

## Towards Critical Secular Studies in Education

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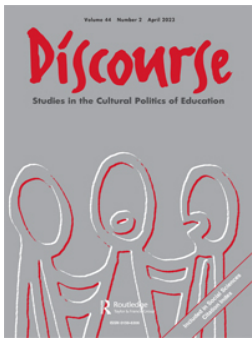
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## Towards Critical Secular Studies in Education: addressing secular education formations and their intersecting inequalities

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# Towards Critical Secular Studies in Education: addressing secular education formations and their intersecting inequalities

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## ABSTRACT

This paper calls for systematic inquiry into the relationship between secular governing formations and education inequalities. We present a thematic analysis of existing scholarship on secularism, the secular and post-secular in education. Our review of 184 texts reveals a frequent implicit or explicit reliance on the liberal state to address religious inequalities in education, and to draw the line on the extent of public religious expression. Taking a critical sociological approach, we argue this reliance neglects the state's regulation, as opposed to its elimination, of the violence of multiple education inequalities. Understanding state sovereignty as an assemblage of forces, we illustrate the need for a cohesive body of research into how secular sovereign power *privatises and de-privatises* religiosity through education, and how race, gender and sexuality are shaped as public or private concerns in the process. We conclude with key indicators for a Critical Secular Studies research and curriculum agenda.

## KEYWORDS

Secularism; post-secular; education; inequalities; Critical Secular Studies

## Introduction

The difficulty with secularism as a doctrine of war and peace in the world is not that it is European ... but that it is closely connected with the rise of a system of capitalist nation-states – mutually suspicious and grossly unequal in power ... A secular state does not guarantee toleration; it puts into play different structures of ambition and fear. The law never seeks to eliminate violence since its object is always to *regulate* violence. (Asad, 2003, pp. 7–8)

This paper argues for a move towards Critical Secular Studies in the field of Education. Considering the historically recent turn to analysing secular and post-secular societal formations in the wider social sciences and humanities, we seek to mobilise a systematic critique of the idea that politically secular sovereignty provides a neutral and unequivocally just corrective to contemporary problems of religious conflict and inequality in education. Secularism is examined here as a political project from above and below (Sheedy, 2022) that more or less strongly advocates for the separation of Religion and State, and the privatisation of religion in family and community spheres (Casanova, 2009), as opposed to a

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personal moral framework focused on temporal existence. Much has been written about the differential place of religion in diverse secular education systems, and about the possibilities and limits of liberal multiculturalism in responding to questions of rights, inequality and conflict (Modood, 2019). But the varied ways that secular political rationalities are mobilised *against* equality and social justice purposes in education have been under-researched. We argue for the need to more systematically study the ways that secular sovereign power may not only privatise, but perhaps counter-intuitively, de-privatise religion – or make it public – through education, as part of exclusionary efforts ‘to shore up power in the never-ending quest to define national and civilizational identities’ (Sheedy, 2022, p. 11).

We first establish through a review of current literature how secularism, the secular and the post-secular are conceptualised and discussed in the education literature, particularly in relation to political and equality concerns. The literature review identifies an explicit, and implicit – but not total – reliance on a liberal concept of the state managing a public/private divide to address issues of religious inequality. We outline the problems with this reliance by engaging alternative perspectives for the education literature which address forms of violence associated with secular (state) sovereignty (Asad, 2003, 2021; Mahmood, 2009, 2015). We contend that a Critical Secular Studies in Education is warranted to more systematically examine how secular sovereign processes of privatising and/or de-privatising religion through education may be used to sustain violence, through the political containment of minoritised or indigenous populations, the use of secular claims and knowledge for exclusionary purposes in the public sphere, and through the related framing of race, gender and sexuality inequalities as public or private issues. We offer illustrative examples of how Critical Secular Studies in Education can address these complex issues of inequality and violence and create a more cohesive and systematic research agenda.

### **Analysis of secularism and related concepts in the education literature**

We conducted a search of journal articles and books from January 2000 to August 2021 using the Web of Science Core Collection, ProQuest, Jstor, ProjectMUSE and EBSCO databases. This period reflects the emergence of a twenty-first century turn towards analysing the secular in philosophy and anthropology (Asad, 2003; Habermas, 2008; Mahmood, 2015; Taylor, 2007). We searched for titles – combining publication name, journal and/or book containing the words ‘secular’ and ‘education’ (158) ‘post-secular’ and ‘education’ (an additional 11) and ‘secularism’ and ‘education’ (an additional 15). The resulting total of 184 publications excludes medical publications that used the term ‘secular’ to mean a long-term trend. The vast majority (156) were published between 2010 and 2021, including all but one of the ‘post-secular’ titles. A search for ‘post-secular’ titles was included, due to the role this concept has played in scholarly rethinking of the public position of religion in society (discussed below). The search within titles rather than abstracts, keywords or main text is limited, but it allowed us to gather a critical mass of studies indicating the breadth of how these terms are conceptualised in the field of education.

