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Belgian *Laïcité*: Associations With Racism, Sexism, and Strategic Endorsement in the Face of Islam

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ABSTRACT

Laïcité, a version of secularism typically encountered in France, is at the heart of a heated debate, notably because it is frequently invoked as a reason for public measures against the headscarf. Research conducted in France has suggested that two conceptions of *laïcité* coexist, a historical version and a more recent one limiting the expression of religious symbols (e.g., headscarf) in the public space. In Belgium, such debates about Islam and *laïcité* also came to the fore in recent years. However, no empirical work has examined the different conceptions of *laïcité* in Belgium nor their link with attitudes towards Islam, racism, and sexism. In Study 1 ($N = 321$), we relied on Confirmatory Factor Analysis and found that *laïcité* comprises three separate dimensions (historic, anti-funding and anti-public expressions of religious symbols *laïcités*), each having distinct links with intergroup attitudes of racism, sexism, and anti-Islam attitudes. In Study 2 ($N = 191$), we used an experimental design and made either Islam or Catholicism salient. As expected, antiegalitarian participants increased their levels of endorsement of "anti-public expression of religious symbols" in the Islam condition, compared to the Catholic one. In line with Study 1's findings, this interaction was not present for anti-funding *laïcité*. These results suggest the presence of distinct forms of *laïcité* in Belgium while showing the existence of a strategic malleability of this concept in Belgium. Findings such as these further our understanding of the dynamics at work in the debates around the headscarf, the financing of cults, *laïcité* in Belgium, and implications for societal cohesion.

In France, and across several other Western European countries, the Muslim headscarf has become a focal point of how people envision the place of Islam in society. It is frequently framed as a symbol of Islam's incompatibility with principles that would be core to Western societies, such as secularism and gender equality (Benelli et al. 2006; Bentouhami 2018). However, the very application of secularism—of which *French laïcité* is one interpretation—has been the matter of a considerable debate. While secularism is a principle that applies in many countries (e.g., Maclure and Taylor 2011; Siam-Heng and Liew 2010), its specific manifestations vary. In France, where *laïcité* has taken on distinct forms, these complexities have fueled not only public controversy but also a growing body of academic research. Scholars, for example, have argued that right-wing politicians endorse the principle of *laïcité* as a means to advance their hidden racist agenda against Muslims (Al-Saji 2018; Benelli et al. 2006; Delphy 2006; Krivenko 2012). At the same time, recent social psychological research suggests that the general public holds distinct interpretations of *laïcité*: one dating back to the initial law instituting *laïcité* in the country, and another, more recent and restrictive view (Roebroeck and Guimond 2016). This conclusion is all the more significant that these two meanings appear to have different associations with prejudice towards Maghrebi or immigrants in

France. Although Belgium is often compared to France, Belgium's version of secularism, informed by its history of pluralism, diverges from the French model (Schreiber 2014). A first goal of the present work was to examine the way *laïcité* is understood in Belgium and whether the same distinctions would emerge as in France. A second goal was to investigate the relations between these various dimensions of *laïcité*, on the one hand, and three sets of attitudes, namely, attitudes towards Islam, racism, and sexism, on the other. A third important goal was to establish whether participants' attitudes towards *laïcité* can be seen as a strategic posture by checking the impact of exposure to a specific religion (i.e., Catholicism vs. Islam) on those attitudes.

1 | Laïcité in France

Most Western European countries rest on the well-established principle that there ought to be a strict separation between the Church and the State. At the same time, the question remains vivid as to what exactly secularism entails. In France, several issues are raised in the public debate in the name of *laïcité*, the French version of secularism, arousing a huge amount of passion and controversy. In spite of its repeated use, the exact application of *laïcité* does not seem to be agreed upon (Hennette-Vauchez 2016; Martin et al. 2015; Roy 2015). Somehow, "the concept of *laïcité* tends to be hollowed out to become a strange discursive object, at the same time a loose meaning and a rigid designator" (Sibertin-Blanc and Boqui-Queni 2015, 105, our translation).

In France, *laïcité* has been explicitly articulated in a law issued in 1905, even though its history is more ancient (Barthélemy and Michelat 2007; Lindner 2019; Selby 2011). The law asserts freedom of thought, equality among all citizens regardless of their religion, and separation of civil society and religion. The main purpose of the law was to diminish the Catholic Church's influence (Barthélemy and Michelat 2007; Cesari 2002; Selby 2011). However, in the last decades, another, more restrictive understanding of *laïcité* has gained popularity. This novel concept emerged in the late 1980s, coinciding with a period of intensified public debate over immigration and Islam in Europe. The first generation of "guest workers" immigrants—who arrived in Europe in the 1960s as a temporary workforce following labor immigration agreements between Belgium and France, on the one hand, with countries such as Turkey and Morocco, on the other—had begun to settle more permanently, notably through family reunification. However, in the 1980s, as European economies transitioned away from industrial production (such as mining), many found themselves pushed out of this sector into economic precarity (Phalet et al. 2015; Strabac and Listhaug 2008; Zick et al. 2008). During the same period, highly publicized events, such as headscarf controversies in France, as well as the rise of the far-right, contributed to a climate of alarmism. The increasing presence of Islam in countries like France, where it was initially almost nonexistent, became a topic of intense public discourse, and governments intensified their scrutiny of Muslims in society (Barthélemy and Michelat 2007; Bentouhami 2018; Lindner 2019; Selby 2011).

At that time, rising concerns and disagreements led to the setup of a commission by the French President to address the matter. Despite later criticism for its alarmist rhetoric and biases, the commission report deeply entrenched the idea that the headscarf is a threat to French *laïcité* and played a pivotal role in shaping the 2004 law banning religious symbols in schools (Baubérot 2008). In 2001, the public response following the 9/11 attacks further entrenched the idea that Muslims are driven, or even blinded, by their religious affiliation (Sibertin-Blanc and Boqui-Queni 2015). The heightened fear of Islamism promoted the idea that *laïcité* is intrinsically at odds with Islam (Benelli et al. 2006; Bentouhami 2018; Lindner 2019). Since then, the headscarf, along with other garments commonly associated with Muslim women, such as long skirts, the burkini, and the abaya, have faced growing restrictions in various public spaces or events, all framed as necessary for the protection of *laïcité*. Ironically, public debates on the matter have largely excluded the perspectives of Muslims. Nevertheless, this newer, more restrictive, conception of *laïcité* proposes a version of secularism that dictates neutrality not only to the State and to public officials (such as teachers, hospital agents or State agents working in city councils) but also to citizens themselves, as users of public institutions (Barthélemy and Michelat 2007; Hennette-Vauchez 2016; Policar 2017; Roebroeck and Guimond 2016). This change is the use of *laïcité* has been abundantly criticized by several scholars who denounced a "falsified" *laïcité* targeting Muslim minorities. In their view, the concept is losing its essence by prioritizing neutrality over the goals of religious freedom and non-discrimination (Baubérot 2008; Jacquemain 2014).

Work in social psychology conducted over the last decade has confirmed the existence of distinct conceptions of *laïcité* within the French population (Kamiejski et al. 2012). Whereas some authors find as many as four dimensions (Cohu et al. 2018), others identify two dimensions, namely of historic and new *laïcités* (Roebroeck and Guimond 2016, 2018). Specifically, whereas a first dimension enshrines equality of all citizens regardless of their religion, freedom of conscience, and the separation of civil society and religion (referred to as "historic *laïcité*"), a second dimension demands neutrality from individual citizens, bans religious symbols (i.e., the wearing of signs or clothing by which one ostensibly manifests a religious affiliation, (Loi du 15 mars 2004 encadrant, en application du principe de laïcité, le port de signes ou de tenues manifestant une appartenance religieuse dans les écoles, collèges et lycées publics. 2004) in public spaces and administrations, and opposes the public funding of religions (referred to as "new *laïcité*").

2 | Laïcité in Belgium

Although, like France, Belgium does not have one official "state" religion, Belgian *laïcité* takes a different shape (Dobbelaere 2010; Jacquemain 2014; Martin et al. 2015). First, much like in France, it can refer to the principle governing the management of religious diversity. This is grounded in the legal frameworks of the separation of Church and State, which ensures that religious institutions do not interfere with the functioning of the government and vice versa. The separation is

designed to guarantee freedom of conscience for all citizens, ensuring that individuals can freely practice their religion or choose not to follow any religion at all, without any coercion or state influence. Additionally, the neutrality of the state is crucial in Belgian *laïcité*, meaning that the state is not allowed to endorse or favor any religion over another in public life or policymaking. At the same time, the practical application of the principle of State neutrality sparks intense debates. Much like in France, second- and third-generation Muslims, rightfully acknowledged as citizens, have been striving to connect with their Islamic heritage. Whether they should have the freedom to express their religious beliefs in specific settings, such as higher education institutions and the parliament, is a matter of dispute.

