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Secularism as an Anti-Religious Conspiracy: Salafi Challenges to French *laïcité*

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Abstract: Regarding organizational power, Salafism in France is a minority of dispersed groups emerging on the periphery of the Muslim French space. However, it can be regarded as a discursive force that has influenced significantly French discussions about Islam. Specifically, one of the most contentious positions in French political and intellectual discourse at the moment is Salafi vehement rejection of *laïcité* as a conspiracy against religion in general and Islam in particular. This article provides a close reading of three Salafi and neo-traditionalist discourses on secularism written by well-known theologians and intellectuals associated with this school of thought: Youssef Hindi, Kareem El Hidjaazi, and Aïssam Aït-Yahya. Investigative in nature, our aim is to comprehend the fundamental criticisms of French secularism and the rhetorical devices these Salafi and neo-traditionalist discourses have been using for the past ten years.

Keywords: *laïcité*; secularism; France; Salafism; Islam



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1. Introduction

The contentious debate in France on Islam and secularism encompasses several social and political aspects. In the media and other public spaces, various viewpoints supported by state and non-state actors—including Muslim ones—play out a discursive role in this debate. Islamic discourses are mostly shaped by religious leaders—preachers, theologians, and intellectuals—who have moral, theological, or discursive authority within their local communities. These influential religious figures represent a diverse range of Islamic discourses in France, including Salafis, Sufis, reformists, Turkish Islamic organizations, and more. The only Islamic discourses that explicitly reject secularism are Salafism and neo-traditionalism. Therefore, in order to fully understand the Islamic perspectives on secularism in France, it is crucial to examine the critical arguments made by Salafism and neo-traditionalism in this regard.

The majority of research on Islam and secularism in France focuses on two broad issues. On the one hand, institutional conflicts between Islam and secularism in public administration, education, and other contexts have been the subject of micro-sociological research up till now (Lorcerie 2003; Bowen 2006; Göle 2015, 2017). On the other hand, mainstream Muslim organizations are usually studied by political scientists and political sociologists as political actors who disagree with particular Islamic-related government policies, centering on the challenges the French Republic has in seeking to force secularism on Muslims (Roy 2005; Frégosi 2008; Seniguer 2009). French Muslim leaders diverge on a number of topics, including secularism. I have previously investigated how Muslim reformist thinkers in France view secularism (Belhaj 2022). In this paper, I come to the conclusion that reformist Muslim thinkers envision secularism as equality; they advocate for a liberal *laïcité* for all that upholds the 1905 legislation, which keeps religion and state apart without supporting anti-religious laws or singling out Muslims for particular treatment (like the headscarf ban, for example). In the spirit of a neutral *laïcité*, they also see secularism as a chance to exercise religious freedom, demanding that the French

government recognize public religiosity and the Muslim community's right to diversity and inclusion in French society.

I shall now discuss the ways in which Salafi and neo-traditionalist theologians and intellectuals in France approach secularism. Salafism is the predominant interpretation of Islam held by traditionalists in France. It is a Sunni school of thought that prioritizes the Islamic legal tradition, rigorous beliefs, and pious behavior over reason, modernity, and religious freedom. However, non-Salafi French neo-traditionalists also exist. The latter are intellectuals who, while not advocating orthopraxy, embrace Salafism's ideal of a pure Islam as a tradition embodied in Islamic law and theology, which presumably came under attack from modernity.

Traditionalist Muslims in France often agree that secularism is an anti-Islamic movement. This perspective seeks to "unveil" French secularism as a Jewish, Pauline, Kabbalistic, Messianic, or colonial undertaking. I have selected three significant discourses produced by three Muslim figures in France as a corpus of analysis: the two Salafist theologians Aïssam Aït-Yahya and Kareem El Hidjaazi as well as Youssef Hindi, a neo-traditionalist Muslim thinker. In the first section, I outline the two main reasons I chose these theologians and intellectuals in particular: First, they are visible and engaged in opposition to French government, and second, they have developed full arguments against secularism.

1.1. The Rationale for the Corpus Selection

According to French authorities, over a hundred mosques in France, out of approximately 2000, are reported to follow Salafi schools of thought.¹ This represents 5% of the total Islamic communities. However, Salafism is overrepresented in French public discourse since the French government keeps an eye on over 10,000 individuals because it believes they may be radicalized due to ideological ties to Salafism.² The French state views Salafism as a security danger whose influence in France extends beyond its actual groups. Fear of Salafism as a radical minority is also reflected in its coverage by the French media.³ Salafism, which is based on a set of ideas, is therefore a challenging voice against secularism in France. Furthermore, Salafism shapes discourse on law and theology in the Islamic sphere, which includes social media, libraries, and audiovisual materials of Islamic sermons (Zwilling 2020, 2023). These factors make it imperative to consider the Salafi discourse on key political and social issues in France, such as secularism.

Salafi theologians and preachers rarely offer well-reasoned arguments in written works intended for intellectual discussions. Rather, they usually disseminate their views through speeches given in mosques, videos posted on social media, or pamphlets that are not easily obtainable by researchers. Thus, none of the eight most prominent Salafis in France under surveillance by French authorities has authored a book on secularism that is amenable to argument and rhetoric analysis.⁴

In my study of Muslim discourses on secularism in France, I could approximately identify twenty books that have been published by twelve French Muslim theologians and intellectuals and are accessible in Muslim libraries for a wide public; five of these works are written by Salafists and neo-traditionalists: Aïssam Aït-Yahya, Kareem El Hidjaazi, Youssef Hindi, Rabah Graïne, and Habib S. Kaaniche. Rabah Graïne published *Le voile de la Laïcité: La fabrication du problème musulman* (*The Veil of Secularism: Fabricating the Muslim Problem*) in 2023, primarily addressing French laws that forbade the headscarf in public areas (such as offices and schools). This book lacks a well-developed argument on secularism, paying attention to the political and media debate on the headscarf and its underlying discrimination tendencies against Muslims (Graïne 2023). Habib S. Kaaniche, a retired Muslim chaplain and neo-traditionalist, wrote *Laïcité: qui dit l'Islam? (Secularism: What has Islam to Say?)*, which was released in 1999 and makes the case that Islam does not contradict science (Kaaniche 1999). As a result, the writings of Habib S. Kaaniche and Rabah Graïne do not meet the standards I set for choosing the research corpus: First, they must have developed comprehensive arguments against secularism; second, they should be visible and actively opposed to the French government.

Conversely, Youssef Hindi, Kareem El Hidjaazi, and Aïssam Aït-Yahya meet these criteria; they have written on *laïcité* as a legal and political system in France, in a fully constructed thesis. These authors continue to be influential in the public discourse on Islam and secularism in France because they publish often, disseminate content on social media, and clash with the French government while offering political commentary on various issues. Because of the impact of Aïssam Aït-Yahya, the French authorities closed down his publishing house, accusing him of spreading discourses that supported jihad.⁵ The French government's decision triggered a controversy on freedom of speech in France.⁶ The French Ministry of Interior also singled out Kareem El Hidjaazi, calling him "an extremist Salafist preacher" and "a dangerous radical Islamist militant", filing a complaint in court against him.⁷ He frequently publishes books, essays, and papers on French political and intellectual debates via his websites, <https://islamologues-de-france.com> and www.histoiredislam.com (accessed on 20 February 2024). Regarding Youssef Hindi, his 63.5K followers on X and 2,086,418 views of his videos on YouTube alone demonstrate that his Muslim conspiracyism is significant.⁸

These three theologians and intellectuals help us comprehend the logic of a particular Muslim critical discourse on secularism in France that opposes *laïcité*, a fundamental aspect of the French state. These voices need to be studied because, despite being a small minority among French Muslims, thousands of people endorse their discourses; researchers mapping and examining the entire spectrum of Muslim perspectives on secularism in France should not disregard them.

