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BRILL

SECULAR STUDIES 5 (2023) 1–7

SECULAR STUDIES
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New Insights

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Abstract

Review article on Jacques Berlinerblau's *Secularism: the Basics*.

Keywords

secularism theory – religion and state – politics and religion

Secularism[1], a term indicating a variety of meanings regarding the relation between religion(s) and politics within states—will continue to engage most societies in the contemporary world. It is not an issue that will go away but is in many respects crucial to the social order and the public sphere. Our lives are dominated more and more by technology, ICT and AI (artificial intelligence), rapidly redefining the nature and scope of humans as social beings, but religions as systems of meaning-creation will stay around. In fact, how to deal with organized religion in today's states across the globe is challenging for the development of democracy, toleration, and free, informed public debate and also for authoritarian/theocratic power structures. The crucial questions on religion's role in governance, first explicitly posed by John Locke's pathbreaking 1689 *Letter concerning Toleration* and later in the French Enlightenment—cf. Diderot's work,[2] showing personal indifference to religion but also tolerance—are as relevant as ever.

1 On Jacques Berlinerblau (2022), *Secularism: The Basics*. London—New York: Routledge, viii, 200 p. Price: $24.95.

2 See, for example, his delightful piece 'Entretien d'un philosophe avec la Maréchale de ***'

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill NV | DOI:10.1163/25892525-bja10043
 | ISSN: 2589-2517 (print) 2589-2525 (online)

A good conceptual understanding and definition of 'secularism' is important and the recent book by Jacques Berlinerblau provides them (see below). The book is one of the best guides to the thorny issue of 'secularism' as a political formula, and indeed sets out the issues of debate in an exemplary way. In three parts and 15 chapters, the author discusses concepts, and ideologies, and provides excellent historical examples and more recent trajectories and forms of secularism. He rightly emphasizes that it is a global phenomenon (p. 4) and not a 'Western invention'—even though it was theorized most intensely in the West, especially after the religious wars of the 16th–17th century. Berlinerblau contends that 'secularism' has a 'religious genealogy' (p. 4) and refers to a surprising pair of 14th century critics in the Christian tradition, Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham, who in response to papal overreach (as claiming both spiritual *and* political power) first criticized rule by religious authorities. But the author also mentions the case of the early 17th-century Lebanese Druze ruler Fakhr ad-Dīn II al-Ma'an, who pleaded explicitly—before Locke—for toleration, spoke of equality between his Muslim and Christian subjects and opposed discrimination (p. 183).

The word 'secular' itself goes back, of course, to the Christian term *saeculum*, used by 5th century church father Augustine: referring to the period of imperfect, temporal this-worldly existence of humankind, before the coming of the Messiah (p. 21), and also to the time lived in the 'City of Man', necessitating rule by non-religious powers. But in a wider sense, political governance without a defining religious basis, and separating religious authority from political rulers, was not unknown outside 'the West'.

So, what is 'secularism'? What is a good working definition that withstands easy criticism and cheap attacks? In the first chapter, Berlinerblau give this 'skinny' one: "political secularism refers to legally binding actions of the secular state that seek to regulate the relationship between itself and religious citizens, and between religious citizens themselves." (p. 5). The only quibble I would have is that he uses a term to be defined ('secular state') in defining 'secularism'. In the rest of the book, he then elaborates on this political-theory strand of the scientific debate on 'secularisms'. What this book does not do is discuss the *sociological* processes of secularism or secularization, as for instance exten-

(1774). There are good reasons to argue that the Enlightenment philosophers—pioneers in many respects—were *not* against religion either but were making the case for 'religious toleration'; cf. J.P. Dominguez (2017), 'Introduction: Religious toleration in the Age of Enlightenment', *History of European Ideas* 43(4): 273–287. John Locke was an early proponent of this position.

