



SECULARISM: ISSUES AND IMPACTS

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Abstract: Secularism is becoming increasingly problematic and is giving rise to clashes of ideas and people. The aim of this article is to help construct a meaning of secularism by avoiding any confusion between secularism, which is the political, legal, and institutional regulation of religion, and secularization, which refers to the decline of the symbolic, cultural, and social role of religion. This multiseismic approach to secularism not only highlights questions that challenge personal and collective educational traditions, but also, and above all, draws on a methodology of semi-structured interviews on the theme of secularism, put into perspective by consultations with 75 students, aged 18 to 24, in their first and second years of a bachelor's degree in modern literature at the University of Parakou in northern Benin. These interviews, developed in 2022 and conducted using a guide consisting of broad categories reflecting the cognitive, social, and subjective aspects of their experiences of secularism, made it possible to gather the knowledge, understanding, and perspectives of these students on secularism, thus revealing their own visions of the concept of secularism. In general, the survey highlighted a lack of knowledge about secularism among some, and also a rigidity of the concept among others, which is not the focus of this work.

Keywords: Secularism, secularization, globalization, terrorism, separation.

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Introduction

Distinct from secularization, which may be a consequence or even a cause of it, secularism gives rise to extremely passionate positions on both sides of the debate. It is a positive thing that this debate is taking place, so that secularism does not become a secularism of combat rather than a secularism of debate. As Cornelius Castoriadis (1996: 111) observed, "only the West has created this capacity to question its own institutions and ideas in the name of reasonable discussion between human beings, which remains infinitely open and knows no ultimate dogma." At the origins of secularism, we find the separation of political and religious powers, the separation of orders that some equate with secularization. Among the Hebrews, Greeks, and Christians, the separation of orders, according to Delsol (2014), is affirmed and heralds modern secularism.

The Archontate, which shared political and military authority in Athens in the 7th century BC, separated the political from the sacred by leaving the king in his sacred and religious functions

without any political legitimacy. Its aim was to distinguish political authority from religious authority; and thus remains the ancestor of the separation of powers, which was not well known in the Middle Ages, when people spoke of the separation of swords. Royal authority was therefore not abolished. The powers of the time were left in place and simply kept at a distance from each other. Through this impressive decision, the Athenian aristocrats defined political power as something human. In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) had already made the same bitter observation as St. Augustine eight centuries earlier, that the social world goes its own way, like Kipling's cat, and no longer needs to be ruled by the sacred. For Thomas Aquinas, temporal power can become something other than evil and injustice.

In living memory, the principle of secularism has never sparked so much debate. In these times of globalization and terrorism, it was imperative not to remain on the sidelines of this debate in order to shed light on the true meaning of secularism and the monumental error that can be made in thinking that a single political regime has sufficient intellectual resources to legislate on



religious matters concerning a religious group, the Church, that is older than the independent state. What is secularism? What are its challenges and impacts? Is today's secularism in line with that of 1905, or is it a new form of secularism, which takes shape in similar or different ways depending on the country and its socio-historical and geopolitical situation? While discussing secularism in its historical roots, we will discover the specificity of this concept.

However, one conviction remains: it is not enough to enshrine secularism in a country's constitution; it must also be taught. Secularism is something that is learned and understood throughout one's life. It must remain an evolving concept. It should not be used to undermine religions or, conversely, to establish itself as a new dogma. Secularism, as we shall see, has developed and become more complex slowly, through successive constructions and reconstructions, retaining clear traces of its past at each stage.

1. Secularism in question

When we examine the meaning and origin of the word secular, we discover that it is the scholarly form of the word *lai*, used in the Middle Ages to refer to people who lived within a monastic community without having taken vows, and who performed domestic duties there. In Greek, *laos* means the people, the nation. The original meaning of secular is therefore that which is popular and national. Historically, the word secular is opposed to the Greek *klérikos* or the Latin *clericus*, which in everyday French means "good lot" implied by the Lord, the "chosen ones of the Lord," "those set apart"; the clergy, referring to religious people, monks, and priests. The clergy, the clerics, are therefore a fraction of society, while the laity are the people. The secular spirit is the sum of the aspirations of the people.

Secularism is therefore a political and ethical concept based on the separation of powers and freedom of conscience, aimed at the fulfillment of human beings as individuals and citizens. Freedom of conscience is based on two fundamental principles: freedom of religion and freedom from religion. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948 but not legally binding, defines freedom of conscience and religion in Article 18 as follows: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance." This helps to prevent fanaticism and its excesses.