Second, while Belgium applies a principle of "*neutralité*" (neutrality), meaning that the state cannot favor one religion over the other, it does not enforce a strict separation between religion and state as seen in France. Instead, Belgium officially recognizes a diversity of religious and philosophical beliefs, among which *laïcité* is included. This pluralistic approach has historical roots in the country's development through a delicate balance of opposing ideological forces known as "pillars"—specifically, the Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal pillars. Each pillar historically established its own parallel institutions, such as schools, healthcare systems, trade unions, civil society organizations, and political parties. As a result, rather than promoting a singular national ideology, the Belgian state evolved into a model of organized pluralism, in which multiple belief systems—and the services they provide—receive public recognition and funding. Today, Belgium officially acknowledges seven such beliefs: Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Protestant-Evangelicalism, and organized *laïcité*. In this framework, *laïcité* is not a neutral absence of religion but a recognized worldview in its own right, fully integrated into the state's neutral stance by being treated equally among other beliefs (Dobbelaere 2010; Jacquemain 2014; Martin et al. 2015). The state funds the organization of these religions (churches, employees...) as well as religious (mainly Catholic) schools in addition to public schools (whose pupils have access to some specific classes in which their religion is taught). Yet, administrations and non-religious (public) schools do not tolerate displays of religious affiliation among their employees and students during work hours (like in France). Of note, although the practice of Catholicism, the dominant religion, is on the decline, a substantial portion of Belgians still identify with Catholicism, and the Catholic Church maintains a robust presence in civil society.

Having said this, the funding of the different beliefs remains the focus of some debate. In particular, the Catholic belief is said to receive an excessive portion of governmental funds (RTBF 2019; Schreiber 2014). Moreover, opponents argue that in virtue of the separation of religion and State, religions should simply not be funded, or to a much lesser extent (Schreiber 2014). Finally, other critics argue that Islam should receive more funding so as to protect it against foreign, Islamist influences (Le Vif 2017). Clearly, the debate surrounding public funding reveals a variety of motivations, that is, a will to grant less space for religions in general, a will to grant less space for Catholics, a will to grant less space for Islam, or a will to protect Islam from foreign dangerous influences, among others. As Schreiber (2014, 140, our translation) summarizes it: "Thus, the assumption in Belgium is that Islam—supposedly the prime symbol of discrimination against people of foreign origin—is minorized or even excluded from the European scene, that this exclusion is an unacceptable violence against Muslims, and that the balance must be redressed. That is, to grant Muslims and Islam rights comparable to those of previously recognized religions. This rebalancing would therefore lead to an increase in religion in the public sphere—a public sphere already overloaded with symbols and symbolism".

To sum up, Belgium experiences challenges analogous to those encountered in France, such as the debate on religious symbols and their relation to *laïcité*. However, Belgium's unique heritage of political pluralism and the financial support provided to religious institutions in Belgium combine to set Belgium's *laïcité* apart from that of France. In spite of the uniqueness of the Belgian version of *laïcité*, no research has investigated the conceptualization of *laïcité* among Belgians. This is the first goal of the present research.

3 | Laïcité and Prejudice

For many observers, *laïcité* supports gender equality (Charte De La Laïcité Dans Les Services Publics 2021). In France, the legal ban on religious symbols was justified by stating the need to promote gender equality and help vulnerable women (Bentouhami 2018; Delphy 2006; Howard 2012; Selby 2011). According to this view, *laïcité* would go hand in hand with an antisexist agenda. In contrast, many authors claim that the use of an antisexist rhetoric to ban the headscarf is nothing but hypocritical (Bentouhami 2018; Delphy 2006; Howard 2012; Selby 2011). Indeed, testimonies reveal that the motives behind the wearing of the headscarf are manifold. These may range from an identification with the Islamic cultural minority to a form of resistance, or even a reaction to rejection, a proof of religiosity and humility before God, a will to control one's body, a desire to escape objectification, a radical interpretation of the faith, a pressure from relatives (Djelloul 2013; Fernandez 2009; Howard 2012; Krivenko 2012; Mullally. 2011). According to some, only a small portion of *hijabis* experience pressure, and the idea that pressure is the main reason for wearing the hijab stems from hegemonic, androcentric views (e.g., Joosub and Ebrahim 2020). This means that a ban would limit educational and professional opportunities, thereby constituting an obstacle to emancipation (Howard 2012). In this view, *laïcité* (more specifically, the ban on religious symbols) would be a case of benevolent sexism (Glick and Fiske 1996). Thus, although numerous scholars warn that a ban is counterproductive for gender equality (Freedman 2007; Howard 2012; Krivenko 2012), one might wonder how adherence to *laïcité* relates to sexism.

In addition to condemning adverse outcomes for gender equality, numerous authors have highlighted the racial bias inherent in contemporary interpretations of *laïcité*. Notably in the field of sociology, scholars have suggested that actions taken in the name of *laïcité* such as the ban on the headscarf in schools, hospitals, administrations, sports competitions, or

other public spaces where one represents in some way its state, are signs of Islamophobia, both in France and Belgium (Delphy 2006; Koussens 2010; Mullally. 2011). Such measures are deemed discriminatory. Rather than promoting equality in settings where the headscarf is banned, they would marginalize the minorities affected by such bans (Delphy 2006; Howard 2012; Krivenko 2012; Roux et al. 2006; Selby 2011). The rejection of headscarves or of the expression of religious symbols would be linked to a negative perception of Islam, and to a perception of Islam as being a distinct religion for which one needs to take specific actions and measures (Allievi 2005; Schreiber 2014).

In a large representative survey of the French population conducted in 2007, Barthélemy and Michelat (2007) found that *laïcité* attitudes towards religions also differ along political lines. On both the left and right, people who declare themselves as attached to *laïcité* perceive Islam as the first threat to *laïcité*, but right-wing participants attached to *laïcité* are more likely to see Islam as the only threat (51%) than their left-wing counterparts (31%). Meanwhile, left-wing participants attached to *laïcité*, while also seeing Islam as the primary threat, are more likely than right-wing individuals to perceive both Islam and the Catholic Church as threats (26% vs. 14%). The authors propose that, on the right, *laïcité* is primarily linked to a rejection of Islam, whereas on the left, it may be more closely associated with a broader rejection of religion in general.

In social psychology, the link between *laïcité* and prejudice has also gained recent attention. Kamiejski et al. (2012) showed that, in France, the dimension of *laïcité* related to the desire to restrict religious symbols in the public sphere is associated with anti-Maghrebi prejudice (i.e., negative attitudes towards Maghrebi, with items such as "We can easily understand the anger that Maghrebi feel in France" (reversed), or "If there is a lot of unemployment in France, it's because foreigners are taking jobs away from the French")[1]. The so-called new *laïcité* is shown to be linked to social dominance orientation (albeit weakly), prejudice towards immigrants, as well as discriminatory behavior (Anier et al. 2018; Roebroeck and Guimond 2018; Sablonnière et al. 2020; Troian et al. 2018). Historic *laïcité* shows the opposite pattern and is associated with less prejudice, less social dominance orientation, and greater well-being among majority group members (Roebroeck and Guimond 2016, 2018; de la Sablonnière et al. 2020).

Interestingly, Roebroeck and Guimond (2018) examined whether *laïcité* could be an example of *malleable ideology*. This concept outlines how individuals with a strong Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) Sidanius and Pratto 2004) can shape and advocate for egalitarian ideologies in pursuit of their social goals. In their research, Knowles et al. (2009) concentrated on the ideology of color-blindness. These authors showed that high-SDO participants facing intergroup threat strategically shaped color-blindness as a procedural principle (i.e., equal treatment between individuals, regardless of their race) rather than a distributive principle (i.e., equal outcomes between individuals, even if it means using unequal treatment such as affirmative policies). In other words, they found that participants endorse this egalitarian principle, construing it differently, depending on their exposure to an intergroup threat.

Along similar lines, Roebroeck and Guimond (2018) conjectured that antiegalitarian individuals feeling threatened by the outgroup may strategically adhere to *laïcité*. In several studies, they tested whether intergroup threat (e.g., exposing participants to a text arguing that Turkey's values clash with those of the European Union) could lead participants with higher levels of social dominance to support the *laïcité* principle more readily. Their results support this hypothesis, suggesting that, much like White antiegalitarians in the United States endorse color-blindness to maintain the racial status quo (Knowles et al. 2009), antiegalitarian individuals under intergroup threat promote *laïcité*. This study suggests that *laïcité* may work as a malleable ideology, that is, a sociopolitical ideology that individuals can rely upon to promote their intergroup goals (Knowles et al. 2009). In a similar vein, Lankester and Alexopoulos (2021) argue that new *laïcité* may be serving as a justification to express prejudice (Crandall and Eshleman 2003).

Building upon these considerations, the second goal of this paper is to investigate the relations of dimensions of *laïcité* with a set of prejudiced attitudes, comprising sexism, racism, and anti-Islam attitudes. Moreover, in line with the concept of malleable ideologies, our third goal will be to investigate whether antiegalitarian Belgians show stronger support for dimensions of *laïcité* when confronted with Islam as opposed to the dominant religion of Catholicism.