1.2. Defining and Categorizing Salafism

Salafism (from the Arabic term *salafiyya*) refers to a school of thought that seeks to imitate the pious predecessors of Sunni Islam (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). Muslim reformists and the Wahhabi movement both claimed Salafism in the 19th century. But since the 1960s, the Wahhabi movement—backed by the Saudi government—has shaped Salafist religious rhetoric in a significant way. Since the 1970s, it started to gain traction throughout the Arab-Muslim world outside of the Gulf states. Because of this, Wahhabi-led Salafi groups and ideas have been identified with the term Salafism when it comes to Islamic thought during the past fifty years. Over time, Salafism has split into three subgroups: jihadist Salafism, political Salafism, and traditionalist Salafism. The focus of traditionalist Salafism is on literalist attitudes toward the texts and rigorous practices. Most participants in this movement are apolitical and legalistic. Salafism that is political or activist forms political parties, takes part in elections, and opposes the modernization of societies (see, for instance, the al-Nur party in Egypt and al-Asala in Bahrain). Lastly, there is extremist or jihadist Salafism, which supports using force to create an Islamic state. Its adherents are also fiercely anti-Western and hostile to other Muslim currents that they view as disbelievers (Wiktorowicz 2001, 2006; Wagemakers 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017; Evstatiev 2021).

Salafism is a relatively new phenomenon in Europe, having emerged alongside immigration, even though one can see in the 1980s the first visible signs of Salafism in dress and lectures in the mosques and libraries. In Western academia, European Salafism has been extensively studied, particularly in relation to theology and violence. Thus, it would be beyond the scope of this article to cover all studies conducted on the subject. Here, what interests us is how Salafism interprets secularism within the French setting. While the jihadist and quietist Salafi groups are the most noticeable in France, radical Salafism established centers in France during the 1990s through a variety of groups related to Algerian radical Islamists and later to al-Qaida and ISIS groups. Quietist Salafism is arguably the most pervasive branch, backed by a number of mosques and institutes founded by French Muslims who attended Saudi colleges and Yemeni seminars (Rougier 2008; Amghar 2011; Adraoui 2013; El Karoui 2018).

2. Aïssam Aït-Yahya and the Jewish-Christian Origins of Secularism

Currently, the most vocal French Salafist theologian opposing secularism is Aïssam Aït-Yahya. He was the first Salafist theologian in France to critically examine secularism and produce a comprehensive monograph on the subject. Aït-Yahya's opinions are commonly shared by Salafist groups, according to a recent report on Islam in France published by L'Institut Montaigne, a think tank close to the French government (El Karoui 2018, p. 69).⁹ The French government took three different measures against Aït-Yahya: first in closing his Ana-Muslim association in 2014 for encouraging terrorism, second in dissolving the Association Collective against Islamophobia in France in 2020, of which Aït-Yahya was a leading ideologue, and third in closing his publishing house Nawa in 2021.¹⁰ In addition to his publications and involvement in Islamic associations, Aït-Yahya gave a number of critical and public lectures on secularism.¹¹ As a result, Aït-Yahya is far from an obscure figure and actively engages in the French debate over secularism. With the terrorist events in France in November 2015 and particularly in 2021 with the closure of Nawa, he gained significant media attention.¹²

2.1. Intellectual Trajectory

Born in Les Lilas, in the Seine-Saint-Denis district of the Île-de-France region, in 1979, Aïssam Aït-Yahya (his pen name; his true name is Aïssam Moussadak) is a French Salafist thinker and activist.¹³ Aït-Yahya is a prolific author, and his books are published by Éditions Nawa, based in Mazères (near Toulouse), of which he is the main author-publisher. He has a degree in history and law and was trained in Western and Islamic cultures. He has published a number of books with Éditions Nawa on topical issues that are constantly relevant to debates on Islam in France and the West in general: *De l'idéologie islamique française (On French Islamic Ideology)* (2011)¹⁴, *Fiqh al-Waqi', le savoir profane au service du savoir religieux (Fiqh al-Waqi', Secular Knowledge at the Service of Religious Knowledge)* (2012), *Histoire et Islam (History and Islam)* (2013), *Les origines chrétiennes d'une laïcité musulmane (The Christian Origins of Muslim Secularism)* (2013), *Théologie du complotisme musulman (Theology of the Muslim Conspiracy Theory)* (2014), and *Textes et contexte du wahhabisme (Texts and Context of Wahhabism)* (2015). His latest book is entitled *Lire et comprendre Qotb (Reading and Understanding Qotb)* published in 2018.¹⁵ Aït-Yahya also co-founded a Salafist association called "Ana-Muslim" (I am Muslim), which in 2014 called for a boycott of the French municipal elections to avoid, in his view, participating in a game of fools that would only lead to legitimizing a reproduction of existing power relationships.¹⁶

His books have all been republished, which is no mean feat for Islamic literature in France. Some of Aït-Yahya's books are commented translations of other authors' works. This is the case with the book *Fiqh al-Waqi', le savoir profane au service du savoir religieux*, which is a translation of Nāṣir al-'Umar's text, commented and annotated by Aït-Yahya. (Nāṣir al-'Umar is a Saudi Salafist activist, currently in prison.) The same work of commentary and translation was done by Aït-Yahya in *Textes et contexte du wahhabisme and in Ibn Taymiyya: textes politiques*. Finally, his book *Lire et comprendre Qotb* rehabilitates Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian theorist of radical Islamism and ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, by translating several short texts by Qutb on France, the United States, and the path of triumphant Islam and by placing his thought at the heart of debates on memory, colonization, and Islam in France. Aït-Yahya's books are easily accessible to everyone, as they are sold on Amazon, Fnac, and various Islamic libraries in Paris and Brussels, among others.

At the end of September 2021, against the backdrop of the lengthy trial following the Islamist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015 and the forthcoming presidential elections in April 2022, French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin launched proceedings to dissolve the Nawa publishing house. The company was accused of distributing "several works legitimizing jihad". Nawa is best known for publishing the writings of Aïssam Aït-Yahya, who has co-managed the publishing house with Abu Souleiman Al Kaabi since it was founded in 2008.¹⁷

2.2. The Jewish-Christian Origins of Muslim Secularism

In his book, *Les origines chrétiennes d'une laïcité musulmane*, published in 2013, Aït-Yahya begins by drawing on Jean Baubérot (prominent historian of secularism in France) to distinguish between *laïcization* (the institutional process of the retreat of religion) and secularization (the social dynamic of the retreat of religion). Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Vatican are examples of secularization, whereas Russia, India, and Tunisia under Bourguiba (President of Tunisia between 1957 and 1987) are examples of *laïcization*. For Aït-Yahya, a more “vital” form of *laïcization* is that of France and Kemalist Turkey (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 25). In his view, the retreat of religion in secularization primarily concerns the realm of faith, whereas in *laïcization*, the retreat primarily concerns the realm of law (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 26).

