

Secularism

Secularism is the principle of the separation of government institutions and persons mandated to represent the state from religious institution and religious dignitaries (the attainment of such is termed secularity). One manifestation of secularism is asserting the right to be free from religious rule and teachings, or, in a state declared to be neutral on matters of belief, from the imposition by government of religion or religious practices upon its people.^[Notes 1] Another manifestation of secularism is the view that public activities and decisions, especially political ones, should be uninfluenced by religious beliefs or practices.^{[1][Notes 2]}

Secularism draws its intellectual roots from Greek and Roman philosophers such as Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius; from Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Denis Diderot, Voltaire, Baruch Spinoza, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine; and from more recent freethinkers and atheists such as Robert Ingersoll, Bertrand Russell, and Christopher Hitchens. It shifts the focus from religion to other ‘temporal’ and ‘this-worldly’ things with emphasis on nature, reason, science, and development.^[2]

The purposes and arguments in support of secularism vary widely.^[3] In European laicism, it has been argued that secularism is a movement toward modernization, and away from traditional religious values (also known as secularization). This type of secularism, on a social or philosophical level, has often occurred while maintaining an official state church or other state support of religion. In the United States, some argue that state secularism has served to a greater extent to protect religion and the religious from governmental interference, while secularism on a social level is less prevalent.^{[4][5]}

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Overview

The term "secularism" was first used by the British writer George Jacob Holyoake in 1851.^[6] Although the term was new, the general notions of freethought on which it was based had existed throughout history.

Holyoake invented the term secularism to describe his views of promoting a social order separate from religion, without actively dismissing or criticizing religious belief. An agnostic himself, Holyoake argued that "Secularism is not an argument against Christianity; it is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity; it advances others. Secularism does not

say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, and act forever. Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life.^[7]

Barry Kosmin of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture breaks modern secularism into two types: hard and soft secularism. According to Kosmin, "the hard secularist considers religious propositions to be epistemologically illegitimate, warranted by neither reason nor experience." However, in the view of soft secularism, "the attainment of absolute truth was impossible and therefore skepticism and tolerance should be the principle and overriding values in the discussion of science and religion."^[8]

History

The departure from reliance on religious faith to reason and science marks the beginning of the secularization of education and society in history. According to Domenic Marbaniang, Secularism emerged in the West with the establishment of reason over religious faith as human reason was gradually liberated from unquestioned subjection to the dominion of religion and superstition.^[9] Secularism first appeared in the West in the classical philosophy and politics of ancient Greece, disappeared for a time after the fall of Greece, but resurfaced after a millennium and half in the Renaissance and the Reformation. He writes:

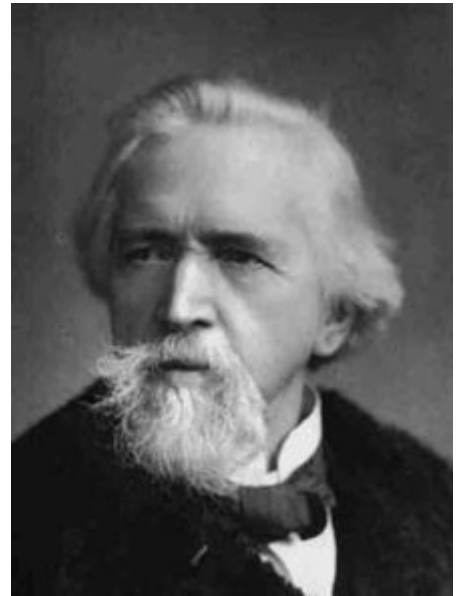
An increasing confidence in human capabilities, reason, and progress, that emerged during the Italian Renaissance, together with an increasing distrust in organized and state supported religion during the Reformation, was responsible for the ushering of modernity during the Enlightenment, which brought all facets of human life including religion under the purview of reason and thus became responsible for the freeing of education, society, and state from the domination of religion; in other words, the development of modern secularism!^[10]