4 | Overview of the Present Research

The aim of this study is threefold. The first is to understand how *laïcité* is conceptualized by Belgians, a country close to France but with a very distinct history with regard to *laïcité* and the separation of Church and State (Dobbelaere 2010; Schreiber 2014). The second is to examine the relationship that *laïcité*, in its various dimensions, may hold with sexism, racism, and attitudes towards Islam, among Belgian citizens. The third goal is to examine how the different dimensions of *laïcité* relate to attitudes towards Islam and Catholicism in Belgium—where Islam is often viewed as the newer target of *laïcité* and where Catholicism has historically been the dominant religion—and to assess whether participants' attitudes towards *laïcité* reflect a strategic posture, influenced by exposure to either religion (i.e., Catholicism vs. Islam).

This project was approved by the Ethics Committee by the Psychological Sciences Research Institute of Université Catholique de Louvain, reference 2019–10.

5 | Study 1

Study 1 aimed to identify several dimensions of *laïcité* in the Belgian context and to examine relation between emerging dimensions and various intergroup issues (racism, anti-Islam and sexism). To do so, we relied on correlational data and conducted confirmatory factor analyses. We hypothesized that participants would distinguish between at least two dimensions of *laïcité*, and that these dimensions would show opposite relations regarding sexism, racism, and anti-Islam attitudes.

5.1 | Methods

Materials, data and R script are available on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/smu28/?view_only=7ddb19af8894466c900badecede65975.

5.1.1 | Participants

Participants were 694 Belgian French-speaking adults reached via Facebook ads. Of these, 321 filled out the questionnaire and responded correctly to the attention check. The present study included these 321 individuals ($M_{age} = 45.12$, SD = 7.43), 265 women, 52 men, and 4 people who did not indicate their gender or identified with another gender. Of the sample, 12% had no degree higher than secondary school education while 83% had a higher education.

5.1.2 | Measures

After providing consent, participants responded to various measures, namely anti-headscarf attitudes scale, anti-Islam conspiracy, beliefs about the headscarf, modern sexism, ambivalent sexism inventory, *laïcité*, prejudice, acculturation preferences, intergroup threat. The survey ended with demographic data. All materials were in French. Participants indicated their response using a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), unless otherwise noted.

5.1.2.1 | Anti-Headscarf Attitudes. We measured anti-headscarf attitudes with nine items adapted from Saroglou et al. (2009). The items tap the feeling of discomfort regarding the wearing of the headscarf in a number of places (e.g., "It bothers me that staff members of public services (administrations, hospitals, etc.) wear the headscarf" (reversed)). Higher scores denote more positive attitudes. The reliability proved satisfactory ($\alpha = 0.95$).

5.1.2.2 | Conspiracy Beliefs Regarding Islam. We measured beliefs in conspiracy regarding Islam using eight items adapted from Uenal (2016). The items evoke perceptions of conspiracy from Muslims to Islamize Belgium (e.g., "Most Muslims in Belgium are in cahoots with racial groups who strive for an Islamisation of the society"). The reliability proved satisfactory ($\alpha = 0.94$).

5.1.2.3 | Beliefs about the Headscarf. We created an eight-item scale to measure beliefs about the headscarf tapping into the perception that the headscarf is a sign of oppression, a will to Islamize society, or a simple expression of one's faith (e.g, "The headscarf is a sign of oppression towards women") ($\alpha = 0.90$).

5.1.2.4 | Modern Sexism. We measured modern sexism using items from Swim et al. (1995). An illustrative item is "Discrimination towards women is no longer an issue today in Belgium" ($\alpha = 0.87$).

5.1.2.5 | Ambivalent Sexism. We measured the two dimensions of ambivalent sexism (benevolent and hostile sexism) using the French version of the 22-item Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick and Fiske 1996) adapted by Dardenne et al. (2006). We conducted principal component analyses and created two separate factors, namely hostile and benevolent sexism, with respectively $\alpha = 0.92$ and $\alpha = 0.84$.

5.1.2.6 | Prejudice. We measured prejudice using the scale of prejudice towards immigrants in France (Dambrun and Guimond (2001) in a modified version adapted to the Belgian context. A sample item was "Belgian society is unfair towards immigrants" ($\alpha = 0.89$).

5.1.2.7 | Acculturation Preferences. We measured acculturation preferences with Berry and Kalin's (1995) scale, adapted to the Belgian context. An illustrative item was "The people who come to live in Belgium should adapt their behavior so that it matches that of Belgians." Higher scores express higher desire for assimilation and a lower desire for multiculturalism ($\alpha = 0.86$).

5.1.2.8 | Intergroup Threat. We measured intergroup threat with six items taken from Stephan et al. (1999), three items tapping into symbolic threats (e.g., "The immigration of persons of Muslim faith is undermining Belgian culture") and three tapping into realistic threats (e.g., "Immigrants of Muslim faith get more from this country than they contribute") ($\alpha = 0.90$).

5.1.2.9 | Laïcité. To measure participants' conceptions and attachment to *laïcité*, we used the scale proposed by Roebroeck and Guimond (2016) originally elaborated in the French context. This 15-item scale is meant to cover several conceptions of *laïcité*, including a more tolerant and egalitarian historic *laïcité* (e.g., "Each citizen should be free to practice the religion of their choice") and a more restrictive so-called new *laïcité* (e.g., "As much as possible, religious practices should be private and not public") ($\alpha = 0.86$).

5.2 | Results

To analyze the data, we turned to confirmatory factor analysis using the *lavaan* package in R in version 1.4.1717 (Rosseel 2012) and relied on the MLR (robust maximum likelihood) estimator and fit indices. We relied on Hu and Bentler's (1999) cut-off criteria for goodness of fit, that is, next to the χ^2 value and its associated p-value (often criticized for their sensitivity to sample size), we expected a CFI and TLI equal or superior to 0.95, a RMSEA equal or inferior to 0.06 and a SRMR equal or inferior to 0.08. However, based on the considerations of Chen et al. (2008) that fit indices penalize good models tested on smaller samples, we applied a comprehensive approach, that is, we combined these statistical measures to make a decision on model fit.

Because our model comprises both second order and first order factors, we started with conducting confirmatory

factor analyses on the first-order latent factors (e.g., anti-headscarf attitudes), ensuring construct validation, and then examined the CFA for the corresponding second-order factor (e.g., Islam, comprising first order factors of anti-headscarf attitudes, anti-Islam, and beliefs about the headscarf). After that, we examined the CFA for dimensions of *laïcité*. In the final step, we fitted our global model including dimensions of *laïcité*, second order factors (racism, sexism, anti-Islam) and corresponding first-order factors using structural equation modeling.

Because an excessive number of indicators for one latent factor may cause problems of identification and poor fit, especially if the sample size is rather small (Little et al. 2002), we created parcels for scales with eight or more items. Parceling is a measurement technique that consists of creating indicators formed by aggregating (sum or average) two or more items (Little et al. 2002). We relied on a parceling technique proposed by Little et al. (2002). We created four parcels for constructs comprising at least eight indicators, and five parcels for constructs comprising at least 10 indicators. We created parcels using the best four (or five) loading items as anchors for our parcels. To balance the relation between each parcel and the construct, the next four (or five) items with the higher loadings were then added to the anchors in the reverse order. The remaining items were placed following the same procedure (Little et al. 2002). Table 1 reports correlations and descriptive statistics of the variables of interest.

5.2.1 | Measurement Models of Islam

First, we examined the fit of the measurement models of the anti-headscarf attitudes, conspiracy about Islam, and beliefs about the headscarf separately. Table 2 shows the loadings and fit indices for the scales. We then computed a model including the three first-order factors as well as a second-order factor, Islam. To reach a proper solution (avoid a Heywood case, i.e., a negative variance in our model), we constrained some of the parameters of the model to be equal. The model fitted the data well ($\chi^2[59] = 441.44$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.14; 90% CI [0.128, 0.154], SRMR = 0.13). All parcel loadings were satisfactory (> 0.86) and all three first-order latent factors loaded strongly on the second order factor (> 0.79).

5.2.2 | Measurement Models of Sexism

Here too, we first examined the fit of the various sexism factors separately. Table 3 shows the loadings and fit indices for these models. We then computed a model including first order factors of modern sexism, benevolent sexism, and hostile sexism as well as a second-order factor of sexism. Here too, we constrained some of the parameters of the model to equal to avoid a Heywood case. ($\chi^2[83] = 355.31$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.10; 90% CI [0.087, 0.099], SRMR = 0.14. Parcel loadings were satisfactory (> 0.66).