Aït-Yahya defines religion as a universal category of belief/faith and action/law in which the heavenly order and the earthly order are interconnected (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 33). For Aït-Yahya, the origin of the rupture in this relationship between the two orders lies in Pauline Christianity, which began the process of secularization. Pauline Christianity, he argues, separated the Law of Moses, which is faith and action, from the Law of Christ, which is faith and belief alone (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 45). Faith then became a matter of heart, mind, and word. Pauline Christianity reduced actions to those of the heart and the word, and the law to that of the mind and faith (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 49). Pauline Christianity thus established a secularization marked by reduced, irregular or superficial religious practice, devalued deeds, accepted positive law, spiritualized religious law, and belief confined to the private sphere (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 55). Christianity thus committed the original sin of the secular spirit: separating abstract faith, the inner act, individual piety, spiritual law, morality, spirit, gnosis, and allegorical interpretation from practice, the apparent act, collective fervor, scriptural law, rule, body, dogma, and literal interpretation (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 56).

For Aït-Yahya, the Islamic religious system is different from Pauline Christianity; it consists of *islām* (submission), *īmān* (faith), and *iḥsān* (intention). *Islām* (submission) is a practice that consists of five pillars: attestation of faith, prayer, almsgiving, the Ramadan fast, and pilgrimage; *īmān* (faith) consists of belief in Allah, the angels, revealed books, messages, the judgment day, and destiny (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 69); *iḥsān* (intention) is to strive for excellence and virtue in deeds. These three components are based on each other. Thus, faith consists of deeds by the limbs, heart and tongue, words (expressed by the heart and tongue), and intentions (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 75). Faith is expressed in a visible and public way and in a concealed and private way; the *tawḥīd*, which is the creed of the oneness of God, appears (1) in the action of God in the universal heavenly order (*tawḥīd fī ‘amalih*) with which believers connect through faith and (2) in the deeds of believers (*tawḥīd fī ‘amalinā*) in the earthly order manifested in law and deeds (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 80). The law itself, sharia, is a legislative path that is based on the Qur’an and Sunnah and presupposes faith in Allah and the Prophet; this law has political functions in the state and society as well as religious in rite and worship, in public and collective, as well as individual acts (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 80).

However, according to Aït-Yahya, this “complete” system of Islam was interrupted by the school of thought known as the supporters of *irjā’* or the *murji’a*; this school of thought consists of postponing judgment on people and acts and stipulates that “faith is in the heart and that only God judges” (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 89). This theological school appeared at the beginning of the history of Islam, during the Great Discord (656–661), and became established in the 8th century. It was a politico-religious movement in early Islam and subsequently referred to all those who “identify faith (*īmān* [q.v.]) with belief, or the confession of belief, to the exclusion of deeds. The nouns *Murji’a* and *irjā’* are derived from the Quranic usage of the verb *arjā* in the sense of ‘to defer judgment’” (Madelung 2006).

Aït-Yahya attributes the birth of this doctrine to the influence of “multiple religious traditions that already existed in Syria and Iraq before Muslim domination, notably Christianity” (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 96). As a result, the school of *irjā’* limited religion to faith and

the latter to belief, knowledge, and speech (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 101), thus introducing, like Pauline Christianity, the separation between faith and law. The faith of the *irjā'* consists in deferring judgement on the value of political, cultic, or ritual acts and the law to God. Aït-Yahya interprets the attitude of deferring final judgment to God as questioning and devaluing the law (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 106). He willingly relies on some European orientalist who defended the thesis of Christian influence on Muslim theology to show that the *irjā'* is a Judeo-Christian creation. One of the main theologians of the *irjā'* school, Jahm b. Šafwān (696–745), is taken as proof of this Judeo-Christian influence; Jahm b. Šafwān is said to have received *irjā'* by two routes: (1) a Jewish route through Ja'd b. Dirham, a Sabaeen, who is said to have learned it from Bayān b. Sam'ān, an extremist Shi'ite, who is said to have received it from Tālūt (a Jew) and Labīd b. al-A'sam (another Jew), and (2) a Christian path through Ghaylān al-Dimashaqī, a Christian, who is said to have learned it from Ma'bad al-Juhanī, a proponent of free will, who is said to have received it from Yūḥannā al-Naṣrānī and Sawsan, both Christians (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 128). Thus, Judaism and Christianity worked together to establish secularization in Islam, (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 153), whereas at the beginning of his book, Aït-Yahya questioned Christianity alone.

According to Aït-Yahya, the phenomenon of *irjā'* divides society between the sphere of the population/society/common people and that of the elite/holders of authority/power. In the former sphere, secularization leads to the individualization of faith, while in the latter, secularization leads to the retreat of law (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 158). Thus, *irjā'* privileges worship/private rite/the religious sphere tolerated by secularization, while the political sphere and/or the neutrality of the public space tolerates *irjā'* (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 160). Thus, contemporary *irjā'* emphasizes the individual private act of Muslim worship that is tolerated by secular and secular ideologies and disparages the public political act, which manages society, that *irjā'* reserves for these secular ideologies (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 169).

Aït-Yahya concludes that secularization is a movement that emerged first with Judaism, taken up by Paul of Tarsus and Christianity, producing secularism and *irjā'*. Both *irjā'* and secularism isolate the world from religion; while secularism separates the political from the religious and the private from the public sphere, *irjā'* separates acts of faith and the secularized act of personal faith (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 213). On the one hand, politics is a world of major acts managed by public policies, secular faith defined by binding collective ideologies, and law determined by positive law, without religious involvement. On the other hand, religion is a spiritual world that governs minor acts through rites and faith through personal spiritual beliefs, and cultic law is applied in the private sphere, without political involvement (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 215). Aït-Yahya declares that “for a Muslim, even a minimally coherent one, to accept the idea of secularization and laïcization of Islam is to renounce Islam’s particular vocation on earth. Renouncing the Islamic temporal order and renouncing the foundation of a new model of society based on the principles of Islam and respecting its fundamentals” (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 223). He adds that “renouncing the political sphere of Islam, or distorting it in order to make it compatible with Western norms and values, is the end of Islam as a civilisational entity; it is also the end of the Muslim identity” (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 223).

For Aït-Yahya, the defenders of the French Republic have turned democracy and secularism into a religion with its own rites and clergy; the clergy and priests of different religions, including Islam, cynically promote secularism and destructure their own religions, confining them to the private sphere. Secularism is said to be a secular neo-religion that does not tolerate traditional religions and wants to impose itself on people’s consciences, posing a threat to the durability of Islam and the integrity of its faith (Aït-Yahya 2013, pp. 224–25). Aït-Yahya admits that individual Muslims can be secularized (by conviction or force) but claims Islam as Sunni orthodoxy will always remain beyond the reach of secularization, despite the attacks (Aït-Yahya 2013, p. 226).

