Revisiting Urban Secularism
Critical Points, New Questions

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Abstract

In this piece, I revisit my work in Urban Secularism by addressing the main critical points raised by five generous critics. These concern issues about the theoretical framing of the book, its methodological design and implementation as well as points concerning the findings of the book and some aspects that would have required more attention, such as the relevance of the far-right, race and class in urban secular politics. In the last section of this piece, I take on the invitation of two of the commentators to explore new questions that arise from their reading of the book.

Keywords
urban secularism – religious diversity – laïcité – municipalities – France – Europe

I am immensely grateful to have my book Urban Secularism: Negotiating Religious Diversity in Europe (Routledge, 2021) selected to be discussed in Secular Studies, as I see my work gearing more and more towards this field of research. It is a great honour to have such distinguished colleagues commenting on my work so thoroughly and constructively. All of them have been sources of inspiration in one way or another, prior or after conducting the research presented in the book. Their commentaries offer generous praise of my work as well as constructive critiques and questions that forced me to reflect back on some of
the statements I made in the book, think about ways to expand my work further and become aware of some of the limitations or absences in my work. I am particularly excited about the lines of thinking that the book has sparked among these colleagues, which I will address in my comments below. I appreciate the diversity of positive comments as well as critiques and questions for further elaboration, which reflect the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds and research interests of the commentators. I also appreciate how, in their reformulations of some of my arguments and statements, they are able to put them in more clear and precise terms.

While it would be tempting to address the comments one by one, as discussed by the authors, I have tried, when possible, to merge some of them to offer more elaborate responses. In doing so, I will also briefly go over some of the strengths and contributions of the book that the commentators highlight. I have divided the comments and my responses into theoretical, methodological and empirical issues to both make my task and that of the reader easier. I hope that this whole exercise will attract the attention of new readers.

Urban Secularism is an attempt to provide nuance and in-depth interpretations of the ways in which religious diversity and the distinction between the religious and the secular are been dealt with and negotiated in contemporary European societies. To do so, and starting out from some of the limitations in the academic literature on comparative state secularism, I adopted both a governance perspective and a focus on the urban level, which through an ethnographic approach and discourse analysis of qualitative data, allowed me to go beyond the limitations of methodological nationalism and the normative assumptions contained in the national models approach to explaining diverging patterns of governing religious diversity. Commentators found these choices particularly successful in: 1) offering a new way of looking at “a familiar problematic” (Hjelm, Selby), 2) showing the complexities of applied secularism as it is produced on the ground (Barras, Dhont, Selby), 3) offering the possibility of comparing infra-state levels of governance (Hjelm, Selby), 4) engaging seriously with the complexity of state and non-state actor constellations, their unequal power positions and their engagement in secular politics (Barras), and 5) translating these perspectives into real ethnographic practice and findings (Barras) and serious discourse analyses (Hjelm, Selby).

As much as I am grateful for the very generous reading of my work by all these colleagues, I am also deeply indebted with the more critical comments they made, as they force me to sharpen my arguments further. To start with, Hjelm questions the implicit generalization that the subtitle of the book suggests (Negotiating religious diversity in Europe), as it refers to Europe generally whereas the research is almost exclusively based on France. This is a fair point
as, indeed, the core of the empirical material comes from fieldwork done in French cities. While in principle this should not be an issue because the focus is not so much on a national context, when it comes to the regulation and governance of religion, there are quite some specificities to the French context that make generalisations rather difficult. However, and this connects directly with the argument that I try to make in the book, since it is not only the national context that matters, but local factors also play a role, French municipalities could differ between each other more than a French city might differ from a socio-culturally similar city in another country. In other words, some cities across countries may share more similarities than some cities within one national context. Secondly, the book refers in several occasions to examples from cities in other European countries as a way to illustrate that some of the findings are not exclusive to this particular national context. Finally, rather than an attempt to generalise findings, my aim with *Urban Secularism* was to provide a definition of urban secularism and, more generally, a framework that could be used to study other urban areas in different countries, even beyond Europe.

This is precisely the main point that Dejean highlights in his response to the book. In his commentary, he suggests that the book offers both a theoretical and a methodological toolbox for conducting research on negotiations of secularism in subnational levels of governance beyond the three French city study cases. Starting out from this, and to put it into practice, he briefly examines some of the most recent developments of secular politics in the Canadian province of Quebec. With Quebec in particular, as he highlights, the toolbox may be particularly helpful, due to the connections and similarities between the French and the Quebecois contexts; yet, it should be applicable across other national contexts since the emphasis is on the importance of urban actors in shaping secularism, next to the broader national political, legal and social contexts.

