

**RELIGIOUS MORALITY AND THE ETHICS OF EXCLUSION IN *L'ORANGE DE NOËL*: CATHOLIC AUTHORITY, SOCIAL BELONGING, AND HISTORICAL COMMUNITY FORMATION**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines religious morality as an ethical system of inclusion and exclusion in Michel Peyramaure's *L'Orange de Noel*. Set in early twentieth century rural France, the novel dramatizes religious control as a mechanism of moral legitimation determining education, status and citizenship. Through the congregational school and the village cure, the Church becomes a source of moral surveillance legitimizing the exclusion of the deviant. The plight of Malvina and the ostracism of Cecile Brunie illustrate how religious morality can intersect with discipline, shame and ethics. It is not simply the code of a specific religion that determines belonging; rather exclusion is based on "les pratiques quotidiennes" of morality as an ethic which decides membership and conditionality. Peyramaure's fiction highlights the ethical limits of such a religious moralism by pitting the authority of the cleric against what becomes a secular relational ethics of education and mutual responsibility. Through an explicit articulation of the effects of moral certainty, the paper demonstrates how *L'Orange de Noel* adds fuel to an ongoing discussion of history and religion, ethics and government.

**Keywords:** Religion, Ethics of exclusion, Historical fiction, Social belonging, Laïcité

**1. Introduction**

Michel Peyramaure's *L'orange de Noel* offers a literary insight into the ethical nuances of a period in rural France during the early twentieth century when there existed great conflict between Catholic dogma and republicanism. The novel chronicles the marginalisation of those vulnerable, such as a dyslexic child and a secular school teacher, in a community living according to religious moral tenets. Through the portrayal of education establishments, religious authority and class, the novel brings us face to face with an important question regarding religion and morality systems: is it ethically justifiable to exclude? The historical background of the Third Republic (1870-1940) is needed for understanding the conflicts expressed in the novel. France underwent important change in church-state relations,

culminating with the Law of Separation of 1905 (Peker, 2019; Robert, 2022), while changes to education reforms aiming to achieve laïcité within state schools threatened centuries of Catholic control of schooling and therefore moral teaching (Morgan, 2002; Verneuil, 2014). Such reforms were not neutral nor simply related to structural organisation of society; they impacted upon the very ethical fabric of communities and who has the moral authority to shape that social world. Michel Peyramaure portrays the individual faces behind such historical conflicts of ethical values. The Catholic School teaches at a congregational school run by Catholic nuns who espouse the traditional religious moral authority, where moral worth is measured according to obedience to religious belief. In contrast, the Secular School reflects republican ideals of inclusion, rational pedagogical practice and open access to education (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024).

This paper looks at the ways in which religious morality constitutes an ethic of exclusion in *L'Orange de Noël*, exploring the mechanisms by which Catholic authority exerts its moral gaze, the repercussions of religious dogma for vulnerable others and alternatives to religious morality that the novel proffers. Situating Peyramaure's novel in relation to broader scholarly discourses on laïcité, Church-State relations and the ethics of religious authority, it shows how the particularities of literary text may be said to reflect the lived realities of moral exclusion in historical communities. It is divided into five sections: first looking at theories of religious morality and exclusion; secondly exploring Catholic institutional authority and surveillance; thirdly exploring the exclusion of Malvina and Cécile Brunie; fourthly discussing the ethics of religious dogma and alternatives; and finally conclusions regarding historical communities and religious authority in the present.

## **2. Theoretical Frameworks: Religious Morality and the Ethics of Exclusion**

To conceptualize the ethics of exclusion in *L'Orange de Noël*, I attend to theoretical perspectives about how religious organizations construct moral boundaries and legitimize social hierarchies. Religious morality not only functioned as a set of beliefs but more so as a mechanism for social control defining right and wrong behaviour, moral worth and access to community resources (Ehigie, 2025).