1.1. Secularism in the Republic of Benin

The model of secularism to be considered is a tolerant model, one that maintains social peace and cohesion. To take stock of the laws in force in Benin, where our investigation into secularism took place, it is recognized that religious freedoms and freedoms of worship and conscience have constitutional value, with reference to Article 23 of the Constitution, paragraph 1 of which states that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, worship, opinion, and expression, subject to the public order established by law. " The practice of worship and the expression of beliefs are carried out with respect for the secular nature of the State. Having freedom of worship means that one can freely express one's faith and perform acts related to the practice of one's religious beliefs. Similarly, enjoying freedom of conscience means being able to think calmly and express one's opinions,

whatever they may be, without being threatened for doing so. The laws and regulations of the country determine the conditions for exercising this freedom, which must be in accordance with secularism.

The secular nature of the state is set out in Article 2, paragraph 1: "The Republic of Benin is one and indivisible, secular, and democratic." In its primary meaning, secularism refers to the separation of state affairs from religious affairs. However, the separation of state affairs from religious affairs does not mean that the former has no oversight of the latter. It is by virtue of this right of oversight retained by the public authorities that they are often called upon to legislate in order to reconcile the exercise of this right with other freedoms. In order to be realized, secularism and the enjoyment of freedom of worship and conscience must be accompanied by supporting and protective measures. Among these measures, those that are decisive in this case are defined in Articles 10 and 34 of the Constitution. Article 10, which states that "Everyone has the right to culture" and that "The State has a duty to safeguard and promote national values of civilization, both material and spiritual, as well as cultural traditions," is very rich in that it sets out the fundamental issues involved in implementing the right to culture in a multicultural State.

Benin is rich in its diverse population, its ethnic groups, the different origins of its men and women, and the various religions and sects found there. Given this cultural diversity, which also implies a diversity of customs, public authorities must intervene to promote the many cultures and civilizations. This necessity is taken into account by Article 98 of the Constitution, which deals with the legislative domain.

In Benin, a secular state that tolerates diversity and is also based on the separation of state and religion, secularism consists of the state's neutrality towards religion, which means that the state must neither favor nor disadvantage any religion. It must behave in an egalitarian manner, or, failing that, in a fair and equitable manner, without disproportion. Between the different religious denominations, there must be mutual respect and tolerance of the different religious denominations, both in their practices and in their words. In clear terms, secularism, according to the Beninese model, is characterized by a *laissez-faire* attitude that benefits all faiths and respects laws and regulations. This *laissez-faire* attitude is evident in both words and deeds. This means that everyone can express their faith, but it is not permitted to attack the religious expressions of others; in this way, everyone is free and protected against intolerance.

1.2. Secularism elsewhere

In summary, the Beninese model of secularism is one of mutual respect and tolerance between religions, a model of multiple tolerated expressions and visible manifestations of faith and worship in the public sphere. It contrasts in particular with the French model of secularism, which philosopher and Islamologist Tariq Ramadan described in these terms during an interview on RMC radio and BFMTV television with journalist Jean-Jacques Bourdin on December 12, 2014: Secularism is becoming a religion of opposition to all other religions. We need a secular republic in the diversity of the visible, not a secular republic of neutrality in the invisible. If secularism is understood as a kind of neutrality of the state, this neutrality is neither passive nor harmful. It is clear that the current leaders of Benin, considering that our streets our public spaces can no longer be exposed to the expression of faith

and religion, regardless of denomination, in accordance with the Constitution, have allowed themselves to be misled by a French conception of secularism that has nothing to do with our cultural realities and is blatantly out of step with the interpretation of secularism as seen by the Constitutional Court in a recent ruling against Pastor John Migan, who considered the Vodoun festival to be unconstitutional. This raises questions about the type of secularism that is in vogue in Benin. What type of secularism are we copying in Benin? French secularism, which we are trying to copy and which comes in two forms: the open model, which opposes the removal of all signs of religious affiliation, and the closed model, which is committed to strict religious neutrality in the public sphere and opposes what is described as an “open” vision? Or should we copy English secularism, in which the Queen of England is the head of the Anglican Church, which has the status of an established church? To be authentic, secularism must be based on the different experiences, understandings, and priorities of citizens. And it is the form of relationship that the state maintains with the Church that will determine the type of secularism in force in Benin.

