

Does Secularism Imply Religious Neutrality?

David Rand

When dealing with the subject of secularism, it is often said that the secular State must be neutral with regard to religion. But this concept of neutrality is often poorly formulated and incorrectly interpreted.

The secular State must of course present a neutral face towards the citizens whom it serves. For example, the public school system and health network must be neutral with respect to clients of these services. This neutrality manifests itself in various ways, in particular by the fact that the State generally is – and indeed should be – unaware of whatever religious allegiances such clients may have.

However, the secular State must not remain neutral in the operation of its institutions. Indeed, it must reject any and all supernatural or pseudoscientific hypotheses, as well as all religious dogma, in its institutional decision-making. For example, dogmas must not be taught as facts in the public school system, and medical care and procedures must be consistent with solid scientific knowledge.

Thus, the secular State is neutral with regard to religious diversity: no privileges for Catholics, nor for Jews, Scientologists, Buddhists, Raëlians, Anglicans, or any other religious group. On the other hand, the secular State is certainly not neutral when faced with a choice

between supernatural religion on the one hand and natural reality on the other: if faced with such a dichotomy, secularism opts for reality.

A few examples: A creationist (i.e. a scriptural literalist who denies the evolution of species) would not be an appropriate candidate for director of a public institution responsible for awarding research grants in the biological sciences. Similarly, an individual who believes that AIDS is a plague sent by “God” to punish

homosexuals would not be a good candidate for the administration of a public institution which performs or manages medical research. Finally, a less hypothetical example: A theistic philosopher who upholds the importance of religion in the public sphere and who is extremely reluctant to admit the possibility of morality without god would be a rather dubious person to choose as copresident of a parliamentary commission whose mandate includes the maintenance of Church/State separation.

A poor understanding of the neutrality of the secular State is responsible for a number of questionable assertions commonly put forward on the subject of secularism. If, instead of neutrality in the face of religious diversity, we accept that the secular State must show itself to be completely neutral with respect to religious phenomena in general, then this leads to several highly dubious conclusions which are at best

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half-truths, if not completely false.

Assertion : “Secularism is not antireligious.”

It is true that the secular State is not antireligious towards its citizens. However, the decision to exclude supernatural and pseudoscientific hypotheses from the functioning of its institutions is founded on a rejection of religion as a basis of knowledge. Thus secularism has an undeniable antireligious aspect. Furthermore, without that orientation, how could one justify the exclusion of religious principles from the operations of the State?

Without its antireligious aspect, secularism would inevitably be truncated and weakened, with the risk that it would degenerate into American-style pseudo-secularism, or what is sometimes called “open” secularism. The all-important separation between religions and the State would be compromised by religious influence over public affairs, where the influence of each religious sect would be proportional to its demographic weight in the population.

Finally, it is important to point out that, even with this limited antireligious aspect, secularism nevertheless remains less antireligious than other approaches, including religions themselves. Indeed, so-called “open” secularism favours majority religions to the detriment of marginal religions, whereas theocracy opposes all religions other than the State religion. By respecting freedom of conscience, secularism turns out to be the form of government which is the least antireligious.

Assertion : “Secularism is respectful of religious beliefs.”

This is false. The secular State cannot respect beliefs. On the contrary, its mandate is to respect and to enforce respect for freedom of conscience, including freedom of belief and freedom from belief. This distinction between belief and freedom of belief is crucial. As for the diversity of religious beliefs, the secular

State rejects them all in the operation of its institutions.

Assertion : “The secular State is not qualified to make decisions on religious issues.”

This assertion is simplistic, even false. In fact, the secular State has a duty to use all reasonable means at its disposal to acquire whatever expertise is necessary in order to distinguish the rational from the irrational and science from pseudoscience. Now it is true that the State cannot make pronouncements about the relative merits of two competing supernatural belief systems. It cannot say, for example, that Christianity is superior or inferior to Scientology or Islam. However, it must take a stand against supernatural beliefs by rejecting them all in the functioning of its institutions.

Assertion : “Secularism has nothing to do with atheism.”

