

Secularism: a short presentation

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(Google translation with some modifications adapted by David Pollock)

The modern concept of secularism in Europe originates in acceptance of the need for religious tolerance in order to avoid conflict and above all to put an end to the Wars of Religion. From that time on there has been general acceptance of a plurality of religions in society and of the right of individuals to choose and change their religion.

At that stage there was still no place for the unbeliever, because it was considered that anyone without religious convictions would be unable to form social bonds in society.

From the moment we extend tolerance to the unbeliever whose convictions are no longer based on a transcendent authority, the concept of secularism is established, because the state can no longer support religion. In the spirit of democracy that treats all citizens equally, the state must be neutral as between different beliefs. It cannot favour any school of thought, and as a consequence we see the arrival of the new requirement on government of non-discrimination and non-interference in matters of belief. The result is freedom of thought and conscience for all (which includes freedom of religion while the reverse is not true). It also follows that law-making is vested solely with the public authorities.

That is the principle.

This very general analysis of the concept of secularism has the merit of avoiding the complications of the very different ways used by different countries to organize this cohabitation of beliefs. A key aspect of this approach lies not (as is often suggested) in choosing a particular criterion as proof of a state being secular or not (signing of a concordat, paying ministers of religion, etc ...) but in examining whether society treats all citizens - atheists and agnostics or religious believers - equally regardless of their beliefs.

We can see the difficulty that churches and religions, even today, have in accepting this position of equality with "those who believe in nothing" and are therefore considered amoral or, to put it another way that is just as pejorative, with the proponents of a crass materialism devoid of spirituality or of a relativism "whose only reference is the self and its desires".

The concept of secularism requires a range of democratic freedoms for all, but it is not anti-religious. It has to be understood that while phrases such as "separation of church and state" or "religion being a private matter" mean that churches do not intervene in affairs of government, they also mean that government does not intervene in religious affairs. This is called government impartiality. Of course, every individual citizen has the right to express his beliefs and to practise his religion "in public and in private", that is, in civil society.

Today a secular society is one that without discrimination accords equal rights to all citizens regardless of their philosophical or religious beliefs.

We can summarize the position of secularism in five requirements:

1. The public authorities refrain from intervening in the internal affairs of religious and non-religious communities and vice versa.
2. Churches and religious and non-religious communities do not receive any privileges in the exercise of public power. The state does not delegate to them any part in public services.
3. The decisions of ecclesiastical authorities have no legal significance, and religious laws (Canon Law, Shariah, Talmud, etc.) carry no legal weight.
4. Public authorities cannot assign to religious or non-religious communities or to their organisations or representatives any subsidy, any assistance, any buildings, any relief unless it is in accordance with law and respects the principles of equality and non-discrimination.
5. The representatives and the communications of public authorities meet the requirement of impartiality. Public authorities organise only civil or pluralist ceremonies and issue invitations only to ceremonies of this character.

Establishing a healthy relationship between public authorities and the religious and philosophical convictions of citizens, that is, maintaining the impartiality of the state and the neutrality of public space, our common heritage, and so building secularism is the business of all citizens of a democracy, whatever their private feelings on religion, belief or doubt, faith or atheism.

The starting point for answers to today's problems is secularism: that the law should above all safeguard individual human rights - notably freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression and the principle of equality and hence non-discrimination. This principle of equality maintains that every human being should command in law equal worth and dignity and value and protection.

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