

Secularism and the secular state

Aisha Abdul-Ismail*

Abstract: The known history of secularism goes back to 1648, and it received recognition as a philosophical system in 1846. It now has a claim on guiding the operation of state institutions in countries. A qualitative content analysis of various scholarly publications shows that the term lacks an agreed-upon definition. Some use it to mean the separation of the Church and the State especially in public affairs. Others deny the religious values altogether. This conceptual confusion is portrayed by various states which claim to practice secularism. Some states proclaim to be secular but allow religious values to determine public policies. Others do not permit religious institutions to play any role whatsoever. This situation calls for a caution in establishing relationships with states in the international arena.

Keywords: Islām, secularism, secular state, laicism, Church-state relationship

Introduction

Human beings, in many countries in contemporary times, carry out their lives largely in a thoroughly secular environment. Humans eat and sleep, work and play, strive to achieve and seek comfort in this world. But the world of the sacred is set apart. It concerns worship, beliefs in the supernatural, prayer, the ecstasy of religious experience, and the escape in meditative withdrawal. Those who take a broader view of religion as a “way of life” see no conflict between secular reason properly employed and faith properly understood. Others have maintained that faith and reason can (or even must) be in genuine contention over certain propositions or methodologies. Those adhering to the “conflict” approach disagree as to whether religion or secularism ought to prevail when the two are in conflict. This study examines the concept of secularism, its elements and most importantly, the way it has been used by the Christians and the Muslims. It is argued that the term secularism does not carry one particular and correct meaning and that it has been practiced in different ways in different societies.

* Dr. Aisha Abdul-Ismail is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria, E-mail: aischeismail@yahoo.com; aaismail@buk.edu.ng

Secularism in brief

Though the term secularism can be traced to Longueville, in 1648, the idea of secularism as a formal philosophical system was first suggested by Jacob Holyoak in 1846. Holyoake's programme in England aimed at freeing the secular from the unnecessary shackles of the Church. The components of secularization and the evolution from the religious to secular ideology has been traced by scholars through a series of events beginning with the Renaissance, the Reformation and the success of the Protestant movements, the various revolutions beginning with the outcome of the English Civil War of 1642-60 to the American Revolution (1776-83), the French Revolution (1789), the Russian Revolution (1917), the Dutch Revolution, the Scottish (1559), and Swiss Reformations (1541).

Secularism denotes the separation of the church and the state. The catholic countries use the term laicism thus amplifying the difference between the clergy (religious leaders) and the laity (laymen). The word "secularism is derived from the Latin *seculum*, meaning age or generation, but in Christian Latin, it came to mean the temporal world. The word Laicism is derived from Greek *Laos* (the people) and *Laikos* (the lay)" (Moten, 1996:191). The two terms are "used in connection with the problems of duality, opposition or separation of church and state" (Moten,1996:1). Some scholars consider separation as being beneficial to both religion and politics. To Roger Williams, society is composed of two separate sectors born of the same parents, religion and morality, "... the separate branches of church and State have a single religious root, and, by extension a common moral source" (cited in Sanneh, 1997: 3).

Cochran has identified four elements of secularization: (1) Institutional differentiation denoting the division of the many institutions in society, each having its specific roles to perform. Thus, in a highly differentiated society religious institutions are separated from other institutions. (2) Pluralism which denotes the existence of, and competition between different existing worldviews for legitimacy. (3) Rationalization or the "disenchantment" of the world. It is characterized by disenchantment whereby the traditional ways of knowing which gives meaning and a sense of belonging are stripped, undermined of their significance by rational explanation. (4) Privatization which implies further division of the institutions in society into the public or private sphere. Such institutions like those of the family, religion, leisure, the arts, etc., are termed private and separated from the political, economic or legal institutions. These are termed public and therefore not to be affected by the values and beliefs of the private institutions. All these elements work together to bring about the secularization process (Mcguire, 1997: 289).