2.3. Inflated Theological and Normative Reasoning

Although Aït-Yahya uses a variety of rhetorical strategies in his reasoning, we will concentrate on two that, in our opinion, are crucial in the discourse under consideration: the inflation of theology and the clustering illusion. Let us start with his reading of the history of religions and specifically the history of Islam and the inflation of theology. Even though the theological dynamics of disputes between the various schools of Muslim thought, particularly those centered on the *irjā'*, are significant, these factors only partially account for the conflicts that have existed in Muslim societies since the 7th century because other social and political factors have also influenced how the relationship between religious and political authority has developed in the Islamic world. For instance, disputes over political legitimacy and the type of government to be established are among the issues portrayed by Islam's civil wars, which have occurred from the 7th century to the present. The *modus vivendi* of the autonomizing of the spheres of governance that arose between political power and religious authority was undoubtedly influenced by these conflicts; however, this *modus vivendi* cannot be attributed to the theological influence of a single school of thought, in this case the *irjā'*, which was also considered heterodox by the dominant Sunnism from the very beginning. Furthermore, Paul of Tarsus did not cause Europe to become secular, despite the fact that, theologically speaking, he undoubtedly had a significant influence on religious thought, but a complex interplay of historical, political, economic, and social factors leads to secularization. Nevertheless, Christianity also saw the fusion of politics and religion under a single political structure during specific premodern historical eras.

Additionally, Aït-Yahya used the rhetorical tool known as the clustering illusion, picking specific instances from the history of three major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and drawing conclusions about their causal relationship, even if the frequency of these events is random—that would have led to secularization. Additionally, the author frequently makes generalizations based on lone incidents that do not actually affect how things turn out. It is believed that the “possible but uncertain” encounter between a Muslim and a Christian theologian was a pivotal moment that shaped Muslim theology for many centuries.

Lastly, Aït-Yahya knowingly combines values and facts: Islam is, ethically, both a religion and a political system, but this is a value and not a reality. Due to the autonomy of religion and politics rather than their separation, the history of Arab-Muslim countries demonstrates that this value was not always true. Thus, Aït-Yahya's rationale is founded on values, ignoring the fact that, in actuality, relationships between states and religions have changed and come to terms with division in the modern era for a variety of factors, including social, political, and economic ones.

3. Kareem El Hidjaazi: Secularism as an Acculturation Plot

Kareem El Hidjaazi is not French by nationality but Belgian. Yet, he has worked for French publishers and published his works in France. In addition, through his *Observatoire des Islamologues de France*, he regularly comments on French current affairs. Similarly to Aït-Yahya, El Hidjaazi is a prolific author and an active voice in French Islamic discourse. El Hidjaazi's writings have also irritated French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin and the intelligence agencies in France, who placed him under surveillance for radicalism and later charged him with it in court in 2021.¹⁸

3.1. Intellectual Trajectory

Kareem El Hidjaazi is a Belgian-Palestinian Salafist author and founder of the *Observatoire des Islamologues de France*. He has lived, studied, and worked in Europe, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco. He is a well-known author and researcher in Islamic studies.¹⁹ He began his career as a translator with Éditions El-Hejaz in 2005, where he remained until 2009. His published translations include the book *Dialogues musulmans-chrétiens* (*Muslim-Christian dialogue*) by Hasan M. Baagil, *Mes enfants—L'éducation selon les préceptes musulmans*

(*My children—Education according to Muslim precepts*) by Sâlim al-Ajmi, and translations of DVDs for the Salafist Athariya publishing house. Kareem El Hidjaazi pursued his traditionalist Islamic education at Dar al-Hadeeth in Dammaj, Ma'bar, and Shihr (Yemen); this traditionalist Salafist institute is important in the region and has trained hundreds of Salafists from Europe. El Hidjaazi completed his Islamic studies at Dar al-Hadeeth in 2014. He has published several short books, including *L'acculturation des Musulmans de France—La dernière conquête coloniale* (*The Acculturation of Muslims in France—The Last Colonial Conquest*) (2015) and *Nègres & Islamistes: Les convergences d'une lutte culturelle* (*Blacks & Islamists: The Convergence of a Cultural Struggle*) (2020).²⁰

3.2. Secularism as an Acculturation Plot

In his *L'acculturation des Musulmans de France—La dernière conquête coloniale* (2015), El Hidjaazi criticizes the acculturation of Muslims as a neo-colonial project and a French plot against Muslims in France. The author argues that the origins of this project lie in the French colonization of Egypt and Africa in general. The author condemns French policies of secularism and the institutionalization of Islam as tools of the new colonialism. El Hidjaazi begins his book by attacking Manuel Valls (French Prime Minister between 2014 and 2016). He compares Valls's call for the assimilation of immigrants in France to Nazism. The author accuses Valls of wanting to impose secularism as a value system on Muslims (even though their values are different from those of the Republic). For the author, "the Jacobin elite club may well believe that the Islamophobic laws of the new secularism abrogate the 'universal' rights invented by the West, but the fact remains that requiring Muslims to adopt 'republican' values will paradoxically and necessarily run counter to the principles of freedom to which France claims to adhere. Converting the normative values of present-day France into laws will inevitably bring the Republic into conflict with the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 6). The author promotes the view that secularism is a law and not a system of values and that Muslims will remain free to choose the values they wish to love, adopt, and pass on to their children (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 6).

Next, El Hidjaazi disapproves of reformist Muslims such as Bordeaux imam T. Oubrou, whom he criticizes for saying that "Islam must not negotiate its place in secularism in terms of rights and arm-twisting, but integrate in terms of culture" (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 18). El Hidjaazi insulted Oubrou in some pretty harsh terms: "Even for the impartial onlooker, it must be mind-boggling to see how an unqualified immigrant can demand that a cultured Muslim woman born in France 'adapt to French society' by 'putting her headscarf in her pocket' (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 18). After Oubrou, it is now the turn of Dalil Boubakeur, President of the French Council of Muslim Faith between 2003 and 2008 and Rector of the Grand Mosque of Paris between 1992 and 2019, to come under attack from El Hidjaazi, who accuses Boubakeur of being a Freemason; Boubakeur is said to be a colleague of N. Sarkozy in freemasonry, so "Boubakeur became the new representative of secularism to the Muslim community. And let's face it, Dalil did not disappoint his masters. He became the new darling of the secularists, who spontaneously and loudly began spouting the orders of Mr. Nicolas, who kept whispering in his ear: "Islam in France will be liberal, we must do away with the veil..." (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 21). El Hidjaazi blames Boubakeur for the acculturation of Muslims when he declared that the Islam of France is "the affirmation of a non-political Islam that adopts the rules of secularism" (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 21). El Hidjaazi is vehemently opposed to the plan to train imams in secularism. He says: "If we train future imams with secular teaching drawn up by the Sorbonne, can we still talk about imams? And if the role of French imams is to preach secularism, who will preach Islam?" (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 21).