We conducted a thematic analysis, which involved flexible use of deductive and inductive approaches to coding the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2019). All texts were closely read twice by the first author. The first reading involved a familiarisation process where

summary notes were taken on each publication, with particular attention to the basis for conceptualising secularism, the secular and post-secular, and their relationship to education inequalities. The second reading involved systematic coding of all texts. Some *a priori* codes based on the key concepts ‘secular’, ‘secularism’, ‘post-secular’, ‘secularisation’, and ‘religion’ were used from the outset to map patterns in their use. To ensure the reliability of the meanings identified from these codes, we cross-referenced the second set of codes (below) with these codes, and regularly returned to source literature to ensure coded excerpts reflected authors’ wider arguments. The second set of codes (183 in total) was entirely inductively developed at first.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of identifying how secularism’s political relationship to equality and social justice in education was understood, specific literature discussing explicit political questions of ‘liberalism’, ‘inequality or minoritisation’, ‘colonialism’, and ‘capitalism or neoliberalism’ was examined from across these codes. A key theme, posed as a question (‘drawing the line between politics and religion?’) emerged from this analysis, and is discussed later below.

### **Initial summary of conceptual patterns**

To demonstrate key literature patterns, and given space limitations,<sup>2</sup> the three tables below identify the top five most frequent ways the terms ‘secularism’, ‘secular’, and ‘post-secular’ were discussed or conceptualised, however briefly. The low frequencies below are attributable to the fact that many authors did not define their use of these terms. It is also possible that the term ‘secular’ was more frequently defined than ‘secularism’, because of its flexible use as an adjective as well as a noun (e.g. ‘secular humanism’, ‘the secular’).

Despite the limited conceptualisation of the secular in the literature, it is significant that many saw the secular and religious as entangled or mutually constitutive constructs (Table 1, row 1). The second point, that secular forms contain de-theologised aspects of the majority religion, is particularly important to note, as authors had differing relationships to this idea (Table 1, row 2). Most in row 2 (23 of 34) adopted an implicitly liberal and/or dispassionate stance that de-theologised religiosity was a feature of secular societal complexity, reflexivity and debate. For example, Fischer, Hotam, and Wexler (2012) endorse the secular concept of *Bildung*, drawn from Christian theology, as generative for individual and collective growth and transformation. Eight authors in row 2 problematised the presence of de-theologised religion from a justice perspective. For example, Alberts (2019) directly critiques how non-confessional religious education (RE) in Europe presents Christianity as exceptionally linked to humanism and liberal democracy.

**Table 1.** Most frequent ways the term ‘secular’ is discussed/conceptualised.

| Row | Conceptualisation of the term ‘secular’   | Frequency |
|-----|---|-----------|
| 1   | A concept entangled with, non-oppositional to, or in a dialectical relationship with notions of ‘the religious’   | 35        |
| 2   | A de-theologised societal form (e.g. institution, space, subjectivity, symbol, concept) underpinned by historically dominant concepts of religious and/or national identity | 34        |
| 3   | A non-confessional form of education  | 22        |
| 4   | A post-Enlightenment, modernist form of scientific or literary knowing distinguishable from religious faith/knowledge   | 21        |
| 5   | A non-religious, rational, atheist or humanist personal worldview   | 21        |

**Table 2.** Most frequent ways 'secularism' is discussed/conceptualised.

| Row | Conceptualisation of the term 'secularism'  | Frequency |
|-----|---|-----------|
| 1   | A political ideology which decouples state from religious authority, and may offer religious freedom and equality                             | 12        |
| 2   | A diverse set of ideologies from moderate recognition of religion in public, to institutional 'atheism', to authoritarian purging of religion | 11        |
| 3   | A political ideology that may present a problematic, partial and/or oppositional notion of religion   | 10        |
| 4   | A social movement or political stance   | 9         |
| 5   | A political ideology that may retain a privileged position for the majority religion or national group  | 8         |

As Table 2 (below) reflects, secularism as a political ideology was comparatively infrequently analysed, but it was most commonly understood as having multiple manifestations. Some concerns were noted about how 'harder' forms of secularism may erase (e.g. in the case of French *laïcité*) or purge (e.g. in the case of the Soviet Union) public religiosity and understanding of minority groups (e.g. Bowie, 2012; Hauser, 2021).