Harvey Cox explains that the Enlightenment hailed Nature as the "deep reality" that transcended the corrupted man-made institutions of men. Consequently, the rights of man were not considered as God-given but as the de facto benefits of Nature as revealed by Reason.^[11]

State secularism

In political terms, secularism is a movement towards the separation of religion and government (often termed the separation of church and state). This can refer to reducing ties between a government and a state religion, replacing laws based on scripture (such as Halakha, Dominionism, and Sharia law) with civil laws, and eliminating discrimination on the basis of religion. This is said to add to democracy by protecting the rights of religious minorities.^[12]

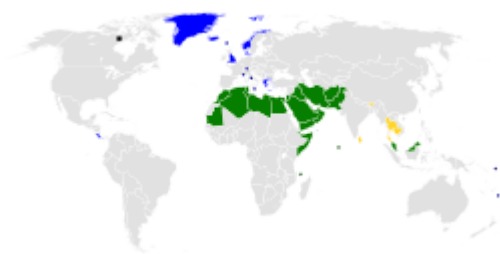
Other scholars, such as Jacques Berlinerblau of the Program for Jewish Civilization at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, have argued that the separation of church and state is but one possible strategy to be deployed by secular governments. What all secular governments, from the democratic to the authoritarian, share is a concern about the



The British writer George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906) coined the term "secularism" in 1851.^[6]



Italian law professor Alberico Gentili (1552–1608) first split secularism from canon law and Roman Catholic theology.



Countries with state religion



Christianity



Islam



Buddhism

relationship between the church and the state. Each secular government may find its own unique policy prescriptions for dealing with that concern (separation being one of those possible policies; French models, in which the state carefully monitors and regulates the church, being another).^[13]

Maharaja Ranjeet Singh of the Sikh empire of the first half of the 19th century successfully established a secular rule in the Punjab. This secular rule respected members of all races and religions and it allowed them to participate without discrimination in Ranjeet Singh's darbar and he had Sikh, Muslim and Hindu representatives heading the darbar.^[14] Ranjit Singh also extensively funded education, religion, and arts of various different religions and languages.^[15]

Secularism is most often associated with the Age of Enlightenment in Europe and it plays a major role in Western society. The principles, but not necessarily the practices, of separation of church and state in the United States and Laïcité in France draw heavily on secularism. Secular states also existed in the Islamic world during the Middle Ages (see Islam and secularism).^[16]

Due in part to the belief in the separation of church and state, secularists tend to prefer that politicians make decisions for secular rather than religious reasons.^[17] In this respect, policy decisions pertaining to topics like abortion, contraception, embryonic stem cell research, same-sex marriage and sex education are prominently focused upon by American secularist organizations such as the Center for Inquiry.^{[18][19]}

Some Christian fundamentalists (notably in the United States) oppose secularism, often claiming that there is a "radical secularist" ideology being adopted in our current day and they see secularism as a threat to "Christian rights"^[20] and national security.^[21] The most significant forces of religious fundamentalism in the contemporary world are Christian fundamentalism and Islamic fundamentalism. At the same time, one significant stream of secularism has come from religious minorities who see governmental and political secularism as integral to the preservation of equal rights.^[22]

Some of the well known states that are often considered "constitutionally secular" are the United States,^[23] France,^[24] Mexico^[25] South Korea, and Turkey although none of these nations have identical forms of governance with respect to religion.

Secular society

In studies of religion, modern democracies are generally recognized as secular. This is due to the near-complete freedom of religion (beliefs on religion generally are not subject to legal or social sanctions), and the lack of authority of religious leaders over political decisions. Nevertheless, "religious beliefs are widely considered by many people" to be a relevant part of the political discourse in many of these countries (most notably, in the United States). This contrasts with other developed nations, such as United Kingdom, France, and China, where religious references "are generally considered" out-of-place in mainstream politics.