In the same conspiratorial vein, the author denounces the role of the Grand Orient de France in promoting secularism, which proposed a draft of 25 measures in 2014 to strengthen secularism in France; El Hidjaazi considers that this draft aims to reduce the visibility of Muslims in the public space (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 18). The author compares

France today to Napoleon's rule in terms of the imposition of secularism and the institutionalization of Islam. He warns that "our era has changed nothing. To force Muslims in France to swallow secularism, the State had to manage the institutionalization of Islam at all costs. In this case, there is nothing better than a puppet that can be fully manipulated, not to express the will of the Muslims of France to the public authorities, but to convey the demands of the Minister of the Interior to the Muslims" (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 19).

For El Hidjaazi, the origins of the acculturation of the Muslim world go back to the time of Napoleon, who "sowed the seeds of a Western secularism that would germinate and eventually devastate the East" (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 24). He adds that the French "began to teach the Egyptians a new way of living and thinking under the pretext of bringing the benefits of civilization to Egypt. Napoleon was determined to found a permanent colony where the Egyptian people would be acculturated to serve the French colonists" (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 24).

El Hidjaazi also criticizes the 7th point of *La Charte de la laïcité*, drawn up by the Ministry of Education in 2013, which states that "secularism ensures that pupils have access to a common and shared culture".²¹ El Hidjaazi sees this article as an attempt by the "French government to prevent Muslim parents from passing on Islamic values to their children" (El Hidjaazi 2015, p. 36).

3.3. The Use of *ad Hominem* Attacks against Secularism

Ad hominem arguments are a major component of El Hidjaazi's discourse; instead of addressing the reasons put out by secularists, Muslims or not, in favor of *laïcité*, he is not afraid to personally assault them. El Hidjaazi purposely misrepresents the target individual, his own commitments, his opponent's personal circumstances, and the political project to which he subscribes in a given situation. He also quotes "unfavourable" information about the target individual in order to undermine anything the target individual says regarding secularism. He also has no qualms about using the use of motive—always accusing his opponents of planning anti-Islamic plots—and dismissing ideas by questioning the author's intentions: Reformist or liberal intellectuals are viewed as traitors, and French governments are treated equally as colonizers. Sociologists, orientalist, and Islamologists are all represented as agents of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and so on.

El Hidjaazi's second primary rhetorical device involves assigning blame to specific agents through association. Thus, all of modern principles must be rejected by association because they were brought to the Muslim world by colonial France. The entire discourse of an individual who belongs to the Freemasons is discredited. A person's statements are suspect if they are regularly featured in the media. Speaking as a Muslim, an artist should not be taken seriously since the art industry has "certainly" corrupted him, and so forth. The author blames the acculturation of Muslims on the West and France taken together. This reasoning, if logic it be, declares any connection or affiliation with the French political or intellectual scene to be "a crime against Islam".

Even though conspirators of all colors use the same rhetoric, modern Salafism has transformed it into a theologically justified instrument known as *al-jarḥ wa-l-ta'dīl* (discreditation and accreditation), which is essentially a subfield of ḥadīth studies that involves criticizing or endorsing the prophetic tradition's transmitters in classical Islam. This weapon has been used by modern Salafism not to challenge the line of transmission or validate specific religious authority but just to undermine the arguments of its opponents (Meijer 2011, pp. 375–99; Duderija 2014, p. 134). Everyone has flaws, including Shiites, reformists, Muslim jurists, Sufis, Ash'arites, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This method is also used by modern Salafists to resolve their own internal issues; much of their discourse is devoted to warnings against other Muslims. This instrument, meanwhile, is quite contentious and frequently results in excommunication and serious rifts with opponents.

4. Youssef Hindi and the Demystification of Secularism

Youssef Hindi is a Muslim neo-traditionalist intellectual. He is not a member of any specific Muslim organization or the school of thought doctrine known as Salafism. Rather, he speaks to both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences by fusing different conspiratorial theories from Islamic and Catholic traditions. Hindi is just as prolific an author as Aït-Yahya and El Hidjaazi, and even though he has not yet been prosecuted by the French government, he is equally defying to the French ruling elite. Hindi is also well known in the media, particularly on social media, combining anti-colonialist, anti-Semitic, and Islamist ideologies to expand his audience. In France, far-right movements have also embraced his ideas, which have become a major figure in French conspiracyism, offering him outlets to publish his books and deliver his public lectures. Hindi is seen by French sociologist Éric Marlière as the rising voice of radical far-right movement in France (Marlière 2022a, pp. 20–22). Marlière pinpoints the popularity of Youssef Hindi within the far right and North African audiences in France attracted to his thesis of Jewish messianism as a driving force of world politics (Marlière 2022b, p. 264). Jean-Yves Camus, a French political scientist, sees him as the new-wave of anti-Semitic discourse in France (Camus 2024, pp. 85–109).

4.1. Intellectual Trajectory

Youssef Hindi (born in Morocco in 1985) is a French Muslim intellectual known for his conspiratorial and anti-Semitic writings. He describes himself as a “historian of religions and geopolitologist, specializing in messianism and its historical, political and geopolitical implications, and conducting research into the origins of modern ideologies, including Zionism, socialism and French republicanism”.²² Hindi is active mainly through his publications; he regularly posts articles on his blog about current events in France and internationally, in which he accuses Jewish messianism of being behind all the major events in world politics.

To date, Hindi has published around ten books in French, in essay form, with obscure publishers (KA' Éditions, Kontre Kulture, SIGEST). In 2015, he published *Occident & Islam—Tome I: Sources et genèse messianiques du sionisme. De l'Europe médiévale au Choc des civilisations* (*The West & Islam—Volume I: Messianic Sources and Genesis of Zionism. From Medieval Europe to the Clash of Civilisations*). In 2016, he published his second book entitled *Les mythes fondateurs du choc des civilisations ou Comment l'islam est devenu l'ennemi de l'Occident* (*The Founding Myths of the Clash of Civilisations or How Islam became the Enemy of the West*), followed by *La mystique de la laïcité: généalogie de la religion républicaine de Junius Frey à Vincent Peillon* (*The Mystique of Secularism: Genealogy of the Republican Religion from Junius Frey to Vincent Peillon*) in 2017. In 2018, he published *Occident & Islam—Tome II: Le paradoxe théologique du judaïsme. Comment Yahvé usurpa la place de Dieu* (*The West & Islam—Volume II: The Theological Paradox of Judaism. How Yahweh usurped the Place of God*). In 2019, he published *Du Brexit aux Gilets jaunes: la révolution en marche and Chroniques du sionisme* (*From Brexit to the Gilets jaunes: The Revolution in the Making and Chronicles of Zionism*). In 2020, he published *Sources et genèse messianiques du sionisme, de l'Europe médiévale au choc des civilisations* (*Messianic sources and genesis of Zionism, from medieval Europe to the clash of civilisations*). In 2021, he published three books: *Covidisme et messianisme: tyrannie sanitaire, crise religieuse et sacrifice* (*Covidism and Messianism: Health Tyranny, Religious Crisis and Sacrifice*), *L'Autre Zemmour* (*The Other Zemmour*), and *L'islam politique: saoudo-wahhabisme, Frères musulmans, réformisme, maçonnerie et services secrets anglo-américains* (*Political Islam: Saudi-Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood, Reformism, Freemasonry and Anglo-American Secret Services*).