TABLE 1 | Correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of the variables of interest.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Historic *laïcité*	5.44	0.72		−0.02	0.01	−0.25***	−0.39***	−0.23***	−0.10	−0.16**	−0.17**	−0.45***	−0.35***	−0.41***
2. Anti-expression *laïcité*	4.82.82	1.88	−0.02		0.37***	0.79***	0.45***	0.72***	0.18**	0.09	0.25***	0.43***	0.53***	0.50***
3. Anti-funding *laïcité*	5.25	1.64	0.01	0.37***		0.29***	0.12*	0.30***	−0.06	−0.13*	−0.02	0.14*	0.19***	0.16**
4. Anti-headscarf att.	3.71	2.01	−0.25***	0.79***	0.29***		0.66***	0.89***	0.26***	0.20***	0.37***	0.64***	0.70***	0.68***
5. Islam conspiracy	3.06	1.22	−0.39***	0.45***	0.12*	0.66***		0.68***	0.15**	0.40***	0.41***	0.73***	0.71***	0.81***
6. Negative beliefs headscarf	4.33	1.50	−0.23***	0.72***	0.30***	0.89***	0.68***		0.23***	0.22***	0.36***	0.63***	0.71***	0.69***
7. Modern sexism	2.41	1.01	−0.10	0.18**	−0.06	0.26***	0.15**	0.23***		0.09	0.60***	0.36***	0.36***	0.24***
8. Benevolent sexism	2.27	0.97	−0.16**	0.09	−0.13*	0.20***	0.40***	0.22***	0.09		0.39***	0.38***	0.33***	0.41***
9. Hostile sexism	2.37	1.20	−0.17**	0.25***	−0.02	0.37***	0.41***	0.36***	0.60***	0.39***		0.49***	0.47***	0.46***
10. Prejudice towards immig.	3.24	1.51	−0.45***	0.43***	0.14*	0.64***	0.73***	0.63***	0.36***	0.38***	0.49***		0.80***	0.83***
11. Accul. pref.: assimilation	3.95	1.38	−0.35***	0.53***	0.19***	0.70***	0.71***	0.71***	0.36***	0.33***	0.47***	0.80***		0.78***
12. Intergroup threat	3.06	1.53	−0.41***	0.50***	0.16**	0.68***	0.81***	0.69***	0.24***	0.41***	0.46***	0.83***	0.78***	

*$p \leq 0.05$; **$p \leq 0.01$; ***$p \leq 0.001$.

TABLE 2 | Fit and loading measurements of the Islam second-order factor and included first-order factors.

Dimension	Parcel	Items	Loading	χ^2	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Anti-headscarf att. (AH)				(2)17.36	0.99	0.97	14.9	0.01
Anti-headscarf attitudes	Parcel 1	1,2,7	0.89					
Anti-headscarf attitudes	Parcel 2	9,4	0.93					
Anti-headscarf attitudes	Parcel 3	3,5	0.93					
Anti-headscarf attitudes	Parcel 4	8,6	0.97					
Conspiracy Islam (CON)				(2)2.37	0.99	0.99	0.026	0.006
Conspiracy Islam	Parcel 1	7,3	0.90					
Conspiracy Islam	Parcel 2	4,1	0.86					
Conspiracy Islam	Parcel 3	2,6	0.90					
Conspiracy Islam	Parcel 4	5,8	0.90					
Beliefs headscarf (BH)				(2)7.69	0.99	0.98	0.09	0.02
Beliefs about the headscarf	Parcel 1	4,2	0.84					
Beliefs about the headscarf	Parcel 2	7,3	0.85					
Beliefs about the headscarf	Parcel 3	8,1	0.82					
Beliefs about the headscarf	Parcel 4	5,6	0.79					
Islam = AH + CON + BH				(59)441.44	0.91	0.90	0.14	0.13

Note: All loadings are standardized. Models of "AH", "CON" and "BH" are one-latent factor models. Model of "Islam" is a hierarchical model with a second order factor (Islam) and three first-order factors (AH, CON, BAH).

TABLE 3 | Fit and loading measurements of the sexism second-order factor and included first-order factors.

Dimension	Parcel	Items	Loading	χ^2	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Modern sexism (MS)				(2)33.06	0.95	0.85	0.21	0.04
Modern sexism	Parcel 1	7,3	0.78					
Modern sexism	Parcel 2	6,2	0.75					
Modern sexism	Parcel 3	1,8	0.84					
Modern sexism	Parcel 4	5,4	0.73					
Hostile sexism (HS)				(5)18.53	0.99	0.98	0.08	0.02
Hostile sexism	Parcel 1	2,10,15	0.85					
Hostile sexism	Parcel 2	5,18	0.85					
Hostile sexism	Parcel 3	4,11	0.87					
Hostile sexism	Parcel 4	7,16	0.84					
Hostile sexism	Parcel 5	21,14	0.79					
Benevolent sexism (BS)				(5)29.57	0.96	0.92	0.12	0.04
Benevolent sexism	Parcel 1	1,19,3	0.81					
Benevolent sexism	Parcel 2	8,12	0.70					
Benevolent sexism	Parcel 3	13,17	0.69					
Benevolent sexism	Parcel 4	9,20	0.65					
Benevolent sexism	Parcel 5	6,22	0.75					
Sexism = MS + HS + BS				(83)355.31	0.90	0.89	0.10	0.14

Note: All loadings are standardized. Models of "MS", "HS and BS" are one-latent factor models. Model of "Sexism" is a hierarchical model with a second order factor (Sexism) and three first-order factors (MS, HS, BS).

5.2.3 | Measurement Model of Racism

We examined measurement models of prejudice, acculturation preferences and intergroup threat. Following modification indices, we allowed covariances between indicators to achieve a good fit, for acculturation preferences (Accultu_1 and Accultu_5, Accultu_2 and Accultu_6). Table 4 shows the loadings and model fits. We then computed the model including the

TABLE 4 | Fit and loading measurements of the racism second-order factor and included first-order factors.

Dimension	Parcel	Item(s)	Loading	χ^2	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Prejudice (PREJ)				(2)73.77	0.92	0.75	0.33	0.05
Prejudice	Parcel 1	8,3	0.84					
Prejudice	Parcel 2	4,6	0.88					
Prejudice	Parcel 3	2,7	0.81					
Prejudice	Parcel 4	5,1	0.80					
Acculturation pref. (AC)				(7)20.34	0.99	0.97	0.07	0.03
Acculturation pref.		1	0.63					
Acculturation pref.		2	0.60					
Acculturation pref.		3	0.75					
Acculturation pref.		4	0.82					
Acculturation pref.		5	0.72					
Acculturation pref.		6	0.65					
Intergroup threat (TH)				(9)47.04	0.97	0.95	0.11	0.03
Intergroup threat		1	0.59					
Intergroup threat		2	0.84					
Intergroup threat		3	0.77					
Intergroup threat		4	0.89					
Intergroup threat		5	0.67					
Intergroup threat		6	0.89					
Racism=PREJ + AC + TH				(99)446.91 446.9446.9	0.92	0.90	0.10	0.06

Note: All loadings are standardized. Models of "Prej", "AC" and "TH" are one-latent factor models. Model of "Racism" is a hierarchical model with a second order factor (Racism) and three first-order factors (Prej, AC, TH). In the acculturation preferences model, two pairs of indicators were allowed to covariate, Accultu_1 and Accultu_5, Accultu_2 and Accultu_6.

first-order factors of prejudice, acculturation preferences, and intergroup threat, with a second-order factor of racism, allowing the same two covariances for acculturation. The model showed good fit ($\chi^2[99] = 446.91$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.10; 90% CI[.095, 0.115], SRMR = 0.056). Loadings were satisfactory (> 0.59), with the first-order latent factors loading strongly on the second order factor (> 0.93).

5.2.4 | Measurement Model of Laïcité

Turning to the measurement of *laïcité*, we first computed a model relying on Roebroeck and Guimond's (2016) dimensions, that is, a measurement model including three dimensions, historic *laïcité*, new *laïcité*, and attachment to *laïcité*. The model had poor fit indices ($\chi^2[87] = 547.17$, CFI = 0.69, TLI = 0.62, RMSEA = 0.14; 90% CI [0.13, 0.15], SRMR = 0.115). We also tested a model including historic *laïcité*, and new *laïcité*, but not including the two items of attachment to *laïcité*, as these do not measure a specific conception of *laïcité* but rather a mere attachment to the principle, devoid of any meaning. Here too, the model had poor fit ($\chi2[64] = 466.53$, CFI = 0.65, TLI = 0.57, RMSEA = 0.15; 90% CI [0.14, 0.17], SRMR = 0.119). We compared this model with an alternative model, in which we split new *laïcité* into two dimensions: a dimension about the public expression of religious symbols and another dimension about the public funding of religious practices. This 3-dimension solution (historic *laïcité*, *laïcité* expression, *laïcité* funding), in which we allowed a covariance between the errors of two items of historic *laïcité*, *Laicité*_14 and *Laicité*_15 yielded a better fit in comparison with the previous solution ($\chi^2[61] = 170.01$, CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.08; 90% CI [0.066, 0.094], SRMR = 0.089) but item Laicite_2 showed a low loading on the "historic *laïcité*" factor. In the final model, we thus removed it (Hair 2014) and found a better fit in comparison to previous models ($\chi^2[50] = 158.74$, CFI = 0.92, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.079; 90% CI [0.063, 0.095], SRMR = 0.085). Table 5 shows the three dimensions and corresponding indicators loadings.