### **2.1 Religious Authority and Moral Surveillance**

The theory of moral surveillance refers to the monitoring, judgement and discipline of behaviour on the part of religious institutions to compel conformity to established moral codes. In the setting of Catholic France, the Church deployed moral surveillance through confession, catechism instruction, oversight of schools and public ritual (Peker, 2019). As a result, what Foucault would call a "disciplinary regime" operated by which religion was inscribed upon individual consciousness while simultaneously rendering it susceptible to external surveillance and control (Bowen, 2007). Peker (2019) shows how the development of laïcité in the Third Republic was characterized by a conscious effort by republican institutions to dislodge Catholic moral surveillance and create new state-centred mechanisms for the control of society. Education came to play a key role in this struggle because schools were perceived as the site par excellence for the inculcation of moral and civic values among future generations. The congregational school represented in *L'Orange de Noël* is emblematic of the Church's traditional role in the moral education of the young, with religious instruction and secular teaching being inextricably linked (Morgan, 2002). The novel portrays moral surveillance in action through the everyday habits of observation, judgment and sanction exercised on behalf

of the Catholic Church by the nuns responsible for running the congregational school. Academic ability is judged alongside and conflated with the child's degree of religious assent, with failure being treated as a sign of moral fault (Ehigie, 2025). Surveillance penetrates not only every aspect of classroom and family life but also the child's deepest private thoughts, which are revealed through confession (Morgan, 2002).

## **2.2 Ethics of Exclusion and Social Belonging**

Religious exclusions are not merely a matter of discrimination; rather, they constitute a broad denial of social belonging rooted in ethical claims regarding human dignity and community membership. Lucassen, Feldman and Oltmer (2006) examine how religious institutions mediated belonging for marginalized people in Western Europe. In many settings, inclusion was predicated upon meeting certain religious expectations. Those who failed to do so - whether due to doctrinal dissent, moral transgression or inability to fulfill expected religious practices - were systematically excluded from community. The ethics of exclusion can operate in numerous ways. First, epistemic exclusion can deny certain actors their rightful place among communities of knowers and moral agents. In *L'Orange de Noël*, Malvina's learning disability leads to the dismissal that she is incapable of meaningful participation in the educational and ethical project (Ehigie, 2005). Second, material exclusion can render certain social goods, opportunities or resources dependent upon religious purity. The treatment of Malvina by the congregational school illustrates how educational exclusion can be used to reinforce larger patterns of social exclusion. Finally, the ethics of exclusion can take the form of symbolic violence where particular constructions of meaning are imposed upon social subjects (Hayat, 2007). In this manner, religion can turn contingent states of being into needed conditions of exclusion, so naturalizing and making seem inevitable what would otherwise be seen as contingent ethical projects (Bourdieu, 1992).

## **2.3 Competing Moral Frameworks: Religious Absolutism and Secular Ethics**

The conflict in *L'Orange de Noël* is a microcosm of the larger struggle between religious absolutism and secular ethics. Religious absolutism posits an exclusive access to moral truths based on divine revelation and ecclesiastic authority (Ehigie, 2025). It sees moral norms as transcendental, immutable and non-negotiable. It demands an absolute obedience, irrespective of the impact of such obedience on human welfare and sociability (Pelletier, 2022). Secular ethics, however, derives moral reasoning from human experience, rational reflection and care for human well-being. The republican school reforms of the Third Republic represented a secular moral agenda, which championed a moral education based on civic virtue, rational autonomy and universal human dignity (Terral, 2007; Verneuil, 2014). This approach neither abjured religion nor conceded moral authority to it. Rather, it insisted that any moral claim must be validated through public reasons rather than by ecclesiastic fiat (Williams, 2020). The tussle between religious and secular moralities in *L'Orange de Noël* was symptomatic of a historical moment of conflict when the Catholic church's supremacy in morals faced a republican challenge (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024).

By suggesting that religious absolutism, if it becomes the state form of religion, causes systematic wrong because it gives primacy to adherence to abstract rule over tangible human need, it contrasts implicitly to a rival ethic enshrined in the character of Cécile Brunie: an ethic of empathy, pedagogic responsiveness and the enduring commitment to the child regardless of

his conformity to religion (Ehigie, 2025). It is this contrast that constitutes the ethical thrust of Peyramaure's argument.

### 3. Catholic Authority and Institutional Mechanisms of Exclusion

The congregational school in *L'Orange de Noël* is the chief site at which Catholic moral authority is converted into practices of exclusion; an analysis of its operation will therefore require consideration of the institutions as well as the informal modalities through which moral authority is exercised.