Youssef Hindi is not active in Islamic associations, although he does have a certain Muslim following; his X account has 63.5K followers (as of April 2024), which is not insignificant for a young essayist with only a few conferences and limited public appearances to his name. The account is regularly updated with conspiracy theories on various global and French politics.²³

Youssef Hindi's political and media support in France comes mainly from two networks: Alain Soral's *Égalité et Réconciliation* movement and the weekly *Rivarol* (a far-right

magazine founded in 1951 by René Malliavin). Youssef Hindi was recruited by the fundamentalist Catholic political party Civitas as a “geopolitical and strategic adviser” in 2016 with the aim of preparing “a strategy that will counter, or try to counter, if we have the strength and the means, the grand strategy of Anglo-American Judeo-Protestant domination”.²⁴ Civitas is a French fundamentalist Catholic movement, founded in 1999, which has adopted conservative positions on a number of societal and political issues, including its opposition to gay marriage. In August 2023, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin ordered the dissolution of the movement after a guest at the Civitas summer university made remarks deemed to be anti-Semitic.²⁵ Obviously, tensions between the French state and religious movements are not limited to Islam.

4.2. Demystifying Secularism

In *La mystique de la laïcité*, Youssef Hindi offers a critical history of secularism in France from the reign of Clovis to the present day. The author argues that Europe and France were founded by Christianity, which saved the Roman Empire through the moral force of the Church and which became a factor in the political stabilization of Europe from the 5th century onwards. In this context, France was born of an alliance between the Franks and Catholicism. From this alliance emerged the “universalist” role of Catholic France, which was later perverted by the Revolution of 1789 and the Enlightenment. The Republic replaced the monarchy, and “the religion of the Enlightenment and secularism” replaced Catholicism. Hindi depicts secularism as a “foreign and artificial religion” in France, a weapon in the fight against Catholicism and the legal application of a “supposed neutrality of the State” with regard to religion (Hindi 2017, pp. 20–28).

Hindi then goes on to clarify his “thesis”: The Revolution of 1789 was indeed a religious project. He takes the concept of “the French Revolution as a religion” literally, a concept that was used figuratively by a number of 19th century historians such as Jules Michelet (1798–1874). The author identifies “the church of this religion of the Revolution” in Freemasonry, which, in his view, played a central role in building “the republican religion” and in the French Revolution. The author then looks for the origins of this “religion of the Revolution”, whose principles are secularism and the Enlightenment, and finds them in the Jewish Kabbalah, developed by Frankism and adopted by Jacobinism. In particular, the author believes that Jewish messianism is the driving force behind the history of French secularism. Hindi reconstructs Frankism, founded by Jacob Frank (1726–1791), a Polish-Jewish claimant to messiahship, as a movement to destroy the world and the Catholic clergy and the basis of Freemasonry. Shortcuts were quickly made of the relationship between the Frankist movement, which played a marginal role in the history of Central Europe, and the French Revolution: The Rothschild family and Junius Frey (1753–1794), an alchemist, writer, and poet of Bohemian origin, were Frankists who influenced the French Revolution. However, Frey did not arrive in France until 1792, while the first member of the Rothschild family in France, James de Rothschild, did not arrive in Paris until 1811. Apart from the enthusiasm of some Jews for the ideals of the Revolution, the author presents no evidence of this “crucial role” of the Jewish Kabbalah in the French Revolution (Hindi 2017, pp. 29–52).

Subsequently, Hindi moves on to the 19th century, which the author sees as the “mystical” century, dominated as it is by ideologies such as humanism, positivism, socialism, etc., all of which are said to be forms of Jewish messianism, which is not just about destruction but also about rebuilding a new world. As before, the author takes formulas such as “the proletariat is the redemption of humanity”, which is figuratively used by Marxists, in their real sense and uses them as the basis of his argument. The enthusiastic ideas of 19th century socialist, anarchist, and liberal thinkers about “a new order to come” are interpreted as Kabbalist and Frankist religious beliefs. These different ideologies were apparently combined in the “republican socialism” that inspired the secularism of Jules Ferry (1832–1893) (Hindi 2017, pp. 53–65).

Finally, Hindi delves into the history of secularism in the 20th century, where the author does not hesitate to argue that secularism is the official religion of the Republic in the literal sense. In particular, he presents Ferdinand Buisson (1841–1932)—a French philosopher, teacher, and politician, a liberal Protestant and Freemason, and the architect of the 1905 law—as responsible for the consecration of secularism as a religion. For the author, Jewish messianism wanted to teach its religion to the people. The second figure who, for the author, illustrates the religion of secularism is Vincent Peillon (born 1960), a French politician and philosophy professor, a leading member of the Socialist Party (PS), and Minister of National Education between 2012 and 2014. Peillon, a fervent supporter of secularism in schools, is not a Freemason, but his mother is Jewish. The book concludes with a condemnation of secularism as a “product of Jewish messianism” (Hindi 2017, pp. 66–75).

4.3. Using History

Hindi treats the decision makers of the past as if they had the same information as those who later examined the decision; his reasoning is basically built on “historical” fallacies. In this way, he views the Middle Ages relationship between Church and State as predicated on the State’s intention to impose secularism against the Catholic Church. Hindi occasionally employs presentism, which is the projection of contemporary concepts and viewpoints into the past in an anachronistic manner. For instance, he extrapolates discussions about secularism from today’s public discourse onto the interactions between religion and the state in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Certain modern-day figures—the Rothschild family, in particular—are profiled as economically and politically dominant in the past as though their forebears had always been powerful. Hindi, on the other hand, holds that certain outcomes can only be attributed to the execution of a particular process, even when the process itself may not be connected to the outcomes. Therefore, it is not true that Frankism or Freemasonry “created” secularism because they supported it. Lastly, continuing along the same line, Hindi argues that historians can discover the “whole truth” by deducing it from specific historical facts, depending on an assertion made here and an incident there. However, all it takes to discredit Hindi’s reading of history is to compare his “conspiracy history of secularism” to the writings of historians who have studied secularism in France, such as Jean Baubérot (Baubérot 2014) and Dominique Avon (Avon 2022), who present a “complex history of secularism in the power relations between monarchy, society, state and church”. Hindi treats historical events from the past as an “immutable general truth”; therefore, France’s monarchical and Catholic past is not merely a chapter in the nation’s history but rather its eternal foundation. In a paradoxical way, the author demonstrates how France has been de-Catholicized for historical and social reasons while simultaneously attributing these changes to Jewish messianism.

Hindi’s second rhetorical device is the single-cause fallacy, which confuses association with causation by failing to adequately look into the origin of an observable result. Therefore, this association implies causality since a number of Freemasons and Jews favored secularism (keeping in mind that some Jews opposed it, and some Protestants and Catholics supported it). That said, many liberal or reformist Muslims—whether they are Freemasons or not—support secularism, whether it be in France or elsewhere.

5. Discussion: The Origins of the Paradigm of Secularism as an Anti-Religious Conspiracy

The aforementioned three discourses (by Aït-Yahya, El Hidjaazi, and Hindi) demonstrate how traditionalist Islamic thought views secularism through the lenses of history and identity. These theologians and intellectuals highlight the harm secularism would cause to religion in general and Islam specifically by looking at the “real” history of secularization. Secularism would be a set of principles that is fundamentally at odds with the Islamic way of being, understood as Islamic social and political ethics at the individual and the communal levels.