sively and insightfully done in the work of José Casanova and his colleagues.[3] In fact, the latter's name is not once mentioned in the book. Such societies where the (public) role of religion and people's religious adherence has greatly declined are also called 'secularist', but this sociology of secularised societies and socio-cultural patterns[4] is indeed a different line of work; I am not saying that Berlinerblau *should* have discussed it. But ultimately, there *is* some relationship, and seeing the growing number of religiously non-affiliated people (the 'Nones', p. 157) that he sees, e.g., in the USA, such wider societal developments must be considered as well. The new assertiveness of religion in the USA and some other Western countries, in Africa and in the Muslim world since several decades is often the work of militant elite groups/minorities, and marshalled for primary political reasons, rather than being the deep-seated wish of the broader population.[5] It is important to note, however, that political secularism came *before* sociological secularization.[6]

A key point underlined by the author is that 'secularism' as a *political arrangement* is *not* anti-religion; it just aims to regulate the inherently unclear or problematic relationship between religion(s) and the state, in the recognition that there is no direct link ever from religion to politics: that link is always mediated by *human* action and rule-making. In any society there is a plurality of voices and views within and outside religious communities, and the task of state authorities—by their very nature—is to deal with and manage this. As the author says, "… a secular state, in theory, pushes theology out of its governance philosophy" (p. 172). Interesting in his definition also is the last part: on regulating the relationship between "… religious citizens themselves". This aspect is usually ignored by religious anti-secularists because they pose their version of the majority faith as hegemonic. But in all (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist) societies there are sectarian differences, who ideally need a 'neutral

3 For instance, J. Casanova (2013), 'Exploring the postsecular: three meanings of 'the secular' and their possible transcendence', in: C. Calhoun, E. Mendieta and J. VanAntwerpen, eds., *Habermas and Religion*, pp. 27–48. Cambridge: Polity Press; and J. Casanova (2019), 'Global religious and secular dynamics—the modern system of classification', Washington, DC: Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs.

4 See also Ph. Zuckerman (2008), *Society without God. What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment* (New York—London: New York University Press).

5 Compare: https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/theorizing-modernities/islamiclaw-secularization-modernity/; https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-secular-life/201907/secularism-hits-the-arab-world.

6 Excepting Greek and Roman (Republican) antiquity, where actual politics was not overly determined or defined by service to the gods.

referee'.[7] As the author argues (p. 16), "… political secularism is an idea born of *religious* thinkers contemplating *religious* problems using a *religious* vocabulary to solve them".

The emphasis on definition and the now common use of the term secularism as a governance model has meanwhile acquired a strong Western political tinge. But there were other, non-theorized arrangements of the relation between state or 'worldly' powers and religious officeholders in societies *outside* the Christian or Muslim realms that also recognized a *de facto* differentiation of spheres of influence and 'division of labour'. For instance, in Somali society there was an important distinction (binary) between the religious leaders (*wadaad*) and the political/war leaders (*waranle*),[8] and in precolonial Igbo society (Nigeria) where the offices and functions of the 'king' (*Eze*) were distinct from those of the priests (*dibia afa* or *dibia mmuo*); i.e., there was a 'separation of powers'.[9] Thus, reducing the debate on secularism to a Western pedigree or problematic is wrong.

The great value that the author attaches to a precise definition of terms and organizing concepts is justified. The interest of various commentators, notably from conservative religious circles and ideologues, is often to obfuscate terms and confuse ideas and histories. For instance, they often automatically equate 'secularism' with 'atheism' and with being 'anti-religion'. This is not only incorrect, but also beside the point. This rhetorical figure is likely meant as intimidation and complicates the public debate. They thereby show they are purposefully ignoring a point made in the 1850s by British thinker G.H. Holyoke, who already argued that secularism (he invented the term in 1851) was nót anti-Christian religion.

Based on a thorough comparison of historical forms of secularisms developed by various countries, Berlinerblau offers four models and ten principles regarding the relationship between state and religion (discussed in Part 1) along which to evaluate or think about secularism—very illuminating and comprehensive.

