
UNIT 8

SECULARISM*

Structure

8.0 Objectives

8.1 Introduction

8.2 The Concept and its Etymology

8.3 Historical Background and the Rise of Secularism

8.4 Public Sphere, Religion, Secularism: The Problematic

8.5 Different Types of Secularism

8.6 Criticism and the Future of Secularism

8.7 Let Us Sum Up

8.8 Key Words

8.9 Further Readings and Reference

8.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

8.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will enable the learners to get:

- A definitional understanding of the term secularism.
- To understand the historical background against which the concept emerges.
- To understand some of the issues, complexities, and nuances of the concept in terms of its deployment in modern political societies.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of secularism is one of the most significant issues in modern social and political philosophy. It focusses on the nature of the relation between the state and religion/s in the context of modern political thought. As a society we witness the critical role religion plays in

* Dr. Shridha Shah, Former faculty, Department of Philosophy, Hindu College, University of Delhi.

society. It can be divisive and polarizing, and yet it can also provide a moral-cultural framework to societies and people. Like state and the political organization of society, religion is one of the most universally found, and long-standing institutions that has characterised human civilisations. In the course of development and progress, we have questioned the efficacy and relevance of religion to modern societies, however, religion has proven itself resilient against any such questioning. At best, we would like to do away with its dogmatic and divisive tendencies, and allow only for its redeeming qualities, at least for those who would like to believe in a religious framework. And yet there are issues and questions that remain: how do we accommodate different religious beliefs, their practices, their adherents, and non-believers, within an increasingly globalizing political world, with all its complexities? The concept of secularism gives us one kind of an answer, which has been fairly dominant in modern political societies. It is enshrined as part of our constitutional makeup, and yet as a theoretical concept, it is riddled with complexities, and finds different interpretations in different nations and societies.

This unit will introduce the learners to this concept, and the manner in which it emerges as part of the contemporary political discourse. It will further discuss the nature of some of these complexities that will enable the learners to better understand the nature of the concept and its criticisms.

8.2 THE CONCEPT AND ITS ETYMOLOGY

The term secularism emerged in the middle of the 19th century, and was first conceptualised by George Holyoake (1871) to denote an ethical framework of thought, which did not depend for its parameters solely on religion, and could also be distanced from the worldview of the atheists, as atheism at that time carried a negative connotation. From then to now, the conceptual bearings of the term have changed immensely, and implies a range of other meanings, and issues that accompany this concept, some of which will be taken up for discussion in this unit.

PONDER BOX-I

Is there an afterlife? Does it make any difference to how we conduct our life in the present?

Etymologically, secularism comes from the late Latin word *saecularis*, which means worldly, belonging to this age, etcetera*, indicating a concern with

* <https://www.etymonline.com/word/secular>

the temporal, as opposed to the atemporal or eternal. Temporality indicates a separation from the church/ religious institutions, and their ‘other worldly’ concerns and eternity. Instead of dealing with concerns of the afterlife, the temporal deals with issues of the current age, in the now. This concern with the issues of the age, brings us to a definitional understanding of the term secularism, which denotes the separation of religion from the institutions of the state, along with a growth of its accompanying secular values to govern the public sphere.

Despite the surface simplicity of this kind of definition, there are several assumptions that underlie it, and they need to be unpacked in order to realise the complex nature of this concept. To begin with, the term religion itself is something which presents a philosophical issue – our understanding of what is religion, is not only informed by cultural and historical contexts, for instance dietary norms, marriage rituals, etcetera; but more fundamentally, raises the philosophical issue of what is the essential meaning of the term, irrespective of culture and context, perhaps even raise the issue that is there a need or even possibility for such meaning. Is belief in God, or a central scriptural text essential to the understanding of a religion? No, we have significant instances to argue otherwise.

PONDER BOX-II

What are the different religions you know of (including tribal, and other specific groups)? Think about differences in their beliefs and practices.

In any case, a discussion of such conceptual issues is a part of the philosophical exercise to develop a better understanding, and it is only based on such conceptual clarification that we can further articulate what it would mean to separate religion from the state, and its institutions, and thereby understand secularism.