#### 3.1 The Congregational School as Moral Institution

Congregational schools in the early twentieth-century French played an important role in shaping young Catholic subjectivities (Brooks, 2016). The schools integrated religion study, formal learning and personal discipline into a single pedagogy with the goal of creating people who identified as Catholic in ideology and submitted to church authority. In the book, Peyramaure's Congregation School offered a total moral vision education; studying Catechisms took precedence over other subjects of study and there was constant prayer throughout the day. The sisters engaged in pedagogy, pastoral care and surveillance; academic assessment not only judged pupils as intelligent but also who was worthy enough to engage themselves to the group (Ehigie, 2019). The hierarchy was reflected in both material and symbolic terms in the school's arrangements of space and time. Religious imagery and objects occupied every corner and wall; time for praying and praying again structured the child's daily schedule and personnel staff authority followed church as well as school hierarchy lines. Pierre Bourdieu coined terms regarding these processes such as moral environment, which Durkheim also supported (Hayat, 2007), to show the structure consciousness produces. Inside these schools' social spaces, one could recognize the patterns of society that taught young people it was natural and proper.

#### 3.2 Mechanisms of Moral Surveillance and Discipline

Congregation schools have various devices for enforcing moral conformity and labeling deviation. Table 1 lists primary mechanisms of surveillance and discipline operating in the novel.

**Table 1: Mechanisms of Moral Surveillance and Discipline in the Congregational School**

<b>Mechanism</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Effect on Malvina</b>
<b>Academic Evaluation</b>	Assessment of learning performance interpreted as moral indicator	Conflates intellectual capacity with moral worth	Learning difficulties read as moral failure
<b>Behavioral Monitoring</b>	Constant observation of student conduct in classroom and beyond	Enforces conformity to religious behavioral norms	Minor infractions magnified as evidence of deficiency
<b>Confession</b>	Private disclosure of thoughts and actions to religious authority	Penetrates interior life and enforces self-surveillance	Psychological pressure and guilt intensification

<b>Public Shame</b>	Exposure of failures and transgressions before peer group	Reinforces hierarchies and deters deviance through humiliation	Social isolation and damaged self-worth
<b>Exclusion Threats</b>	Warnings of removal from school or community	Maintains discipline through fear of total rejection	Constant anxiety about belonging

These three mechanisms work in tandem to form a complete control system. Academic evaluation becomes moral judgment when the nuns interpret Malvina's reading problem as a sign of laziness, disobedience, and/or spiritual corruption, rather than as a pedagogical problem to be addressed with adjusted instruction (Ehigie, 2025). By interpreting dyslexia in this way, a neutral condition is transformed into a moral failing, justifying exclusion from the congregation. Behavior monitoring broadens surveillance to include all aspects of student behavior, as the nuns observe posture, speech, socializing and even facial expressions for evidence of immorality. This fosters a panopticon effect, where students internalize surveillance and police their own behavior to avoid penalty (Bowen, 2007). As a result, for Malvina, whose learning difficulties render her incapable of meeting academic expectations, surveillance becomes an insistent cause of anxiety and shame. Confession functions as the most invasive form of moral surveillance, extending into the interior life of students to demand disclosure of their private thoughts and feelings. In doing so, the Church asserts its jurisdiction over the conscience, requiring subjects to frame their experience according to Catholic moral structures and submit them to ecclesiastical judgment (Ehigie, 2025a).

### 3.3 The Curé's Role in Community Moral Policing

Beyond the school, the village curé holds a position of moral authority for the community. His role is simultaneously spiritual, social and political and he plays a important part in defining boundaries within the community and authorizing exclusion (Peker, 2019). The curé in *L'Orange de Noël* personifies the confrontation between traditional Catholic power and Republican attempts to challenge this authority. The curé's animosity towards Cecile Brunie and the secular school shows the reaction of religious power against those it sees as attempting to usurp its authority. The secular school is described as morally corrupting and the curé warns the parish that their children will be damned if sent to the school (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024). As such, the conflict is framed as a cosmic battle between good and evil that sanctions extreme measures to defend religious power. The curé also has more informal social power by controlling public opinion and overseeing religious rites of passage in the lives of people. Families who refuse to submit to the curé's power face social exclusion from births, weddings and funerals which grant the church's approval of a person's actions and integrate them into the community (Pelletier, 2022). Through these measures, the curé can enforce conformity to his dictates through spiritual threats (excommunication and damnation) and social exclusion. The curé is portrayed as inflexible and unwilling to adapt the church to new social circumstances or acknowledge the legitimacy of competing moral frameworks. This portrayal fits into broader patterns of how Catholic institutions responded to modernization, which frequently saw the church push back against changes which undermined its traditional role (Robert, 2003). In reality, this intransigence undermines the moral legitimacy of the church as an institution by laying bare the gulf between its claims to universal love and practice of exclusion.