2. Problemization

2.1. The challenges of secularism

Secularism is everyone's business and can be jeopardized by significant challenges:

- a constitutional challenge, interpreted by each person as they see fit;
- the challenge of new emerging religions with gods who walk among humans;
- the challenge of teaching values with the rise of particularism;
- the challenge of love and open-mindedness, to counter hatred of others, fear of others, isolation, and retreat into ignorance;
- the challenge of respecting beliefs without provocation, proselytism, or disturbing public order: we provoke others by calling them agents of the devil;
- the challenge of activism and fundamentalism: “my religion is the best”;
- the challenge of the right to be different.

2.2. Types of secularism

When there is collaboration between the state and religions, there are three possible types of secularism:

- Secularism based on civic faith, which pits the values of religious traditions against those of political society. Here, there is a presumption that the values held by believers are incompatible with the dominant values of society. Renouncing visible religious expression then becomes an expression of loyalty and integration into society.

- Secularism of recognition, which is based on the importance of fully recognizing the rights of each and every individual. It values the autonomy of individuals in the conduct of their lives, within the limits of respect for others. The right to equality and freedom of conscience are understood as fundamental rights to be preserved. The state is then more present to manage conflicts that may arise from the coexistence of diversities, but much less active in proposing a unifying project. It is a model based on an ideal of reciprocity, which unfortunately is not always achieved.

- Collaborative secularism, which characterizes states that maintain privileged ties with groups of thought (philosophical or religious) in certain areas.

If there is conflict between the state and religions, there are three forms of secularism:

- Separatist secularism, which establishes a significant divide between the civic and private spheres, relegating everything related to freedom of conscience and religion to the private sphere or to one's personal life. The sense of citizenship promoted by this concept cannot include religious affiliation. The symbols of the majority that remain are preserved as part of cultural heritage. Anyone who expresses their religious affiliation outside the private sphere is perceived as wanting to impose their beliefs on others.

- Anti-clerical secularism, which extends its exclusion of religion to the public sphere.

- Authoritarian secularism, which corresponds to a much more active and firm conception of the role of the state in relation to what is acceptable or unacceptable in terms of religious traditions in the public sphere. The demands associated with this form of secularism call on the state to limit the freedom of expression of certain religious groups, to act as the interpreter of religious symbols, and to subject freedom of religion to a hierarchy of rights.

The challenge we face is to discuss these different concepts with a view to reaching a consensus that could bring out or identify the aspirations that best correspond to the particular trajectory of the state and the social project we want to give ourselves. It is clear that contemporary democracy, with its dictatorial tendencies, finds it difficult to integrate and accommodate religion. For Alexis de Tocqueville, “religion has a social function and must maintain harmonious relations with the democratic state.” And in this context, the model proposed by Christ is to be followed: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's” (Matthew 22:21), in the hope that Caesar belongs to God, as Emperor Constantine understood. Religion therefore has a civic function that cannot be erased by the democratic universe. It should be noted that in Europe, where Christian religions are waning in democratic nations, Islam is gaining ground. In the United States, on the other hand, religion goes hand in hand with democracy, because Americans have understood that sacredness is the foundation of politics. When it comes to secularism, we must not engage in import-export, because its challenges may not vary, but its impacts would. Nor should secularism be frozen between a discourse of depth and a discourse of superficiality, both of which would engender despair, or even worse, provoke hilarity.

3. Argumentation

3.1. Individual issues of secularism

As mentioned above, the principles of secularism are freedom of conscience, equal treatment of believers, atheists, and agnostics, and the universal orientation of public power, namely public money for public service. Indeed, the state ensures freedom of conscience and guarantees the free exercise of religion. It does not recognize, pay, or subsidize any religion. The role of a secular state is not to meet the religious needs of believers, but to ensure that everyone, regardless of their spiritual position, has the conditions for a dignified and decent life. This is made possible by free healthcare—as a benefit for the body—free education—as a

benefit for the soul or conscience—and all public services: social housing, affordable access to energy, water, etc. It is by playing its social role that the state gives all its citizens the means to ensure their own spiritual needs. The state does not need to pay to control what is said in a place of worship: it sets out rules for living together which, in themselves and in advance, constitute protection.