8.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A very important aspect of understanding the concept of secularism is in terms of its development in the context of the rise of Christianity, and modern Europe. There are claims by scholars that secularism cannot be limited to the European context, and other societies too had a conceptualization of the secular. We will take up some of these claims and issues later in the unit. In the case of Europe, the historical conflict between the church and the state that eventually leads to the articulation of the concept of secularism and secular values, develops

as a conflict between the values of this world and that of the world of God. God as the creator of the world, stood outside of it, i.e., was not subject to the contingencies and laws of the world created by it. At least this was a significant way of understanding God's relationship with the world, which eventually leads to the development of the secular worldview. Values and virtues of this world that lead to success were seen to be in conflict with values that would lead to the kingdom of God. There are several instances of such conflicts where the sacred is seen in conflict with the secular, particularly in terms of the place of scriptural reason and authority vis-à-vis human reason and rationality. Is scriptural authority to be accepted over independent human reason and rationality or vice versa? This sort of question came to be the mark of the development of modern thought, and along with the rise of Protestantism, the Scientific Revolution, that ushered in the Age of Enlightenment, together formed the larger historical background of the rise of secularism. Immanuel Kant's dictum of "Sapere Aude" (dare to think), in the context of the Enlightenment, is a perfect motto for what leads to the articulation of the secular worldview.

The important thing to note in this context is the swiftness and the nature of change that characterises European society. Since the time of adoption of the Nicene Creed (around the 4th century CE) Christianity had been the dominant religion in all of Europe. In fact, going to a meta level, religion was a fundamental way of life. It is very difficult to imagine and articulate a meaningful life outside of the purview of religion in medieval Europe. It is not as if Christianity was not questioned, and there are several historical instances of that, but to altogether conceive of no religion or God, was a far deeper issue. From being a society dominated by a single religion, to multiple sects forming within that religion, eventually leading to one of the bloodiest periods of internecine fighting (Thirty Years' War, which ended with the Peace of Westphalia -1648), and the foundations of the rise of modern secularism, these were very sweeping and radical changes for the European continent. The rise of Protestantism and Reformation, which bring along with them a change in the understanding of the nature of human reason vis-à-vis the scripture, further lead to the emergence of a new world order, where religion did not hold the same place of importance. From being the most dominant institution that covered every aspect of life, to becoming something that could only be a part of the private life of an individual, there was a fundamental shift in the understanding of religion, and its relation to the public sphere. Religious toleration that came in with the secular worldview, brought with it several other

conceptual changes to the status of religion, which will be discussed in detail, in the next section.

Check your progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the meaning of secularism?

.....
.....
.....
.....

8.4 PUBLIC SPHERE, RELIGION, SECULARISM: THE PROBLEMATIC

As noted in the previous section, there was a significant shift in the status and conception of religion with the rise of the secular worldview. Cultural and political shifts, religious wars and bloodshed, combined with ideational ferment among thinkers, led to the rise of a world view that argued for toleration of religious differences, but along with such toleration came the changed status of looking at religion as part of the private sphere of human life and activity.

Philosophers such as John Locke (1632-1704), theoretically argued that the state and the church belong to separate realms of human activity. One was concerned with the civil society and its members in the here and now, and the other was concerned with promises made for the afterlife, and therefore, the church had no business meddling with the business of the state, and that the state need not meddle with the religious beliefs of an individual. This sort of distinction argued for religious toleration on the part of the state, but was predicated on religion being a concern of an individual's private life. The increasing power and autonomy of the state, issues like education, social welfare, social order etc. all coming within the purview of the state, as opposed to religion, forwarded the idea of this separation.

Following philosophers like Baruch Spinoza and John Locke, who argued for the role of the state against religious oppression and tyranny, later thinkers like Montesquieu, Voltaire, David Hume, Adam Smith, all further carried this argument for the separation of state and religion, and state neutrality in the face of religious differences, to different degrees. It is important to keep in mind that such distinctions that now seem obvious to us, were actually novel for the time when they were being proposed. The existence of the private sphere as a separate realm, predicated upon the sanctity of individual freedom, was itself a product of the historical age. It had not existed prior to that time.

PONDER BOX-III

Consider the differences between the public and the private domains. What are the issues/domains that are exclusively private?