#### **4. Cases of Exclusion: Malvina and Cécile Brunie**

The book's critical examination of religious morality focuses upon two cases of exclusion: that of Malvina, the dyslexic child failed by the congregational school and of Cecile Brunie, the secularist teacher whose appointment is resisted by Catholics. These two cases represent distinct aspects of the ways in which religious moral systems generate and justify exclusion.

##### **4.1 Malvina: Learning Difference as Moral Failure**

Malvina's fate highlights the violence in collapsing mental ability with moral worth. As a girl with dyslexia, Malvina is unable to learn how to read and write according to the congregational school's pedagogy (Ehigie, 2025). Rather than adjusting instruction to meet her needs, the nuns view her inability to learn as a sign that she is lazy, disobedient, or spiritually corrupted. In this, the nuns of the congregational school participate in wider historical and philosophical traditions about understanding disability and difference through religious moralities. "When moral structures valorize conformity to particular norms of behaviour and performance, then anyone who finds themselves unable to conform does not simply suffer the consequence of practical exclusion but will be seen as morally bad" (Ehigie, 2025). So, Malvina suffers a double exclusion - both from an education and from membership in the congregation. The psychological effects of such exclusions are disastrous. Malvina comes to believe in the nuns' vision of her as fundamentally defective. The shame and self-doubt that Malvina suffers reveal that "moral exclusion also works via the internalisation of degrading categories" (Hayat, 2007). The novel shows that this is, in itself, a grave ethical problem, highlighting the brutality of religious moral absolutism. Ehigie (2025) points out that current artificial intelligence technologies may allow for customized instruction which can help address the learning needs of students such as Malvina. This highlights two points: the congregational school had the resources to address Malvina's learning needs but failed because of their ideological commitments; the school also lacked the ethical frameworks for recognizing the worth and dignity of people outside of performance.

##### **4.2 Cécile Brunie: Secular Ethics as Threat to Religious Authority**

Cécile Brunie's exclusion operates differently from Malvina's, reflecting conflicts over institutional authority rather than individual moral status. As the secular schoolteacher, Cécile represents republican values of *laïcité*, rational pedagogy, and inclusive education (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024). Her success in teaching Malvina, where the congregational school failed, demonstrates the superiority of secular pedagogical methods and challenges Catholic claims to moral authority in education. The curé's hostility toward Cécile reveals the threat that secular ethics poses to religious authority. By demonstrating that moral education can proceed without religious foundations, secular schools undermine the church's claim to monopoly over moral formation (Terral, 2007; Verneuil, 2014). Cécile's pedagogy, grounded in empathy, patience, and commitment to each student's development, offers an alternative ethical framework that judges moral worth by responsiveness to human needs rather than conformity to religious doctrine.

Cécile's conflict with the curé is emblematic of the larger struggle over *laïcité* in Third-Republic France, where republicans claimed that only neutral public schooling could provide equal access to all, while Catholic authorities insisted that all secular schooling encouraged atheism and moral relativism (Morgan, 2002; Robert, 2022). Taking a side in the debate, La Guerre

scolaire portrays a more authentic morality in secular ethics because it prefers real human flourishing over abstract dogmatic purity. Meanwhile, Cécile's ultimate successful incorporation into her community implies that though religious authority is potent, its legitimacy has limits. After witnessing the results of secular education (Malvina's transformation), other members of the community begin to question Catholic assertions and admit alternate moral authorities (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024). We learn by doing this that ethical authority depends finally on demonstrated ability to support human well-being.

### 4.3 Comparative Analysis of Exclusion Mechanisms

Table 2 compares the mechanisms and consequences of exclusion for Malvina and Cécile Brunie:

**Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Exclusion: Malvina and Cécile Brunie**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Malvina</b>	<b>Cécile Brunie</b>
<b>Basis of Exclusion</b>	Learning disability interpreted as moral failure	Secular pedagogical approach threatening religious authority
<b>Primary Excluders</b>	Congregational school nuns, supported by cure	Village curé, supported by conservative parishioners
<b>Type of Exclusion</b>	Educational and social marginalization; denial of dignity	Professional opposition; social hostility; institutional conflict
<b>Psychological Impact</b>	Internalized shame; damaged self-worth; anxiety	Professional stress; social isolation; ideological commitment tested
<b>Resistance Strategy</b>	Limited agency; dependent on external advocacy	Active resistance through pedagogical success; community engagement

<b>Resolution</b>	Transfer to secular school; successful learning with adapted pedagogy	Gradual community acceptance through demonstrated effectiveness
<b>Ethical Significance</b>	Reveals violence of conflating ability with moral worth	Demonstrates viability of secular ethics independent of religious authority

This contrast highlights how religious moral systems help exclusion in diverse ways. For vulnerable people like Malvina, religion facilitates exclusion by applying directly its moral categories linking conformity to worth. For people who challenge religious institutions, like Cécile, religion facilitates exclusion by protecting religious powers from other moral systems. In these two cases, religious morality does not promote flourishing; it reinforces hierarchies.