5.2.5 | Global Model

After confirming the factorial structure of the attitudinal factors and *laïcité* dimensions comprising the model, we tested a global model encapsulating the three dimensions of *laïcité*, as well as Anti-Islam, Racism, Sexism second-order factors and associated first-order factors. This global model brings together the models listed above. We fixed the covariances between first-order factors (e.g., hostile sexism, conspiracy Islam, intergroup threat) and dimensions of *laïcité* (historic *laïcité*, anti-funding *laïcité*, anti-expression *laïcité*) to zero. Doing so allowed us to ensure that covariances between *laïcité* dimensions and second order

TABLE 5 | Fit and loading measurements of the *laïcité* dimensions.

Dimension	Items	Loading	χ^2	CFI	TTLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Historic *laïcité* (HL)	3	0.54					
Historic *laïcité*	4	0.50					
Historic *laïcité*	9	0.71					
Historic *laïcité*	13	0.64					
Historic *laïcité*	14	0.55					
Historic *laïcité*	15	0.59					
Laïcité public expression	1	0.50					
Laïcité public expression	7	0.87					
Laïcité public expression	8	0.91					
Laïcité funding	5	0.94					
Laïcité funding	10	0.42					
Laïcité funding	11	0.86					
Laïcité = HL + LE + LF			(50)158.74	0.92	0.90	0.08	0.085

Note: All loadings are standardized. Model of "*Laïcité*" is a model with three latent factors (HL, LE, LF). A pair of indicators was allowed to covariate, laicite_14 and laicite_15.

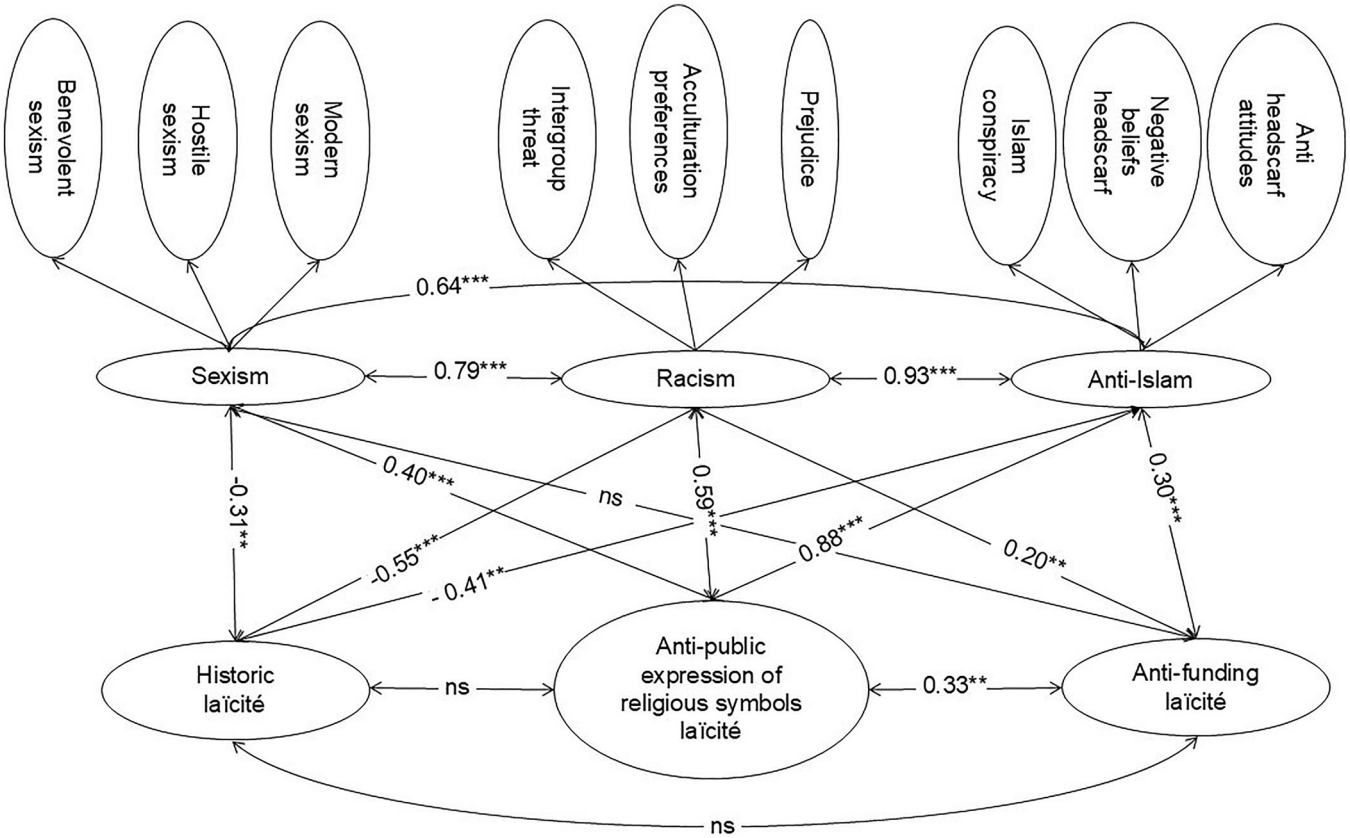

FIGURE 1 | Global model of the covariances between dimensions of *laïcité* and Sexism, Racism and Anti-Islam second-order factors and their corresponding first-order factors. Model fit: $\chi^2[1367] = 3154.04$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.06; 90% CI [0.059, 0.065], SRMR = 0.086. Covariances coefficients are standardized. *** = $p < 0.001$, ** = $p < 0.01$, * = $p < 0.05$. ns = $p \geq 0.05$. *Note:* For readability concerns, the indicators are not shown on the graph. Furthermore, the covariances between first-order and dimensions of *laïcité* were fixed to zero.

factors (racism, sexism and anti-Islam) were not affected by the covariances between *laïcité* dimensions and first-order factors. The model showed a good fit ($\chi^2[1367] = 3154.04$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.88, TLI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.060; 90% CI [0.059, 0.065], SRMR = 0.086) and is represented in Figure 1.

In line with hypotheses, our data showed that in Belgium, the dimensions underlying *laïcité* have distinct associations with attitudes regarding sexism, racism or Islam. Specifically, historic *laïcité* was negatively associated with sexism (−0.31, $p < 0.01$), racism (−0.55, $p < 0.001$) and the anti-Islam

second-order factor (−0.41, $p < 0.001$). Strikingly, the *laïcité* dimension of "anti-expression of religious symbols" showed an opposite pattern as it was positively associated with sexism (0.40, $p < 0.001$), racism (0.59, $p < 0.001$), and anti-Islam attitudes (0.87, $p < 0.001$). As for the "anti-funding" *laïcité*, the picture was more complex and once again marks the specific character of the Belgian context compared to the French *laïcité* (Roebroeck and Guimond 2016). While in the French context, the rejection of public funding and of the expression of religious symbols combine to form one dimension, our data showed only a moderate link between these two dimensions of *laïcité* (0.33, $p < 0.01$). Opposition to the funding of religions was associated with racism (0.20, $p < 0.01$) and anti-Islam attitudes (0.30, $p < 0.001$), but these covariances were smaller than the ones found with the "anti-expression" dimension reported above. This might be explained by the fact that opposition to public funding of religious beliefs stems from various motivations (arguing for lower funding of Catholicism, or no funding regardless of the targeted belief), beyond an anti-Islam sentiment. Interestingly, however, no links emerged between opposition to the funding of religions and sexism ($p = 0.41$), nor with adherence to historic *laïcité* ($p = 0.63$).

5.3 | Discussion

Based on the literature on *laïcité* in social psychology, history and sociology, we examined the divergent conceptions of *laïcité* within Belgium. With this study, we aimed to uncover how a sample of French-speaking Belgians interpret the concept of *laïcité* and how this (these) representation(s) are linked to different intergroup attitudes, such as sexism, racism, and different beliefs and attitudes regarding Islam.

We analyzed our data by means of confirmatory factor analysis. Our results confirm the existence of very different understandings of *laïcité*. First, as is the case in France, our data verified the presence of historic *laïcité*, which enshrines the right to worship, and the nondiscrimination based on an individual's religious or philosophical beliefs. This stance was associated with more tolerance in the form of less sexism, less racism, and less negative attitudes and beliefs towards Islam. Next to this tolerant conception of *laïcité*, a second dimension emerged, encompassing the desire to restrict the public expression of religious symbols. Finally, a third dimension concerned the desire to limit the funding of religious beliefs. Remarkably, while in France these last two dimensions both fall under the umbrella of the dimension of new *laïcité*, our data suggest that in Belgium, the attitude towards the funding of religious beliefs is distinct from the one that concerns the expression of religious symbols in public. As it turns out, our data revealed that these two conceptions of "anti public expression of religious symbols" and "anti-funding" showed close but distinct patterns with our measures of intergroup attitudes. On the one hand, "anti-funding" *laïcité* was positively associated with racism and negative attitudes and beliefs of Islam, albeit moderately. It was not linked with sexist attitudes. These moderate associations possibly reflect the multi-faceted debate at play when it comes to funding religions in Belgium. Indeed, although the desire to limit funding of religions may go hand in hand with a desire to limit the space taken by Islam, it may also emerge among egalitarian participants wishing to question the funding received by the Catholic Church or who feel reluctant to fund religions in general. On the other, the *laïcité* dimension capturing refusal of public expression of religious symbols was strongly associated with racism, very strongly associated with negative beliefs and attitudes towards Islam, and positively associated with sexist attitudes (encompassing modern, hostile and benevolent sexism). These findings suggest at the very least that the motivations underlying the laws restricting the expression of religious symbols may be related to marked intolerance against several targets.