The term 'post-secular' arguably demanded greater definition, and as Table 3 indicates, it was certainly more likely to be discussed as a contested concept. It is possible that this is because the term is historically recent, and it has not entered common (non-academic) usage.

**Table 3.** Most frequent ways the term 'post-secular' is discussed/conceptualised.

| Row | Conceptualisation of the term 'postsecular'  | Frequency |
|-----|--|-----------|
| 1   | <i>As a society</i> (that may require increased awareness of the endurance or re-emergence of religion in old and new forms, and/or a reflexive, mutual learning stance towards religious or secular others)   | 26        |
| 2   | <i>As a conceptual turn</i> (indicating a rethink of secularisation as a linear historical process, an affirmative focus on hermeneutic, intercultural translations of secular/religious meanings and texts, a philosophical re-engagement with spirituality and affect, and/or greater attention to the role of capitalism in secular-religious/public-private relations) | 24        |
| 3   | <i>As a contested concept</i> (which may be too diversely used to be meaningful, or; overstate its relevance given secular societies were never devoid of religion, or; overstate its relevance given the continued strength of secular governance; or overemphasise Global Northern interests)  | 14        |

The concept of the post-secular is often attributed to Habermas's (2008) argument that, as affluent Global Northern societies see both long-term majority faith decline and an increase in minority religious movements, there is a need for both secular and religious citizens to be reflexive with each other as equals and undergo 'complementary learning processes'. However, the concept of the post-secular arguably owes an earlier debt to Casanova's (1994) analysis of the de-privatisation, or the becoming public, of religion. Notably, de-privatisation was only explicitly referenced in three of the post-secular titles (and only three of the others). Only Bowie (2012) referred to Casanova's argument that religious privatisation and de-privatisation may happen concurrently. There was also no explicit analysis of how struggles over religious privatisation and de-privatisation may occur together through secular education institutions at multiple (macro, meso, micro) scales (discussed later).

### **Drawing the line? Politics/inequality and the question of state violence**

Before examining the education literature on secularism, equality and violence, it is worth noting issues raised in the wider literature on such matters. Habermas (2008) argues for

state religious neutrality as a core democratic norm on the basis that the state controls the means of legitimate coercion, and it should not be 'opened to strife between various religious communities, otherwise the government could become the executive arm of a religious majority that imposes its will on the opposition' (p. 28). Critique of the concept of state neutrality have long been present in critical analyses of liberalism's rational, autonomous citizen, for whom in reality, class, gender and ethnicity regulates their access to various publics and the fruits of economic and social 'progress' (Fraser, 1990; Lynch, 2022). But at the same time, analysts of liberal state violence/inequality have often historically used an unreflexively secularist conceptualisation of religion as a proxy for, or epiphenomenal to, other ideologies and struggles. For example, claims to state religious protection have been reduced to an aspect of ethno-cultural/anti-racist claims (Lloyd, 2016; Mahmood, 2015) and public claims to religious identity have been reduced to a form of capitalist false consciousness (McLennan, 2019).

Critical scholarship also further outlines that legal concepts of religious rights and equality are not just problematic because they fail to critique state violence generally. As secular concepts, they have historically constructed a culturally specific, majoritarian understanding of religion (Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2009). As Brown (2014) argues, 'far from sequestering religion, secularism is a particular way of stipulating, organising, and producing it' (p. 112). In Europe, for example, minority religious claims are heard in a context which positions Christianity and Christians as exceptionally able to rationally engage the secular public sphere. European court rulings which decide crucifixes in schools are symbols of cultural heritage, but hijabs are religious and potentially indoctrinating, involve a religification of Islam and 'Muslimness' by secular powers, which overdetermines Muslims as driven by fixed religious beliefs (Gholami, 2021). This notion of belief uses a liberal Protestant understanding of religion as a set of propositions (Lewin, 2017) which erases religion's embeddedness in political, economic, and social struggles.