5.1. “Legitimate” Historical Victims

Aït-Yahya returns to the classical history of Islam to claim Christianity exerted its influence on Muslims to separate religion from the State, while El Hidjaazi finds fault in the history of French colonization as the start of the acculturation and secularization of Muslims. Hindi, on the other hand, reinterprets the history of secularism in France as an attack on religion by Freemasonry and Jewish sects, who took over the institutions of the State. The “evil of the past” still persecutes Islam today, and this history is being continued by current French administrations and intellectuals.

Probably, the main purpose of this use of history is to invalidate secularism. The proponents of this discourse seek to undermine secularism by linking it to “dangerous” ideas and harmful colonial endeavors. In fact, secularism’s “dreadful” past is being used to highlight its “evil” aspects in the present. The key link between the past and now in this case is that secularism targets Muslims today, while it originated in illegitimate conditions since it is essentially the same repressive and hidden secularism from the past. Thus, while secularism is doubly delegitimized, Muslims can claim double victim status (of the past and the present).

The portrayal of secularism as an anti-religious plot easily confounds justifiable anger stemming from historical or contemporary injustices committed against Muslims with an attempt to “artificially” undermine secularism by bringing up historical aspects that are either fictitious or not necessary to its evolution. Regarding the first kind of resentment, the practices of authoritarian secularism and colonialism of Arab populations (especially in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria²⁶) can help to understand why the dominated Middle Eastern populations express their resistance against power and why they fear secularism (Fassin 2013, p. 253). Despite the fact that the context, the agents, and the institutions have changed between the past and the present, Salafism promotes a nihilistic resentment that rejects all interaction with the modern State and society and then defends itself in isolation, finding refuge in a convoluted history of secularism in order to reject it in the present as an absolute evil (Fassin 2013, p. 259).

5.2. Islam Transgressed: “Pure” Identity and Particularist Dogma

As we have seen, Aït-Yahya views secularization and secularism as a departure from traditional Muslim doctrine, while secularization is believed to occur “in a natural way” in Christian lands. El Hidjaazi has additionally stated that secularism violates Islam’s unadulterated identity. To put it another way, secularism is viewed as a deviation that modifies Islam’s typical course. This belief stems from the notion that Muslims’ identity is shaped by their Islamic tradition and that the moral basis of the “purity of this tradition” is equal to the development of loyalty and identification.

All civilizations and religions share this moral basis of purity against impurity (Haidt 2012, pp. 162–70), but religious purists of all stripes emphasize the significance of this moral basis for the community’s survival, as in the case of Salafism. This is why they are wary of systems like secularism that pose a danger to this moral foundation. Purists view secularism as a threat and a set of radical, negative, and wrong practices that jeopardize the group’s imagined cohesiveness (Haidt 2012, p. 171).

Salafism and neo-traditionalism believe that secularism is an “untouchable product” that taints Islam’s purity. To safeguard the sanctified from the degrading, it is important to set a distinct boundary between what is holy (Islam) and what is degraded (secularism). Since secularism has a “degrading” history, as previously described, this prohibition is justified, and the harm secularism may do to the “sanctity of Islam” is highlighted. The three discourses approach secularism as if it were a sickness that was contaminating Islam in particular as well as the clean and healthy body of religion, arguing that secularism is alien (imported by the Freemasons, Jews, colonizers, or Christian influence).

At the same time, by its willingness to protect Islam from “impurity”, traditionalist Islamic thought shows signs of intellectual weakness and an incapacity to see a plural world in which the lines separating the sacred and the profane are not distinct. The world

is becoming more secular (which does not entail religion disappearing from public space), which frightens Salafism since it impacts Islam in France and other countries. Salafism is working hard to preserve what is left of the “sacred” because it believes without the sacred, there can be no Islam, no religion, no identity, and no humanity at all.²⁷ These discourses’ response to secularism is indicative of their attempt to uphold a moral society that is collapsing under the weight of secularization’s desacralizing influence.

5.3. *What Is to Be Made of Tradition?*

Not unexpectedly, Salafist discourses mobilize arguments based on authority, from contemporary Salafist literature to Islamic canonical sources. Their rejection of secularism is meant to be justified by these authoritative texts, which make reference to the prophetic concept of the interdependence of politics and religion. However, in the face of irreversible political and societal changes in modern civilizations, particularly in the West, the inflexible Salafist concept of tradition brings Muslim thought to a standstill. Without considering the dynamics of the links between tradition and change, particularly in relation to the factors of time and space that necessitate adjusting ways of understanding tradition, Muslim arguments by authority are removed from their contexts and transplanted into the context of French secularism.

Salafi discourses on secularism give rise to the idea that a legitimate Islamic tradition of authentic Islam exists, but it has been betrayed by modernity. Other interpretations of the Muslim tradition undoubtedly challenge the Salafi theologians’ perception of the authentic Islam. Reformists, Sufis, Shiites, and other interpretations of Islam can all legitimately claim authentic Islam without limiting the opportunities provided by Muslim tradition for alternative interpretations and claims of a similar nature. Conversely, Muslims are expected by the French state and society to support a progressive and liberal style of thought, which is why French media and intellectuals are even more critical of the traditionalist paradigm Salafism preaches in France. While Salafism does not reject all social evolution and does not disagree with the material aspects of Western civilization, it rejects secularism and giving up Islamic law, especially public law, which runs counter to the secular character of the French state.

5.4. *Anti-Political Attitudes?*

Aït-Yahya criticized Muslims for being apolitical and for straying from the political aspect of Islam. This is a salient point of contention among Salafists: whether Muslims in France engage in politics or not. Aït-Yahya does not, however, go into detail about Islam’s political participation in France. In that, he criticizes the French state, which he believes possesses illegitimate political power, while it is “separate” from religion; his point of view appears to be more anti-system, which turns it into a political protest in the end. Nevertheless, considering that Aït-Yahya opposes jihadism and engages in boycotts of elections, this could also imply that he agrees with quietist Salafis about the refusal of political participation in France. In addition, he hopes that this state will grant him religious freedom, while he does not want to participate in the elections or follow its secular laws. In the French context, living in the envisioned city of Islam and rejecting the political system is what it means to be anti-power and anti-politics. Similar to this, El Hidjaazi targets French politicians of all hues and contests the “anti-Muslim” policies of the French government, thereby denouncing the French political system. However, he frames the French government’s goal as “acculturation” or a conquest of civilization, and he advocates for historical awareness of “authentic” Muslim identity as a means of opposing this goal. In his view, this would entail a stronger emphasis on Muslim pietism in daily life, which would grant Muslims the upper hand against their adversaries. El Hidjaazi is a traditionalist and apolitical; therefore, he is not interested in politics and does not advocate for taking action against secularism. Additionally, it is an anti-political mindset that decries the status quo and hopes that maintaining religious practices would protect Muslims. This is a vaguely anti-political attitude that usually results in a traditionalism that does not

manifest itself politically, where Salafism is limited to matters of faith and ethics, but it can also occasionally give rise to militant sentiments. El Hidjaazi's traditionalist views and lack of interest in concrete political action do not imply that he has no interest in politics per se. He engages in political discourse by making critical remarks about government policies. The Middle East's experience with traditionalist Salafism demonstrates how this school of thought may support a range of political involvement strategies from peaceful action to deference to the ruler (Haykel 2014, pp. 49–50).