## 5. Ethical Dimensions of Religious Absolutism and Alternative Frameworks

The novel's portrait of exclusion prompts needed questions about whether or not religious moral systems provide an adequate ethics or might be replaced with an alternative, which promotes greater human dignity and inclusion.

### 5.1 The Ethical Failures of Religious Absolutism

The religious absolutism in *L'Orange de Noël* is ethically inadequate in several respects. First, it sets an abstract ideal of doctrine above real human needs: the congregational school's treatment of Malvina illustrates how rigid adherence to such a pedagogical ideal may result in harm to the children when used to maintain institutional privilege and control (Ehigie, 2025). In that regard, it fails the most elementary test of ethics - it fails to account for particularity and need. Second, religious absolutism takes itself to have knowledge of objective moral truth which no longer leaves room for further discussion, negotiation and revision: the curé's denunciations of secular education illustrate a general epistemological stance of religious absolutism (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024). In doing so, it immunizes itself against accountability for past injustices, as well as against the kind of moral learning that comes through recognition of error. Third, religious absolutism relies mostly upon fear and shame to enforce its moral dicta: the novel documents how fear of damnation, fear of public humiliation and fear of ostracization are employed by the church to ensure obedience (Ehigie, 2025). In that regard, it violates its own central claim of respect for human dignity and freedom. Any theory that requires fear and shame as the primary means of enforcing its morality reveals that it has failed in the task of inspiring free and willing assent. Fourth, religious absolutism centralizes moral authority in institutions that are accountable only to themselves, never to those who are ruled: the curé exercises complete power in his field, unaccountable to the people for whom he speaks (Peker, 2019). This arrangement enables systematic abuses and severely complicates any attempt to hold religion to moral accountability.

## **5.2 Secular Ethics: Empathy, Responsibility, and Inclusion**

Secular ethics, represented in the novel by Cécile Brunie, is portrayed as based on empathy, responsibility and inclusion. Secular ethics is distinguished from religious ethics through its eschewal of any pretension to transcendent moral truth, replacing this with a commitment to respond to the needs of others and to create conditions where everyone can flourish (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024). Empathy secures the basis of this ethics. Cécile successfully responds to Malvina, while the congregational school fails to address her, because she recognizes the child's dignity and potential despite her learning difficulties (Ehigie, 2025d). Instead of responding to people according to preconceived moral categories, Cécile responds to her own students and Malvina as singular persons with different needs and capacities. Response here displaces the abstract application of a moral code. Responsibility relates to how secular ethics accounts for the consequences of actions and institutions. Cécile understands that she, as an educator, has responsibility for Malvina's success and should change her methods if students are failing (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024). In contrast, the congregational school blames students for pedagogical failure and denies that the institution bears responsibility for the exclusion of certain students. Inclusion represents a key principle of secular ethics in the novel. The republican school purports to include all the children of the commune, whatever their religious adherence, economic situation or learning ability (Terral 2007; Verneuil 2014). The universal aspirations of the Republican School are in line with the Enlightenment ideals of equal human dignity that underpin secular moral philosophies. Although the novel recognizes that secular institutions do not always achieve these ideals, they are morally superior to religious institutions whose very purpose is to promote belief at the expense of disbelief and conformity against any dissent.

## **5.3 Toward a Relational Ethics of Belonging**

In the end, the novel suggests that ethical community must move beyond religious absolutism and procedural secularism alike in favour of a relational ethics of belonging that recognizes human dignity and moral worth as properties not of people but of relations of mutual recognition and care (Lucassen et al., 2006). A relational ethics of belonging offers at least the following three recommendations for building ethical communities. First, moral worth must be understood as unearned and universal not conditional upon conformity to external expectation (Muldoon, 2011). In this sense, all beings - and especially all humans- are worthy of regard and respect not because they are intellectually gifted, spiritually awakened or behaviourally correct according to some religious ideal but just because they are; and so ethical communities must recognize Malvina and others like her not as morally lacking but rather as fully deserving of regard and respect. Second, community membership must be inclusive rather than exclusive, diversely rather than uniformly composed. Ethical communities make room for multiple forms of being and knowing, multiple ways of living well in the world (Bowen, 2007) and do so by taking steps to dismantle barriers erected against marginalized populations and by doing this build institutions capable of accommodating difference. Third, moral authority must be distributed and accountable rather than monopolistic and absolute. Ethical communities are brought into being through dialogue among members who mutually and fully regard each other as moral equals not imposed from on high by privileged authorities (Hayat, 2007). The democratic approach to ethics does not signal moral relativism but instead a commitment to justifying moral claims in terms intelligible to all whose concerns they encompass.