While authors in our review may have been critical about how the secular contained de-theologised Christian elements, they did not always offer a political theorisation of why this was the case. Those publications that referenced or discussed secularism as a feature of political liberalism (36) could be categorised in three ways:

- Those who *endorsed* liberal secular ideas of state neutrality towards religion/belief, state law, liberty of worldviews, respect/tolerance of others, self-limitation in the public sphere, and intercultural learning (6);
- Those who *discussed problems or limits with* liberal secular ideals in specific contexts, including lack of meaningful engagement with religious perspectives in public; the contradictory lack of critique of secularism itself; the agonistic nature of living with difference; secular liberalism's foundation in inter-Christian struggles, and the challenge of knowing where to draw the line between public and private religious expression (16);
- Those who *explicitly critiqued how liberal secular ideas are discursively used* to enact forms of social control, discipline and/or epistemological violence (13). These include the Global Northern representation of Christian-centred 'liberal values' as a de-politicised common standard for religious practice that minorities – particularly Muslims – must live by.

Cross-referencing the above with the other political literature codes, only three of the 13 publications that discussed colonisation also referenced secular liberalism. Each analysis of colonisation fell into in the third, explicit critique of liberalism category above. Specifically, Ivermee (2015), Sahin (2018), and Ray (2020) address epistemic injustices where colonial governments, focused on liberal 'reform', used education to construct separate and/or oppositional objects of secular/religious inquiry (e.g. Sanskrit literature reclassified as secular study; the hierarchising of Western vs Islamic knowledge). Separately, 22 publications overall focused on the minoritisation of, and inequalities experienced by, specific groups. Sixteen of these focused on Muslims, or on Islamic education in Britain, Canada, India, the Netherlands, Finland, France, Sweden, and Turkey. Seven of these minority group-focused works also fell into the above explicit critique of liberalism category (Hauser, 2021; Ivermee, 2015; Jivraj, 2013; Ray, 2020; Sahin, 2018; Sözeri, Altinyelken, & Volman, 2019; Vincent, 2018). Across the 22 minority-group-focused works, only Sahin (2018) briefly distinguished between race-focused and religion-focused claims in the secular public sphere.

Five publications provided a critique of relations between secularism, capitalist ideologies, and/or neoliberal policies. Hastie (2017) notes colonial Australia's apparent move towards 'free, compulsory and secular' education may have been born both of social control desires both to 'secure the mercantile interests of the capitalist classes' (p. 287) and establish a dominant Protestant alliance's definition of non-confessional schooling in their terms, to the exclusion of Catholics and others. Sirozi (2004) describes how Dutch colonisers of Indonesia had a similar requirement for 'lower-class labour' but established state-funded Islamic schools for this purpose (p. 126). Fancourt (2021) discusses how Milton Friedman's neoliberalism viewed public education as blocking parental freedom to choose schools according to their religious conscience. Watson (2013) and Kitching (2017) further argue contemporary neoliberal ideologies of school choice in England and Ireland allow a form of post-secular education policy to develop, by supporting majority religious and economic interests through the maintenance or expansion of majority faith, state-funded schooling.

In terms of identifying an overall theme characterising the literature's political-inequality analysis, there was a reasonably clear distinction between (a) scholarship working within the limits of liberalism, which focused on where the public/private line should be drawn for equality purposes, and (b) critical theory-driven scholarship that critiqued – in not so many words – how the drawing of that line through liberal, colonial or neoliberal governance itself has typically enacted forms of exclusion, inequality and/or violence. However, no publication (or series of publications, given that a small number of authors appeared 2–3 times) brought together the critical analysis of relationships between secularism and political liberalism, colonialism, minoritisation, and neoliberal economic relations into one explicit framework. Aside from Jivraj (2013), there was an absence of explicit analysis of secular law and its relationship to religion and education. Notably, given the significance of media to a critical analysis of how and whether the public sphere is accessible (Asad, 2003), there was virtually no focused attention given to education media dynamics. There was an absence of explicit focus on how *both* dynamics of religious privatisation and de-privatisation occur, and how they may reproduce the violence and inequality of certain forms of secular political rationality. Finally, while seven authors referenced the idea that secular worldviews also may involve a



form of faith, there was no explicit consideration in the literature given to how 'in societies that may understand themselves as relentlessly secular, commodities, money, status, cultures, nations, states, and even civilisation may be sacralized' (Brown, 2014, p. 112). Below, we take the above issues as opportunities for a more cohesive education research agenda.

