

# Secularism and its effect on society religion essay



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Secularism is the separation of state and religion. It is the exclusion or rejection of religion from political or civil affairs of the state. Being an ancient belief of some ancient Greek and Roman philosophers like Marcus Aurelius it has developed and expanded to reach different corners of the world.

However, the term “ secularism” is relatively new as it was first mentioned or coined by the British writer George Holyoake in 1851. In the 1700’s different writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment Age had proposed its application in society. High Renaissance authors also gave rise to secularism and idealism in their works formed from Classicism, but it was mostly in historical rather than artistic and architectural works. Thus, secularism was formally “ born” or started during the Renaissance but found a sure footing in the 18th century during the Age of Reason. The concept and its application grew stronger with the French revolution carrying until today.

The most secular states in contemporary times have more than doubled the number of non-secular states. However, some secular states do not apply it fully and still observe some religious idiosyncrasies like holidays. Some states, however, do not have a defined state religion because of different practices of a large number of its citizens. For example, Nigeria has Islam, Christianity and other Traditional religions- but not as much as the first two- as the official religions of the nation. The entire nation observes both Islamic and Christian holidays and puts aside money in its budget for different purposes for this religion. Hence, secularism has had a boost in the last two to three centuries.

Since its emergence, religion holds the role or status as the basis for law and all other legalities. It is the sole source of law and everyone is expected to

obey its rules and regulations and failure to do so results in punishment of the guilty person or persons by religious decree. Therefore, the proper role of religion in every society is to lay down the rules or laws to be followed by every member. It also encompasses the entire life of a person, from his or her birth, daily activities and even to demise and further. Religion is absolute i. e. it is a divine decree from the Almighty.

Europe was widely Roman Catholic Christians due to the Roman conquerors of the Dark and Middle Ages. Europe was a very religious continent. Hence, religion was the law putting the church over even the ruling Monarchs and nobles. However, this arrangement depended on the country and sometimes changed according to the ruler. For example, King Richard the Lion Heart of England was a strong catholic and a leader of the crusades therefore, had a good standing with the church while his brother John also known as John Lackland who became king after him did not. Pope Innocent II excommunicated him due to a dispute between them on who was to be the next Archbishop of Canterbury. Because the olden Norman and Angevin kings of England had had considerable influence with the church, he also assumed he could. However, the church triumphed and he kept on paying the church compensation money for some time.

Thus, religious rules have been around for a long time due to religion and its willing followers. It can also be seen from the time of its emergence and evolution from animism to polytheism and finally monotheism, all religions allow for the belief in a power or deity that sets rules. These rules have been sometimes to the advantage of society and at other times to its detriment. For instance, in pre-Christian Rome, human sacrifice or bloodshed is said to

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be the bringer of the god's and goddesses' mercy on the people of Rome. Human sacrifice brought about rainfall, good harvest and abundant wealth. Thus, it brought about the birth of the gladiators and their legendary fights to "please" the deities. Another example would be the Indian sacrifice of a widow on her dead husband's funeral pyre or later times the end of her social life and she is considered a bad luck charm for anyone. Thus, religion compelled society to either kill these widows or cut them off from society and force them to live together without support, wearing only white and selling their bodies to feed themselves most of the time. Some religions even support and approve of incest especially brother-sister incest which can be seen in Egyptian, Japanese and Chinese royal families of the olden days. Hence, the proper role of religion in society is to arrange and bring order not chaos to religion. But for the most part, Europe engaged in wars between its countries due to religion sacrificing thousands of lives to its cause. For example, the Crusades that were undertaken three times by different countries that threw all of their money into them by heavily taxing their people to finance wars which were lost in the end. Some countries, like England and France never recovered fully from this economical sacrifice which can be said the evolutions in both these countries because of poor standard of living.

State religion in France after the revolution gave way to state atheism which promoted the suppression of religion. It is paramount to understand that secularism promotes religious freedom while keeping it from influencing its laws while atheism does not support the practice of religion at all. In modern or contemporary times, secularism is more popular because it promotes

equality of religions before the law and can quell accusation of favoritism towards one religion.

However, in communist states state atheism is promoted. The modern world should not abandon or relegate religion to the side as it is being done in most modern states. It is a given that some states have more than one major religions to consider. This might present a problem to most states when it comes to law making. However in Nigeria, the law makers have done a good job inculcating its major religions i. e. Islam and Christianity with great results. The country also recognizes other practices of the less populated traditional religions accepting some things like marriage, paternity and adoption without a need for a legal representative at the time. It can be said that religion threw Europe in to a state of war, but it cannot be refuted that it also brought about stability at the time of its emergence in Europe. However, most people especially the philosophes like Denis Diderot rejected the idea of God making religion synonymous to societies sufferings. He wrote an essay about a dying blind professor, *Lettre sur les aveugles*, in which he promoted his ideology. It is believed Diderot's sister's death in a convent where she was a nun contributed to his dislike of religion.