Although we used measures that captured a broad spectrum of sexist attitudes, a limitation of Study 1 is that our questionnaire did not measure all aspects of sexism that Muslim women face. Specifically, scholars describe that women wearing the headscarf are perceived by members of the majority as victims and accomplices of their domination by Muslim men (Bentouhami 2018). In this view, headscarves would convey a desire to proselytize and impose Islamic norms on others—notably on other women. Women wearing the headscarf are sometimes perceived to believe that a virtuous woman must be covered so as not to attract male attention, and that uncovered women are morally questionable, even associating them with prostitution (Bowen 2008; Howard 2012; Krivenko 2012). This positions them not as passive victims, but as "hostile" agents of a fundamentalist threat. However, this hostile view of Muslim women is not captured by the ambivalent sexism measure. In fact, although hostile sexism denotes a form of perceived aggressiveness in women, hostile sexism represents above all a perception of willingness among women to seize power and to dominate men. Future studies should investigate this question.

Another issue concerns the measurement of prejudice. Contrary to other measurements in our study, the prejudice scale focused on immigrants in general. While this validated scale has been widely used in the literature, including in studies examining French *laïcité* (e.g., Roebroeck and Guimond 2018), a scale focusing on Muslims would be more adequate and would avoid creating confusion between immigrants and Muslims, which are not the same categories, although often perceived as such (Allievi 2005). Clearly, the present findings confirm the existence of various conceptualizations of *laïcité* in Belgium, conceptualizations that show some similarities but also differences with those that are prevalent in France. The data also emphasize the importance of understanding these differences. Indeed, each type of *laïcité* shows a different pattern of relations with important issues in the area of intergroup relations and, in this way, different consequences for social cohesion. Building on these observations, it is worth examining how individuals may alter their interpretations of the *laïcité* beliefs when they face changing contexts. Echoing the recent work on malleable ideologies, we aimed to investigate whether antiegalitarian individuals (i.e., high-SDO participants) would be likely to construe *laïcité* in more exclusive forms and to express higher attachment to *laïcité* when explicitly reminded of a minority eliciting threat, that is, Muslims.

6 | Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed at digging into the relation between *laïcité* and possible weaponization of this set of attitudes against the Muslim minority. Following the research on malleable ideology by Knowles et al. (2009), we wanted to check whether antiegalitarian individuals change their views about *laïcité* as a function of the intergroup context. The newer form of *laïcité* is often said to be a strategic response to Islam (e.g., Bentouhami 2018). Hence, based on Roebroeck and Guimond's (2018) findings, we wanted to examine how people express their attachment to the *laïcité* principle and endorse the two subdimensions of *new laïcité* identified in Study 1 depending on the religion at hand. Specifically, we looked at participants' levels of attachment to *laïcité* and adherence to the subdimensions of *new laïcité* identified in Study 1 (i.e., expression of religious symbols and funding of religious practices) after they had been exposed to items pertaining to Catholicism (Catholicism condition) or Islam (Islam condition). In doing so, we expected to garner further support for the findings of Study 1 and further establish the relevance of a distinction between these two subdimensions in the Belgian context. Such a pattern would contrast with Roebroeck and Guimond's (2018) findings in which the two factors combined under a single *new laïcité* factor.

Following the literature on ideological malleability, we used SDO as our main moderator, but also tested a moderation by Right-wing authotarianism (a personality and ideological variable that reflects among others, a person's level of adherence to societal conventions, and aggression towards outgroups, Altemeyer 1981) due to the relevance of ideological deviance from perceived norms in the present context. Moreover, we looked at the possible role of political orientation.

In line with the ideological malleability hypothesis and building upon the results of Study 1, we hypothesized a three-way interaction between SDO, condition, and new *laïcité* dimension. Specifically, we expected that high-SDO, but not low-SDO, participants would adhere more to the "anti-public expression of religious symbols" dimension, as opposed to the "anti-funding" dimension, when they have been exposed to Islam rather than to the Catholic religion. Said otherwise, we predicted a significant two-way interaction between SDO and condition for the subdimension of "anti-public expression of religious symbols", but not for the subdimension of "anti-funding". We predicted the emergence of a similar pattern using RWA and political orientation as moderators.

Next, and in line with findings from Roebroeck and Guimond (2018), we predicted that SDO and condition would significantly interact to predict attachment to *laïcité*. Specifically, we expected that high-SDO participants would be more attached to *laïcité* in the Islam condition compared to the Catholicism condition. As to low-SDO participants, we predicted that they would not express different levels of attachment to *laïcité*, as a function of condition. We expected the emergence of a similar pattern using RWA and political orientation as moderators. We preregistered the study on the Open Science Framework.

6.1 | Method

Preregistration, materials, data and R script are available on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/d3zjb/?view_only=48edda6717f54f60ac6ab54b78eb734c.

6.1.1 | Participants

The sample consisted of 191 French-speaking individuals recruited in public areas of Louvain-la-Neuve during March and April 2023. We had initially planned to collect 280 participants but we stopped data collection after 2 months due to a lack of resources. Participants had to be at least 18 years old and to be native French-speaker. We excluded from the analyses participants who failed attention checks, who were interrupted during completion, who spoke Arabic at home or who were Muslim. The final sample comprised 160 individuals ($M_{age} = 47.49$, SD = 16.14), 90 women and 69 men and 1 person who did not wish to indicate their gender or identified with another gender.

6.1.2 | Procedure

We recruited participants in the street and invited them to fill the questionnaire on an electronic tablet. The research was introduced to them as "a survey looking at the position of individuals toward certain societal issues in Belgium." In addition, they learned that the data collection was anonymous and confidential and that there were no right or wrong answers. After providing their consent, respondents provided some demographic data (gender, age, city of birth, education level, nationality, language spoken at home, and religion). Then, the questionnaire started with political orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance scales. Next, we randomly assigned participants to one of the two conditions. In both conditions, participants completed two scales, namely the Bogardus Social Distance Scale consisting of seven items by Mather et al. (2017) with items on practicing Muslims (Islam condition) or practicing Catholics (Catholicism condition) and an Anti-Islam sentiment scale consisting of four items by Uenal (2016; Islam condition) or the same scale adapted to Catholicism (Catholicism condition). Then, participants filled out items on *laïcité*.

6.1.3 | Measures

All materials were in French. Using 7-point scales, respondents had to indicate the extent to which they agreed (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*) with a list of statements originating from the following scales.

6.1.3.1 | Political Orientation. We measured participants' political orientation using the following item: "In terms of political orientation, would you say that you are more left or

right-wing? The number 1 corresponds to a political orientation completely to the left, the number 7 corresponds to a political orientation completely to the right".

6.1.3.2 | Right Wing Authoritarianism. We measured participants' right wing authoritarianism using a six-items version of the Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale by Bizumic and Duckitt (2018). A sample item was "There is nothing wrong with premarital sex." Three items were reverse coded ($\alpha = 0.64$).

6.1.3.3 | Social Dominance Orientation. We measured participants' social dominance orientation using the French form of the Social Dominance Orientation scale validated by Duarte et al. (2004). A sample item was "Some groups of people are simply inferior compared to other groups." Out of the 10 items, 5 were reverse coded ($\alpha = 0.77$).

6.1.3.4 | Laïcité. We measured participants' endorsement and attachment to *laïcité* with the 15-items scale proposed by Roebroeck and Guimond (2016) that was used in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.75$). The original scale, based on the French context, comprises two conceptual dimensions of *laïcité*: historic *laïcité* and new *laïcité*. Yet, based on the model that emerged in Study 1 in a Belgian context, we split the new *laïcité* dimension into two dimensions, one dealing with the expression of religious symbols in public spaces (e.g., "I think it's only right that visible religious signs should be banned from schools in the official network") ($\alpha = 0.80$) and the other dimension pertaining to the funding of religious practices (e.g., "I'm opposed to state funding of religious buildings") ($\alpha = 0.61$).

6.2 | Results

6.2.1 | Anti-Expression and Anti-Funding Dimensions

Analyses were conducted using R (R Core Team, 2013) and the lme4 package (Bates et al. 2015). To test our hypothesis, we relied on a mixed model analysis. We treated condition (coded −0.5 for the Catholic condition, 0.5 for the Islam condition), SDO (centered), type of *laïcité* (coded −0.5 for anti-funding dimension, 0.5 for the anti-expression dimension) and all interactions involving these variables as fixed effects. We included both participants and items as random intercepts.

