but the judge said, No, we can't do anything because that's the way you people discipline children. Thus, a different standard for people from a different religious background.

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## Race-Religion Conflation, a Major Weapon of Antisecularists

- Confuses innate with acquired.
- Religious identity considered immutable, a life-sentence, similar to Islamic taboo on apostasy.
- Key strategy of Islamists → accusations of "racism" & "Islamophobia"
- If criticizing a religion is racist, then "sacred texts" of Judaism, Christianity & Islam are all extremely racist.

To conflate race with religion is a major weapon of antisecularists and Islamists. It involves deliberately confusing an innate property, race, with an acquired characteristic. It treats religious affiliation as immutable, as if each person were a prisoner of a religion for life, similar to the Islamic taboo on apostasy. This confusion is a key strategy of Islamists so that they can accuse anyone who criticizes their ideology of racism or Islamophobia. Ironically, if criticizing a religion is racist, then the sacred texts of all three Abrahamic religions are extremely racist because they denigrate other religions.

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## Examples of Race-Religion Conflation

- Quebec Bill 21 will cause genocide ???!
- Murder of George Floyd linked to Bill 21 ???!
- Decision, Quebec Superior Court, 2021-04-22:  
To ban religious symbols violates “soul or essence” of believer.  
(But banning political symbols is OK.)
- Vilification of Bill 21 from outside Quebec.  
“Racism has become law.” ???!

There has been a flood of hostility towards Quebec’s secularism law. Opponents have implied that it is racist and could even cause genocide—which of course is absurd, because it deals only with religion.

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## Neoracism, A Major Weapon of Political Islam Against Secularism

- Current “antiracist” movement *promotes* racism.
- Anti-universalist:  
Values personal identities—especially racial—above all else.
- Race-religion conflation → “Muslim” becomes a racial identity.
- Anti-European bias, but still Eurocentric.
- Inappropriate exporting of American situation to other countries.

The current so-called “antiracist” movement in fact promotes racism. I call it neoracist. It is anti-universalist and values personal identities, especially racial, above all else. It conflates race and religion, making Muslim a “racial” identity. Neoracism is mainly American in origin and it exports American concerns—with an emphasis on anti-black racism—to other countries where it is not appropriate.

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## Monolithic View of Each Group, blind to problems within a group

- Greatest persecution of Muslims is by other Muslims, motivated by Islamic dogma.
  - Persecution of Europeans (“whites”) by other Europeans, such as Francophones victimized by British colonialism as reported recently by Moroccan immigrant
- Neoracism allied with Islamism against secularism.



A major problem with neoracism is its monolithic view of each group, failing to consider problems within a group. For example, the greatest persecution of Muslims is not by non-Muslims, but by other Muslims, because of Islamic dogma. Neoracists are blind to racism of one European group against another. They and their Islamist allies deny the fact of anti-French bigotry, rooted in British colonialism. They even promote such bigotry in order to fight secularism.

## Three Attitudes Towards “Race” & Racism

Classical (European) Racism	Neoracism (falsely “antiracist”)	Antiracism
Eurocentric Europe = Wellspring of civilization	Eurocentric Europe = Source of all evil	Universalist
Exaggeration of biological (genetic) differences	“Race” left undefined, to facilitate accusations of “racism.” Racialization of religious affiliation.	“Race” is biological, but all humans in same “race” or subspecies.
Tribalism rationalized by pseudoscience	Multi-tribalism rationalized by postmodernism	Universalism, “colour-blindness”
Prejudice against “inferior” groups, usually minorities	Prejudice against “privileged” groups, usually majorities	Racial identity unimportant. Just one attribute of many.
Negative discrimination against “inferior” races	Positive discrimination in favour of “marginalized”	Anti-discrimination, possibility of temporary affirmative action

Thus, there are three approaches to racism. Classical racism considers Europe to be the wellspring of all civilization. Neoracism considers Europe to be the source of all evil. Both are Eurocentric. Then there is authentic antiracism which is universalist and considers race to be only one of many attributes of each individual, much less important than our common humanity.



## Some Criteria to Distinguish Secularism from Antisecularism

### IT IS ANTISECULAR:

- To oppose *all* bans on religious symbols & face-coverings
- To racialize religious affiliation
- To use “Islamophobia” as an accusation, similar to “racism”
- To value religious rules above civil law

Applying these criteria, Canadian antisecular groups include:

- Centre for Inquiry Canada (CFIC)
- British Columbia Humanist Association (BCHA)

Several criteria can be used to distinguish secularists from antisecularists. Antisecularists give religious rules priority over civil law. Applying that criterion, there are several Canadian organizations which hypocritically claim to be secular but are in fact antisecular because they oppose secularism in the very place, Quebec, where it is making the most progress.

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## The main question: What is Secularism?

1. **Equality of all, including female/male equality**
2. **Protection of freedom of conscience**
3. **Religious neutrality of the State**
4. **Separation between religion and State**

We can now define secularism clearly, with four points:

1. **It guarantees equality, including male/female equality**
  2. **It protects freedom of conscience**
  3. **It imposes religious neutrality of the State, and**
  4. **It imposes separation between religion and State.**
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## Conclusions

- **Universalism is an Enlightenment value.**
- **Freedom of conscience is fundamental.**  
(Freedom of religion is not.)
- **Secularism must include the separation principle.**
- **Political Islam:**  
**Extreme right-wing movement, allied with neoracism.**
- **To criminalize apostasy is barbaric.**
- **Children have no religion.**

To conclude, universalism is a major Enlightenment value which we must defend.

- Freedom of conscience is fundamental.
- Secularism must include the separation principle.
- Political Islam is an extreme right-wing movement allied with neoracism.
- To criminalize apostasy as Islam does is barbaric.
- Children have no religion. It is unacceptable to identify children with the religion of their parents. Let them grow up and choose when they become adults.

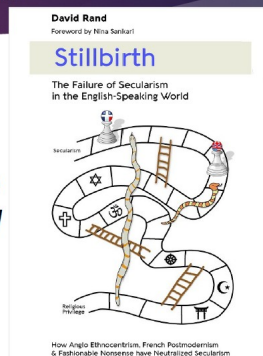
## Universalism: Suggested Reading

[Manifesto for Universalism](#)

Adopted by  
*Atheist Freethinkers*  
2022-10-29

*Stillbirth*

*The Failure of  
Secularism in the  
English-Speaking  
World*



Finally, some suggested reading on universalism:

- [Manifesto for Universalism](#), adopted by AFT
- My book [Stillbirth](#)