### ***Towards Critical Secular Studies in Education***

At the heart of the critical study of secularism is the question of state sovereignty, and the violence that can be enacted through the ways religion is conceptualised and structured as part of various public and private spheres. The Christian European shaping of modern secularism is often a key focus, due to its influence on how states organise, fund and legislate for 'proper' (de-politicised, individualised) religion (Anidjar, 2006; Mahmood, 2009). But Asad (2021) indicates that, to avoid a nativist analysis, what is more important to analyse internationally is secularism's dependence on the illusion of totalising power to care for and defend the worldly interests of its people, and exclude minoritised or colonial others. Critical anthropological and philosophical research unpacks the relationship between sovereignty and violence without conceptualising (or indeed, sacralising) the secular state as a timeless, absolute, or unitary source of power (Asad, 2003, 2021; Brown, 2014; Butler, 2008; Mahmood, 2009, 2015; Scott, 2011). Whereas sovereignty may be popularly imagined as 'held by' a state, this work prioritises the historic, contemporary and comparative *performance* of sovereignty – as an assemblage of economic, political, juridical forces, and public and private actors within and beyond a specific territory, which shapes the government of life and produces subjects (Foucault, 2010; Wiertz, 2020).

A key insight Education Studies can explore from this notion of sovereignty as performed is that the de-privatisation, or the becoming public, of minority or colonial indigenous religiosity at the level of the state or civil society (Casanova, 1994) is not necessarily threatening to secular sovereignty. Rather, de-privatisation is a contingency that may be leveraged in the interests of sovereign secular power, e.g. based in the Orientalist view that religion is the 'true spirit' of the East, which can be used to discipline the colonised (Mahmood, 2015). There are germs of this idea in the work of Schneider (2014) and Ivermee (2015), who show how British colonials de-privatised, or at the very least avoided entirely privatising religion in education, to manage colonial populations. British administrators managed sectarian confessional education systems for Jews and Arabs in Palestine based on the idea that (a) appropriately standardised religious education provided universal principles of moral conduct, and (b) an integrated, non-confessional education system risked becoming politicised as part of a nationalist struggle. In Indian higher education, Hindus and Muslims were eventually permitted to open universities to contain their social movements and control their perceived 'impudence, insolence and irreverence' (Ivermee, 2015, p. 141).

Any assumption that increased state support of religious interests in education is 'not really' secular then, relies on a linear temporal notion of countries being 'completely' or 'deficiently' secular, modelled on the western nation-state (Butler, 2008; Mahmood, 2015). As only one education paper took a comparative perspective (on India and Sweden, which itself focused on 'where to draw the line'; Niemi, 2018), there is a need for critical comparative education work which challenges notions of complete Northern/incomplete Southern secularism. We illustrate below, drawing further on the

literature beyond education and our own recent work, that *both* dynamics of de-privatisation and privatisation affect not just minoritised religion, but how and whether race, gender and sexuality inequalities appear as public, private or non-issues. We present some recent historical experiences of British Muslims, and the politics of Britain's counter-terrorism legislation, as examples of how dynamics of privatisation and de-privatisation operate concurrently through education to enforce exclusionary secular sovereignty. These examples also indicate the ways both secular laws and media discursively produce and delimit how religion and how secular claims in education are publicly structured for minoritised groups.

### ***Secular sovereignty, race, and religion***

Secular sovereign power has historically mobilised categories of race and religion hand in glove to produce specific forms of advantage and disadvantage (Anidjar, 2006; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1986; Lloyd, 2016). For example, Muslims *qua* Muslims arguably started to become a politically charged category in the UK from the 1970s onwards when the British state began deploying 'multiculturalist' strategies such as highlighting religious and cultural differences among South Asian communities and funding projects associated with them. Strategies such as funding local conservative religious community leaders proved potent in breaking up the unity of leftist anti-racist Asian Youth Movements that transcended the ethnic and religious diversity of British South Asians (see Kundnani, 2007, 2014; Maxwell, 2006). This was effectively the interpellation by the state of Muslims as a unified religious group, or more accurately, as noted earlier, a religified group – a phenomenon that has now arguably become entrenched due to milestone events such as the 'Rushdie affair' in 1988, 9/11 in 2001, and the 'Trojan Horse' affair in 2014. This process has been politically expedient for certain segments of British politics: in addition to helping to dismantle the unity of minorities against systemic racial injustices, it has given the state and the counter-terrorism industry the ability to publicly problematise not just acts of so-called Islamist violence, but the loosely defined notion of 'Islamist ideology'. This important shift from violence to ideology resulted from revisions to counter-extremism policy following the Trojan Horse affair and has since become enshrined in law via PREVENT legislation (more on which below; see also Holmwood & O'Toole, 2018). It marks a slippery slope by which any aspect of Muslims' religious beliefs is potentially open to being categorised as extreme (see Gholami, 2021; Mamdani, 2002). This is itself an important articulation of secular sovereignty, which we will come back to below.