Religious belief and practice are not only a matter of individual faith and commitment, but are also part of the larger social fabric of any society. Most people are born into religions, and don't necessarily exercise any choice in the matter. There are shared beliefs and practices, along with individual faith and commitment that characterise religion for most people. Therefore, for religion to be relegated to the private life of an individual, in concept, brought about very complicated scenarios, which are still unfolding for us. There are several instances where such conflicts confront us. Differences in personal laws with regards to marriage, divorce, care of religious buildings, etc., is accepted in India within the purview of it being a secular state; however, states like France advocate a complete separation between public norms and beliefs and practices of a religion. For instance, there is a complete ban on display of religious symbols, and attire in the public space. This often raises issues of freedom of expression, and free practice of religion, which are also avowed values of a modern liberal society. In general, as well, criticism of religions versus the freedom of speech, guaranteed as one of the basic political rights, is often seen to clash in modern societies. Another instance is where public institutions take account of dietary norms of followers of particular religions. Should such concessions be entertained? If yes, to what extent? Or for that matter public holidays for specific religions – how should they be accounted for? What these instances indicate to us is this that the separation of religion from the public sphere is not a neat and uncontroversial process, especially with the rise of multicultural societies. Most states in the current world order have people from different ethnicities, cultures and religions coexist. At the level of multiplicity of religions, what should the role of the state be in mediating differences and keeping a neutral stance?

Check your progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the basis for the separation between religion and state according to John Locke?

.....
.....
.....
.....

8.5 DIFFERENT TYPES OF SECULARISM

The manner in which we have so far discussed secularism can be characterized as political secularism, which emphasizes the separation of the state and the church. This separation is meant to promote secular values in the functioning of the public sphere. These secular values in general can be said to focus on a certain kind of neutrality of treatment among religions, and to prevent any kind of discrimination among people, and institutions based on religious grounds. However, as we have partially discussed earlier that in practice different states interpret these secular ends differently.

Analytically speaking, a secular state can be characterized as having a dissociation with religion at the level of (i) ends, (ii) institutions, and (iii) laws and policies. How a state practices separation from religion at these levels allows for different characterizations of any state. Ideally, a secular state must be neutral on religion on all the above-mentioned levels. A secular state can be distinguished from (i) a theocratic state, eg. Iran, (ii) a state with one established religion, eg. Great Britain, and (iii) a state with multiple established religions, Ashokan empire or Akbar's policy towards religions may come closest to this characteristic. Neutrality among all established religions may seem close to secularism, however, at the most abstract and fundamental level secular states must allow for their own secular ends, and not those established by religion. They must also cater to those who do not believe, or choose to believe in another religion than the one they are born into. The state's ends and ideas of welfare should not distinguish among citizens based on religion.

A very significant issue that emerges here is the case study of India as a secular state. Scholars have argued that India presents a different understanding of the term secularism, than that followed in the West. Others have claimed that it is only a derivative of the western notion. That debate aside, there are certain features of Indian secularism that make it distinctive in its approach to secularism, and are worthy of consideration. One of the foremost features in this regard is the acceptance of group/ community-based rights of religious groups, which is not accepted in western models. As argued earlier, in the European framework, religion is considered an individual centric, private activity, which cannot be entertained in the public sphere. India's approach to secularism is characterized as principled distance, as opposed to one-sided exclusion, mutual exclusion or strict neutrality. What this entails is that the state's engagement with religion, as a publicly significant activity, is underwritten by principles of secular values, and religion is not just removed from the public sphere. Religion may intervene in the public sphere, or likewise the state may intervene in religious matters, if they are guided by secular values of equality, liberty, justice etc. There is a demonstrable historical lineage and definite merits to this approach, in principle; however, this is not an uncontroversial position. In practice, it has been witnessed that it is not always easy to decide what values should be promoted as part of the public domain. For instance, individual liberty versus equality amongst religions may very well be at stake, and not allow for a clear resolution. At a deeper level, this takes us back to the crisis of secularism, where the separation between religion and state is not easy to execute.

8.6 CRITICISMS AND THE FUTURE OF SECULARISM

As was pointed out earlier, mainstream secularism is not without its controversies and criticisms.

One of the criticisms already pointed out is that the division between public and private is not a very clear one, and is in itself a product of developments in modern Europe. The classification of religion as part of the private sphere, rests on the assumption that it is an individual centric activity, and its community centered aspect is undermined. The neutrality that secularism seeks to uphold is therefore, actually a myth, which fundamentally, rests on assumptions that arose as part of the European historical development.

Another significant criticism that secularism comes in for is that very often secularism in its development is seen as anti-religion, and in its best version it is seen as respect for all

religions, which can be seen as part of the Indian model. Even in the case of respect for all religions, it comes from an outsider's perspective and not from the point of view of the believer, and therefore, the decision making on what is acceptable and not acceptable comes from an outsider's perspective, which also goes back to the idea that neutrality is a myth within the secular discourse.