The culture of secularism is a culture of freedom and autonomy; it poses an enormous problem of conscience for all the world's religions, which are perfectly free to believe or not to believe in a metaphysical entity, without destroying each other. The most diverse religions, subject only to compliance with the laws of the state in which they are practiced, are protected from persecution. Secularism is therefore not a revealed doctrine, but the result of centuries of struggle for freedom and equality. To achieve this, it must be a guarantee for all religions, none of which should be in a position of inferiority or weakness in relation to a majority or official religion. This form of positive secularism guarantees equal access for all religions to the public sphere. No religion should be the state religion, since the state is the guarantor of religious freedoms and worship, and religion is the guarantor of the state. The two bodies control each other, without one physically influencing the other. This helps them avoid three pitfalls—the pitfalls of conformism, relativism, and stifling subjectivism—and instead live with tolerance, recognition, dialogue, and openness to others and their values. Secularism should therefore in no way resemble an anti-religious crusade by political powers, which is why it is necessary to educate people about secularism.

3.2. Collective challenges of secularism

Secularism is the glue that holds society together. Stemming in particular from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, it embodies virtues that go far beyond traditional republican values. It encourages us to think differently and invites us to explore spirituality. Secularism is the foundation of an ethic of sharing and contributes greatly to respect for fundamental rights. It is important not to think of it as pluralistic, but rather as evolutionary or dynamic, in that it is always a work in progress, both at the level of states and at the micro level of individuals' daily lives, and in details that are obviously not only religious, even though they undoubtedly stem from religious positions. Secularism remains an essential principle of living together. Secularism does not divide, it brings people together in equality and freedom of conscience. We must therefore avoid misinterpreting it, particularly by forgetting that it is a universal value and therefore in no way specific to any one nation. Secularism is the glue that enables people around the world to live well and live better together.

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while respecting our differences. This is an ideal to pursue and protect, which is indeed a weapon of peace. However, we must avoid turning secularism into a religion, since religion is, by its very nature, dogmatic and can easily lead to obscurantism.

This coexistence draws on three existential dimensions that unfold through gradual enrichment and correction: the qualitative transformation of the self through a growing, liberating, and flourishing inner ethic; a peaceful, beautiful, harmonious, and peaceful social environment; and the principle of otherness as a force for harmonious connection, both humanly and spiritually. Secularism has a social dimension for living together. If freedom and equality are at the heart of the regulation of secularism, it is so that it can work to promote a pluralistic society capable of living together. Secularism does not erase identities or eliminate differences, but promotes them because it provides a space for dialogue and exchange, openness to the world and historical knowledge that does not ignore the diversity of origins, religions and cultures. It is therefore a precious asset to be preserved and protected so that it does not become mired in a promotion of religion that negates secularism.

This also involves a cultural issue. For believers, secularism can appear to be a new cultural reality that they do not understand and even instinctively reject, because it destroys all their usual points of reference. They therefore submit to secularism out of obligation rather than conviction, but only half-heartedly, because they do not know how to explain to those with whom they now want to live that they are not particularly ready to accept what they deep down consider to be a clear denial of their own values. The “native” secularist, imbued with opposing convictions, nevertheless believes that secularism is an obvious concept that is easy to implement. He is mistaken. The strategy of the non-secularist deserves serious study in order to avoid the gradual development of a continuing misunderstanding. Nothing is lost for secularism, but it would be naive to sing victory songs just yet.

4. Discussion: Positive and negative impacts

Secularism is a complex concept that has evolved over time and is multifaceted in its applications. According to Genette (1972), true secularism promotes certain essential principles, such as unity, universal tolerance, the possibility of calm dialogue, and fraternity. Unity allows all human beings to live together, accepting diversity and individual differences. It does not shatter the unity of living together, but rather consolidates it. It reconciles unity and diversity without sacrificing one for the other, and outlines an ideal of fraternity. It is therefore a decisive process at the heart of human destiny.

In addition to the unity of the political body, secularism aims to promote at least six fundamental values, according to Urbain Amoia (2012), founding rector of Charles-Louis de Montesquieu University in Abidjan:

- inner peace, which is the seat of good faith, the source of balance and the spirit of fairness, justice, and equity;
- freedom, which is the expression of the human ability to live one's humanity, in all places and circumstances, and to see in others a difference that must be respected as if they were another version of oneself;
- spiritual love, which brings friendship and humanism, making the wicked good and the good better;

- Solidarity, manifested through the expression of universal brotherhood, which promotes and facilitates community life;
- Charity, which, far from promoting begging and laziness, invites and encourages production and sharing;
- Patience, an expression of perseverance and the pursuit of values, knowledge, and understanding.

