

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-87360-4 - Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship

Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood

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Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship

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TARIQ MODOOD

FOREWORD BY CHARLES TAYLOR



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Foreword

What is secularism?

CHARLES TAYLOR

It is generally agreed that modern democracies have to be ‘secular’. There is perhaps a problem, a certain ethnocentricity, involved in this term, but I’ll leave this aside for the moment, and take it up in the next section. Even so, the term is not limpid. What in fact does it mean? A great deal of discussion seems to assume that we’re all quite clear about this, and the only possible discussion concerns whether we’re for or against.

That is why this collection is so timely. The essays in this book probe the multiple meanings of the term, and moreover show how these are embedded in different historical and political contexts.¹ The reader may not be clearer after she finishes this book, but at least she’ll have begun to recognise her confusions. This is a Socratic mode of wisdom that we all stand in need of in this domain.

If I can parade my own confusions in the next few pages, I think that there are at least two rather different models of what constitutes a secular regime that are going the rounds today.

Both involve some kind of separation of church and state. The state can’t be officially linked to some religious confession, except in a vestigial and largely symbolic sense, as in England or Scandinavia. But secularism requires more than this. The pluralism of society requires that there be some kind of neutrality, or ‘principled distance’, to use Rajeev Bhargava’s term.²

Secularism involves, in fact, a complex requirement. There is more than one good sought here. We can single out three, which we can class

¹ The essays in Part I (Chapters 2 to 5) of this volume explore some of the great range of historical contexts in which something like a secular regime has been sought. The chapters by Hunter and Saunders have the great advantage of making us take a certain distance from our usual exclusive focus on contemporary societies.

² See his contribution to this volume (Chapter 4, pp. 103–106), but also Bhargava (1998c: esp. 493–4, 520) for ‘principled distance’, and Bhargava (2007: esp. 39–41).

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in the three categories of the French Revolutionary trinity: liberty, equality, fraternity. First, no one must be forced in the domain of religion, or basic belief. This is what often defined a religious liberty including, of course, the freedom not to believe. This is what is also described as the ‘free exercise’ of religion, in the terms of the US First Amendment. Second, there must be equality between people of different faiths or basic belief; no religious outlook or (religious or areligious) *Weltanschauung* can enjoy a privileged status, let alone be adopted as the official view of the state. Then, thirdly, all spiritual families must be heard, included in the ongoing process of determining what the society is about (its political identity), and how it is going to realise these goals (the exact regime of rights and privileges). This (stretching the point a little) is what corresponds to ‘fraternity’.

These goals can, of course, conflict; sometimes we have to balance the goods involved here. Moreover, I believe that we might add a fourth goal: that we try as much as possible to maintain relations of harmony and comity between the supporters of different religions and *Weltanschauungen* (maybe this is what really deserves to be called ‘fraternity’, but I am still attached to the neatness of the above schema, with only the three traditional goods).

One kind of secularism claims to have resolved the question of how to realise these goals. It is claimed that one can determine the proper method in the realm of timeless principle, and that no further input, or negotiation, is required to define them for our society now. The basis for these principles can be found in reason alone, or in some outlook that is itself free from religion, purely *laïque*. Jacobins are on this wavelength, as was the first Rawls.

The problem with this is that (a) there is no such set of timeless principles that can be determined, at least in the detail they must be for a given political system, by pure reason alone; and (b) situations differ very much, and require different kinds of concrete realisation of agreed general principles; so that some degree of working out is necessary in each situation. It follows that (c) dictating the principles from some supposedly higher authority above the fray violates the third category of secularism, listed above. It deprives certain spiritual families of a voice in this working out.

We have a good illustration of (b) in the way that the issues concerning secularism have evolved in different western societies in recent decades, because the faiths represented in those societies have

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changed. We need to alter the way in which we proceed when the range of religions or basic philosophies expands: for example, contemporary Europe or America with their Muslims.

In relation to (c), we have the recent legislation in France against wearing the *hijab* in schools. Normally, this kind of thing needs to be negotiated. The host country is often forced to send a double message: (i) you can't do that here (kill Salman Rushdie, practice female genital mutilation), and (ii) we invite you to be part of our consensus-building process. These tend to run against each other; (i) hinders (ii) and renders it less plausible. All the more reason to go as easy as possible on (i). Religious groups must be seen as much as interlocutors and as little as menace as is possible.

