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Lived Secularity: Religious Living in a Secular Age

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

Sometimes secularism is understood in monolithic ways, especially in opposition to religious ways of life. But religion and secularism are not opposites. Religious people can be fully committed to secularism, and in lived secularity we see many ways religious and non-religious people negotiate their position within complex societies.

COMMENTARY

Recently, scholars have noted that seeing secularism as simply a political idea, or a singular concept, may hinder our understanding of how people live within [secular societies](#). Instead, they propose the concept of "[lived secularity](#)" to discuss the way we negotiate our existence within entangled social and political communities. This makes sense not only of the fact that "religion" and "secular" are not distinct spheres, being [defined within specific cultural contexts](#), but also helps show that one can be deeply religious and deeply secular.

Secular: What do We Mean?

Words matter. How we define things shapes what we see. For instance, secular is often contrasted with religion, so one may have a secular government or a religious government (theocracy), but this [flattens a complex landscape](#). Originally, to be "secular" denoted Christian priests who lived in the world, rather than monastics living a cloistered life.

Moreover, "secular" governance is not necessarily an attack on religion. The Christian jurist [Hugo Grotius](#) helped codify, after Europe's "Wars of Religions", a basis for international law which acted "as if there was no God" to find common ground between Catholics and Protestants. It meant not giving priority to any religious viewpoint.

In this frame, to be secular is not to be anti-religious. It was about peace and co-existence. It contrasts with sectarian strife where one community's values are raised above others. In the post-independence Indian context, [Rajeev Bhargava](#) has theorised an Indian (Asian) "religion-friendly" secularism; in recent times, though, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's [Hindu nationalism has threatened this secular model](#). But [both Western and Asian secularisms](#) may be anti-religion or religion friendly, or more or less friendly to certain forms of religion.

Secularism, Secularisation

[Secularisation](#) – often a basis for the now less credible [secularisation thesis](#) that religion would disappear – describes the way that institutions have moved from being religious to governmental. For instance, schools and hospitals – once often run via churches, madrassas, or Buddhist monasteries – have become government run and regulated. While both secular/government run and religiously affiliated schools and hospitals still exist, governments set the agenda.

Under [the French model](#), or *laïcité*, secularisation has been about removing religious control, and emptying the public sphere of religion. This may seem anti-religious. For instance, France's attempted [burkini ban](#) on its beaches, where a particular form of modest Islamic dress for bathing was seen, by some French politicians, as making a Muslim statement of identity in a public space. But secularisation need not be anti-religious. In countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, religious education is taught – often mandated – in schools as part of the [secular curriculum](#). Today, this is often framed via a [need for religious literacy](#).

Secularism is defined as an ideological frame: the belief that a society should be governed in the interests of all without bias, as in Grotius' "as if there was no God". Former Anglican Archbishop and Cambridge Professor Emeritus [Rowan Williams](#) has defined two types of secularism: programmatic which seeks to remove religion from the public square (as in *laïcité*), and, procedural which seeks neutrality so that – ideally at least – no worldview, religious or otherwise, is favoured.

Secularity as Our Condition

A third term, [secularity](#), following Charles Taylor, talks about our situation of living in secular societies as a fact of life whether we are religious, atheist, or agnostic.

Secularity has several consequences and is related to modernity. [Peter Berger](#) has emphasised that a key part of modern, secular experience is the potential to relativise religion. We live in worlds in which it is not just obvious that there are many religious choices, but also where [not being religious is also a clear option](#). We may be aware of our beliefs, therefore, as something of a lifestyle choice.

Related to this is the value of secular knowledge. In work or life, we need skills and understanding that are not religious, whether this be personal communication skills, hospitality industry skills, banking and finance skills, legal knowledge, and so on. For healthcare, we rely upon secular medicine; even in a religiously affiliated hospital, the staff have the same training as in a secular hospital. Our lives therefore run within a secular frame: Taylor's "[secular age](#)". Some people may seek prayer, traditional

healers, or other treatments, but this is nearly always alongside or only after secular treatment.

Many people, politically and/or socially, act as if our religious tradition, or lack thereof, should not be given preference. While [religion may be utilised for votes](#), many do not support candidates based on their religion. Secular society does not give greater weight to one set of beliefs over any others. A secular person will place economic, moral, or social interests, e.g., [social cohesion](#), over often [divisive claims of ethno-religious partisanship](#). Secularism may thus promote neutrality from religion, especially in areas where some may seek to raise it as an arena of contestation.

While certain forms of secularism may be actively anti-religious – for instance, during China’s Great Cultural Revolution many religious institutions were repressed, while the school system in the PRC still teaches that religious belief is false – Bhargava and Williams note the reality of religious-friendly procedural secularisms.

Lived Secularity

Going beyond Taylor, ethnographers such as [Ashley Lebner](#) and [Rebekka King](#) have spoken about “lived secularity” to capture how this operates within people’s lives.

The experience of secularity, and modernity, may seem frightening and challenging for many religious communities and people. But while religious beliefs just become one option, secular forms of knowledge explain the world as an alternative to religious narratives, and people may actively live without any reference to religion, none of this is inherently anti-religious.

In the respect for difference, many religious people may find secularity offering a morally preferable alternative to the enforcement of religious beliefs and practices that have often taken place in religiously dominated societies. For instance, the Qur’an’s injunction that “there is no compulsion in religion” (Q2:256) is, arguably, more likely to be [fulfilled by secular societies](#).

Again, the distinction of secular versus religious knowledge is not new. While, in much of Asia, Buddhist monks were often teachers, doctors, or [architects](#) because they were the most learned people in society, this learning was not from the Tripitaka or other Buddhist texts. Again, historically, Islam’s ulama while trained jurists, were often, for instance, doctors, with [Ibn Sina’s work as a physician](#) being for a long time his most influential legacy.

Complementary, Not Opposites

While some religious communities flee into forms of fundamentalism and extremism and deny or attack the perceived secular – as in climate change denial amongst some of the United States’ Christian right – this is not a necessary response to lived secularity. Taking advantage of secularity’s religious toleration, secular medical and scientific knowledge (even most fundamentalists use smart phones or want an x-ray if they break their leg), and other beneficial aspects of contemporary societies, most people are both secular and religious. They are not opposites, or in antagonism. Rather, with differing methods, all people negotiate their place within lived secularity.

The Danger of Dichotomies

Understanding that being secular and [being religious are not opposites](#) is important. Indeed, dangers arise when these are contrasted, as we cannot avoid the secular world. When politicians or religious leaders speak in ways that portray them as antagonistic, we may see dangerous consequences.

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