

SECULARISM, SECULAR STATE AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Abstract

The historic separation of the Church and the State, as an immediate product of secularism, informs the reality of secular state, a state without official religion. This paper attempts to understudy the extent to which secularism enhances religious freedom within the frame of secular state. With the tools of phenomenological hermeneutics and critical analysis, the paper finds that, although more feasible within secular states, religious freedom and human rights are possibilities relative to existential circumstances of states, irrespective of their secular or non secular leanings.

Introduction

The renaissance period remains, in the annals of history, the wake of a significant paradigmatic shift from the tenets of supernaturalism to naturalism, theism to humanism and fancies of the sacral to secularism. Being a quest for liberation from the shackles of religious dogma and superstitions, secularism sought to place humanity on the path of freedom, rational and scientific progress. The wake of secularism saw the birth of secular state with inherence of freedom of sorts, human rights and equality. For the purposes of clarity and enlightenment, a more detailed exposition of secularism is apt.

Secularism

A form of criticism of orthodoxy based on the assertion that religion impedes human progress consequent upon its focus on dogma and superstition rather than reason and scientific method smacks of secularism. Understood in two broad senses, secularism, in one sense, asserts right to freedom from the rules and teachings of religion as well as and in another sense freedom from the imposition of religion upon the people by any government. It advocates neutrality on matters of belief within a state and dissuades state privileges to religion. In the other sense, secularism projects that human decisions and activities, especially political ones, should be based on empirical realities devoid of any religious or supernatural bias. Secularism is a conceptual complex that, whether viewed as an attitude or a practice, defiles a simple or central definition.

According to the Wikipedia:

Secularism is the assertion that governmental practices or institutions should exist separately from religion and/or religious beliefs. In one sense, secularism may assert the right to be free from religious rule and teachings, and freedom from the government imposition of religion upon the people, within a state that is neutral on matters of belief, and gives no state privileges or subsidies to religions. (See also Separation of church and state and Laïcité.) In another sense, it refers to the view that human activities and decisions, especially political ones, should be based on evidence and fact unbiased by religious influence. In its most prominent form, secularism is critical of religious orthodoxy and asserts that religion impedes human progress because of its focus on superstition and dogma rather than on reason and the scientific method. Secularism draws its intellectual roots from Greek and Roman philosophers such as Marcus Aurelius and Epicurus,

Enlightenment thinkers like Denis Diderot, Voltaire, John Locke, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine, and modern freethinkers, agnostics and atheists such as Bertrand Russell, Robert Ingersoll, Albert Einstein, and Sam Harris.

It is Louay Safi's submission that;

While one may find certain similarities between modern secularist attitudes and practices and those that existed in pre-modern societies, it is fair to say that secularism as we know it today is an essentially modern phenomenon that grew in the modern West, and later took roots in different societies.

He further posits that "In its essential sense, secularism denotes a set of notions and values whose aim is to ensure that the state is neither engaged in promoting specific religious beliefs and values, nor uses its powers and offices to persecute religion."

According to Shorter and Onyancha (1997:14):

Secularism refers to a situation in which religious faith, for one reason or another, is felt to be superfluous. It is a state in which religion loses its hold both at the level of social institutions and at the level of human consciousness. As such, it is a datum of modern society. Secularism is a world view which, in theory and and/or practice, denies the immanence of God.

The emerging concern of secular or scientific humanism was the shaping of human life and society, according to reason instead of the discovery of God's will. In other words, it is:

The attempt to replace the traditional belief that the concept of human person makes sense only within the context of talk about created soul, a transcendental, divine order and faith, with the conviction that the idea of persons is correctly to be understood within the context of reason, freedom for self-creation and fundamental skepticism. (Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1998:529).

After a critical reflection on the development of the term, Daniel Baril(2003) of the Quebec Secular Movement, asserted that secularism goes beyond mere separation of church and state. Rather, for him:

Secularism is the republican ideal embodied in the protection of fundamental human rights. All charters which recognize liberty of conscience and equality of individuals, without discrimination based on sex, race or religion, are expressions of the quintessence of secularism.