Table 3 contrasts the key features of religious absolutism, procedural secularism, and relational ethics:

**Table 3: Comparative Ethical Frameworks**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Religious Absolutism</b>	<b>Procedural Secularism</b>	<b>Relational Ethics</b>
<b>Source of Moral Authority</b>	Divine revelation; ecclesiastical hierarchy	Universal reason; democratic procedure	Mutual recognition; dialogical engagement
<b>Basis of Moral Worth</b>	Conformity to religious doctrine and practice	Rational autonomy; citizenship rights	Inherent dignity; relational care
<b>Approach to Difference</b>	Demand uniformity; exclude or convert dissenters	Tolerate diversity within neutral framework	Welcome diversity; accommodate particularity
<b>Mechanism of Enforcement</b>	Fear, shame, and exclusion threats	Legal sanction; civic education	Social accountability; empathetic response
<b>Conception of Community</b>	Hierarchical; bounded by religious identity	Procedural; defined by legal citizenship	Relational; constituted through mutual care
<b>Accountability Structure</b>	Upward to ecclesiastical authority	Horizontal to fellow citizens	Distributed across relational networks
<b>Ethical Priority</b>	Doctrinal purity; institutional authority	Individual rights; procedural fairness	Human flourishing; social solidarity

The present structure would suggest that the tension in *L'Orange de Noël* does not revolve around religion versus secularity. Rather, the terms of the contest are different visions of moral community. So the novel criticizes religious absolutism not because it is religious but because it favors institutional authority and dogmatic conformity over human welfare. Secular ethics is not represented as indifferent to values but as committed to a conception of human dignity, equalitarianism and inclusivity.

## **6. Historical Context and Community Formation**

Fully understanding the ethical critique of the novel demands placing it within the historically specific setting of Third Republic France and the more general history of religion and of the formation of communities by religious and secular organizations.

## **6.1 The Third Republic and the Struggle Over Laïcité**

The time period in which *L'Orange de Noël* takes place - the early twentieth century - was a momentous one for France: it was an era in which disagreements about laïcité reached their zenith. The Third Republic, founded in the wake of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871), strove both to build Republican institutions and to construct a singular French national identity (Peker, 2019). In the eyes of Republican reformers, education provided the opportunity to forge French citizens and mold minds. So, they saw Catholic control of the educational system as being at odds with their conception of a Republican, laic society. The Ferry Laws (1881-1882) that instituted free and obligatory, secular, primary education therefore removed religious education from the public school curriculum and also challenged the church's monopoly over education (Morgan, 2002). The fervent Catholic resistance to these laws which, in their opinion, attacked religious freedom and endangered the foundations of a Christian society, culminated in the Law on the Separation of Church and State, adopted in 1905. That law definitively enshrined laïcité as a pillar of state authority by rescinding state support for religious bodies and imposing neutrality towards religion within public institutions (Robert, 2003; Robert, 2022). These reforms ended decades of sectarian struggle and fundamentally altered church-state relations in France (Pelletier, 2022). Peyramaure's book illustrates how these events were experienced in a small regional community. The congregational school vs. secular school conflict dramatizes this struggle, allowing us to see how larger national-level arguments translated into local-level disputes that had an important impact on people's lives. As such, the book illustrates how laïcité was not imposed from above but was actively negotiated through struggles at the local level between religious and secular power structures (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024).