These groups also evolve if they're in a process of redefinition of this kind in a democratic, liberal context. José Casanova in this volume and elsewhere points out how American Catholicism was originally targeted in the nineteenth century as inassimilable to democratic mores, in ways very analogous to the suspicions that nag people over Islam today. The subsequent history has shown how American Catholicism evolved, and in the process changed world Catholicism in significant ways. There is no reason written into the essence of things why a similar evolution cannot take place in Muslim communities. If this doesn't happen, it will in all likelihood be because of prejudice and bad management.

Let's pause and look at how this could happen (perhaps is happening). There is substantial suspicion of Islamic immigrants in many European countries today, and of Islam in general in the western media and public.

'Multiculturalism' has become a suspect term in much of Europe today. People say things like: 'I used to be for openness and toleration of difference, but now I see where it's leading.' Where is it leading? This is all about Islam. Rather simple requests, like that of schoolgirls to wear a headscarf, are suddenly freighted with immense significance.

In part, this is because of a rather simple and unreal understanding of multiculturalism that was abroad earlier. It meant on this view limitless acceptance of different forms of life, which could allow at the limit the evolution of a society with self-contained ghettos. This was absurd on two levels: first, in its original notion (for instance, in the Canadian case) multiculturalism was seen as a procedure for integration: precisely the idea that the norms and accommodations to which we

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would all come to adhere were to be negotiated between new and old citizens, and not simply taken over without change from the past.

But second, this whole idea was absurd in another way. The tremendous assimilative force of the way of life in advanced liberal, consumer-capitalist society is so great that there is no question of communities integrally retaining their whole original life-form, unless they go to great lengths to isolate themselves from the mainstream – as, for instance, the Amish have done, and also certain communities of Orthodox Jews. The danger of a society of ghettos is a totally unreal one. The real menace is that of failed integration, where young people, who have lost much of their original language and culture, nevertheless cannot make a go of their lives in our societies, because they lack the skills and training (including crucially the linguistic skills), or because they suffer discrimination. This is the situation we see in some *banlieues* of Paris, and in certain parts of German cities. This is a really tragic plight. It is the worse in that it breeds a sense of alienation and resentment, which can then emerge in violent action, and even in resistance to further efforts to bring about integration.

In other words the real danger is not that immigrants retain their original identities unchanged, but that they develop alienated counter-identities, which are very much in the society they have joined (e.g., they speak some version of French, or German; they aspire to a job, prosperity), but not of it (they feel themselves outsiders, and want to strike back.) We have here a phenomenon that is familiar from other societies, like the United States and Canada – only there it is to be found not so much among immigrants, as among African Americans (for the USA), and some communities of First Nations (in the Canadian case).

Add of course, in the Muslim case, that the building of a counter-identity is further encouraged by the global backlash that we now see in many Muslim countries, and which focuses in general on the West as an enemy. It is tempting for disoriented young people, frustrated in their ambitions for themselves, to draw on, sometimes partly and provisionally, sometimes with deadly intent, these ‘Islamic’ counter-identities, which grab so much attention and headlines everywhere.

To the extent that this happens, it must not be seen simply as a reflection of ‘Islam’, but also and especially as a phenomenon generated by the failed relationship of frustrated integration.

But unfortunately, it is all too often seen in the first light. This brings us back to the phobia about Islam in the West. Why do demands by

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schoolgirls to wear headscarves provoke such a disproportionate reaction?

The feeling often is: this simple-seeming proposal is really part of a package. The package is 'Islam', and it includes such terrible things as we can read of in the press daily, happening in Nigeria, or Saudi Arabia. If you reply that the girls in question aren't living in Nigeria or Saudi Arabia, and almost certainly don't share, say, extreme Wahabi views, people in Europe today may look at you with that kind of almost indulgent pity reserved for the terminally naive; or they will tell you stories about how imams are twisting the girls' arms, making them into unwilling stalking-horses for 'Islam'.

You can't just talk about headscarves as an issue on its own, and all the sociological evidence about the (in fact very varied) motives of the girls themselves is swept aside as irrelevant.

Here is a classic example of block thinking, which seems to have made huge strides in Europe in recent years. John Bowen's book, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves* (2006) documents this shift for the French case.

Block thinking fuses a very varied reality into one indissoluble unity, and this on two dimensions: first, the different manifestations of Islamic piety or culture are seen as alternative ways of expressing the same core meanings; and second, all the members of this religion/culture are seen as endorsing these core meanings. That actually a girl's wearing the headscarf might express a rebellion against her parents, and their kind of Islam, that others might be deeply pious while being utterly revolted by gender discrimination or violence – all this is lost from view.