From inception, the principles of secularism are aimed mainly at achieving the separation of the temporal order from religious influence. This mainly indicates that secularism originated at a point when religion and socio-political life were not separated. It originated around the 14th century when political, economic and religious changes occurred within the Christian culture. A renowned Islamic thinker, Louay Safi, stated elaborately that:

To prevent state officials from using their political authority to impose a narrow set of religious attitudes and values on the larger society, and to foreclose the possibility of using religious symbols to agitate one religious community against

another, western intellectuals embarked on a project that aimed at separating political authority from religious affiliation. To do that, the Enlightenment scholars embraced a set of concepts and principles, and used them as the basis for reconstructing modern European consciousness. The new political ideology advanced by Enlightenment activists and thinkers emphasized concepts such as equality, freedom of conscience and conviction, and the supremacy of law, all of which were advocated by the Religious Reformation that put an end to the ancient regime of Europe.

Hence, “Secularization of man’s thought and action developed within the historical framework of modern western civilization”. (New catholic Encyclopedia, 1967:36)

The advent of secularistic trend was marked by the 14th century revival of commerce and the upsurge of merchandize within the feudal society which provided at least two indications of expectations of secularistic economic head:

First, the notion of “useful” freedom from external restraint, an acquired right granted by the free cities and distinct from natural right inherent in land ownership; second the attempted reconciliation of business practice with the religious prescriptions denouncing the profit motive. (Ibid)

The Rise of Humanism

The 15th century Italian Renaissance of which trend of thought was mainly homocentric, featured prominently the alliance of the papacy and the humanists. The progress in arts and sciences glorified the natural and accentuated the human, thus engendering decline of social responsibility and pioneering the failure of the *Conciliar* movement for ecclesiastical reform and less allegiance to the papacy. The emergence of secularism engendered and valorized the humanist consciousness. According to Daniel Baril(2003):

Secularism is in fact an expression of humanism. Humanism, by definition, promotes the wellbeing and advancement of human beings, motivated solely by considerations of justice and equality, without reference to any hypothetical divinity. A humanism worthy of the name is consequently intrinsically secular. (Indeed, it is on this basis that the Quebec Secular Movement recently decided to define itself as a humanist association and to take appropriate measures to revise its statutes and its name accordingly).

Maritain(1968:15) considered humanism a powerful structure altogether different and purely human, which came in replacement of the sacral forms of the middle ages. He submitted that:

The catastrophe of the middle Ages thus opens the epoch of modern humanism. The radiating dissolution of the Middle Ages and its sacral forms is the engendering of a secular civilization – of a civilization not only secular, but what separates itself progressively from the Incarnation. It is still, if you wish, the age of the son of man: but in which man passes from the cult of the God-man, of the Word made man, to the cult of humanity, of sheer man.

For him, what characterizes the epoch include “... the sense of the abundance of being, the joy of knowledge of the world and freedom and the *élan* toward scientific discovery, the creative enthusiasm and the love of the beauty of the sensible forms.”

The emerging secular trend ushered in the ascendancy of power and nationalism in the social political sphere together with the need for secular education for expanding financial and commercial enterprises. These were the factors precipitating a crisis between secular pre-occupations and religious inspirations within a society that remained basically Christian.

Secularization

The scientific revolution championed by the 17th century scholars like Galileo, Newton and Bacon caused a major crack to the medieval thoughts mainly centred on supernaturalism and occasioned the searches of intellectuals for a rational approach to faith in study of nature itself. Francis Bacon's discourse in *Theology and Method* portrays, according to Thomas Fowler, his opposition to superstition and religious enthusiasm, but sincere belief in God, divine providence and the teachings of the scripture. This in a sense shows that secularism is of necessity anti-theological, whereas secularization, strange as it may seem, is not. As a social and cultural process by which non religious beliefs, practices and institutions replace religious ones in certain sphere of life, secularization may involve the use theological doctrines in the study of value. Bacon, for instance, was prominent in arguing that man's coming of age was theologically desirable.

Secularization tends to reconcile the polarity between the sacred and the secular, in the sense that secularity allows for a legitimate restoration of the secular sphere. Shorter and Onyancha(1997) hold that, "Such a restoration was the preoccupation of the so-called secular of the 1960s who proclaimed that humanity has now come of age and the religion faith has nothing to fear from the ascendancy of the human." Bacon was violently indifferent to religious controversies, as evident in Farrington's(1964:95) *Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, which states that, "Religious controversies have become a weariness of the spirit and men are perhaps more ready to contemplate the power, wisdom and goodness of God in his works."