Mill in Chadwick (1975) and Moten (1996) prefer to look at the characteristics of secularism in terms of such postulates as this worldly orientation, Western science and liberalism. This worldly orientation emphasizes humanity as the highest reality and implies that the highest and most important goal of humans should be what concerns this world and their social wellbeing, and neglecting the hereafter or even religion. Western science espouses a belief in the natural causation with an emphasis “upon reason, observation and experiment to the neglect of revelation, tradition or authority” (Moten, 1996: 2). The third characteristic is liberalism, which is based on humanism. Liberalism emphasizes individual human rights, freedom and integrity. Thus an individual having the right of freedom of conscience and expression can decide what to think and even which God to worship.

The Christian perspective

It has been wrongly assumed that everyone in the West understands secularism in the same way. The truth, however, is that the Christians differ among themselves in their understanding of secularism. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* defines secularism as:

A form of humanism that limits true value to those temporal qualities that contributes to man’s natural perfection both individual and social to the actual exclusion of the supernatural. More than abstract theory, secularism is a philosophy of life, a movement of thought and in the broad sense of the word, a religion. Secularistic ethics is founded upon the principles of a purely naturalistic morality that is independent of revealed or supernaturalism. As a movement it pervades government, economic theory, education and family. Secularism may be described as a view of life that limits itself not to the material in exclusion of the spiritual, but to the human here and now in exclusion of man’s relation to God here and hereafter (Bidmos, 1993: 36)

For Christianity, secularism meaning godlessness or total separation is not ideal. This is because not only should there be a relationship between religion and politics, but that everything in the world is under the supremacy and sovereignty of God, the divine. Thus to assert that such idealistic and impractical teachings of Christ as “turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, not replying evil for evil or not taking up arms” ... (Sanneh, 1997: 4) is wrong as explained by Saint Augustine. He argues further:

the common wealth is the repository of the interests of the people, interests that are common to all, including the state. In fact ... the state

itself is a community of people united by a bond of agreement. The conduct of public affairs requires more than the rule of efficiency: we need sanctions to restrain evil, norms to produce works of mercy, precepts to guide and direct, warrants to instill and commend virtue, and sacraments to change and transform life. Accordingly, let those who say that Christ's teaching is in opposition to the commonwealth give us an army made up of the kind of soldiers Christ's teachings orders them to be, let them give us citizens, husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants, rulers, judges and even tax payers and tax collectors, such as Christian teaching commands them to be and then let them say that this doctrine is in opposition to the commonwealth, let them instead not hesitate to confess that – if it were to be obeyed – this teaching would be the salvation of the commonwealth (Sanneh, 1997: 4).

Despite the harmonious relationship of identical values that should exist between religion and politics or state and religion, once one encroaches on the other's sphere of influence, hostility is provoked.

From the Christian point of view, the idea of separating the church from the state goes back to the time of Jesus Christ who was asked a thorny question by the Jews as to whom should they pay their taxes and tributes, to Caesar or not. According to King (1971: 106):

If he said 'yes' they would count him as a running dog of the imperialists. If he said 'No' they would tell the Romans he was a rebel. He asked his questioners if they had a penny (presumably he did not carry such things) and inquired whose image it bore: It was Caesar's. (As a good Jew talking to Jews he could thus allude to the Genesis story where man was made in God's image). He then replied, "Render to Caesar, the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's". The whole man belongs to God.

This basis of separation is perceived differently by scholars, the clergy and layman alike. Some feel that there actually should be a separation between the church and the state, while others feel that the Biblical verse is quoted out of context and Jesus actually meant that everything should be rendered unto God as even Caesar belongs to God's. Thus King argues that "a Christian cannot keep out of politics, though every political cheap-jack will misquote Jesus to imply that Christians should keep purely to spiritual things" (1971: 106).