1 Theoretical Questions

In *Urban Secularism*, I engaged with the literature that has offered explanations to the question why countries respond differently to religious diversification and thereby establish the boundaries of the religious and the secular in public policy and in discourse. While I do acknowledge their usefulness and do not disregard them altogether, in the book I propose to adopt a more local approach, focusing on urban politics. This allowed me to get into the intricacies of secular politics as they are done on a day-to-day basis. While this is acknowledged by all commentators, Jennifer Selby raises questions regarding
my conceptualisation of “the urban”. In her commentary, she encourages me to elaborate further on how the urban differs from the suburban and rural areas. This is a very important point and one that is particularly relevant for contexts where the distinction between city centres and peripheries marks sharp class, ethnic and racial hierarchies, which ultimately also impact on religious categories. Originally, in my research, the distinction was between the national, more as a space of politics, symbolic disputes and national identity building, and the urban, represented by middle-size cities, as the spaces where people live and engage with one another in daily interactions, where religious differences may come to the fore but also may remain unnoticed or even irrelevant, but in any case as spaces where different actors negotiate on a daily basis their conditions for a peaceful coexistence. However, Selby’s emphasis on the sharp distinctions between the urban as the space of “modernity, wealth, whiteness and secularism” and the suburban, characterised by its “overt unacceptable traditionalism, poverty, religiosity, and race” are crucial to understanding where secularism is produced and negotiated and where it is implemented to address not only religion but also other negatively connoted social categories. In the context of big conglomerations in France, but also elsewhere, this could partly reproduce colonial schemas where the urban resembles the metropole and the suburban the colonies that “needed” regulation and policing.

2 Methodological Aspects

Conducting empirical research requires several methodological decisions which have consequences for the development of the project and the findings one obtains. While commentators praise the richness of the fieldwork as well as the implementation of discourse analysis procedures, they also point at some absences for me to comment on. In particular, Hjelmand Selby call my attention to two similar points concerning 1) the socio-cultural characteristics of my interviewees and 2) my positionality as researcher. I will address the two separately, as they have different implications.

In her reading of my work, Selby notes that apart from mentioning some public figures by name, I provide very little background information of the interviewees, especially the municipal employees whose work is crucial for the everyday deployment of secularism. She asks whether these actors’ racial, class, religious and national backgrounds might have shaped the ways in which they engage with their work in negotiating and shaping the boundaries of “acceptable religiosity”. This is a key observation and one that I should have considered more systematically when writing the book. One of the reasons that I was so
cautious about providing more details was my fear of revealing details that could identify some of these actors as, in the end, these are quite small networks of people. This was particularly important for me given the sensitivity of these issues in the context in which I conducted my research (right after the Bataclan attacks). Providing more detailed information about their own background could have compromised their anonymity, if not to the wider readership, at least to their closest networks. However, I could have included a more general reflection on this without singling out individual cases. Overall, I could indicate that municipal actors working on issues related to laïcité did not have minority or disadvantaged backgrounds (be their ethnic, racial or class) in contrast to those working on immigrant integration, whose work only incidentally touched upon issues of secularism. In the latter case, it is more common to find people descendants of migrants or immigrants themselves.

In my current research on apostasy, where I interview ordinary apostates (even if some are visible activists), I am more consciously providing more background information to situate their stories better. In this case, it is easier to do so as these people do not occupy specific positions in government and the administration or at least it is not that which makes them relevant for my study.