Although Bacon's theological position seems to favour belief in God's divine providence and the teachings of the scripture, his real concern was expressed by Allfield(1978:17) as follows:

What he really cared for was the advancement of science, the knowledge of nature, the extension of the kingdom of man. And to this end, as well as in the interests of religion, he advocated the separation of religion and science: a view which was to bear fruit in the science of the future.

Bacon championed the enthronement of scientific research, the project to which he was unreservedly devoted. For him, such venture should be divested of all dogmatic tendencies for true knowledge to be achieved. Atfield's view in Bacon's position reveals that:

Scientific research is extremely unlikely to be conducted when knowledge about the physical world is dogmatically grounded on authority, or again when it is believed on skeptical grounds that no such knowledge is to be had. It was a part of the achievement of Bacon to supply reasons for rejecting both dogmatism and skepticism.

More scholars of the enlightenment secular humanism who were men of Letters, philosophy and science, like Voltaire, Montesquieu, Rousseau, D' Alembart, Diderot, Hume, Locke and Kant took the centre stage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The central message was that:

Human dignity was not a function of man's allegedly divine origin, but of the ordering and rational possibilities of earthly existence. The end of persons is neither the immediate adoration of God nor the heavenly city of the blessed, but rather the realization of those projects appropriate to this world, suggested on both reason and imagination. (Routledge)

They are known for their severe attacks on metaphysics and idealism as well as the position that knowledge must be scientific to be true. For instance Hume holds that there are no synthetic a priori propositions, with regard to knowledge. He stated in his discourse on the relations of ideas thus:

I shall venture to affirm as a general proposition which has no exception, that the knowledge of this relation is not, in any instance, attained by reasoning, *a priori*, but arises entirely from experience, when we find that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other. (1955:42)

Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* holds that although there are some such propositions "we cannot know them to be true when they surpass possible experience." (1929:194)

The introit of speculative physics and autonomy as proposed on Gassendi, Descartes and Hobbes marked the point of consolidation of science for furtherance of human welfare. The attacks of these scholars on the dogmas of Aristotelianism are quite remarkable. Attfield(1978:34) notes that:

In place of explanation of the behavior of bodies by natural places, essences and final causes, they put forward in different forms mechanistic theories, by which change could be explained by matter and motion, or by matter, motion and weight, alone. It was thus claimed that the world could be succinctly and fruitfully explained without employing the notions normally favoured by the ecclesiastical and lay establishment.

Such mechanist position simply advocates for the elimination of divinely driven postulations with their particular purposes within the created order. Extremists in this system champion the course of atheistic humanism and radically diminish the place of God in their theories. Attfield(1978:35) for instance, noted that:

In the more consistent mechanistic systems of physics, those of Descartes and Hobbes, there is indeed little room for God. In Cartesianism, God is, like the human mind, consigned to the realm of thinking things. While in the thorough going materialism of Hobbes, God only figures at all because he is material! For Hobbes materialism is applied not only to the created world, but to the universe, God included.

In line with this position, Shorter and Onyancha(1997:15) are of the view that:

Secularism may stem from explicit unbelief, the denial of the existence of God or of any religious dimension to human life. Such unbelief is rarely the product of a

formal, atheistic, rational philosophy. More often, it is an allegiance to a popular myth of science as the ultimate theory of every thing, a conviction that the only truths are scientific truths, reality as accessible to scientific observation and experiment.

Other scholars, whose rational approaches could be considered building materials for the edifice of secularism, include:

John Locke in his atomistic view of society, his political philosophy (preservation of property), and his reduction of faith to reason and clarity to natural duty; Voltaire and the philosophers in their concept of society as a collection of individualistic interests and in their religion of deism, which acknowledged only the existence of God, virtuous living, and eternal reward. American revolution by Ethan Allen, Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson. Economic theory absorbed the *laissez faire* of Adam Smith and the economic liberty of the physiocrats. (New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967:36-7)

Patent Emergence of Secularism

The strong application in the 19th century of Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism in David Ricardo's classical economic theory; Herbert Spencer's application of scientific law of natural selection and individual freedom within representative government and Thomas Malthus' doctrine of population ushered in the final separation from the public, of spiritual values, religious truths and moral absolutes. Even Darwin's evolution repressed vigorously the considerations of God and religious inclinations. Then came a distinct philosophy known as secularism developed in the mid 19th century for George Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh of England as they postulated: "... principle of natural morality independent of all revelation and supernatural orientation; absolute freedom of opinion on all matters, including morality; natural improvement in this life; absolute separation of church and state." (New Catholic encyclopedia, 1967:37).

