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Emily Laxer, *Unveiling the Nation: The Politics of Secularism in France and Quebec* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019). x + 293 pp. Photographs, tables, appendix, bibliography and index. \$120.00 Cdn. (hb). ISBN 9780773556287; \$34.95 Cdn. (pb). ISBN 9780773556294.

Review by Joseph Downing, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Quebec represents an interesting and under-explored case for scholars of nationalism and secularism. While it has long been studied in comparative perspective with anglophone Canada, such as work on the “two solitudes,”^[1] it lacks being placed in a comparative perspective with its much better-studied “big brother,” France. This is of particular importance given longstanding debates around the place of Islam in France itself that have taken increasingly securitised and exclusionary discursive and policy terms.^[2] While not in the exact same situation regarding post-colonial mass labour migration in the twentieth century,^[3] Quebec as part of Canada is subject to increasingly “super-diverse” ^[4] forms of migration of religiously diverse populations, including those from the Islamic world. Indeed, Quebecois Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made global news headlines in 2015 by welcoming Syrian refugees as “new Canadians,” commenting on national identity when he said “we define a Canadian not by a skin colour, a language, a religion, or a background, but by a shared set of values.”^[5]

It is into this fascinating comparative context that Laxer produces a thoroughly researched, nuanced, and well-written intervention. Within this, of particular merit is her engagement with important empirics regarding the political activities of parties around policy responses to public religious symbols. Laxer is correct to identify the continued salience of this issue as a key symbolic resource deployed by French politicians when they seek to define the terms upon which nationhood is constituted in the contemporary era. Vital here is what Laxer terms the “party political battles over who gets to ‘own’ the religious issue in France” (p. 45) which has come to increasingly dominate the political landscape in that country over the previous decades with the increasingly divisive rhetoric of politicians on both the left and the right of politics. This convergence has become ever more pronounced and interesting since Marine Le Pen has sought to centralise the National Front and re-brand it as the National Rally. This has situated the religion and in particular the Islam debate as one of the key political battles across the spectrum. “Islam” here has unfortunately become a far less contentious issue upon which to campaign in France than the far thornier issues of public sector reform, rising Euroscepticism, and concerns about unemployment.

Indeed, Laxer correctly highlights the worrying development of competition between politicians across the political spectrum for ownership of the issue, as they act as a kind of vanguard

defending a particular notion of French secularism using increasingly exclusionary and aggressive terms. Indeed, this dovetails very well with the increasingly hostile tone of President Macron in the run-up to the looming 2022 election which is interesting coming from a president who was elected without the backing of an established political party and defined the first half of his presidency more around modernising economic reforms than on the combined national identity and economic reform agenda of his predecessors such as Sarkozy.

A point Laxer makes that is often grossly under-discussed in the French political sphere is the fluidity of *laïcité* and its ongoing redefinition since the outset of the 1789 revolution. Indeed, Laxer highlights the transition after the death of Robespierre to a more radical crackdown on religious activities, including church-bell ringing, which was only partially reversed under Napoleon in 1801 (p. 47). This process has always been far from settled. However, *laïcité* is presented by politicians in a static, unitary, and dogmatic fashion, which is extremely damaging to the public debate in France about religion. If *laïcité* is presented as this static and enduring tradition, it is all too easy to argue it as something threatened by newcomers. In fact, it is something that has been much more in flux and a function of frustrations internal to France that existed long before any pre-occupation with post-migration communities originating in the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

Observations around Quebecois politics made in this context are fascinating in that Laxer identifies far more contestation regarding possible policy solutions to the secularism question. Thus the prominence of aggressive political discourses around the need to preserve French language and culture in Quebec does not automatically translate to a salience of religious difference as a threat to this cultural and linguistic heritage. Indeed, Laxer commendably takes this further by highlighting the emergence of an “intercultural approach to integrating minorities” (p. 193), albeit unofficially. Thus here Laxer opens up a fascinating insight into how a francophone cultural heritage precludes neither the recognition of ethnic and religious difference nor state-generated integration policies.

