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Religion, Secularism and the State

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Like the unhappy families of the opening line in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, every plural society is diverse in its own way, and alarming number are also unhappy.¹ Basic social co-existence, let alone social cooperation, is impaired by animosity, mistrust, intolerance and even violent conflict directed against groups that represent an Other defined in ethnic, racial, religious or caste terms. Despite being the custodians of social order, states in plural societies may privilege dominant ethnic or religious groups; and political processes, even in democratic states, may advance the interests of particular groups at the expense of others in ways that jeopardise the formal equality of citizenship.

The relationship between the state and religion acquires particular significance in plural societies populated by citizens avowing different faiths. This relationship varies widely, encompassing a spectrum ranging from theological states (such as Saudi Arabia) to states that determinedly refuse to recognize religion (such as the former Soviet

Union). In between these two extremes, there are different, more or less rigid, models of secularism. Whether these other approaches are officially secular or secular by practice rather than through the law,² each has evolved in response to specific historical contexts.

For instance, the French model of *laïcité* (strict separation between religion and the state) originated as an attempt to secure the freedom of public institutions, especially schools, from the domination of the Catholic Church. In the United States of America, what Jefferson called the “wall of separation between church and state” was introduced in the First Amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing the free exercise of religion and enshrining the principle that there will be no official establishment of religion. In both of these democracies, each formed in the late eighteenth century, contention over the place of religion in the public sphere has endured into the present. Far younger democracies, such as

This paper is part of a new publication series from the **Global Centre for Pluralism** called **Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies**. Focused on six world regions, each “change case” examines a specific moment in time when a country altered its approach to diversity, either expanding or eroding the foundations of inclusive citizenship. The aim of the series – which also features thematic overviews by leading global scholars – is to build global understanding of the sources of inclusion and exclusion in diverse societies and the pathways to pluralism.

Turkey and India, are also experiencing profound challenges to their own varieties of secularism.

WHY SECULARISM?

The historical explanation for the emergence of secularism typically attributes it to the impetus for peace in societies, such as those of early modern Europe, ravaged by religious wars. By contrast, the philosophical justification for secularism grounds it in the principle of the moral autonomy of the individual and her right to live her life in accordance with her own conception of the good—rooted in beliefs that are religious, spiritual, atheist, agnostic or any other—by which she has freely chosen to live. In any society, individual choices of this kind will necessarily yield a multiplicity of world-views and even belief-systems, which may not be in harmony with one other and may even be deeply incompatible. In such circumstances, it is important for the state not to avow or impose upon its citizens a particular conception of the good, but to remain neutral between religions. (Maclure and Taylor, 2011: 20)

The need for secularism as state policy arises from the requirement of both protecting the individual's freedom of religion as well as making possible the creation and promotion of a democratic public space in which issues of shared civic concern may be deliberated upon, determined and resolved, in keeping with liberal values such as freedom, human rights and self-determination. The principle of liberal political equality requires us to detach citizenship from any religious affiliation so that the

moral equality of all individuals is reflected in their political equality.

These justifications are of course broadly relevant to liberal-democratic polities, though even these arguments have yielded more than one model of secularism. Maclure and Taylor offer a distinction between the strict republican model (such as France) and the more flexible and open liberal-pluralist model (such as the United States or India). The central difference between them is their attitude toward religion in the public sphere. Whereas the republican model insists on a strict separation between the state and religion, banishing religious affiliations to the private sphere, the liberal-pluralist model views secularism as a political mode of governance that must find an “optimal balance” between respect for the moral equality of citizens and respect for their freedom of conscience. (ibid: 34) The republican model thus expects individuals to display neutrality and avoid the display of any symbol of their faith in the public sphere; the liberal-pluralist model makes the demand of neutrality only upon institutions, not individuals. (ibid: 39)

Some of these principles have come under challenge in recent years, as seen in the recent controversies over the headscarf or the Burkini in France; over Creationism in the United States; and over suggestions to incorporate Sharia law in the British legal system. Today, secularism is under challenge not only in states that have been secular for a couple of centuries, but also in states that began their experiments with secularism less than a hundred years ago.

SECULARISMS IN PRACTICE

Secularism as state policy is arguably a necessary but not sufficient condition for the flourishing of a pluralistic society. In younger democracies, where state secularism is a twentieth-century invention intended to manage historically diverse populations (as distinct from diversity introduced by immigration), contemporary challenges to secularism are largely a function of the reassertion of identities from within. The relationship of religion to the state has become fraught even in advanced democracies that historically constructed states which were (more or less stringently) neutral to religion, and which sought to ensure that religion remained confined to the private domain with no purchase in the public sphere.