## **6.2 Religious Institutions and the Construction of Community Boundaries**

Religious institutions once played important roles in defining community and belonging. The Catholic Church controlled social lives in rural France through its monopolies of education, charity, life-cycle rites and moral authority (Bowen, 2007). Parishes were the key organizing units of social membership and exclusion from religious community easily slid into exclusion from social community. The church's ability to decide who belonged depended on its monopoly over a set of goods that people had to acquire to be full members of social life. Education, poor-relief and life-cycle rites were all available only to those in good standing with religious authorities (Pelletier, 2022). The church's ability to punish dissent with exclusion made it possible to enforce conformity without coercion. Republican institutions broke the religious monopoly by offering alternatives to the church's sources of moral legitimacy and social goods. Republican schools, poor-relief systems and civic rituals created alternative paths to becoming a member of social community without going through the church (Terral, 2007; Verneuil, 2014). This institutional competition changed the terms of social belonging and gave people the ability to choose between different moralities and communities. *L'Orange de Noël* dramatizes this shift by focusing on the secular school as an alternative to the congregational school. Families that send their children to the secular school suffer pressures from the curé and his allies but gain access to a better education and a more inclusive community (Ehigie & Braimoh, 2024). The novel suggests that this pluralization of institutional options made French society stronger by ensuring that no single institution could exercise total control over belonging.

### **6.3 The Ethics of Community Formation**

The historical processes described in the novel pose important questions about the ethics of community. How should communities balance their need for unity with their diversity? What morality ought to regulate communities' inclusions and exclusions? How ought to balance respect for the dignity of the individual with its need for social cohesion? Traditionally, religious communities have sought unity through shared beliefs and practices, treating such conformity as indispensable to social solidarity (Hayat, 2007) but generating exclusion as a consequence. The novel shows this trade-off through the congregational school's tight-knit but exclusive community compared to the secular school's more diverse but possibly less solidaristic classroom. The secular republican community has sought unity through shared citizenship and civic values, rather than shared religious belief (Morgan, 2002), generating one kind of exclusion by requiring assimilation to the republic but avoiding another by not requiring religious membership. The novel suggests that, although there may be problems with the exclusionary features of religious community, secularism offers more resources to handle the problem of exclusion because it commits itself to universality rather than to maintaining boundaries between believers and unbelievers. Contemporary discussions about religious diversity, multiculturalism and social cohesion in the setting of religious pluralism seem to be reviving the conflicts depicted in *L'Orange de Noël* (Sandberg & Doe, 2007): how can pluralistic communities incorporate religious difference while protecting unwilling citizens from religious authorities seeking to impose religiously based moralities; how can societies maintain social standards without excluding those who do not hold them; how can people balance unity and diversity? The novel suggests that answering these questions requires going beyond both religious absolutism and proceduralism to consider relational ethics of human dignity.

## **7. Implications for Contemporary Debates**

The analysis of religious morality and exclusion in *L'Orange de Noël* sheds light on several contemporary debates about religion, ethics and government.

### **7.1 Religious Authority in Pluralistic Societies**

The novel's critique of Catholic moral absolutism connects with contemporary debates about the appropriate role of religious moral voices in pluralist democracy. Many religious communities still claim a privileged moral authority arising out of putative access to special revelation or to an authoritative religious moral tradition. Secular critics counter that moral authority within pluralist societies must rest instead on public reasons that are accessible to all citizens irrespective of religion (Muller 2003). The novel shows how religious people's moral claims may become morally problematic when deployed either to underpin exclusions or to control conformity to such moral norms as religious people endorse upon others who lack commitment to shared religious beliefs. Religious communities may appropriately enforce distinctive norms upon their own members but they may not wield coercive power or deny goods necessary for life in common among all persons if some of these persons refuse to comply with community religious norms. The book engages current discussion of religious demands for exemption from antidiscrimination laws, religious control of educational and health care institutions and appropriate uses of religious arguments in public policy debates.

## **7.2 Education, Inclusion, and Learning Differences**

Malvina's tale invites questions of educational inclusion and the treatment of learning difference, demonstrating the ill effects on students with disabilities when morality conflates intelligence with human worth (Ehigie, 2025d), which remain pertinent today as educational systems continue to favour certain forms of intelligence and marginalise different kinds of learning. The novel argues that pedagogy should tailor its teaching strategies to student needs rather than demanding that they comply with generalised standards. In this, it has parallels with contemporary educational movements like inclusive education and universal design for learning that seek to make educational systems more amenable to diverse learners. The congregation school's method, contrasted with that of Cécile, illustrates the difference that institutions can make when they flex in response to personal dignity.