The aspirations of a secular society could characterize a society as one which:

1. Refuses to commit itself as a whole to any supernatural views of the nature of the universe, or the role of mankind in it.
2. Is not homogeneous, but is pluralistic.
3. Is very tolerant of religious diversity It widens the sphere of private decision-making.
4. While every society must have some common aims, which implies there must be agreed upon methods of problem-solving, and a common framework of law; in a secular society these are as limited as possible.
5. Problem solving is approached rationally through examination of the facts. While the secular society does not set any overall aim, it helps its members realize their shared aims.
6. Is a society without any official images. Nor is there a common ideal type of behavior with universal application.

Positive Ideals behind the secular society:

1. Respect for individuals and the small groups of which they are a part.
2. Equality of all people.

3. Each person should be free to realize their particular excellence.

4. Breaking down of the barriers of class and caste.^[26]

Modern sociology has, since Max Weber, often been preoccupied with the problem of authority in secularized societies and with secularization as a sociological or historical process.^[27] Twentieth-century scholars, whose work has contributed to the understanding of these matters, include Carl L. Becker, Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg, M. H. Abrams, Peter L. Berger, Paul Bénichou and D. L. Munby, among others.

Some societies become increasingly secular as the result of social processes, rather than through the actions of a dedicated secular movement; this process is known as assecularization.

Secular ethics

George Holyoake's 1896 publication *English Secularism* describes secularism as follows:

Secularism is a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable. Its essential principles are three: (1) The improvement of this life by material means. (2) That science is the available Providence of man. (3) That it is good to do good. Whether there be other good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good.^[28]

Holyoake held that secularism and secular ethics should take no interest at all in religious questions (as they were irrelevant), and was thus to be distinguished from strong freethought and atheism. In this he disagreed with Charles Bradlaugh and the disagreement split the secularist movement between those who argued that anti-religious movements and activism was not necessary or desirable and those who argued that it was.

Contemporary ethical debate in the West is often described as "secular." The work of well known moral philosophers such as Derek Parfit and Peter Singer, and even the whole field of contemporary bioethics, have been described as explicitly secular or non-religious.^{[29][30][31][32]}

American interpretation of secularism

It has been argued that the concept of secularism has frequently been misinterpreted.^[33] In a 2012 *Huffington Post* article titled *Secularism Is Not Atheism*, Jacques Berlinerblau, Director of the Program for Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University, wrote that "Secularism must be the most misunderstood and mangled ism in the American political lexicon. Commentators on the right and the left routinely equate it with Stalinism, Nazism and Socialism, among other dreaded isms. In the United States, of late, another false equation has emerged. That would be the groundless association of secularism with atheism. The religious right has profitably promulgated this misconception at least since the 1970s."^[33]

Secularism in late 20th century political philosophy

It can be seen by many of the organizations (NGO's) for secularism that they prefer to define *secularism* as the common ground for all life stance groups, religious or atheistic, to thrive in a society that honors freedom of speech and conscience. An example of that is the National Secular Society in the UK. This is a common understanding of what secularism stands for among many of its activists throughout the world. However, many scholars of Christianity and conservative politicians seem to interpret secularism more often than not, as an antithesis of religion and an attempt to push religion out of society and replace it with atheism or a void of values, nihilism. This dual aspect (as noted above in "Secular ethics") has created difficulties in political discourse on the subject. It seems that most political theorists in philosophy following the landmark work of John Rawl's *Theory of Justice* in 1971 and its following book, *Political Liberalism* (1993),^[34] would rather use the conjoined concept *overlapping consensus* rather than secularism. In the latter Rawls holds the idea of an overlapping consensus as one of three main ideas of political liberalism. He argues that the term *secularism* cannot apply;

But what is a secular argument? Some think of any argument that is reflective and critical, publicly intelligible and rational, as a secular argument; [...]. Nevertheless, a central feature of political liberalism is that it views all such arguments the same way it views religious ones, and therefore these secular philosophical doctrines do not provide public reasons. Secular concepts and reasoning of this kind belong to first philosophy and moral doctrine, and fall outside the domain of the political.^[34]