This is very interesting for scholars of nationalism and religion more broadly in that it demonstrates the power of the anglophone Canadian response to diversity management, even in the face of a decade of decrying the “death of multiculturalism” by European politicians. As such, recent discussions around among linguists defying the notion of Canada's “two solitudes” can also be said to apply to the broader secularism and multiculturalism debates in France.[6] Indeed, if the “two solitudes” logic can break down in an area as contentious in Quebec as linguistics, Laxer’s work appears to suggest that this effect is also evident within the diversity agenda. A particular strength within this work are the in-depth and extremely fruitful first-hand interviews that lend a real empirical weight to the findings of the book. It offers fascinating insights into how actors on the ground involved in policy making perceive the policy making process, in particular the insights gained from Jacques Beauchemin, a member of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, who commented, “the only thing that stunned me when reading the final report was that its positive orientation towards interculturalism” (p. 101). Thus it becomes clear that even experts working within the field are unclear about both the vision of Quebecois nationalism that “should” be articulated and on what terms the rules of re-making the nation are to be structured.

To improve, I would encourage Laxer to consider the multitude of ways that debates about religion and integration become decentralised within the French context. This is important, as

her focus on these two themes at the national level in both cases is well executed, but only tells one side of the story. Indeed, diversity in both cases (religion and integration) is overwhelmingly concentrated in urban areas and it is not simply in the national manifestations of the state where diversity and religion questions are raised, contested, and settled. This remains understudied, especially in the context of Quebec. It would be fascinating to know how the much broader migration context of Canada and the balance of anglophone and francophone diversity works out locally in policy discussions. This has been identified as particularly important in the French context where the local arena is an area where questions of diversity are raised, subverted, and settled with local solutions. France is also part of larger, trans-national forms of governance that both encourage and impose norms about diversity. Indeed, a key critique of the debate about diversity in France is that it is not completely in the control of national politicians to dictate the agenda, as France's exceptionalism is intertwined with the constant re-making of norms internationally. This is in part due to the intrusion of European norms of diversity into the French context at the local level.[7] Access to European funding for large, headline urban regeneration projects like the European Capital of Culture requires a foregrounding of diversity, and evidence of political respect and validation of this concept, with total disregard for the specificities of French thinking on the subject. Thus, *laïcité* and its prohibition on the recognition of religious and ethnic markers of identity has failed to exert any international influence as a norm and instead has been superseded by requirements to acknowledge religion and diversity as key, important, and positive dimensions of the human social condition.

Further to this, this process of diversity recognition goes much further, as local politicians and activists seek to break out of the "deadlock" of a Republican secularism that does not give them the tools to even discuss, let alone tackle, the significant problems in France emanating from religious and ethnic forms of discrimination. This has included the adoption of "territorial multiculturalism," a concept that seeks to tackle such issues indirectly through the designation of particular territories as requiring specific measures to tackle broader issues.[8] However, as I have argued, these measures often exist in conditions of "solitude" where policy innovation on an issue occurs in isolation from the broader national debates, and as such remains highly vulnerable to retrenchment.[9] These observations would have added some important comparative strands to the observations about the diversity of contested ways that this process is occurring at the level of Quebecois politics. Laxer would do well to consider better these intricacies of the French context and not essentialise the re-making of both the nation and *laïcité* as only occurring within the context of national politics.

NOTES

[1] See Peter Oliver, "Canada's Two Solitudes: Constitutional and International Law in Reference re Secession of Quebec," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 6/1-2 (1999): 63-93; Keren Rice, "Must There Be Two Solitudes? Language Activists and Linguists Working Together," in Jon Allen Reyhner and Louise Lockhard, eds., *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance & Lessons Learned* (Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University, 1999), pp. 37-60; Jean-Sébastien Rioux, "Two Solitudes: Quebecers' Attitudes Regarding Canadian Security and Defense Policy," Submission from the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute's (DFAI) Research Paper Series, February 23, 2005, reprinted in *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 7/3 (Winter 2004).

[2] Jocelyne Cesari, "Securitization of Islam in Europe: The Embodiment of Islam as an Exception," *Why the West Fears Islam: An Exploration of Muslims in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 83-105; Joseph S. Downing, *French Muslims in Perspective: Nationalism, Post-Colonialism and Marginalisation under the Republic* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[3] Alec G. Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2007).

[4] Steven Vertovec, "Superdiversity and Its Implications," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30 (2007): 1024-1054.

[5] "PM Trudeau Welcomes Syrian Refugees to Canada." *BBC News*.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-us-canada-35075181>.

[6] Rice, "Must There Be Two Solitudes?"

[7] Joseph S. Downing, "European Influence on Diversity Policy Frames: Paradoxical Outcomes of Lyon's Membership of the Intercultural Cities Programme," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38 (2015): 1557-1572.

[8] Milena Doytcheva, *Une discrimination positive à la française? Ethnicité et territoire dans les politiques de la ville* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007).

[9] Downing, *French Muslims in Perspective*.

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