Block thinking is an age-old phenomenon, and we all do it to some degree. In another age, we might be indulgent, but today it has explosive potential. People who think like this are prime recruits for Huntington's theory of the 'clash of civilisations'. What's worse, the way they then act tends to edge us closer to this nightmare scenario, because by treating all the varied segments of Islam as though they belonged to one threat, they make it harder for Muslims to stand out and criticise their own block thinkers, who are busy fighting their own gigantic, unified enemy. 'Christians and Jews', says Osama bin Laden – that takes in quite a lot of people. Block thinkers on each side give aid and comfort to block thinkers on the other, and with each exchange they edge us closer to an abyss. We're still very far from the edge, but still, the sooner we stop this madness, the better.

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How to stop this dialectic? Well, it works in part because the critics of block thought on each side are unknown to the others. How many times does the European critic meet this kind of response: ‘But where are the Muslims who are criticising extremist Islam?’ Of course, you patiently explain that you’re not likely to meet them in the drawing rooms of Paris journalists or the French political class. But this will never have the impact of a real connection to the multi-faceted discourse of the other side. Developing this type of discourse is an urgent necessity in the West today. Contributions like those of Tariq Modood and Abdullah Saeed to this volume (Chapters 7 and 9) are urgently needed to impart further depth and realism to the often frighteningly unidimensional western debate on Islam.

But to return to the main line of my argument above, we have to turn to the other basic model of secularism. This means not one based on an antecedently available set of principles, but one that builds an overlapping consensus, of the kind that Rawls was tending towards, without perhaps fully reaching it. Here there is no canonical justification; the principles are agreed, the basis on which we coexist, but each spiritual family justifies them in their own way. Why respect human life? Because of the nature of humans as rational, because humans are in the image of God, or whatever.

The actual principles are what we can come to agree on, as something we can all justify from our own point of view. This means that in any concrete situation, we cannot know beforehand (before negotiating) what they are. This would be scandalous if we were using the overlapping consensus as a *criterion* of right principles; then the principles I accept would be hostage to some illiberal gang that I have to include in the negotiation. No, each of us must determine from their point of view what is right. But what will be established as the ruling regime must be negotiated. Democracy doesn’t permit of anything else.

This allows us to respect our third goal, really to give the different spiritual families a voice in the determination of the rules by which they will live.

In the discussion of secular regimes above, which appeal to timeless principles, I invoked the extreme variety of situations in which we must try to realise these principles, in which we have to work out what they mean. But this variety includes societies outside the West. Is there

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a problem involved in even speaking of ‘secularism’ here, in view of the fact that the key term ‘secular’ is one that belongs to the historical language of Latin Christendom?

We live in a world in which ideas, institutions, art styles, and formulae for production and living circulate among societies and civilisations that are very different in their historical roots and traditional forms. Parliamentary democracy spread outward from England, among other countries, to India. And the practice of non-violent civil disobedience spread from its origins in Gandhi’s practice to many other places, including to Martin Luther King’s civil rights movements, to Manila in 1983 and the Velvet Revolution in 1989, and eventually to the Orange Revolution of our time.

But these ideas and forms don’t just change place as solid blocks; they are also modified, reinterpreted, given a new spin and meaning in each transfer. This can lead to tremendous confusion when we try to follow these shifts and understand them. One possible course of confusion comes from taking the word too seriously: the name may be the same, but the reality will often be different.

This is evident in the world ‘secular’. We tend to think of ‘secularisation’ as a process that can occur anywhere (and for some people, is occurring everywhere). And we think of secularist regimes as options for any country, whether they are adopted or not. And certainly, these *words* crop up everywhere. But do they really mean the same thing? Are there not, rather, subtle differences, which can bedevil cross-cultural discussions of these matters?

I think there are, and that they do make problems for our understanding. Either we stumble through cross-purposes; or else, a rather minimal awareness of the differences can lead us to draw far-reaching conclusions that are very wrong: as when people argue that since the ‘secular’ is an old category of Christian culture, and since Islam doesn’t seem to have a corresponding category, including such notions as distinction of church and state, *therefore* Islamic societies cannot adopt secular regimes. Obviously, they will not be just like those in Christendom, but maybe the idea here can travel in a more inventive and imaginative way.

Let’s look at some of the features of the ‘secular’ as a category developed within Latin Christendom. First, it was one term of a dyad. The secular had to do with the ‘century’ – that is, with profane time – and contrasted with what related to the eternal, or higher time.