The idea of religification noted earlier draws attention to further complexities. Muslim people not only occupy a myriad political and identity positions, they also practice Islam in vastly heterogeneous ways, not to mention that sizeable numbers of people from Muslim backgrounds identify as secular. But the major problem with the ways in which the race-religion nexus is theorised currently is that it does not account for these nuances well. By aligning Islamophobia virtually entirely within the secular (i.e. non-theological) anti-racist tradition, theories of marginalisation lose sight of the different historical trajectories, social relations and experiences of people of African, Asian and Middle Eastern descent. As noted earlier, for example, Sahin (2018), argues that the literature on Muslim education in the West is typically steeped in the anti-racist tradition and neglects 'the experience and articulation of Islam in the individual and collective lives

of Muslims' (pp. 5–6). Commentators such as Patel (2022) have even gone as far as to suggest that the very concept of Islamophobia is redundant because there is nothing distinct about the prejudices that Muslims face, thus ignoring the uniquely Islamophobic dynamics of the post-9/11 world. As such, despite their best intentions, anti-racist approaches may end up enabling the perpetuation of Islamophobia by failing to account for its religified dimension, reducing its complexities to 'traditional' understandings of racism.

A key question that Critical Secular Studies introduces here is: How might analyses of Islamophobia in education benefit from the critical study of the secular privatising and deprivatising of minoritised religiosity? We suggest this question offers new layers to the analysis of policies such as the UK's counter-extremism legislation (PREVENT), which is enacted significantly through the education system, and which since its inception has disproportionately targeted Muslims. During his tenure as Prime Minister (2010–2016), David Cameron defined Islamic extremism as a symptom of moral collapse, which needed to be countered by muscular liberalism, and he identified Christianity as central to British culture and values (Jivraj, 2013). His government's counter-extremism agenda changed focus from targeting violent extremism to targeting extremist ideology. This was a monumental shift and meant that people's beliefs and attitudes could be put under explicit public surveillance. Although we are not suggesting that fighting extremism should be confined only to its violent expressions, it is important to acknowledge that PREVENT had from the outset targeted 'Muslim communities' in general as a way to stop a potential 'conveyor belt to terrorism' (Qurashi, 2018). Given this manufactured link between 'being Muslim' and being at risk of radicalisation, and the fact that 'Islamism' was identified as the greatest threat to face the UK, politicians, the media and the public soon questioned the level of threat that Islam and Muslims posed to Britain. In this climate, and especially after PREVENT became statutory in 2015 (Department for Education, 2015), young Muslims in schools and universities across the UK bore the brunt of a policy that seemed designed to ostracise them from any sense of Britishness. It is well evidenced that this has had huge educational ramifications (Gholami, 2021; Miah, 2017).

What is significant for our purposes here is not simply the changing mechanisms of racialised surveillance, or the way in which sovereign power confidently reclaims majoritarian religious heritage (Brown, 2014), but how it selectively destabilises binaries of secular publicness and religious privateness through policies such as PREVENT. If, following traditional secularist logics, we accept that religious belief is private, then the problematisation and politicisation of 'Islamic culture' that PREVENT has brought about has effectively de-privatised belief, and made it a public matter. In other words, Muslims do not necessarily even have the option to practise their faith privately; Islam-as-religion is routinely dragged into the public sphere under the banner of 'Islamism', where it is used as justification for increasingly un-democratic and draconian counter-extremism measures. There is further scope for a strengthened analysis of race-religious intersections, of course, to also better understand the role of minority faith publicness in contributing to anti-racist education movements, and vice versa (Sahin, 2018). Questions may arise here as to whether legal and policy measures like PREVENT are secular or post-secular in nature. But given the lack of consensus on what the 'post-secular' means (as noted in Table 3 and as outlined outside of Education by Beckford, 2012), we argue what is more significant to ask is whether a policy analysis confronts the relationship

between sovereign governing formations and multiple, intersecting forms of violence and inequality, including as below, those of religion, gender, and sexuality.