Pope John Paul II has tried as much as possible to show that despite the separation between Church and state, members of the Church should bring the

teachings of Christ to bear on temporal issues. Pat Utomi quotes the Pope as follows:

The faithful are called to participate in politics and ensure that the (sic) choices make Christ present, same for business and in other social spheres. In participating in civil society and other regular activities of our temporal order, the faithful are called a unity of life and faith. Sadly the way of the moment is that many approach temporal affairs with the mindset of rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesars and unto God which is His, with this mentality some who profess to be Christians engage in temporal affairs in a manner that brings scandal to the faith (*Newswatch*, June 1999).

Despite King's (1971) assertion that the biblical verse Mathew 22: 21 or Mark 12: 17 is usually quoted out of context, the secularization of man's thought as a process grew as a result of certain changes – political, economic and religious – which occurred within Christian culture, thereby affecting Western civilization and the influence of religion on the state. Thus, Christianity or its representatives had to accommodate it and justify its accommodation. Hence, the lack of consensus with regards to Mathew (22: 21).

Even within Christianity, some assert that the relationship between Church and State should be theocratic, whereby the priestly class rules the kingdom of God, through His laws which are the laws of the land. The adoption of theocracy as a system of government can be traced to the conversion of Emperor Constantine I of Rome to Christianity, who ensured the embodiment of the religion to the Roman state. Others, on the other hand, prefer that the relationship between church and state should be secular to protect the religion from such evils of state issues as politics, culture, etc. The advocates of this position known as the religionists feel that the real essence of religion is to orient man to the spiritual; however, it has been diverted from its purpose by such evils as power, wealth, duplicity, bureaucratization, etc. For these proponents religion is meant to provide an alternative culture, even though a private one, “where emotion can flourish as a refuge from the desiccated rationalism of the public world. This idea recalls the theme of religion as a refuge from liberal political culture” (Cochran, 1990: 172). Others like Luckman (1967) and Beckford (1985) view secularization as the modernization of religion within the various religious institutions by becoming more “rationalistic, more organized and bureaucratic, more individualistic and more formal” (Beckford, 1985: 17). In other words, religion should adopt the culture of secularism.

The *Islāmic* critique of secularism

In contrast to Christianity, *Islām* does not justify and accommodate secularism in whatever form it manifests itself, despite the calls by some for *Islāmic* secularism. This is because the basic tenets and principles of *Islām* negate the elements secularism stands for. Secular states tend to be materialistic and as such do not possess the important spiritual base for the development of two significant features: the ability to resist and fight evil and real brotherly feeling of compassion and honour for others. Ishaque (1986) argues that the only basis for the first is the belief in *Allāh* (God), *akhirāh* (the last day) and the judgment that is inevitable while the second cannot exist without “a world view, which, for spiritual advancement, makes human society a field for moral endeavour” (Ahmad, 1986: 29). Thus, *Islām* and secularism cannot be reconciled. Citizens adopting secular ideology prefer maximum efficiency and material wellbeing for the here and now. People see each other in terms of what they can get from each other or of what service one can be to them and not as a fellow brother. Hence, while secularism can transform a society to Rostow’s final stage of growth, that is the age of high mass consumption, it is also capable of doing the opposite. Bidmos (1993: 4) argues that “religion in its original purity has not created any vacuum for secularism to fill. The compartmentalization of life between religion and secularism cannot work. It is religion or secularism, and if it is secularism, man must be ready for the inevitable end result.

Human rights, a stated feature of Western liberal democracy, which itself developed out of secular ideology, denote the existence of the rights of the people, which should not be denied them under any circumstances. In *Islām*, Muslims view human rights as duties and obligations, the fulfillment of which leads to the attainment of one’s rights and thus to look towards long term rather than short term benefits, in line with the Prophet’s (SAW) approach when he declared that “I seek no recompense from you, my recompense is with none but Allah” (Bukhari).

The *Qur’ān* requires of Muslims to “enter into *Islām* completely and do not follow the footsteps of Satan, for he is to you an open enemy” (2: 208). This verse indicates that everything in society is subordinated to and guided by the *Islāmic Shari’ah*, the Divine law. Thus, in an *Islāmic* state political power and its different arms i.e. the legislative, executive, administrative and judicial, bow down to the *Shari’ah* which entrenches morality. *Islām* also opposes secularism, because it calls for the obedience to man-made laws rather than religious or divine laws. In fact, if these laws are not totally eradicated, then they are institutionalized and made “one” of the state laws, and not the principal one.