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Certain times, places, persons, institutions, actions were seen as closely related to the sacred or higher time, and others as ‘out there’ in profane time. That’s why the same distinction could often be made by use of the dyad ‘spiritual–temporal’ (e.g. the state as the ‘temporal arm’). Ordinary parish priests are ‘secular’ priests, because they operate out there in the ‘century’, as opposed to within monastic institutions under rules (the ‘regular’ priests).

So there was an obvious meaning for ‘secularisation’, which goes pretty far back – to the aftermath of the Reformation. When certain functions, properties, institutions were transferred out of church control to that of laymen, this was ‘secularisation’.

These moves were originally made within a system in which the dyad held; things were moved from one niche to another within a standing system of niches. This feature, where it still holds, can make secularisation a relatively undramatic affair, a rearrangement of the furniture in a civilisation whose basic features remain unchanged.

But from the seventeenth century on, a new possibility arose. A new conception of social life came gradually to be defined, in which the ‘secular’ was all there was. Since ‘secular’ originally applied to a kind of time – profane or ordinary time, seen in relation to higher times – what was necessary was to come to understand profane time as all there is: to deny any relation to higher time. The word could go on being used, but the meaning was profoundly changed, because what it contrasted with was quite altered. The contrast was not another time-dimension, in which ‘spiritual’ institutions found their niche; rather the secular was in the new sense defined over and against claims on resources or allegiance made in the name of something transcendent to this world and its interests. Needless to say, those who imagined a ‘secular’ world in this sense saw these claims as ultimately unfounded, and only to be tolerated to the extent that they didn’t challenge the interests of worldly power and well-being.

Because many people went on believing in the transcendent, it could even be necessary that churches continue to have their place. They could in their own way be essential to the well-functioning of society. But this good function was to be understood in terms of ‘this-worldly’ goals and values (peace, prosperity, growth, flourishing etc.).

Obviously, this way of putting things depends on a clear distinction being made between ‘this world’, or the immanent, and the transcendent. This very clear-cut distinction is itself a product of the

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development of Latin Christendom, and has become part of our way of seeing things in the West. We tend to apply it universally, even though nothing this hard and fast exists in any other human culture in history. What does seem, indeed, to exist universally is some distinction between higher beings, or spirits, or realms, and the everyday world we see immediately around us. But these are not usually sorted out into two distinct realms, where the lower one can be taken as a system understandable purely in its own terms. Rather, the levels usually interpenetrate, so that the lower can't be understood without the higher. To take an example from the realm of philosophy, for Plato, the existence and development of the things around us can only be understood in terms of the corresponding Ideas, and these exist in a realm outside time. The clear separation of an immanent from a transcendent order is one of the inventions (for better or worse) of Latin Christendom.

The new understanding of the secular I have just been describing builds on this clear separation. It affirms, in effect, that the 'lower', immanent or secular order is all there is; that the higher, or transcendent is a human invention. Obviously, the prior invention of the clear-cut distinction between the levels prepared the ground for this 'declaration of independence' of the immanent.

The first unambiguous assertion of this self-sufficiency of the secular came with the radical phases of the French Revolution, although there were ambiguous regimes in the century that preceded it, like the attempts of 'Enlightened' rulers such as Frederick the Great and Joseph II to 'rationalise' religious institutions, in effect treating the church as a department of the state.

This polemic assertion of the secular returns in the Third Republic, whose *laïcité* is founded on these ideas of self-sufficiency and the exclusion of religion. Marcel Gauchet shows how Renouvier laid the grounds for the outlook of the Third Republic radicals in their battle against the church. The state has to be *moral et enseignant*. It has *charge d'âmes aussi bien que toute Eglise ou communauté, mais à titre plus universel*. Morality is the key criterion. In order not to be under the church, the state must have *une morale indépendante de toute religion*, and enjoy a *suprématie morale* in relation to all religions. The basis of this morality is liberty. In order to hold its own before religion the morality underlying the state has to be based on more than just utility or feeling; it needs a real *théologie rationnelle*, like that of Kant (Gauchet 1998: 47–50).

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Needless to say, this spirit goes marching on in contemporary France, as one can see in the discussion about banning the Muslim headscarf. The insistence is still that the public spaces in which citizens meet must be purified of any religious reference.