### ***Secular sovereignty, gender, sexuality and religion***

Feminist and queer analyses have posed significant critiques of the idea that the sovereign privatisation of religion equates with gender and sexual emancipation. For example, Scott (2011) argues the relegation of family, sex, and religion to the private sphere after the French revolution was in part a response to the perceived threats that women's religiosity and sexuality posed to public order: 'the susceptibility of women to priestly influence was long used to justify denying them the vote in Catholic countries of Europe' (Scott, 2011, p. 97). Rasmussen (2016) takes up this critique of assumptions of secular emancipation in education with respect to gender and sexuality in the path-breaking *Progressive Sexuality Education: The Conceits of Secularism*. Rasmussen thoroughly challenges policy and political discourses that assume comprehensive, science-based sexuality education, which does not explicitly engage religious values, is universally progressive and value-neutral. This work demonstrates how the representation of secular claims and knowledge as superior can be used to exclusionary effect in public education and highlights the potential for right-wing conservatives to claim a private monopoly on religiosity.

But there is further work to do to consider how gender and sexuality become legally framed as public or private issues to shore up secular sovereignty, and how news and social media structure how minoritised groups' education claims can be heard in public. Taking an example outside of Education, Mahmood (2015) contends an exaggerated importance has been accorded to family law as the exemplary site of the preservation and reproduction of religious identity in Egypt, a fact not explained entirely as a legacy of Islamic empire. The Egyptian state has permitted Christians, Muslims and Jews to have separate, private family law systems was partly an artefact of colonial powers using sectarian governing strategies. As Islamic family law is seen as embodying national identity norms, Coptic Christian family law has become even more important to the community's efforts to not assimilate. At the same time, Coptic laws become aggressively problematised in Egyptian media, e.g. as the cause of Coptic women's 'abduction' from their Muslim husbands, in ways that intensify Coptic minoritisation and inter-religious conflict. This work shows how minority religion becomes discursively positioned as a threat to public order and women's bodies, while the role of secular sovereignty in structuring such problems remains invisible.

As an example of a pathway for Critical Secular Studies in analysing education-related media, and building on the work of Bialystok and Wright (2019), Kitching (2022) analyses coverage of protests by conservative Muslim parents and activists against queer-inclusive primary schooling in Birmingham, UK, in 2019. These protests took place in the wake of the PREVENT-related positioning of LGBT-inclusive education as a securitised British value (Nash & Browne, 2020). Both those defending and those protesting queer-inclusive schooling appropriated a particular form of secular liberal discourse which positioned schools as politically neutral public spaces, where strong beliefs (either about religion, or sexuality) should remain private, and not trump common Fundamental British Values defined under PREVENT (DfE, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Those protesting queer-inclusive schooling

were represented as using secular arguments for private freedom of conscience, parental rights/home authority, and child protection to frame schools as value-neutral (yet ultimately heteronormative) public spaces. While queerness has long been represented as a choice or ideology by conservative religious groups, as Nash and Browne (2020) argue, these tactics specifically use secular, rather than theological language, while still appropriating a culturally Christian notion of belief as a private matter and prevailing symbols of queerness (e.g. rainbow flags) as something to be left behind in public education.

The 'value neutral' arguments of religious and sexual privateness put forward by protestors arguably mirrored the stigmatisation of public signs of religiosity (e.g. clothing, prayer) that Muslims experience in everyday ways in Western contexts. At the same time, these arguments allowed protestors to make a kind of claim about aligning to 'common British values'. The analysis demonstrates how secular Christian ideas of religion as private and apolitical may have to be mobilised by minoritised groups to be intelligible in this mediascape, while at the same time, their religiosity is de-privatised and subject to constant scrutiny in this mediascape and policy/political climate. Simultaneously, being LGBT was represented by those defending queer-inclusive schooling as 'an intrinsic part of the individual self', which 'needs to be confessed and practiced without restrictions' (Van den Brandt, 2018, p. 71). The tension here is that confessional models of 'out' Western queer agency, which, as Jivraj and de Jong (2011) argue, often form the basis of state funding for queer communities, map on to secular Christian ideas of autonomy and salvation, a form of 'queer secularism' (Bialystok & Wright, 2019; Puar, 2014; Rasmussen, 2016) which distinguishes Christians as having greater access to national LGBT-inclusive norms even if they reject them, while Muslim conservatism is equated with extremism and threats to public order. By analysing how secular Christian representation of conservative, and liberal groups in various publics (street, media), this work shows how struggles over religious privatisation and de-privatisation cut across micro- and macro-political scales, and shape how gender and sexual inequality are framed as public or private issues.