Al-Qardawi (1991: 84) also criticized secularism as it:

endorses all that is forbidden by *Shari'ah* and advocates corruption, because existing legislation does not derive from divine guidance but from secular philosophies. No wonder, then, that it sanctions as lawful what Allah (SWT) has prohibited and prohibits what He has made permissible. It also neglects obligations ordained by Allah (SWT).

Ishaque also criticizes the secular system of government when he paints an after election scenario whereby once voted for leaders in a secular democratic set up become answerable and accountable only to themselves and their personal interests, until the next election, when they will spew more lies. Thus, for Ishaque (cited in Ahmad, 1986: 35):

... so long as they act within a façade of legality, they can legitimately use their office for advancing their personal careers. Laws favoring some and discriminating against others are passed. Lobbies of hidden persuaders continue to cause distortions in priorities. A realistic assessment of contemporary elected legislators' conduct leads one to agree with Marx that the law is a tool of the ruling elite, that is, those who are economically powerful. Under the *Islāmic* system, the objectives which law aspires to achieve and the values it endeavors to sustain and advance are already given.

Hence in the *Islāmic* system, the *Shari'ah* is already there. Therefore, limiting the powers of the legislators to making subordinate ad-hoc laws under the section of flexible *Shari'ah* laws that could change with place and time, and even then, such laws have to be in conformity with the *Qur'ān* and Sunnah. Entrenched within the *Shari'ah* also are the rights, collective and individual, of the citizens of the state, which if violated, they can seek redress.

Varieties of secular states

Definitions, it has been pointed out by scholars, are neither true nor false; they are more or less useful. Theoretical definitions sometimes differ from practical operations due to the realities of life, etc. The practice and operationalisation of secularism and *Shari'ah* have also been affected likewise. What is manifested may sometimes be different from the ideal. Thus, even the operationalisation of the concepts in the various modern states has differed, as can be seen from what follows. But, what is a secular state?

The secular state, according to J. S. Mill, is

... a state in which government exerts no pressure in favour of one religion rather than another religion, a state in which no social or educational pressure is

exerted in favour of one religion rather than another religion or no religion; a state wholly detached from religious or irreligious teaching or practice (cited in Moten, 1996: 2).

With the reformation, many sects and denominations emerged each antagonistic towards the other, thereby creating a situation whereby the state for the sake of peace and stability could not align itself with one, thus leading to pluralism and mutual toleration. According to Yadudu (1992: 9):

The history of the European nations vis-a-vis the presence and predominance of any particular denomination in their domain in the wake of the reformation differed markedly and consequently the route to and type of secular polity adopted by each princely state, and later country, tended to differ in a corresponding manner.

Martin (1979) has identified several patterns and many other versions of the secular state. The first category of societies includes such catholic countries as Spain, Portugal, Italy, France, and Austria. Orthodox societies such as Russia before the revolution also fall in this category whereby minorities in these societies align themselves with the political left and militant secularism.

Countries in which major denominations share a partnership or a duopoly (e.g. Catholicism/Protestantism, etc.) such as Poland fall within the second category. In the third category, pluralism is the order of the day, whereby England features very well. Here there is a religion of the state and the Anglican Church is dominant and fully associated with the state but at the same time in all other spheres, secularism rules as a result of its plural nature.