The predicted condition by SDO by type of *laïcité* three-way interaction effect was significant ($b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.26$, 95% CI [0.27; 1.28], $t(794) = 2.98$, $p = 0.003$, Rsq = 0.006). As can be seen in Figure 2, there was no significant condition by SDO interaction on the anti-funding dimension ($b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.29$, 95% CI [−0.70; 0.41], $t(244) = -0.51$, $p = 0.61$) but a significant interaction between condition and SDO on the anti-expression dimension of *laïcité* ($b = 0.63$, $SE = 0.29$, 95% CI [0.07; 1.19], $t(244) = 2.21$, $p = 0.028$, $Rsq = 0.008$). Further breaking down the latter interaction as a function of SDO revealed the predicted condition effect among high-SDO participants ($b = 0.86$, $SE = 0.36$, 95% CI [0.16; 1.56], $t(244) = 2.39$, $p = 0.017$, Rsq = 0.010) and no condition effect among low-SDO participants ($b = -0.26$, $SE = 0.36$, 95% CI [−0.96; 0.44], $t(244) = -0.73$, $p = 0.46$). These results confirmed that high-SDO participants showed higher support for anti-expression *laïcité* when confronted to Islam compared to Catholicism. Conversely, low-SDO participants did not change their level of support depending on condition.

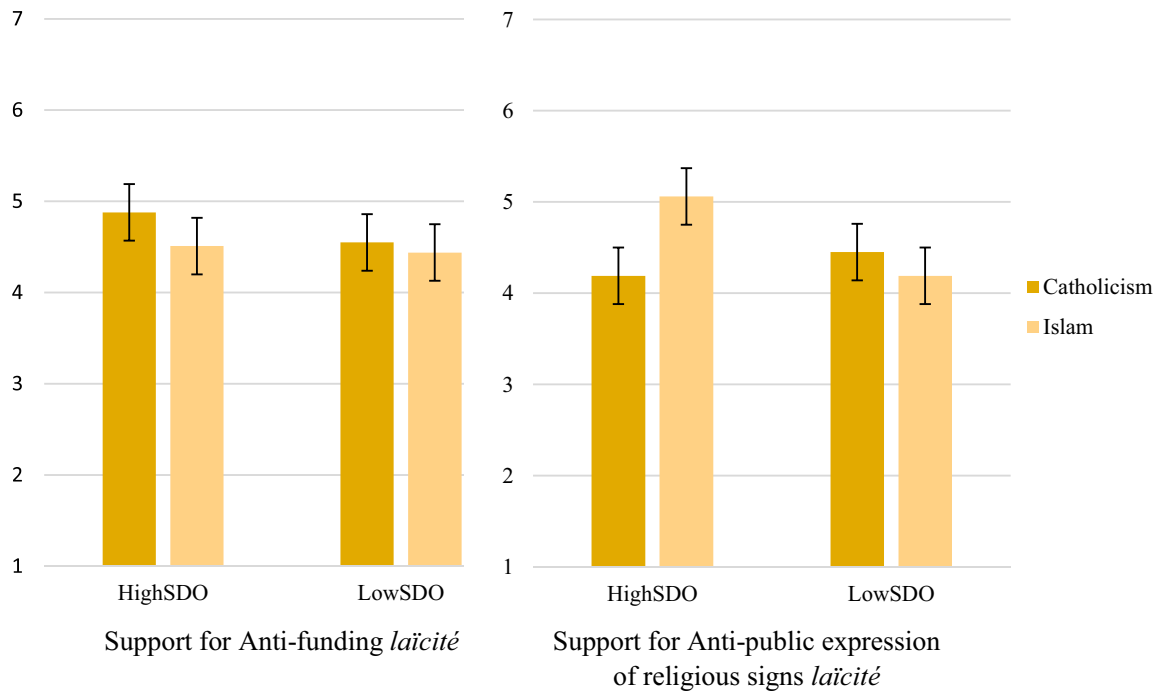

FIGURE 2 | Participants' support for both types of *laïcité* as a function of SDO and condition.

We also examined the same model except that included RWA instead of SDO. Here too, the predicted condition by RWA by type of *laïcité* three-way interaction effect, proved significant ($b = 0.46$, SE = 0.23, 95% CI [0.003; 0.91], $t(794) = 1.97$, $p = 0.003$, Rsq = 0.003). Again, there was no significant condition by RWA interaction on the anti-funding dimension ($b = 0.14$, SE = 0.26, 95% CI [−0.36; 0.64], $t(243) = 0.31$, $p = 0.59$), but a significant interaction effect between condition and RWA on the anti-expression dimension of *laïcité* ($b = 0.59$, SE = 0.23, 95% CI [0.09; 1.09], $t(243) = 2.31$, $p = 0.02$, Rsq = 0.009). Further breaking down the latter interaction as a function of RWA revealed the predicted condition effect among high-RWA participants ($b = 0.84$, SE = 0.36, 95% CI [0.14; 1.54], $t(244) = 2.34$, $p = 0.019$, Rsq = 0.009) and no effect of condition among low-RWA participants ($b = -0.35$, SE = 0.36, 95% CI [−1.05; 0.36], $t(243) = -0.95$, $p = 0.34$). Again, results confirmed that high-RWA participants showed higher support for anti-expression *laïcité* when confronted to Islam compared to Catholicism, but low-RWA participants did not change their level of support depending on condition.

Finally, we examined the same model using political orientation (centered) instead of SDO or RWA. This time the second-order interaction between political orientation, type of *laïcité* and condition was not significant ($b = 0.19$, SE = 0.20, 95% CI [−0.20; 0.58], $t(794) = 0.96$, $p = 0.34$). As expected, however, there was no significant interaction between political orientation and condition when looking at the anti-funding dimension ($b = 0.24$, SE = 0.22, 95% CI [−0.18; 0.67], $t(244) = 1.98$, $p = 0.27$), while the same interaction proved significant on the anti-expression dimension of *laïcité* ($b = 0.43$, SE = 0.22, 95% CI [0.06; 0.86], $t(244) = 1.98$, $p = 0.049$, Rsq = 0.007). Here too, breaking down the latter interaction as a function of political orientation revealed the predicted effect of condition among right-wing participants ($b = 0.75$, SE = 0.36, 95% CI [0.05; 1.46], $t(244) = 2.09$, $p = 0.037$, Rsq = 0.007), and no effect of condition among left-wing participants ($b = -0.28$, SE = 0.37, 95% CI [−1.00; 0.44], $t(244) = -0.76$, $p = 0.045$). Results suggested that right-wing participants were more opposed to the expression of religious symbols when they were primed with Islam compared to Catholicism.

6.2.2 | Results on Attachment to Laïcité

To look at attachment to *laïcité*, we conducted a multiple regression model including SDO, the condition, and their interaction as predictors. As expected, the regression analysis showed no SDO effect ($b = -0.12$, SE = 0.14, 95% CI [−0.40; 0.16], $t(156) = -0.86$, $p = 0.39$), and no condition effect ($b = -0.17$, SE = 0.25, 95% CI [−0.66; 0.33], $t(156) = -0.67$, $p = 0.50$). Also, we did not find the predicted interaction between the condition and SDO ($b = -0.07$, SE = 0.28, 95% CI [−0.62; 0.49], $t(156) = -0.23$, $p = 0.82$).

Next, we ran a multiple regression model including RWA, the condition, and their interaction as predictors. RWA negatively predicted the attachment to *laïcité* ($b = -0.28$, SE = 0.13, 95% CI [−0.52; −0.03], $t(156) = -2.20$, $p = 0.03$), but contrary to expectations, RWA did not interact with condition to predict attachment to *laïcité* ($p = 0.66$).

Using political orientation in the same model, we found an effect of political orientation, such that right-wing participants were less attached to *laïcité* ($b = -0.24$, SE= 0.11, 95% CI [−0.45; −0.03], $t(156) = -2.27$, $p = 0.02$), but condition was not significant ($p = 0.69$) nor was the interaction ($p = 0.33$).

As a set, these results indicate that participants' attachment to *laïcité* did not vary across conditions.

6.3 | Discussion

Building on Knowles et al.'s (2009) work on malleable ideology, this study aimed to investigate whether individuals change their attitudes towards *laïcité* when Islam rather than Catholicism was made salient. Capitalizing on the message emerging from Study 1, we hypothesized that high-SDO individuals would show stronger support for the "anti-public expression of religious symbols" when Islam had been made salient but not when Catholicism had been made salient. Importantly, we hypothesized that this interaction would not emerge with the dimension opposing the funding of beliefs. Our results lend strong support to our hypothesis in that there was a clear shift in the adherence to the dimension pertaining to the opposition to the wearing of religious signs in public spaces as a function of condition. Indeed, antiegalitarian individuals showed stronger opposition to the wearing of religious signs in public spaces in the Islam condition compared to the Catholic condition. Those who scored low on social dominance orientation remained unaffected by the exposure to Islam and showed constant support across conditions. No such moderation pattern emerged for the other facet of *laïcité*, namely the anti-funding dimension.

These results nicely extend what has been conceptualized in Study 1 and confirm the presence of distinct sub-dimensions of *laïcité* in Belgium, with distinct use by antiegalitarian participants. Furthermore, in line with the results obtained by Roebroeck and Guimond (2018) in France, our results show a weaponization of *laïcité* in Belgium. Importantly, they strongly suggest that a more restrictive form of *laïcité* that emerged in recent years can indeed serve as a disguised form of anti-Islam attitudes.