The tenet of secularism with a view to the development of secular society grew stronger in the 20th century characterized by its many forms of positivism with its application of empirical basis of science to all religious beliefs, social theories and intellectual investigations. The birth of logical positivism, pragmatism and analytic philosophy represent the wake of industrialized, technical civilization governed predominantly by economic values producing a sort of mindset closed to transcendent values, metaphysics and theology.

With regard to secularism and religion, Shorter and Onyancha (1997:11) hold that:

Euro-America is deemed to be the home of a relentless and inexorable secularism. African visitors to the west profess to be shocked by the secularism they encounter, a secularism that contrasts with the religious commitment of the continent from which they come. Organized religion is scarcely visible in ordinary daily life. When it does appear, it is the target of a hostile media. Popular science, materialism and unbelief seem to hold sway in public, if not private life.

Secular State

Secularism in its conceptual form could be viewed diversely as either a doctrine or a movement or just an advocacy for change. From whichever perspective it is viewed secularism is not a floating concept of mere speculation, rather it

Ultimately directed at a political end. To this end, secularism is said to be neutral". It is neither a dogma nor a doctrine. If anything, it is an abstention. Secularism abstains from favouring one religion over another, or favouring atheism over religious belief. It is a political principle that aims at guaranteeing the largest possible coexistence of various freedoms.

Since the main appeal of secularism is the separation whether partial or total of religion and state for the purpose of achieving freedom and equality of citizens, a secular state would refer to a nation or country without an official religion. In other words, a secular state would be a state of which constitution is either strong or mildly secular. According to Wapedia:

A secular state is a concept of secularism, whereby a state or country purports to be officially neutral in matters of religion, supporting neither religion nor irreligion. A secular state claims to treat all as citizens equally regardless of religion and claims to avoid preferential treatment for a citizen from a particular religion/non religion over other religions/nonreligions. Most often, it has no state religion or equivalent.

In his essay on Islam and the political state, Dr Louay Safi posited that:

The secular state emerged in modern times in response to religious infighting that plagued Europe for over a century, and put social life on a self-destructing path. The Hundred Year War posed a serious threat to the then emerging modern Europe, underscoring the need to keep the state and church at a comfortable distance. While the secular state was designed to prevent organized religion from controlling public institutions, it did not necessarily aim at undermining religiosity per se, or alienating religious communities. Rather, it was perceived as multi-religious society's best defense against the imposition of the religious values and worldview of one community on another.

The *Concordats*, *"Positive Secularism"* and *the Retreat from Vatican II* presents that "Movements for *Laicite* in France and for the separation of church and state in the United States began the evolution of the present secular states." A secular state moulds its political arrangements including its laws around strict political principles with little or no attention to matters of religion. In other words, it works for the interest of each society as a political whole and treats the individual as part of this whole, administering its justice without any religion bias. It does not operate on the ideals of any religious principles and may not bind itself to any religious obligations. Hence it prevents religion from interfering with state affairs, as well as from controlling government or exercising political powers.

Muhammed Gaber submitted that a secular state upholds "... the principle of respect for person and non discriminations including sex, colour, creed and race." Hence quest for freedom and the course of human rights, forms the end for the desire and establishment of secular state. But this

position could be appropriate for western conception of a secular state when the freedom advocated for in secular state includes that of religion. Secularism nevertheless does not mean the absence of religion or the total disbelief in or worship of God. Hence a secular state may not be an atheistic state whereby the state officially opposes all religious beliefs and practices. Instead Wapedia has it that:

In some secular states, there can be a huge majority religion in the population (e.g. Thailand, Turkey, etc) and in others, there may be great religious diversity. (eg India, Lebanon, etc). Some may have *de facto* official religions, in which even though a government doesn't support or deny religions it may require some members of its government to be a certain religion (e.g. India, Peru).