As the categories progress, there is an increasing encroachment of secular ideology into societal affairs. Thus in the fourth category, that is the U.S.A, there is separation as the church is not fully associated with the state. However, competition among religious bodies is also reflected in the politics of the state. Nevertheless strong cleavages are not detected and stability does exist. The institution of the state does not take any stand on any religious issue or questions. Secularism in the U.S. is not hostile to religion, but it is expected to be more rigorous as a result of the lack of state sanctions (Wald, 1997: 7)

The Scandinavian countries make up the fifth category in the secularization process, which is linked to the third category, whereby the church – Protestantism – Lutheran or Anglican is fully associated with the state. According to Martin (1979: 23):

....it is in relation to Scandinavia that the existence of a Protestant as distinct from Catholic church state nexus becomes an important factor. Protestant Church, especially Lutheran and Anglican ones, are more subject to the state than the Catholic church and for that reason adapt themselves more rapidly to change in the character of the state. They are also impregnated with an individualism which does not promote organized oppositions or united institutional stands... Hence as the establishment becomes more liberal or socialist, the church adapts itself to the new situation and only retains the strictly doctrinal and subjective sphere of faith as its sole prerogative.

The sixth and final stage or category is that exemplified by Russia whereby the society is secularized, but the church is not secularized as it does not even exist. According to Feroz (1976: 19), "a rigid view of secularism is not found anywhere in the Western world. In theory though many western states are secular, in practice they are Christian".

Selected secular states

Secularism in Turkey, during the Kemalist era, totally subordinated religion, i.e. it was just short of the Russian type. Thus, the Constitution promulgated in 1924 was for a secular nationalist state that would completely eradicate all aspects of *Islām* from the public and state affairs. However, with the vote of no confidence on the secularists leading to a victory of the Democratic Party in 1950, the Kemalist secularist principles were re-interpreted and softened, such that state control on religion was slackened and those reforms which were not accepted by the people were repealed while preserving those that were widely accepted and adopted. As governments change, the relationship between the state and religion also changes, sometimes the state is highly secular while at other times less so.

India's brand of secularism, declared in its Constitution, adopts one religion (Hinduism) subtly while neglecting the others (*Islām*, Christianity, Buddhism, etc.). Nevertheless, secularism in India is not very successful because it is being imposed on a predominantly religious society as well as a plurality of religions, even though the state has been trying to constitutionally recognize various religions.

In Italy, the Gelasian two-sword theory is being operationalized, whereby there are two sovereign authorities, the secular state and the Vatican, which is a religious state, existing simultaneously. However, as Yadudu (1992: 18) argues, "the secular Italian state dares not step on the toes of Papal authority by initiating or implementing policies that would fly in the face of the Church or run counter to

the catholic norms and values of its citizens.” Thus Pope Gelasius’ assertion that the secular sword has to bow down to the spiritual sword in terms of dogma and that of the Church should prevail in case of disputes between the two is being followed to the letter. However, this recognition and privilege is given only to the Catholic Church. Other churches are constitutionally recognized as being equal before the law but they do not get the privileges given to the Catholic Church.

Some countries may not necessarily be secular but at the same time may not adopt a state religion. Indonesia is an obvious example where “belief in God is proclaimed as the first principle of the Pancasila” (Cederroth in Westerlund 1996: 382). However, there is separation of state and religion; and *Islām*, the religion of the over whelming majority, is not the state religion nor is the republic an *Islāmic* state. In fact, a party that represents *Islāmic* ideology does not even exist. All religions are equal and a peaceful relationship between religions is given significance to maintain the existence of the state as a unitary one. Practically, however, *Islām* has always been recognized and supported by the state especially “as a religious and socio-cultural ideology” (Cederroth, 1996: 383).

The population of Indonesia being heterogeneous, the country is more concerned with bridging the ethnic, social and religious cleavages, thus religion is not given a chance to act as a divisive force:

Therefore, *Islāmic* political ambitions had to be suppressed at all costs and much of Indonesia’s independence politics can be understood only in this light. Political repression coupled with strong opposition from other aliran (sic) ideologically motivated currents has forced Islamists to adopt themselves to realities. Many leading Islamists such as Nurcholis Madjid and AbdulRahman Wahid have argued for a separation of religion and worldly affairs; a secularisation of *Islām* (Sekularisasi *Islām*) in a reminiscent of Christian traditions (Cederroth, 1996: 386).