And so the history of this term ‘secular’ in the West is complex and ambiguous. It starts off as a term in a dyad, which distinguishes two dimensions of existence, identifying them by the kind of time that is essential to each. But then building on the clear immanent–transcendent distinction, it mutates into a term in another dyad, where ‘secular’ refers to what pertains to a self-sufficient immanent sphere, and its contrast term (often identified as ‘religious’) relates to the transcendent realm. This can then undergo a second mutation, via a denial of this transcendent level, into a dyad in which one term refers to the real (the secular), and the other to what is merely invented (the religious); or where ‘secular’ refers to the institutions we really require to live in ‘this world’, and ‘religious’ or ‘ecclesial’ to optional extras that often disturb the course of this-worldly life.

Through this double mutation, the dyad itself has thus profoundly changed; in the first case, both sides are real and indispensable dimensions of life and society. After the mutation, secular and religious are opposed as true–false, or necessary–superfluous.

Then this term, with all its baggage of ambiguity, and its depth assumptions of a clear immanent–transcendent distinction, begins to travel. No wonder it causes immense confusion. Westerners are themselves frequently confused about their own history. Notwithstanding this, a common outlook embraces the true–false view, but sees the earlier two-dimensions conception as having created the necessary historical preconditions for its arising. One way of stating this is to understand western secularism as the separation of religion and state, the excision of religion into a ‘private’ zone where it can’t interfere with the common life. Then the earlier western distinction between church and state, which eventually led to a separation of church and state, is seen as the run-up to the finally satisfactory solution, where religion is finally hived off.

But these stages are not clearly distinguished. Thus American secularists often confuse total separation of church and state from that of religion and state. Rawls at one point wanted to ban all reference to the grounds of people’s ‘comprehensive views’ (these included religious views) from public discourse.

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And this leads to disastrously ethnocentric judgements. If the canonical background for a satisfactory secularist regime is the three-stage history: distinction church–state, then separation church–state, then sidelining of religion from state and public life; then obviously Islamic societies can never make it.

Or again, one often hears the judgement that Chinese imperial society was already ‘secular’, totally ignoring the tremendous role played by the immanent–transcendent split in the western concept, a split that had no analogue in traditional China. Ashis Nandy (2002), in discussing the problems that arise out of the uses of the term ‘secular’, shows up the confusions that are often involved in analogous statements about the Indian case, e.g., that the Emperor Asoka was ‘secular’, or that the Mughal Emperor Akbar established a ‘secular’ form of rule.

But this kind of statement can also reflect a certain wisdom. In fact, Nandy distinguishes two quite different notions that consciously or unconsciously inform the Indian discussion. There is the ‘scientific-rational’ sense of the term, in which secularism is closely identified with modernity, and a variety of ‘accommodative’ meanings, which are rooted in indigenous traditions. The first attempts to free public life from religion; the second seek rather to open space ‘for a continuous dialogue among religious traditions and between the religious and the secular’ (Nandy 2002: Chapter 3, esp. 68–9 and 80).

The invocation of Akbar’s rule as ‘secular’ can then be a way of redefining the term, rather in the sense of my attempt earlier; that is, one defines secularity as an attempt to find fair and harmonious modes of coexistence among religious communities, and leaves the connotations of the word ‘secular’ as these have evolved through western history quietly to the side. This takes account of the fact that formulae for living together have evolved in many different religious traditions, and are not the monopoly of those whose outlook has been formed by the modern, western dyad, in which the secular lays claims to exclusive reality (Nandy 2002: 85).³

What to do? It’s too late to ban the word ‘secular’; too many controversies have already been started in these terms. But ‘secularism’, as an essential feature of religiously diverse societies, aiming to secure

³ Amartya Sen (2005) also makes use of a similar point about Akbar’s rule to establish the roots of modes of secularism in Indian history.

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freedom of both belief and unbelief as well as equality between citizens, is much too important a matter to be left to ‘secularists’, by which I mean those who are deeply into the true–false dyad arising out of the history of Latin Christendom. (I apologise to Clémenceau for parodying his famous dictum on war.)

We need to take a deep breath, and start again, at another point. And that is why, taking a leaf from the book of Rajeev Bhargava (1998a) thinking about the Indian context, I proposed above that we start by articulating afresh the basic goals we seek in secularist regimes. As a starting point, we might take my trilogy of ‘liberty, equality, fraternity’. People can relate to those coming out of very different religious traditions. And they can devise ways of securing them that make sense in very different religious environments. Let us tune out the mantras chanted in certain western societies with self-endowed vocations to universal validity, like ‘separation of church and state’ or *laïcité*, and look at our real situations in the light of the indispensable values of democratic society.