## **7.3 Secularism, Religion, and Social Cohesion**

The novel participates in the political debate about whether a secular or a religious structure best fosters social solidarity. Critics of secularism hold that it leads to a lack of moral grounding and atomization, by producing societies without shared values (Ehigie, 2025b). In contrast, defenders of secularism maintain that religious frameworks produce conflict and exclusion in societies with diversity, whereas secular frameworks have the ability to enable such diversity while promoting social solidarity (Terral, 2007). *L'Orange de Noël* occupies an ambiguous place in this debate. While critiquing religious absolutism for producing exclusion, it does not propose banishing religion from public space. Rather, it proposes that religious communities adopt a more humble and dialogical stance towards moral authority; one that acknowledges the legitimacy of secular ethics and the provisionality of all moral frameworks. In this sense, *L'Orange de Noël* echoes the call for a "moderate secularism" that neither gives special status to religion nor tries to banish it but, instead, makes room for both religious and non-religious citizens on terms of mutual respect (Bowen, 2007).

## **7.4 Moral Surveillance and Digital Technologies**

The depiction of moral surveillance, by means of confession, behaviour and social control, within the Catholic tradition, has unexpected pertinence to contemporary debates on digital surveillance and social credit technology. The congregation school creates a panoptical experience in which boys internalise surveillance. Digital technologies allow for new levels of moral surveillance and behavioural enforcement (Ehigie, 2025). The ethical arguments raised about religious morality surveillance also apply to digital surveillance systems: moral hazard, concentration of power, absence of accountability and psychological harm due to constant observation. Ethically responsible moral surveillance suggests limiting its scope, distribution of authority and preserving places of private autonomy in which people can exercise independent moral judgement. These principles could be used to inform contemporary debate over limits of surveillance technology and keeping of civil liberty in digital society.

## **8. Conclusion**

Michel Peyramaure's *L'Orange de Noël* provides a scathing critique of religious morality as a basis of exclusion in early twentieth century rural France. Through its portrayal of Catholic institutional power, moral surveillance and the exclusion of Malvina and Cécile Brunie, the novel lays bare the ethical failures of religious morality as a basis of exclusion and shows that equating conformity with moral worth is violent. Analysis of the novel demonstrates that

exclusion based on religious morality has several mechanisms including: the equation of intelligence with moral worth, use of shame and fear to enforce conformity, the concentration of moral authority in unaccountable hierarchies and denial of dignity to those who cannot or will not conform. These mechanisms result in numerous harms, including psychological damage, educational failure, social isolation and denial of full community membership. In contrast to this religious morality, the novel offers an alternative ethics grounded in the figure of the secular educator and that of Cécile Brunie. This ethics centers itself on empathy, pedagogical responsiveness and a commitment to universal inclusivity while basing moral authority on demonstrated ability to promote human flourishing, rather than reliance on ecclesiastical tradition or doctrinal assertion. As such, while the secular as an institution is certainly subject to limitation, the novel suggests that secular ethics has more adequate resources for addressing exclusion precisely because it is committed to universal dignity. Also, the novel finally gestures towards a relational ethics of belonging that goes beyond the conflict between religious absolutism and procedural secularism. This ethics recognizes moral worth as unconditional, embraces diversity over uniformity and distributes moral authority via dialogue rather than concentrating it in hierarchical institutions. Developing this ethics will require ongoing work to dismantle barriers to inclusion and design institutions to support human particularity. The discussion locates the novel in the setting of Third Republic France and the struggle over laïcité, exploring how the ethical conflicts portrayed in the novel impacted community and identity formation at this historical juncture. The shift from a Catholic monopoly of moral leadership to institutional pluralism enabled people to choose among competing moral systems and ensured that no one institution dominated social life. The themes in the novel remain strikingly relevant today in terms of discussions around religious authority in pluralist societies, educational inclusion of diverse learners, the relation between secularism and social cohesion and the ethics of surveillance and social control.

Peyramaure's fiction shows how literature can bring light on ethical issues by showing their specific human embodiments. The struggles of Malvina and Cécile Brunie give a flesh-and-blood reality to discussions of religious versus secular ethics and allow readers to see what the stakes are of different moral systems for people and their relationships. The book reminds its readers that questions of belonging, dignity and moral legitimacy really matter for people's lives. *L'Orange de Noël* presents religious morality as anything but natural, self-obvious or inevitable. It is shown to be historically constructed in such a way as to serve certain interests and generate systematic exclusions. In addition, the book reveals the ethical shortfalls of religious absolutism and the viability of alternative moralities. For this reason, it invites the kind of critical reflections about how humans can organize communities which include all, respect human dignity and enable everyone to thrive, which remains necessary to address the current challenges of religious diversity, social cohesion and ethical governance in pluralist settings.

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