This is completely false and indeed absurd. Firstly, as guarantor of freedom of conscience, the secular State has a duty to ensure freedom from religion, i.e. the right to be a non-believer, to be an atheist. Secondly, the secularist requirement to keep supernatural and religious principles out of public institutions is based on the observation that these principles are both dangerous and non-universal. The secular State does not promote atheism, but it is atheistic in the sense that it is constituted according to principles and values which are material, human and independent of all baseless ideology. In other words, the secular State is based on values which are as universal as possible. The concept of god is completely absent. These secular values are implicitly atheistic.

Assertion : “State atheism is contrary to secularism.”

This assertion is based on a tendentious interpretation of the expression “State atheism”, an interpretation which assumes that an atheistic State would endanger the freedom of

conscience of believers. But in fact there are an infinite number of ways to make a godless State. The Soviet State and the secular State are two examples of this, but with enormous differences between them. The former did indeed endanger the freedom of believers (and everyone else), whereas the latter adopts protection of this freedom as one of its essential founding principles.

As we saw in the previous section, the secular State is indeed atheistic, but passively so, so to speak, without imposing atheism on its citizens. The secular State permits and protects freedom of belief and religious practice both in the private sphere and in public as well, but outside public institutions. On the other hand, it does not allow this practice to hinder the rights of other citizens, including their right not to have a religion imposed on them.

An Honest Approach

To defend and promote secularism, it is important to avoid a simplistic interpretation of religious neutrality which would reduce the role of the State to a useless relativism. To exaggerate neutrality and ignore the antireligious aspect of secularism would be opportunistic, and, above all, ineffectual. Religious authorities have a vested interest in promoting the prejudice that religious belief is necessary for the “spiritual”

health of human beings and of society. The visibility of atheists is thus important to counter antisecular religious propaganda.

Atheism and secularism are obviously distinct concepts, but they are not mutually independent. Far from being incompatible with secularism, non-belief, atheism and antireligious criticism are essential aspects of it. Secularism may be seen as a sort of contract or alliance between non-believers on the one hand, and believers who accept that the State should be established on universal non-religious principles. To support such a program (and in particular to become a member of the Mouvement laïque québécois), it is certainly not necessary to be an atheist. But many of us are, and to try to hide this fact is useless and ineffectual, and constitutes a form of capitulation to those who would silence us.

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In Praise of Rational Discourse

John K. Nixon

Those of us who live in a Western democracy tend to take for granted the freedom of expression that democracy brings. The liberty to debate with others in an atmosphere of open exchange of ideas, coupled with a measure of respect for views divergent from our own, is something that most of us cherish. One has only to visit another country where some form

of institutionalized suppression and censorship exists, or where intolerance born of religious extremism or totalitarianism prevails, to appreciate fully the value of the freedom to debate issues in a democracy.

It was not always thus, particularly with regard to the larger issues in life. Until the

mid-nineteenth century questions of the role of mankind in creation, the origin and nature of the universe and other Big-Picture philosophical discussions inevitably ran afoul of prevailing religious orthodoxy. Up until then, in Christian countries at least, the Church remained the ultimate arbiter on such issues, and those who dared question the existence of an all powerful deity were typically branded as heretics and were shunned socially, imprisoned or frequently tortured and killed. One has only to think of Galileo who, in 1610 had the temerity to publish his heliocentric theory of the universe, which challenged the dominant geocentric theory that had prevailed since the time of Aristotle. For his brazen impudence, Galileo was forced by the Catholic Church to recant his heliocentric views and spent his last years under a form of house arrest.

The first major cracks in this edifice of intolerance came in 1859 with the publication by Charles Darwin of *On the Origin of Species*. This seminal work proposed the theory of evolution of all forms of life through a process of natural selection, commonly dubbed “Survival of the Fittest”. The inference that humans and apes had developed from a common ancestor ran up against the theory of creation by a biblical deity and put Darwin in direct confrontation with Church leaders, many of whom publically ridiculed the eminent scientist.

Since then most of the established Christian Churches, which had been reluctantly forced to accept Galileo’s heliocentric views, have come to accept the validity of Darwin’s theory of evolution which has successfully withstood the test of time for 150 years.