Similar to Selby’s comment, Hjelm points at the little reflection that I offer about my positionality within my research and the methodological implications this had. This is another central observation and one I should have paid more attention to. My positionality as an outsider to the French context definitely facilitated my accessing the field and the way people talked to me and explained things to me. I reflect briefly on this aspect and how it benefited my fieldwork on page 9 of the book: “As a non-French researcher, I was never seen as someone with particular political interests in the issues at stake. Moreover, as a ‘socially acceptable incompetent’ (Lofland et al. 2006, 69), I was in a good position to ask for details about taken-for-granted assumptions in my interlocutors’ responses”. Indeed, being an outsider to the field allowed me to gain access to spaces that I presume I would not have been able to access were I a local. This contrasts with Barras’ experiences conducting research in France. Her being a French native speaker with a “French” rather than a “French Canadian” accent raised suspicion among her interlocutors in France (Barras 2014). Besides, as I explain in the quote above, my being external to discussions around laïcité made my interlocutors explain things to me in ways that they wouldn’t have probably done towards French researchers, as they would have assumed a certain level of local knowledge. Also, my evident foreigner accent when speaking French probably also triggered in my interlocutors the need to speak more slowly and clearly about all the complex matters the book is about. This played to my advantage, as I was able to inquire fundamental aspects that would other-
wise be taken for granted. Moreover, my work as part of a project from the Max Planck Society, a very prestigious research institution in Germany, also ensured that more people accepted to talk to me. At the same time, though, my outsider position might have also pushed some of my interlocutors to water down controversies and problems and present the reality of their city in a more positive way. In a way, I felt that I was often seen as an “ambassador” of German academia who should be “impressed” by positive developments in France.

These are definitely important aspects that should have been elaborated upon more thoroughly in the book. In my current writing projects on disaffiliation or apostasy movements in Argentina and Spain, I am addressing this much more systematically, given how crucial it is to explain how I position myself towards the Catholic Church. This clearly shaped my access to interlocutors willing to talk to me as well as their feelings of rapport and connection with me. Moreover, in that case, as a Spaniard, being an insider to one of the two national contexts has put me in a different place than I was for my research on France's urban secularism.

3 Empirical Findings and Interpretation

A few issues regarding the empirical findings of my research and their interpretation also run across the comments of several colleagues. One such comment is put forward by Frederik Dhont, who misses “more documentation on the construction of laïcité (between the Déclaration of 1789, the Law of 1905 and the 1946 constitution)”. A more historical component would have definitely enriched the research, as it would have provided more background information to interpret current developments. In that sense, my research might err on the part of being too focused on the present, a result of my training as a sociologist. However, my decision to not engage in deeper historical explorations was also motivated by the fact that others have already worked meticulously in tracing the genealogy of laïcité. This is particularly the case of Jean Baubérot’s work, especially his book La laïcité, quel heritage? De 1789 à nos jours (1990).

Dhont raised another point of critique regarding my seemingly simplistic understanding or depiction of the judiciary in its interpretation and implementation of the law. The commentator asks whether the fragmentation of the application of laïcité is actually the result of mismatches in contexts of multi-level governance and the complexity thereof, as I argue, or simply an inherent characteristic of “its legal genesis and formulation”? He also asks whether the dichotomy between “constitutional and legal church-state arrangements” and “the multidirectionality and multilevel nature of the governance of religion”
is not a false one. He is probably right in that it may sound as if I simplified how things work in practice and how this complexity is actually happening not only on the grounds of everyday implementation and negotiation but also that the judiciary and the legal system are much messier than I portray them. One way to engage with this discussion could be through the use of the term “legal consciousness” suggested by Dejean in his comments. This notion by Ewick and Silbey refers to the ways in which legality is (re-)produced on a daily basis: “Every time a person interprets some events in terms of legal concepts or terminology—whether to applaud or criticize, whether to appropriate or to resist—legality is produced. The production may include innovations as well as faithful replication” (Ewick and Silbey 1998, 45). In this sense, the law is far from being stable and interpreted in univocal ways. The judiciary, as well as any other actor that engages with the law, contributes to its continuous making and, from that perspective, then, the legal system would, indeed, not be as strict and stable as my book might have portrayed it. However, despite this, what was indeed evident in my fieldwork is the perception of my interlocutors of the 1905 law as something clear and indisputable (even if they acknowledged that each person then interprets it in a different manner).

On a different note, in his reading of my book, Dejean comments on my oversight of the centrality of the political right and extreme right in mobilizing certain entanglements of secularism and identity. Some authors have argued that there is an identitarian drift taking place in the way laïcité is understood and mobilized in political and legal discourse. Moreover, secularism is often also presented as a European value that needs to be defended, especially against the presence of Muslims. This is a discourse that has often, although not exclusively, been mobilized by far-right parties, in this case the then Front National, now Resemblance National, as well as by other far-right groups that are highly active in social media (Amiraux and Koussens 2016; Froio 2018). In this sense, whereas the extreme right had little to no institutional presence in the three municipalities under investigation, their presence nationally and in other municipalities strongly shapes political debates nationally but also locally. Even in the cities of Rennes, Bordeaux and Toulouse such an impact is visible in the ways certain discussions are framed, be it directly informed by those discourses or as a rejection of them. While I touch upon this briefly on the discussion of the channels through which secularism “travels”, especially regarding social media and electoral campaigns (pages 109 and 110), I could have included more reflection on this in other sections of the book.