In the contemporary globalizing, multicultural world, where at one level apparently, there is an increasing homogenization of cultures, yet at the other level there is a resurgence of religious and ethnic identities. In such a scenario the claims of secularism cannot help us as they've been given. A serious engagement with religious worldviews and identities must be undertaken, particularly in terms of ideas of reason and rationality. Liberal arguments have very often rested with saying that secularism is the best possible alternative in our modern world for negotiating the relationship between religion and politics, and this basis is sourced within the ambit of modern rationality, but perhaps this claim with its assumptions must also be examined in order to seek genuine alternatives. The conception of reason that mainstream secularism is based on is essentially set in a disenchanted world, where religious thought is undermined, and considered superstitious. This leads to an irreconcilable gap between the believers and those who do not believe. It is reason and rationality that form the ultimate basis for what is acceptable and what is not, and that decision has already largely been made against the believer. If we seek a move ahead, perhaps the very nature of this rationality needs to be reconsidered.

Check your progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the two major criticisms against (mainstream) Secularism?

.....
.....
.....
.....

8.7 LET US SUM UP

Secularism as a doctrine arose with the rise of Modern Europe, however, since then it has undergone multiple changes. In a nutshell, it means the separation of church and state, accompanied by a growth in secular ends and values, which seek a neutral, non-discriminatory stance among religions as part of the public sphere. European secularism has largely seen religion as part of the private sphere, which has brought about various conceptual and practical difficulties. It has been argued by some scholars that the Indian model of secularism that takes on a principled distance among religions, as opposed to an outright exclusion or neutrality presents a better model; however, this framework is also not without its difficulties. With the resurgence of religious identities, and a critique of modern notions of rationality, it has been argued that perhaps a reconsideration of the secular worldview, and its assumptions about religious rationality would not be amiss, as a move ahead.

8.8 KEY WORDS

Age of Enlightenment: an intellectual and historical period, emerging in late 17th century in Europe, that was marked by an insistence on independent and universal human reason, which led to radical socio-political changes.

Nicene Creed: is a statement of belief in mainstream Christianity.

Peace of Westphalia: treaties negotiated at the end of the Thirty Years' War, which lay the foundations for modern conceptions of sovereignty and secularism, in Europe.

Protestantism: arose from the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, as a break from the Catholic church. Among other doctrines, they reject the supremacy of the Pope in Rome, and insist on individual faith in Christ, and the Bible, as a method of salvation.

Scientific Revolution: a series of radical changes in scientific knowledge, in Europe, by way of method and discoveries, around the 16th and 17th centuries.

Thirty Years' War: a series of wars starting in 1618 and ending in 1648, in Europe. There were several individual reasons for these wars but most of them had freedom of religion as the key factor.

8.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCE

Bhargava, Rajeev (2020) *Secularism*, in Political Theory: An Introduction, 9th impression, edited Bhargava, Rajeev and Acharya, Ashok, Pearson, Noida.

Kettell, Steven (2019) *Secularism and Religion*, Oxford University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.898>.

Copson, Andrew (2019) *Secularism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.

Madan, T.N. (2012) *Modern Myths, Locked Minds*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

8.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1. Secularism emerged in the middle of the 19th century, and was first conceptualised by George Holyoake (1871) to denote an ethical framework of thought, which did not depend for its parameters solely on religion. Etymologically, it comes from the late Latin word *saecularis*, which means worldly, belonging to this age, etcetera, indicating a concern with the temporal, as opposed to the atemporal or eternal. The term secularism, therefore denotes the separation of religion from the institutions of the state, along with a growth of its accompanying secular values such as equality, liberty, fraternity, justice, etcetera to govern the public sphere, as opposed to religious morality.

Check Your Progress II

1. According to John Locke the basis for the separation between state and church is that they both belong to separate realms of human activity, where state was concerned with the civil society and its members in this life, while religion was concerned with promises made for the afterlife.

Check Your Progress III

1. The two major criticisms against the (mainstream) secularism are,
 - a) The distinction between public and private is not a very clear one, and is in itself a product of developments in modern Europe. The classification of religion as part of the private sphere, rests on the assumption that it is an individual centric activity, and its community centered aspect is undermined. The neutrality that secularism seeks to uphold is therefore, actually a myth.
 - b) The best version of Secularism is seen as respect for all religions. Even in the case of respect for all religions, it comes from an outsider's perspective and not from the point of

view of the believer, and therefore, the decision making on what is acceptable and not acceptable comes from an outsider's perspective, which also goes back to the idea that neutrality is a myth within the secular discourse.