Thus, it can be seen that sufferings of people of the poor at the hands of the church led to many Europeans acceptance of atheism. On the other hand, it most states that have a single religion as its state religion and being non-secular have a relatively calm and orderly society. For example, the Middle Eastern states that use Islam as their official religion use the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (S. A. W) as their law. Although there is crisis in the Middle East countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab

Emirates enjoy a peaceful social and economical life which orderly and chaos-free.

The separation of religion and state laws both has its advantages and disadvantages. It is still an ongoing debate on whether its benefits outweigh its shortcomings. If state is separated from religion, laws will have no direct religious influence. Man made religious rules saying is not the law. Tolerance of other religions will be developed. Nepotism and segregation or prejudice due to religious difference will greatly reduce. The state will not add religious expenses to its budget leaving it with more funds to pursue other state matters or problems. Atheist can also be tolerated and their views heard. Freedom of expression is greatly promoted in these societies. Democracy is also promoted.

On the other hand, if state is not separate from religion it will incur extra expenses. There is less tolerance of other religions and their practice as can be seen in places like Saudi Arabia, the U. A. E, Yemen and Israel to a great extent towards Muslims. Religious sayings are considered as law. Atheism as well as bad mouthing the religion will be considered heresy and might even be punishable by death as seen during the church's powerful hold in Europe.

However, some of the advantages above can also turn into these disadvantages while some of the disadvantages turn into advantages. For example, tolerance of atheism can lead to its widespread and the decline in religion as evidenced in Europe with the advent of atheistic Enlightened philosophers. Although there was no tolerance in most countries, the Netherlands allowed these people to publish most of their works and in doing

so helped the spread of atheism. Democracy can be said to be highly overrated because most states practicing it can also infringe on the rights of others and not tolerate their religious freedom. For example, the law that was passed in France by President Nicholas Sarkozy to prevent Muslim women from covering their head infringed on their freedom of religion and expression. So also were the punishments administered by most churches in early Europe which sometimes involved stoning or beheading depending on the magnitude of the sin in the church's eyes. However, these rights later left the hands of the churches and transferred to the feudal lords who still took advices from their assigned priests. This however, seemed to lessen the punishment taking it away from women and children but mostly between men and their feudal lords. However, a more prominent example of non-separation problems can be seen with the popes of the Renaissance era in Italy. Their frivolous and sybaritic lifestyle damaged the image of religion and gave it no credence in the eyes of the believers. They didn't care for their people and mostly left them to suffer. Another example is the era of the Plantagenet Kings of England. All of these kings made England a very poor and unhappy country by taxing its people heavily and constant engagement in wars that were mostly petty and selfish. Further, Philip II launched a naval attack on England because of religion and without a thought to his people and their livelihood cut down Spain's forests to build his ships led to the economic decline of Spain which was once had a robust economy. Thus, by separating or not separating religion and state, chaos occurs. Nonetheless, it is wiser to keep religion as a basis for law making. Divine messages if followed adamantly lead to peace not anarchy as can be seen in Saudi, U. A. E, Qatar, Brunei and others.

Secularism in contemporary world has led to decline in before highly valued morals. Nowadays, sexual relationships are openly carried out i. e. a couple can move in together with the knowledge with both their parents and other people in society. On the other hand, non-secular and Old Europe frowned upon something like this. Fornication and adultery are seen as a sin from a religious point of view everywhere in the world. Although, the monarchs and aristocrats still indulged in the “ pleasures of the flesh” and the priests and society look the other way as long as they are discreet for instance Henry VII with his six wives and countless mistresses. However, this example is unique to those societies that at the time were not very religious, frivolous and at times chaotic.

For example, Italian renaissance that was characterized with frivolity and worldly pursuits because of they were not practicing religious sayings. This era can be identified with one of Europe’s most scandalous and licentious relationships and lots of unmarried mothers who suffered greatly.

Synonymously, in the modern world, the Western world is highly secular and as such it also faces the problem of teenage pregnancy, unmarried single mothers living in poverty, high divorce rates, and numerous cases of infidelity and so on. However, after the wave of frivolity during the renaissance had been cleared by Paul III and his successors, the enlightenment age brought with it a new wave of low moral standards. It can be seen from the 18th to the 19th century how extra-marital affairs became almost legalized. A wife was mainly the means to an heir. She was required to be faithful to her husband until she has given him an heir so that there will be no contest as to who the child’s father was. She can then have her affairs



as long as she was discreet while the husband also has his own mistresses and affairs. Thus, bastard children belonging to the nobles and aristocrats were very high in number with a great many of the sons given titles while the daughters are at most times educated. All these eras though accepting of these low moral values make social pariahs out of its practitioners.

Thus, secularism might promote or develop individuals to be independent but it does not protect them from the harsh realities of life. A religious and orderly society do not have such problems, although they do occur but not in such high numbers as in secular states. For example, the Puritans live their lives simply though of modern times, they do not believe in worldly pleasures. Moreover, the rate of suicide is seen to be much higher in secular states. There may be religious sacrifices as in the widow burning in Hinduism or stoning in Islam, it however, does not claim as many lives as suicide in the Western secular states. Furthermore, both of the aforementioned practices have falling into disuse while suicide is the most upcoming and pressing problem of deaths in secular societies.