## Concluding discussion

This paper has identified some key opportunities for Critical Secular Studies in Education. In this concluding section, we draw together some key points as to what a move towards Critical Secular Studies in the field would look like. We have shown that a minority of education work has moved beyond an analysis of 'where to draw the line' for religion between the public and private sphere. But there is a need for a more cohesive and systematic focus on the violence and multiple forms of inequality associated with how such lines, i.e. processes of privatising and de-privatising religion, are drawn. A majority scholarly focus on where to draw the line elides how the very indeterminacies of sovereign governance create 'a space internal to secular power, one that animates, sustains and even further entrenches the question of ... the proper role of religion within social life' (Agrama, 2012, p. 227; Groeninck, 2021).

With respect to academic scholarship, we have recognised the growing awareness over the past decade that secular claims and arrangements are not necessarily, always and everywhere progressive, that secular and religious discourses are mutually entangled;

and the limited acknowledgement that struggles over secular education governance is implicated in forms of violence and inequality. We contend that a move towards a more cohesive Critical Secular Studies in Education can be achieved by developing a critical mass of research inquiry that addresses the following four questions/areas:

- How do secular education laws, media, and policy discursively/politically produce and delimit how religion and religious groups are understood? What is important here is the analysis of how these processes may operate to 'shore up' sovereign power in the form of religion's perceived alignment, or lack thereof, with official and unofficial 'national values'. For example, there is scope for greater analysis of the Euro-Atlantic reclaiming of majoritarian religious 'heritage' as part of a scapegoating of minoritised populations as a source of moral decline, and the more global promotion of consumer citizenship through deregulated, (faith) school choice.
- What can we learn from historic, comparative and geographic studies of the above phenomena? Such work can challenge the 'sacralisation' of individual secular state sovereignty as a timeless or unified form of power, and analyse its manifestation in different spatial and temporal education contexts. There is significant potential here to further examine how contemporary struggles between religious sects through education (e.g. Lebanon, Northern Ireland) are not simply 'religious issues', but in part a consequence of the exercise of secular colonial governing tactics.
- How do both majority and minoritised religious groups struggle over 'the drawing of the public/private line'? In particular, there is a need for more research on how secular rather than necessarily theological claims are mobilised in the public sphere (e.g. arguments about secular anti-racism, state indoctrination, child protection), and how multiple, intersecting forms of (in)equality are framed as public or private issues in the process.
- How might sociological studies address the violence associated with concurrent processes of religious privatisation and de-privatisation through education across multiple scales, both of everyday lived experience and national or global policy networks and media discourse?

With respect to how this field can contribute to education practitioners, as with Blencowe (2021), we are supportive of curricula that meaningfully and critically address multiple lifeworlds, epistemologies and their interrelations. But our emphasis is squarely on secularism as a political project, as opposed to a personal moral framework discussed in non-confessional religious/ethics education (cf. Gholami, 2018a, 2018b). The study of secularism as a political topic in itself was not discussed in any of the publications we reviewed. As such, we believe there is scope for education curricula in citizenship, politics and sociology to make space to examine the meanings of secularism itself, how secular sovereign assemblages define not just religion, but also sexuality, gender, race, and class, as public or private concerns through education systems, and how such processes reproduce or mitigate intersecting education inequalities.

Certainly, this wider project may often necessitate further and ongoing critical analysis of Christian influence within modern secular governing power. But as noted earlier, we must avoid a nativist analysis which results in secularism, or indeed Christian groups in global contexts, becoming unilaterally rejected. It is important to conclude that

advocating critical analysis of the assembling of and struggle over secular sovereignty, and the violence associated with processes of privatisation and de-privatisation, does not lead us to give up on the promise of religious equality offered by secularism, or to suggest theological states are a better alternative to liberal states. But simultaneously, the strength of religious nationalism or fundamentalism in various countries does not lead us to consider certain education systems as having ‘failed’ to transition to secular modernity. Rather, both issues lead us to call for more cohesive, joined up, and systematic inquiry into the ‘structural paradoxes that haunt the secular project’ across Western and non-Western education contexts (Mahmood, 2015, p. 2), and to consider how multiple inequalities, e.g. of gender, sexuality, race, and class are mutually shaped through this project.

## Notes

1. To manage the literature, these wider codes became organised early on under the headings of ‘cultural politics of secular categories’ (ultimately 11 codes), ‘agency/subjectivity’ (17), ‘secular-religious formations’ (4), political arguments (23), ‘publi(c)s’ (24), ‘state/policy’ (23), ‘empirical findings’ (26), ‘knowledge, curriculum, epistemology’ (35), and ‘pedagogies’ (20 codes).
2. Due to the volume of literature and the word count limits of this journal, it is only possible to cite an illustrative sample of publications.
3. These values are democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with differing faiths and beliefs.

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