The perception of secularism and the secular state is different in Malaysia where their historical experience is different. The Malays fought for dominance and influence in their country, thus *Islām* served for them as a unifying force “a rallying point through which they could distinguish themselves from their infidel competitors” (Cederroth, 1996: 386). Thus the Malaysians perceived secularism as separation of religion and state and forego that by giving *Islām* prominence as state religion and considered itself as an *Islāmic* state. Initially, nationalism and secularist ideology was considered as the answer for many Malays nowadays, they are anti-westernization and as such look towards *Islāmic* principles and the establishment of the *Islāmic* state as the answer to other problems.

In Philippines, like in Indonesia, although there is constitutional separation between the church and the state, there is a continuous and interchanging play between the two implying the dominance of the church in society. The inspiration of and participation in the EDSA peoples revolt of 1986 by the Catholic Church gave it a position of relevance crucial to the drive towards political change and democracy. This is because it is the EDSA revolt that saw the change in leadership from Marcos to Aquino (Rose, 1996: 323). According to Bautista (1991), the Evangelical Protestant churches also participated in the political game by being apolitical. They therefore shift between giving instructions, with justification from Biblical verses (Romans 13: 1–7) which ordain followers to obey their leaders while at other times “cautioning that civil disobedience may sometimes be an option but only after one has exhausted the judicial and Constitutional processes” (Rose, 1996: 324). However, with the social and political events of the 1980s, the evangelicals metamorphosed from being apolitical to being political, either conservatively or progressively. Hence, many fundamentalist leaders argue that “Christians need to become socially and politically active, to transform social institutions, and serve as Christians in all spheres of life. But one does not hear much talk about theocracy” (Rose, 1996: 349). In a nutshell, Filipinos are not fighting secularism yet because the Protestants and the fundamentalists generally are a negligible minority, hence the idea is not yet official. Yet still, they intend to shape, influence and if possible control public policy. Thus, Christianity and its different denominations in the Philippines have influenced the regionalisation of politics and the operationalisation of secularism, while *Islām* does the same in Indonesia.

Emphasizing the separation of religion and politics, specifically based on the law of separation of the church and the state, the first article of the Constitution of Senegal states that “the Republic of Senegal is Laicistic, democratic and social” (see Loimeier; 1996: 183). Despite the overwhelming majority of Muslims (95% approximately) in Senegal, the colonial legacy of the western secular model has triumphed. For Loimeier, both Islamists and Marabouts in the Senegal engage in an exchange of service with the government. The Islamists helped the state in executing international reform programmes and the depiction of the country to the wealthy Arab states as an *Islāmic* state. At the same time, the Islamists serve as tools which the government uses to counter the power of the Marabouts. In return, members of the Islamists were given permission to establish their own schools, jobs in the administration and reform of the state and diplomatic missions. The Marabouts give their political support to the government and help the government in the generation of revenue, mobilization of people for the army, economic

activities, and the like, while the government provides legal protection for them if there is any conflict, gives them sufficient freedom in their internal activities, supported and funded the construction of masjids and gave them donations and gifts. In sum, similar to the group of secularists who believe that secularism is for the benefit of religion, President Abdou Diouf argues that Senegalese *Islāmic* values are protected and maintained by the secular state. Thus he asserts that “Laicism is neither atheism nor anti-religious propaganda”.

Conclusion

Secularism is dominant in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth century. However, the term secularism lacks an agreed-upon definition. It has been defined differently by different people. Scholars have identified and varyingly emphasized such elements of secularism as pluralism, the differentiation of institution, privatization and rationalization. If there is conceptual confusion, there also prevails confusion in the operationalization of the term. The operationalisation of the secular state in several countries (U.S., Italy, Indonesia, Turkey, Senegal and others) goes to show that each country operates secularism differently in keeping with the context in which they operate. Some maintain strict separation between the Church and the state, others pay lip service to such separation. Thus, in dealing with states in the international arena, it is advisable to check the type of secularism in operation and adopt policies accordingly.

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