While secularism defends freedom of conscience, imposing a static conception of secularism would be to reproduce the detestable methods of religious proselytism activists. In this regard, we must learn to intelligently combine firmness and flexibility and invent a protective, corrective, and creative dynamic capable of transforming and integrating the human centers—religious, political, economic, informational—that Edgar Morin referred to in his vivid metaphor as the “crazy quadruple engine.” Depriving humans of the sacred is the very opposite of secularism, which is the affirmation of everyone's right to believe or not to believe. This requires clarity, dialogue, and determination. Secularism is trust in human beings and their ability to be the architects of their own destiny. The idea of secularism is therefore not at all hostile to faith, as long as that faith does not stray into the totalitarianism of a religion or ideology.

For some thinkers, there is something religious about secularism. The question of the spiritual status of secularism, which must be constantly invented and reinvented, based not simply on traditional historical data, which is relative in its methodological limitations, but on the evolution of Homo sapiens sapiens in all its successive stages, certainly deserves debate. Secularism is not and must not be an attack on religion. In a positive sense, secularism ensures freedom for everyone in matters of belief and non-belief, with the sole but important proviso that in their spiritual choices, everyone respects the civic duties of the republic. Religions therefore have the right to develop in civil society without fear of threat or persecution. It is in this sense that secularism is positive. Only secularism can become, metaphorically speaking, the solid cement that binds together all the components of a major state capable of maintaining its neutrality. Faith is respected, but it does not govern, and religious beliefs cannot exempt anyone from respecting the common rules governing society. It is necessary to mobilize to defend secularism, because it is constantly under threat insofar as the two pillars that support it—freedom of conscience and separation of powers—are still very often called into question, either because of ancient customs that have miraculously been preserved.

Secularism, in order not to be a falsified secularism with more than dubious overtones, must not stray into nationalism and xenophobia. It must now be a struggle, an ethic, and a spirituality necessary in Benin, where since independence in 1960, there has been a habit of neglecting real development issues in favor of mimetic distraction. Secularism must not be a vehicle for dogmatism and extremism, to which economic stagnation adds the permanent risk of social unrest. Reflection on secularism is necessary in order to promote human ecumenism. The ambiguities of secularism can be found on three levels: shared ambiguities (separation of state and religious society); controversial ambiguities, where attempts are made to explain the uses of secularism in a more or less polemical way, denying the relevance of some of them, or establishing a positive or negative correspondence between religion and secularism; and finally contested ambiguities, whether relating to the word itself or to the

multiplicity of debates it has given rise to on the identity and place of believers in Benin.

With its gray areas, misunderstandings, and conflicts, secularism must make the necessary transition from combative secularism to a pacifying secularism that protects against excesses. Everyone must be convinced of an inner secularism, which imposes itself as a principle of responsible regulation of conflicts and tensions. There is therefore an urgent need for education in secularism, which is neither an anti-religious ideology nor a substitute religion. Secularism, in other words, is openness of mind to humanity in order to thwart the inhumanity that infiltrates everywhere. This is certainly what led James Demorgon to consider the future of secularism.

Conclusion

Secularism, contrary to a slogan that has been trumpeted or suggested many times, is not unique to one country, even if that country may have played a very intense role in its development and continues to take a keen interest in it. As Victor Hugo would say, secularism is “a force that moves forward.” Like any form of spiritual commitment, it is not a “universal” concept (which would imply the idea of definitive closure) but a “universalizing” one, that is, a concept in a phase of continuous adaptation to any type of society in the making, regardless of its geographical location. The fact is that humanity as a whole has committed and continues to commit too many abject crimes, precisely in the name of a faith that we are often afraid to question because we are under the gaze of others, forbidden to dispense with any speculative reflection on what could be seriously improved. Insofar as secularism is not the enemy of any religion, it is appropriate to follow and assist its continuous adaptive evolution over time but also in space, and to admit that any place of discussion is never anything other than a means of testing the relevance of a concept capable of paving the way for the birth of a truly new Man. Secularism does not prohibit the practice of religion.

The future of secularism should not be confined to a strictly legal and political definition of secularism that not only respects the 1905 law separating religion and the state, but also commits more fully to affirming autonomy and emancipation in the service of universal values. Historical and democratic secularism serves human rights. The secularism we should strive for is a political and moral ideal that requires a commitment from every citizen, in which culture does not kill universality. Any debate on secularism must help to defuse the clash of cultures, or even the “clash of civilizations” as perceived by Huntington (1997), and enable dialogue between cultures to foster openness to love and respect for others.

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