Interestingly, although Roebroeck and Guimond (2018) found a shift in the attachment to the principle, we did not find such a pattern. In all likelihood, this absence of shift in the attachment to the *laïcité* principle can be attributed to the Belgian context, where the concept of *laïcité* is much fuzzier. In other words, *laïcité* is not as much a significant part of Belgian identity as it is of French identity (Anier et al. 2018; Barthélemy and Michelat 2007).

7 | General Discussion

The principle of *laïcité* is used extensively to support the regulation or ban of religious signs in various environments, such as schools, administration, universities or sport competitions. Despite there being no apparent consensus on the exact meaning of the term, it is claimed by individuals with

conflicting motivations and potentially different representations. To our knowledge, no paper had documented the articulation of *laïcité* in relation to sexism, racism, and attitudes towards Islam, and even less so in the Belgian context. Study 1 allowed uncovering the broad conceptualization of *laïcité*, a concept that takes very specific meanings in Belgium. Indeed, while Belgian *laïcité* was first construed in an attempt to balance the strong powers of the Catholic church (Dobbelaere 2010), *laïcité* has repeatedly been associated with Islam in more recent debates.

Our results confirmed that Belgians have distinct understandings of what *laïcité* precisely entails. Confirmatory analyses revealed three dimensions. First, historic *laïcité* was a more tolerant conception, showing negative associations with sexism, anti-Islam sentiment, and racism. The second dimension concerned the opposition to the public expression of religious symbols. This dimension showed positive association with sexism, racism, and anti-Islam sentiments. It is striking that the effort to restrict the expression of religious symbols is most often portrayed as a means of achieving *laïcité* and supporting women's empowerment, devoid of any discriminatory motivation. Beyond the case that banning religious symbols is said to be counterproductive for women's empowerment (Howard 2012), our results suggest that the newer conception of *laïcité* opposing the headscarf (and other religious symbols) would possibly be detrimental for women and motivated by an antiegalitarian agenda.

A third dimension emerged and tapped opposition to the public funding of religious beliefs. Interestingly, this dimension was only weakly associated with intergroup relations constructs. This state of affairs may reflect the intricate debate surrounding the funding of religions, with advocates of funding potentially having opposing motivations, that is, the goal to recognize the different beliefs versus the goal to control them more. Clearly, the factorial structure obtained in Study 1 suggests that, contrary to what Roebroeck and Guimond (2018) found, the anti-funding and anti-public expression dimensions do not form one factor of new *laïcité* in Belgium.

Building on these findings, Study 2 aimed at examining how these two specific dimensions, along with an attachment to *laïcité*, may be endorsed in contexts where Islam versus Catholicism are salient. Our data point to the fact that, in line with the research on malleable ideology, the Belgian context is not exempt of the exploitation of *laïcité* to justify anti-Islam stances. Indeed, antiegalitarian participants showed higher endorsement for the opposition to the public expression of religious symbols, in a situation when they met with Islam-related content as opposed to Catholicism-related content. Thus, they modified their position with regard to the right of people to wear religious symbols, depending on the religion they were envisioning. Importantly, this interaction pattern did not emerge on the anti-funding dimension. These results highlight the extent to which antiegalitiarian participants can turn to the normative value of *laïcité* as a tool against Islam. Such a strategic use of *laïcité* goes hand in hand with the strategic use of gender equality against Islam (see "femonationalism", Farris 2017; Benelli et al. 2006; Delphy 2006; Farris 2017; Lankester and Alexopoulos 2021), as found among Belgian participants (Van Oost et al. 2023).

The present research is not devoid of limitations. Firstly, in both studies, although the data were collected in the street (thus avoiding the common pitfalls associated with the reliance on psychology students), the samples were not representative. One must therefore remain cautious with respect to external validity. Notably, Study 2 sample took place in Louvain-la-Neuve, a city that is home to a Catholic University, and part of the French-speaking region. It is thus possible that activating Catholicism induced a sense of ingroup. Future studies should rely on a more diverse sample or explore the attitudes towards forms of *laïcité* in Flanders, a region that has historically adopted somewhat different approaches to diversity (Adam et al. 2018). Another drawback is the fact that a lack of resources prevented reaching the planned number of respondents planned for Study 2. Although this did not prevent the predicted effects from emerging significant, future work should ensure that a larger sample be included in the data collection. Despite these limits, we believe that our work contributes to a deeper understanding of how *laïcité* is applied in contemporary society. Indeed, the principle of *laïcité* is reflected in a wide range of policies, particularly those concerning religious symbols in educational institutions, employment practices, and the provision of religious accommodations. Legal rulings on issues such as ritual slaughter, school dress codes, and corporate neutrality policies reflect the ongoing tensions in Belgian society regarding the interpretation and implementation of *laïcité* (Vanbellingen 2022).

In the realm of education, in a 2020 ruling concerning the *Haute école Francisco Ferrer* in Brussels, the Belgian Constitutional Court affirmed the right of higher education institutions to ban religious symbols, including the Islamic headscarf. The case emerged when a group of Muslim students, with support from UNIA (a federal agency whose mission is to prevent and address various forms of discrimination, including religious-based) contested the school's prohibition on religious symbols, arguing that it amounted to discrimination. The Court upheld the institution's policy, asserting that such bans, grounded in a particular interpretation of neutrality requiring the visible absence of religious expression, did not run counter to the European Convention on Human Rights (Vanbellingen 2022). However, a civil court ruling in 2021 deemed the ban discriminatory, leading to its cancellation. Efforts by a collective of professors and former professors to challenge this decision were dismissed by the Constitutional Court, which determined that they were not directly affected by the discrimination and thus lacked standing to contest the ruling. Consequently, religious symbols remain permitted within the institution.

In the workplace, the debate over corporate neutrality has been exemplified in cases such as *Achbita v. G4S*, where an employee was dismissed for wearing a headscarf in violation of company policy (Vanbellingen 2022). This case reflects a broader tendency to interpret neutrality as a requirement for the exclusion of religious symbols in professional environments, reinforcing the notion that religious expression should be relegated to the private sphere.

Our work sheds light on how these legal and institutional controversies surrounding *laïcité* are not merely technical or procedural, but mirror deeper societal tensions around religion and identity. By examining the psychological underpinnings of support for restrictive applications of *laïcité*, particularly when Muslim practices are involved, we show that such positions are frequently associated with antiegalitarian attitudes—including racism, sexism, and anti-Muslim sentiment. In this sense, calls for neutrality may not always reflect a commitment to equal treatment, but may rather serve as a rhetorical tool to legitimize exclusionary practices. This perspective helps to contextualize public and legal debates on *laïcité* in education, employment, and beyond, revealing how interpretations of neutrality can be shaped by broader ideological currents rather than purely principled commitments.

In addition to offering a critical perspective on ongoing debates surrounding *laïcité*, our research also informs prejudice-reduction strategies that draw on this principle—particularly those aimed at fostering interreligious understanding by "explaining" the legal foundations of *laïcité*. While many such initiatives, including those led by civil society organizations, promote *laïcité* as a neutral legal framework for state-religion separation, our findings suggest that this approach may be insufficient. The association Coexister, for instance (*Coexister France—Coexister. fr* s. d.), engages in interfaith dialogue and civic education by clarifying the legal meaning of *laïcité*. However, in doing so, it frequently reiterates official state narratives without addressing the broader socio-political dynamics that have shaped the adoption of *laïcité* laws. This omission becomes particularly problematic when the legitimacy and consequences of these laws are contested. For example, Coexister presents the 2004 law banning conspicuous religious symbols in schools as a measure intended to "protect children from pressure"—a justification that closely follows institutional rhetoric. Yet scholarly work has shown that this legislation was significantly influenced by biased representations of Islam (Baubérot 2008). As such, prejudice-reduction initiatives that rely exclusively on legalistic explanations risk reinforcing exclusionary interpretations of *laïcité*. By uncovering the multidimensional nature of *laïcité*—including its association with anti-Muslim sentiment, racism, and sexism—our research challenges the assumption that *laïcité* is inherently neutral. Rather, it reveals that *laïcité* can operate both as a principle of equality and as a vehicle for intolerance, depending on the context in which it is interpreted and applied.

To conclude, the present data allowed for the identification of Belgians representations with regard to *laïcité*. We also examined how these conceptions relate to sexism, racism and anti-Islam attitudes. We managed to identify similarities and differences between the French and Belgian appraisal of this important ideology. In particular, when French data point to a single new *laïcité* dimension that is related to prejudice, our data point to the presence of two subdimensions, one related to the expression of beliefs and the other to the funding of the different faiths. Last but not least, we also tested whether *laïcité* was strategically used by antiegalitarian individuals and found that these expressed a renewed adherence to some dimensions of the principle in the presence of Islam. These are the first data to investigate these issues in Belgium. As such, it is our opinion that they send a most intriguing message at both practical and political levels.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data are accessible on the Open Science Framework (see https://osf.io/smu28 and https://osf.io/d3zjb, for Studies 1 and 2, respectively).

Endnotes

[1]The term *"Maghrebins"* (Maghrebi) is frequently used in French to refer to this category of people.

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