Having lived in a non-secular society where religion governs our day to day lives. I have witnessed how religious sayings from God can be turned and manipulated to suit the needs of men. In my opinion, secularism is a good idea but it also doesn't get to be practiced the way it is supposed to be. For example, recently the French government although calling itself secular passed a bill to stop women or specifically Islamic women from covering their faces. It is perfectly allowed to sanction those that refuse to show their faces for security reasons, but why persecute all on the basis of a notion or what a minority does? It goes to show that both secular and non-secular

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states need to work on where they stand in the modern world. Times have changed since people will take in stride what the state dictates. As it can be witnessed in France, although women are being sanctioned and charged, they still defiantly wear their head covering. To them, their veil is and identity of who they are and what they represent as Muslim women. The French government will do well to learn from past mistakes of imposing sanctions on their people and its end results i. e. the revolution.

I believe that religion plays a role in society that can be at most positive and sometimes negative. However, both sides can be argued according to one's own point of view. For an academic (western education), socialist or scientific point of view religion has more negative than positive sides. For example, gender inequality, female education and sacrificial roles to make someone give up his/her life. On the other hand, theologians or religious scholars will give credit to the positive side of religion for bringing about peace, tranquility and fairness. For instance, Islam in Arabia pulled the people out of ignorance or Jahiliyyah as the period is known to a blissful time of peace and love for all. Further, in the Christian and Islamic books i. e. the Bible and Qur'an respectively, stories showcased the way religion brought the people peace and escape from harsh and ruthless rulers as in the stories of Moses, Abraham and Jesus. Hence, the amalgamation of these two views still proves to be futile. To my understanding, until these two opposing point of views are united, secularism cannot and will not be practiced to everyone's satisfaction.

Democracy cannot be practiced fully without any partisan influence from religious groups either. The 9/11 attacks claimed by the Taliban are now

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being seen as attacks orchestrated by Jews and some say by the American government itself. President George Bush, the former president was said to be a member of a religious groups that rule America between themselves thus, eliminating any trace that all past democratic rulings were fair. Current president Barack Obama also hit a brick wall during his campaign for the post. Because of his Muslim-like name and his roots, he was considered a Muslim posing as a Christian to get Islam to rule America. This influenced so many people not to vote him fairly based on a judgment of his character. By separating religion and state, the deed has only fueled the widening gap between the two most dominant religions in the world ergo in America too. Schools do not teach their pupils much about religion; hence, they come out with a jaundiced view created by the media. Most politicians also do not hide their distaste for other religions as can be seen by Sarah Palin and her anti-Islamic sentiments.

European history in its course from the ancient Greeks to the Romans to the Celts and the Vikings to Feudal systems and absolutist Monarchies and finally to the arrival of constitutional monarchy and democracy has shaped the world to what it is today. The West is the way it is thanks to these people who lived hundreds of years ago. But sadly, the world is yet to open their eyes and learn from past mistakes. European history in its course has shown us how absolutism or dictatorships can crumble in mere days when the people revolt. But the lure of power is too much for most leaders that they forget the past and only indulge in the present and paint and plan a happy future. This can be witnessed in the recent wave of unrest passing through some of the North African and Middle Eastern countries. The leaders of these

countries had been there since kingdom come but are not ready to lose that power they hold so in their grip. It took a revolution for most of these rulers to surrender and step aside; however, some refuse like Libyan and Yemenis presidents. In my opinion, it all comes down to greed and the lust for power. The characteristics of these people can be witnessed from other historical figures like Napoleon I of France, John I of England, Charles V Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, Philip II of Spain and others. Most of these leaders thirst and lust for power led to their ultimate downfall most especially Napoleon and his quest to create an empire for himself all over Europe.

In conclusion, I believe secularism is only applicable to some states while in others it can never be well implemented. To my understanding, African countries like Nigeria cannot function well under secular rule because of the various religious groups in the country. Other places that witness Islam as the dominant religion can never use secularism to govern a state. Islam itself brings an entire system of the way a state under Islamic rule is supposed to function. It can be seen that most of these Middle Eastern states have flourished under this system. For Christianity, I believe the Vatican is a typical example of a religious state being ruled by a religious system that works pretty darned good. The Pope as its head and the people under him are leaving in a peaceful and non-hectic environment. However, the Christian world (West) has learned another lesson from European history of Christian wars and its rules. Therefore, it is wary of going back for seconds after breaking away and forming other views that do not conform to the Catholic Church. As the saying goes "once bitten twice shy" so also do most

Christians feel they cannot go back under influence and rule by the Church. But most of all European history, especially the Enlightenment age has left its mark on history by advocating atheism. As some figures and statistics show, the world religions are declining in number as more and more people stop believing in God. Atheism has spread its wings to touch every corner of the world not only the west but Asia and Africa, two of the most religious continents in the world. Hence, most people believe the growing rate of atheism should be synonymous with secularism so as to create a balance between the believers and the non-believers. However, I believe only time will tell what is the right path for us to follow and bring peace and harmony to our otherwise chaotic world.