Still, Rawls's theory is akin to Holyoake's vision of a tolerant democracy that treats all life stance groups alike. Rawls's idea is that it is in everybody's own interest to endorse "a reasonable constitutional democracy" with "principles of toleration". His work has been highly influential on scholars in political philosophy and his term, *overlapping consensus*, seems to have for many parts replaced *secularism* among them. In textbooks on modern political philosophy, like Colin Farelly's, *An Introduction to Contemporary Political Theory*,^[35] and Will Kymlicka's, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*^[36] the term secularism is not even indexed and in the former it can be seen only in one footnote. However, there is no shortage of discussion and coverage of the topic it involves. It is just called *overlapping consensus*, *pluralism*, *multiculturalism* or expressed in some other way. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*,^[37] there is one chapter called "Political secularism", by Rajeev Bhargava. It covers secularism in a global context and starts with this sentence: "Secularism is a beleaguered doctrine."

Organizations

Groups such as the National Secular Society (United Kingdom) and Americans United campaign for secularism are often supported by Humanists. In 2005, the National Secular Society held the inaugural "Secularist of the Year" awards ceremony. The award's first winner was Maryam Namazie of the Worker-Communist Party of Iran and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain^[38] which aims to break the taboo that comes with renouncing Islam and to oppose apostasy laws and political Islam.^[39]

The Scottish Secular Society is active in Scotland and is currently focused on the role of religion in education. In 2013 it raised a petition at the Scottish Parliament to have the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 changed so that parents will have to make a positive choice to opt into Religious Observance

Another secularist organization is the Secular Coalition for America. The Secular Coalition for America lobbies and advocates for separation of church and state as well as the acceptance and inclusion of Secular Americans in American life and public policy. While Secular Coalition for America is linked to many secular humanistic organizations and many secular humanists support it, as with the Secular Society, some non-humanists support it.

Local organizations work to raise the profile of secularism in their communities and tend to include secularists, freethinkers, atheists, agnostics, and humanists under their organizational umbrella.

Student organizations, such as the Toronto Secular Alliance, try to popularize nontheism and secularism on campus. The Secular Student Alliance is an educational nonprofit that organizes and aids such high school and college secular student groups.

In Turkey, the most prominent and active secularist organization is Atatürk Thought Association (ADD), which is credited for organizing the Republic Protests – demonstrations in the four largest cities in Turkey in 2007, where over 2 million people, mostly women, defended their concern in and support of secularist principles introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

Leicester Secular Society founded in 1851 is the world's oldest secular society

See also

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|--------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| ▪ <u>Agnosticism</u> | ▪ <u>Concordat</u> | ▪ <u>Islam and secularism</u> | ▪ <u>Naturalism</u> | ▪ <u>Political Catholicism</u> |
| ▪ <u>Anticlericalism</u> | ▪ <u>Deism</u> | ▪ <u>Kemalism</u> | ▪ <u>New Atheism</u> | ▪ <u>Political religion</u> |
| ▪ <u>Atheism</u> | ▪ <u>Freethought</u> | ▪ <u>Kulturkampf</u> | ▪ <u>Nonsectarian</u> | ▪ <u>Postsecularism</u> |
| ▪ <u>Antitheism</u> | ▪ <u>Humanism</u> | ▪ <u>Laïcité</u> | ▪ <u>Nontheism</u> | ▪ <u>Pseudo-Secularism</u> |
| ▪ <u>Civil religion</u> | ▪ <u>Ignosticism</u> | ▪ <u>Multiculturalism</u> | ▪ <u>Pluralism</u> | |
| ▪ <u>Clericalism</u> | | | | |

- Rationalism
- Religious toleration
- Secular humanism
- Secular Review (journal)
- Secular state
- Secular Thought (journal)
- Secularism in Bangladesh
- Secularism in India
- Secularism in Iran
- Secularism in Turkey
- Secularism (South Asia)
- Secularity
- Secularization
- Separation of church and state
- Six Arrows of Kemal Atatürk
- State atheism
- Theocracy

Notes

1. See also Separation of church and state and Laïcité.
2. See also Public reason.

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Secular society

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