A more or less similar critique is raised by Selby when she points at the absence of a more thorough reflection of how racism and class play out in the regulation of religion in France and Europe more broadly. I only briefly refer
to the racialisation of Muslims on page 84 when I refer to the fact that there is an “obsession” with the regulation of Islam that cannot be isolated from the racialised perception of Muslims and the connection with colonialism. Yet, I could have elaborated more on the multiple ways in which this intertwining, together with the often-disadvantaged class position that a majority of Muslims occupy in Europe, influences secular politics in concrete ways. As others have shown, race and religion are strongly intertwined in the case of Muslims in France. Islam and Muslims are racialised and racial and religious discrimination oftentimes go hand in hand. An example of this that I discuss on page 18 of the book happened in the city of Rennes in the 1980s. There, opposition to the building of the first Islamic centre in the city was expressed partly as fear for the devaluation of real estate prices as a consequence of the presence of Muslims in the neighbourhood. In other words, one cannot understand how religion is regulated, in particular how Islam is strongly policed, without taking into account the fact that Muslims are seen as racial others who occupy marginalised class positions, often as economic immigrants who live in poor neighbourhoods or banlieues of the big cities (Beaman 2021; Galonnier 2019). To this, we would have to add how gender and sexuality are also connected to matters of secularism and how Muslim women, in particular, are put on the spotlight of political debates (Selby 2011). This is something I touch upon in the book but which certainly merits more attention too.

A final point raised about the findings of Urban Secularism has to do with both form and content. Hjelm notes that while I argue that I examine processes of policymaking, much of what the book shows is actually about the results of those processes. Policymaking is something that takes place throughout rather long periods of time, which would require spending months or years in the field in each of the cities. While for the case of Bordeaux and Toulouse this was not possible due to the timing of the meetings of the consultative bodies there and that of my project, in the case of Rennes I was able to conduct more extensive ethnographic fieldwork. This allowed me to observe the meetings of the Comité consultatif laïcité de Rennes, among other events, where discussions around laïcité and the regulation of religion took place. In that sense, I was able to capture some of the negotiations as they took place, and not only the final outcomes of those discussions. An example of this is to be found on page 84, when I refer to the “veil chapter” of the Chart de Rennes, that is, the non-official name that one of the participants gave to the chapter that should address religious symbols in general but was clearly targeting the Islamic veil. A similar example of the internal discussions of the committee that I was able to observe appears on page 86, where I examine the discussions around the use that should be given to a newly built contemplation
In this section, I do examine what Hjelm calls “sequences of discourse”, that is, “how people reproduce, reject, and transform discourses in interaction” rather than just focusing on isolated “instances” of discourse. The dialogue among members of the said committee about the use of such a contemplation room and references to the presence or absence of the corpse capture, I believe, how discourse is constructed around the distinction of acceptable and non-acceptable forms of religiosity. In this sense, I do think that parts of the book do capture the processes of policy making and not only its results. Connected to this, Hjelm puts forward a stylistic critique, namely that the book should “show more rather than tell”, that is, that I should have allowed ethnographic material to speak for itself more than me narrating what I observed. While I tried as much as possible to let the research participants’ views occupy a prominent position, I probably did not fully succeed in that. By more frequently showing what my interlocutors argued with each other rather than narrating it myself, I would have shown more explicitly my engagement with policymaking in the making.