French Salafism faces the possibility of dissidence because it rejects secularism. Salafi religious authorities aspire to maintain autonomy while shaping Muslim identity and experience, without going up against the French government. The closing of Aït-Yahya's publishing house Nawa and dozens of Salafist associations and mosques in France in the last two years show that challenges to secularism will not be tolerated by French society or the State, nor will Salafism have much wiggle room among Muslim communities. The seclusion that fosters alienating attitudes and a political-religious fantasy of Islam as a city and a faith is what Salafism clings to.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I examined the discourses of French Salafist and neo-traditionalist theologians and intellectuals on secularism as an anti-religious plan, focusing on three figures of discursive authority: Aïssam Aït-Yahya, Kareem El Hidjaazi, and Youssef Hindi. Overall, these discourses completely reject *laïcité* as a legitimate form of government. Though French Salafism is a minority movement within the French Islamic community, it remains a discursive force that opposes the government, which often expels Salafi imams and closes down religious organizations with a Salafist affiliation. There are deep issues of identity, religion, history, and attitude toward French government policies at stake in this dispute between the French state and Salafism/neo-traditionalist Islam on secularism. The division between Salafism and French *laïcité* is likely to widen as a result of this divergence, giving more radical Salafists a reason to continue to oppose the French government.

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Notes

- ¹ France: une centaine de mosquées aux mains des salafistes, alertent les renseignements: www.lejdd.fr/societe/france-une-centaine-de-mosquees-aux-mains-des-salafistes-alertent-les-renseignements-139479 (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ² Menaces d'attentats: «Il y a 10.000 personnes à surveiller en France» (Driss Aït Youssef): <https://www.latribune.fr/economie/france/terrorisme-il-y-a-10-000-personnes-a-surveiller-en-france-driss-ait-youssef-980071.html> (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ³ Le salafisme cherche à s'imposer dans l'islam: <https://www.la-croix.com/Le-salafisme-cherche-imposer-dans-islam-2016-04-05-1100751403> (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ⁴ Les huit prédicateurs que la police surveille sur Youtube: <https://www.lejdd.fr/Societe/les-huit-predicateurs-que-la-police-surveille-sur-youtube-3650291> (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ⁵ Une maison d'édition «légitimant le djihad» dans le viseur de Darmanin: <https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/nawa-une-maison-dedication-legitimant-le-djihad-dans-le-viseur-de-darmanin-17-09-2021-XKT6M6HOVJERLCWJF6KLDBWCGE.php> (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ⁶ France closes down Muslim publishing house for promoting Islamic history: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/france-closes-down-muslim-publishing-house-for-promoting-islamic-history-50091> (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ⁷ Censure et repression: Gérald Darmanin porte plainte contre Kareem El Hidjaazi: <https://islamologues-de-france.com/2021/09/27/censure-et-repression-gerald-darmanin-porte-plainte-contre-kareem-el-hidjaazi/> (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ⁸ www.youtube.com/@youssefhindi6329 (accessed on 20 April 2024); https://twitter.com/Youssef_Hindi (accessed on 20 April 2024).

- ⁹ In 2016, *Dar al-Islam* the Islamic State's French-language magazine called Aït-Yahya ironically "the jihadist philosopher" in issue 8 for condemning the Islamic State's terrorist attacks in France while embracing the principle of defensive jihad. The Islamic State, "Attacks on the Prophetic Way", *Dar al-Islam*, No. 8, 2016, p. 14.
- ¹⁰ Abdellali Hajjat, Le grand retournement du droit antiraciste: la dissolution paradoxale du Collectif contre l'islamophobie en France: <https://journals.openedition.org/revdh/19076> (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ¹¹ Aïssam Aït-Yahya: la laïcité française une laïcité radicale? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZysLjR4gqs> (accessed on 20 April 2024). Aïssam Aït-Yahya: On Laïcité. <https://www.cage.ngo/articles/on-laicite> (accessed on 20 April 2024). Conférence d'Aïssam Aït Yahya: «Laïcité et émergence de l'esprit laïque en Turquie»—26 septembre 2020—Quelques points clés <https://la-recherche-du-savoir.fr/conference-aissam-ait-yahya-laicite-turquie/> (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ¹² Aïssam Aït-Yahya: "Au nom de ma foi, je ne suis pas républicain": www.lepoint.fr/societe/aissam-ait-yahya-au-nom-de-ma-foi-je-ne-suis-pas-republicain-16-09-2016-2068778_23.php#11 (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ¹³ alarab.co.uk/رفالكتبخديجة واليهودي: https://editions-nawa.com/smartblog/82_La-colere-gronde-en-Algerie-.html (accessed on 20 February 2024); https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/download/pdf?id=zivdEC4kUcdPGYQLM_hUefGCLfB30QVspZYFwUBb6ak= (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ¹⁴ See the critical reading of this book by French anthropologist Cédric Baylocq published in mid-April 2020: Cédric Baylocq, 'Djihad fikri'. note de lecture critique «de l'idéologie islamique française» <https://cdradical.hypotheses.org/> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ¹⁵ <https://editions-nawa.com/content/7-auteurs> (accessed on 20 April 2024).
- ¹⁶ L'interview de Gustavo: Aïssam Aït-Yahya <https://lenouveaumonstre.blogspot.com/2017/03/linterview-de-gustavo-aissam-ait-yahya.html> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ¹⁷ Le ministre Gérald Darmanin officialise la dissolution de la maison d'édition ariégeoise Nawa: <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2021/09/29/le-ministre-gerald-darmanin-officialise-la-dissolution-de-la-maison-dedition-arigeoise-nawa-9820935.php> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ¹⁸ See note 7.
- ¹⁹ See his two websites: Observatoire des Islamologues de France: <http://islamologues-de-france.com> (accessed on 20 February 2024); Histoire d'islam: <http://histoiredislam.com> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ²⁰ Kareem El Hidjaazi: <https://independent.academia.edu/KareemElHidjaazi/Books> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ²¹ Charte de la laïcité à l'École: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/13/Hebdo33/MENE1322761C.htm> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ²² Youssef Hindi: https://twitter.com/Youssef_Hindi (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ²³ See note 22 above.
- ²⁴ Youssef Hindi: <https://www.conspiracywatch.info/youssef-hindi> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ²⁵ Civitas, un mouvement catholique intégriste menacé de dissolution: <https://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/civitas-un-mouvement-catholique-integriste-menace-de-dissolution-20230807> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- ²⁶ In the context of North Africa, French secularism is still unimaginable today. It is important to keep in mind that France did not implement any social reforms in its colonies during the colonial era and instead formed alliances with traditional structures of authority in North African societies.
- ²⁷ In principle, human rights are sacred to all mankind, and the symbols of the nation, the constitution, the family, the flag, etc. are sanctified and elevated in all cultures and societies (Haidt 2012, p. 166).

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