The secular states of the older democracies are today, argues Jürgen Habermas, entering a “post-secular” age. The challenge here comes not so much from reassertions of existing religious identities, as from a fear of global threats of violence that invoke religion; or from the greater assertiveness of religious organizations on ethical issues such as euthanasia or abortion; or from the religious practices of immigrants that appear to unsettle established cultural norms and practices (not recognising that the latter also have their moorings in antecedent religious traditions). These new phenomena have shaken the confidence of citizens of secular societies who had become unused to the visibility of religious observance in their secularized environment, belying their assumption that, as societies modernize, they become more secular. (Habermas, 2008)

One way or another, secularism is today a beleaguered project whose resilience is being put to the test everyday across the world. How might we think about secularism and the state in our world, without losing sight of the specificity and complexity of the varieties of secularism that exist? How might we negotiate what Casanova calls the “deprivatization” of religion and its re-entry into the public sphere? (Casanova, 2010: 19-20)

Four of the country change cases—France, Sri Lanka, India and Turkey—commissioned by the Global Centre for Pluralism help us to make sense of the enervation of the secular project across the world. At least two of these cases—France and Sri Lanka—show that religion is a cross-cutting social cleavage that intersects with other cleavages in different ways. This intersection sometimes leads us to misrecognize and misname the problem, which is often as much about race or language as it is about religion. The French discomfort with its Muslim citizens, for instance, stems from concerns over race as much as religion, while struggles over language and religion entwine in Sri Lanka.

Further, as the Indian and French cases show, the exclusions religion begets cut across the economic, political and social domains. Despite their very different models of secularism, similar patterns of exclusion may be observed in both of these countries: spatial and geographic exclusion; exclusion from the market; discrimination in education, jobs, housing; and hostile treatment by the police force. Prejudice and discrimination are thus reproduced across different domains of social life.

Other than Sri Lanka, where the dominant Sinhala elites historically did exactly the opposite, secularism in France, India and Turkey was a top-down centralizing state project, with the broader societal practices of pluralism lagging behind somewhat. As these three cases show, religious minorities may be disenfranchised even when state policies seek actively to foster respect for diversity through pluralism. The requirement of state neutrality in France, for instance, renders minorities invisible, with *laïcité* becoming a form of “secular totalitarianism”—that is, a smokescreen behind which discrimination can be practised. In India, by contrast, the constitution guarantees minority rights but, being oriented more to strategies of “recognition” of cultural rights than “redistribution” of material resources, these policies have entrenched a denial of educational and economic opportunity for the Muslim minority.

In France, the challenge to the state religion of secularism comes from society, with the state controlling the master narrative of what it is to be French, such that everyday practices of racism can happily coexist with official professions of colour-blindness. It is the opposite in India, where the challenge to secularism in India emanates from both society and state with constitutional guarantees of difference providing a smokescreen for everyday practices that deviate from it. Social pluralism can thus exist without the substantive inclusion of minorities as equal citizens.

Neither are secularism and democracy always reliable guarantors of each other. The Turkey study shows that the rise of authoritarianism and the simultaneous erosion of pluralism are not the result

of the interpenetration of religion and politics. If anything, authoritarianism as a political tool was learned from secularist political elites. It therefore encourages us to reconsider the validity of a secular project that marginalizes the pious from power-sharing and decision-making.

CONCLUSION

The evidence suggests that state neutrality in the form of secularism is a necessary but insufficient condition for pluralism to thrive. From Charlie Hebdo and the Burkini ban in France to the anti-Islamic rhetoric of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign in the United States, to the beef bans and hyper-nationalist politics of *Hindutva* in India, it is clear that both forms of secularism—the republican and the liberal-pluralist—are under attack.

Though Maclure and Taylor argue that states should strive to be politically secular but refrain from promoting social secularization, the relationship between political secularism and societal pluralism is not insignificant. Constitutions and laws can bear only a part of the burden of our normative aspirations of inclusion. Even the republican model is, in practice, not as implacably opposed to religion in the public sphere as it claims to be. In France, for instance, the state funds private religious schools and protects places of worship, and even official holidays have religious origins. However, these contradictions are rarely recognized by those members of officially secular states—or states that have experienced social secularization over time, including a decline in forms of worship

such as church-going—who are visibly unsettled by the phenomenon of active religiosity among the immigrants in their midst

Countries that have determinedly adopted state secularism as the best strategy to manage historical diversity in the modern democratic age are confronted with assertions of majoritarianism that seek to define the nation and citizen in terms of the religious values of the majority community. In both types of societies, the requirements of social cohesion and civic integration send out calls for the erasure of difference, a project that is fraught with danger for minorities in plural societies where the presence of ethnic and religious diversity are perceived as sources of division.

Across the world, very different models of secularism, from the republican to the liberal-pluralist, are finding it hard to grapple with religious assertion, and the global environment is only accentuating the insecurities of the secular project. It is clear that liberal-democracies need to find ways of negotiating religious diversity as they hold firm to their foundational philosophical values of the moral and political equality of citizens and of human rights and human dignity. As with all pathways to pluralism, the solutions—legal, institutional or societal—will need to be as context-specific as the challenges are.

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¹ “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

² England, Scotland, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Finland are all democracies that have maintained established churches.

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