

# Secularism

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for Nottingham Philosophy Club, 20th September 2022

*I am a devout political secularist. Yet at the same time I am deeply opposed to so-called 'secular thinking'. How is this possible?*

## Etymology and meaning shifts

The Latin root of "secular" is *saeculum*, which meant "age; generation; century". *Saecularis* was then an adjective derived from that, meaning "of an age".

In a religious context this word became used to contrast with the **eternal** nature of God. It's a parallel contrast to that between matters **spiritual** and **temporal**.

Thus when referring to the *secular* people in the Middle Ages were thinking of ordinary mundane matters, as opposed to the divine and our connection with it.

Only later was there any sense of tension between the two factors, as a result of Enlightenment thinking. There could be several reasons for this development: possibly the rise of a more sceptical philosophy; the rise of science and a focus on the material; a reaction to the experience of religious wars and the growth of a new Realpolitik in international relations.

From here there has historically been an ambiguity in the word "secularism", between a public (political) sense, and a private/individual (credal) sense. The former sense, a political doctrine, has won out as the majority meaning now applied to the word, but the word "secular", applied in a positivistic way, generally refers to life beliefs related to atheism and humanism.

## Types of political secularism

Political secularism as a whole opposes bias on behalf of religions or religious beliefs in the overall organisational framework of a society. But there are several different versions of this concept. A secular state can be antagonistic towards religion, or aloof, or involved with it but attempting balance between different religions. The constitutions and political models followed by the United States, France, Turkey and India show such different approaches. Communist countries had yet another model in the form of official atheism and opposition to any and all religions.

What secularists are concerned about can be large-scale religious involvement in the running of a society (e.g. Iran), but can also be much smaller issues which blight a mode of life otherwise devoid of religious interference. Such smaller issues include school assemblies in the UK, "In God We Trust" on American currency, and the 'church tax' collected on behalf of churches by the state in many European countries.

## 'Secular thinking' and culture

There is a wide range of beliefs and approaches to life that come under terms like 'secular thought' and 'secular culture'. These are the philosophies that have arisen in the modern era (although there were some equivalents in ancient Greece and India) that oppose supernaturalism and insist on a lack

of belief in any supernatural beings such as gods. They oppose religion, seeing it largely as superstition, and advocate reason and empirical enquiry in its place. Atheism, humanism and materialism are chief among these doctrines.

Such thinking is 'secular' in the sense of "not believing in the transcendental, otherworldly realm" against which the Latin *saeculum*, *saecularis* are contrasted. It does not require a belief in political secularism, and *vice versa*, political secularism does not require it.

## My own position

Speaking for myself I see secularism as *political neutralism* with regard to people's beliefs and belief allegiances. The key point is that whatever people in a society believe, and in whatever numbers and proportions, the general organisational structure of the society should not assume any such beliefs, and particularly should not be biased towards some over others.

**However...** I don't believe this neutralism should apply just towards religions, but also towards any life stances, beliefs and philosophies which are equivalent to religion. This includes atheism/humanism/materialism and similar doctrines, and non-religious spiritual and esoteric beliefs. In particular I think it's hypocritical and contradictory to oppose religious bias in the functioning of a state as being unfair, and to then try to impose metaphysically sceptical thinking such as atheism or materialism. This is just replacing one bias with another. If those who don't believe in a preferred religion are inconvenienced and disrespected by the pre-secular arrangement, those who don't agree with the sceptical outlook are treated the same in its supposedly 'secular' replacement.

Political secularists who are also secular thinkers will see their secularism as being a matter of removing superstition, dogma and folly from influence in a state and its governance of society, and replacing it with reason. But ultimately their beliefs (such as atheism or materialism) are just another set of beliefs, and if they become the basis of a state's governance that is just another system of domination and inequality. A desire to remove what people see as illusion should be a matter for civil society, not state structure. And sceptics could themselves be the targets of such moves as well as the perpetrators.

Secularism in the sense of political neutralism is supported by many religious communities and authorities in countries where they are a minority. Typically biases in the state will be in favour of majorities and dominant groups, and minorities see the enshrining of secular principles in their country as being a defence against persecution or second class citizen status. In no way is secularism necessarily anti-religion or unwelcome to all religious people.

And just as genuine neutralism means no privileged religious belief influencing the state and public business, so the state should not presume to impose irreligiousness on people in their private business. A common example is the moves against certain forms of female Muslims' clothing in France and Turkey. It's one thing to make sure educational establishments are without religious interference in their teaching, behavioural codes etc.; it's another to dictate to students what they can or can't wear or what symbols they are allowed on their person. That goes beyond political secularism and is just a form of authoritarian rule. When it's targeting one religion and not others, it's a re-creation of non-secularist bias.