Evolution and progress of secularism in many countries of the world produce the problem of deciphering between official and practical state secularism in those countries. Hence, not all constitutionally secular states are completely secular in practice. Also many states that are currently secular in practice may have memories of earlier established religion, been as secularism has various guises which may coincide with some degree of official religiosity. For instance:

In France many Christian holy days are official holidays for the public administration, and teachers in catholic schools are salaried by the state. In India, the government gives subsidy in airfare for Moslems going on Haj Pilgrimage. In the Commonwealth Realms, the Head of State is required to take the coronation Oath swearing to uphold the protestant faith. The United Kingdom also maintains positions in its Upper House for 26 senior clergymen of the established church of England known as the Lords Spiritual. (Wapedia)

Some processes for the secularization of the state include, granting religious freedom, stopping public funds to be used for a religion, non-establishment of state religions, opening up the education system, freeing the legal system from religious control, effecting religious tolerance, and allowing political leadership devoid of religious affiliations. Within communism the enthronement of secularism was totalitarian for Tomka(2005:32) who views the reason for secularism within communism as the need for realization of its social vision-communist modernization, holds that:

The social isolation of Christians was only to a degree self-chosen: It was forced on them. But once it was affirmed, the Christian community lost any sense of the seismic tremors in society. That is the tragedy of the churches of Eastern Central Europe. They have lost contact with society and history.

Secular State and Religious Freedom

One of the claims for the establishment of a secular state is the need to entrench religious freedom and human rights since religious states would be more repressive of other religions.

To this end the concordant watch contends that: church state separation does not guarantee human rights – as is shown by communist dictatorship, but this separation is necessary if human rights are to be possible- as is shown by societies living under religious rules, whether Sharia, Hindu law, Halaka or Canon law. Although the sort-after freedom are achieved in some secular

states, some others can be as or more repressive than religious states. Hence, a secular constitution does not ipso facto ensure religious freedom. For instance, the communist or former communist countries are widely known for their severe secular repression of religion. Also:

Turkey, a secular state which purports to guarantee freedom of conscience, aggressively promotes secularism, favouring secular views over religion and controlling all aspects of religious practice. Mexico, also a secular state, has especially since its 1917 constitution a history of anticlerical religious oppression. Churches could not engage in worship outside of a church building, own property, sue or defend itself in a suit, or engage in education; religious orders were outlawed, priests deprived of political speech and the right to vote. Many of these restrictions were removed, but many remain including limitations of the right of freedom of speech. (Tomka, 2005:32)

The repression of religious freedom within secular states cuts across what scholars have referred to as “friendly” and “hostile” separations of church and state. The friendly type, on one hand, tends only to curtail the interference of the church in the state’s affairs and vice versa. The hostile kind on the other hand seeks the drastic repression of religion without allowing for open religious practices. Typical of such hostile repression are the secularism found within French revolution. According to Safi:

The French revolution displayed a clear anti-religious sentiment, but these were not, as Nietzsche was to discover later, directed against religion per se, but against organized religion represented primarily by the Catholic church. Modern philosophy, being an epistemological skepticism, is, Nietzsche argued, covertly and overtly, anti-Christian—although, to say this for the benefit of more refined ears, by no means anti-religious.

The Mexican revolution as well as the Spanish constitution of 1931 radically introduced a kind of hostile secularism that was considered the cause of their respective civil wars. These revolutions were necessitated by the demands for change. The constancy of change equally manifested in the subsequent relaxation of the earlier hostilities.

Hence:

The French separation of 1905 and the Spanish separation of 1931 have been characterized as the two most hostile of the twentieth century, although the current schemes in those countries are considered generally friendly. French’s President Nicolas Sarkozy, however, still consider the current scheme a “negative laicite” and wants to develop a “positive laicite’ more open to religion. (Wapedia)

What could then be characteristic of the contemporary secular state might not be much of hostilities against religious freedom.

Conclusion

Concerted attempt have been made in this paper to broadly explore the contents of secularism noting that secular state is its political consequence. If humanity must progress on the path of freedom, religious freedom ought to be accorded its place especially in secular states as a model for broader appreciation of humanism.

Nevertheless, secular humanism alone is insufficient for human integral development without its theistic import.

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