In 1953, the discovery of the structure of the DNA molecule opened a whole new field of bio-molecular research which has led to the ongoing project of mapping the human genome. These advances have dramatically expanded the field of scientific knowledge of Life itself. Together with the ever increasing accumulation of data from probes into outer space, these de-

velopments have revealed a universe infinitely more complex and elegantly constructed than anything imagined previously by theologians.

Today the influence of the established Christian churches has declined markedly in Western countries, with the exception of some Evangelical Protestant movements, particularly in the United States, where creationism is still defended and taught. Many Catholic churches are sparsely attended and the Anglican Church is deeply divided over recognition of homosexual unions.

In recent years there has been a flood of books and articles supporting the application of reason as a counter to arguments founded in blind, unreasoning faith. Books such as *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins and *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris have argued lucidly and passionately in favor of evidence-based science against the unquestioning acceptance of faith espoused by theologians and the major established religions.

At the same time the rise of Islamic extremism and the spread of the Wahhabi doctrine financed by Saudi Arabian oil-generated wealth has created a school of thought (exemplified by the Taliban) in which any advances in scientific, political or legal knowledge that have originated in Europe and other non-Muslim countries are rejected as the work of crusaders and infidels. Differences in opinion are all too often settled with bullets and suicide bombs. In some theocracies, any argument that opposes the basic tenets of the established religion can invite a death sentence.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, in her courageous and revealing book *Infidel*, describes how she fled a conservative and patriarchal society in Somalia to obtain refugee status in Holland. After learning the Dutch language, she was admitted to Leiden University to study political science. There she was exposed to a culture of intellect and reason, so vastly different from the constrained and rigid theologically-based education

she had experienced in Somalia, where independent thought was actively discouraged and all knowledge derived from the Koran. She writes almost euphorically about the sense of freedom this brought her. "The years at university were the happiest times of my life", she writes. "It was an environment where reason ruled". This brave and intelligent woman has since renounced her faith and lives under constant threat of death from Islamic extremists.

In most successful democracies with an independent judiciary, freedom of expression, both spoken and written, is constitutionally guaranteed. Restrictions understandably apply to the purposeful spread of hate, with several recent court cases revolving around the definition of hate literature.

In 1995, Dr. John Philippe Rushton, a psychology professor at the University of Western Ontario, published a book titled *Race, Evolution and Behaviour*, which generated a storm of controversy. Rushton, who has published over 250 articles and six books, cited his research indicating that certain ethnic groups had evolved larger brain size and greater intelligence than other ethnic groups. His supporters defended his record of solid and well grounded scientific research. His detractors claimed he had links to white supremacy groups and had lectured on eugenics. In any case, his book highlighted what happens when ethics and a concern for human rights intersect with pure scientific research. Democracy presupposes that all human beings in a society be treated equally under the law, and that opportunities should be available for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity.

Those who argue that scientific research should be allowed to proceed unfettered may have difficulty reconciling their belief in democratic principles and Rushton's line of research. Similarly, there has been strong opposition in some quarters to other areas of scientific investigation, including stem cell research, cloning, genetically modified crops and nuclear power. It seems to me that, before the results of inves-

tigations in these controversial areas are implemented, the consequences should be analyzed dispassionately, using scientific reasoning to determine whether or not humanity in general, and society in particular, stands to benefit, and that any demonstrable benefits substantially outweigh the risks. Debate should be open and unrestricted and the general populace be kept fully informed before any decisions are taken by governing authorities.

A growing number of people, in Western countries at least, appear to favor the use of rational evidence-based argument over dictates rooted in blind and unreasoned faith. Ideology and arbitrary beliefs should never be allowed to trump reason.

Obviously there are important issues where the scientific evidence may not be entirely convincing to all. Climate change, and the reasons behind it, is one current example, where a vocal minority continues to reject the arguments advanced by the majority of experts in the field. The important thing is that such divergences of opinion can be debated in a free and open forum, without fear of recrimination, and with respect for opposing ideas as long as they are founded in reasoned beliefs and do not spring from emotion alone.

As long as reason prevails in discussions between humans on the major issues facing us, and as long as such debate is conducted in a context of respect for divergent views, I have faith in the future of mankind.

As Voltaire is reputed to have said: "I may disagree with what you have to say, but I shall defend to the death your right to say it."

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