Looking Ahead: Transnationalising the Study of Secularism

The last section of this response to the commentaries offered by several colleagues is more an exercise of exploration rather than a response to specific critiques. In his comments, Dhont invites me to offer my perspectives on two rather recent developments. On the one hand, the controversies around the public funding of an under-construction Turkish-led mosque in Strasbourg in 2021 and the so-called “anti-separatism law” or “Loi du 24 août 2021 confortant le respect des principes de la République” that followed Samuel Paty’s assassination. For me to be able to provide some meaningful insights on both cases, I would need to conduct thorough research, something which is beyond my goal with this response. One could however ask questions about how urban and national authorities, in the first case, negotiate their interests and the limits of the 1905 law and how those are justified in practice beyond legal principles. One could even inquire whether other cases, such as the Islamic cultural centres in Rennes, for instance, are used as references to legitimise the investment of public funding in the Strasbourg case. On the case of the separatism law, questions arise regarding its construction of Muslims as “communitarian threats”, something I touch upon on Chapter 3 of Urban Secularism. Some authors have already examined some of these questions in detail (Khemilat 2023).

I take on the invitation of Amélie Barras to think about some potential ways to continue the research and discussion around secularism. In Chapter 5 of
Urban Secularism, entitled “From the national to the urban and back: How state secularism travels”, I discuss the different channels through which policies, knowledge, discourses, actors, decisions and regulations around secularism and religion travel across levels of governance. While the focus is mostly on transfers between the urban and the national, some of the examples I present include an international dimension. These are the cases of the international travels of policy and political entrepreneurs or the upscaling of controversies and discussions with the help of social media. While acknowledging that this was not the main focus of the book, Barras indicates her interest in these “international transfers”. She poses some questions regarding how to go about the analysis of transnational policy transfers, focusing specifically on two main challenges: 1) how to identify policy entrepreneurs and apply a governance approach on a transnational level and 2) how to conduct ethnography transnationally. In what follows, I would like to provide some initial reactions to what would definitely require a much more thought-through response.

With respect to the first point, namely, how to identify the networks of policy entrepreneurs that act transnationally and how to apply a governance perspective to do so, I would suggest several options, none of which is an easy task. The first option would be to identify policy entrepreneurs or activists who act as “third party interveners” in court cases transnationally (Dolidze 2011; McCruden 2015). This could be both faith-based actors and those with a secularist agenda. A different strategy would be to follow well-known transnational advocacy organisations in their ordinary work, that is, not focused on litigation. From that starting point, one could potentially reach other relevant actors. A similar option is to do social media analysis of policy entrepreneurs and other actors. As far as I know, Barras and her colleagues at the “Secularism on the Move” research project are already doing something similar. In this way, one could trace their networks, the events they attend, the cases and issues they engage with, etc. Alternatively, one could also trace policy-making processes around controversies or new policy regulations to find out who the initiators or actors involved were. A final option that could serve the purpose of identifying actor constellations that act transnationally within a governance framework could be to start out from contacting policy entrepreneurs known from their involvement in previous cases or through other research projects and draw their networks of contacts.

The second challenge that Barras refers to and inquiries about is how to conduct ethnography in such transnational fields of action, where it is difficult to identify not only the actors involved but also the spaces of their interactions. While there are several alternatives, none of them is without challenges. The first option would be to use the technique of shadowing (Czarniawska...
to follow these people in their policy advocacy work. The difficulty with this technique is to first identify the appropriate actors and then be able to follow them throughout a sufficient period of time. Ethnography in transnational settings, such as international institutions (Barras 2023) or social movement gatherings and demonstrations, could be complemented with online ethnographies, in fora where relevant interactions take place, such as conversations around particular hashtags. However, this is all not so innovative, as this is precisely what Barras refers to when she suggests using Merry’s proposal of a “deterritorialized ethnography” (Merry 2005). With this methodological approach, “[o]ne could follow those who serve as translators and intermediaries: people who participate in global meetings and conferences, then go home and try to sell these ideas to their constituents” (Merry 2000, 131). However, this is not a straightforward enterprise and the challenge remains. As the author suggests, “the project of ethnography in the twenty-first century is challenging because the local is globally constituted and the global is an amalgam of locals. Research which takes global interactions as its subject presents new problems of identifying a locale in which to do ethnography” (Merry 2000, 131). In conclusion, despite all these alternatives, the two questions Barras proposes remain open.

With these and other challenges ahead in the study of secularism in the making, I would like to close this reaction by thanking once more Secular Studies for offering this platform to discuss my work and the commentators for their insightful, thorough and constructive engagement with my work. I have done my best to address as many as possible of the comments and critics put forward by these five generous colleagues. Hopefully this discussion sparks new questions and discussions in the field. If I were ever to revise the book, I would definitely include many of the points they address. Since that is quite unlikely to happen, I take those points for future research endeavours.

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