The four models or (legal-political) frameworks, based on 20th century forms (discussed on Part 2) are: a) separationism (in the US), b) *laïcité* ('non-confessionalism', as in France), c) accommodationism (as in India, derived

7 E.g., A. An-Na'im (2011), 'Why Muslims need the secular state' (https://www.abc.net.au/religion/why-muslims-need-the-secular-state/10101010).

8 I.M. Lewis (1961 [1999]) *A Pastoral Democracy: A Study of Pastoralism and Politics Among the Northern Somali of the Horn of Africa*. London: James Currey, pp. 27–28.

9 Leo Igwe (2017), 'Whence secularism in Africa?' (https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2017/10/whence-secularism-in-africa).

from British colonial rule), and d) Soviet (and Chinese)-style atheism. His ten principles are the following: equality; the binary of two powers ('domain of God' and 'domain of government/state'); state supremacy; internal constraint (on rulers' power); freedom of conscience (no one can force another to think about God in a certain way, p. 32); order (no actions trampling the rights of others); toleration; a belief/act distinction (beliefs are free, but actions based on them can of must be regulated/constrained by the state); disestablishment/neutrality (meant to respect minority rights); and finally, the need for reason in government (not passion and not appealing to religious authority when it contradicts findings of scientific inquiry).

Berlinerblau's fascinating discussion of the various configurations of secularism also shows that it is always a complex arrangement that must be handled delicately, and certainly is not a 'one-size-fits-all' model. This is well illustrated in Chapter 10, on forms of secularism in Turkey, China, and Ethiopia. The ten principles are variously applied or realized within the four frameworks, which are usually quite contested, notably of course the Soviet atheist one. We see the latter still in practice in the case of China's current policies towards the Uyghur Muslims.

What the author ultimately argues—and I fully concur—is that there are no clear or convincing alternatives to secular state orders: few living under secularism would probably want to go (back) to a pre-20th century theocratic order or to a state with a 'state religion'. It would also mean reverting to undemocratic forms of politics, loss of freedom of speech, and decline in open public debate—a situation in which admittedly many (non-secular) countries today are stuck in. If we do not fall into state atheism (like in the former Soviet Union or in China or North Korea today), secularism is a workable and acceptable political order that urges us to 'get along' in the inevitable plurality of our religions and lifestyles (Chapters 13 and 14 are about lifestyle secularism and the issue of gender and LGBTQ rights—the 'control of bodies', always problematic for most anti-secularists). The basic idea, illustrated well in a highly interesting case study of secularist Uruguay, is simply that a state and its officials should be 'religion-neutral' when dealing with its citizens[10]—although for historical reasons this is always easier said than done.

Very interesting is the author's appraisal of two big 'intellectual' movements contesting secularism: a) the 'conservative-religious anti-secularists' (CRAS, p. 8) strongly ideological if not theocratic, and b) many left-oriented post-

10 Cf. Julie Ringelheim (2017), 'State religious neutrality as a common European standard? Reappraising the European Court of Human Rights approach', *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 6(1): 24–47.

modernists/post-Foucauldians/postcolonialists (POMOFOCO, p. 140) who, surprising to some, are also anti-secular due to their persistent and often historically and legally ill-informed anti-'Western' society attitude (criticized as capitalist, imperial, unequal, etc.). These POMOFOCO critics have many things right but typically assume that all is guided by 'power' and that efforts to devise a reasonable social order via the political process are hypocritical. Predictably, their views are marked by recurrent anti-statism (p. 145)—a problematic position that may not yield many new insights on the nature and challenges of secularism.

In the last chapter, the author outlines a research agenda on secularism and mentions the following issues: first, needed is work on secularism's 'traumatic' birth: in conditions of fear and conflict, as in 17th century Europe, or in India-Pakistan's independence war in 1947; second, on the period of accelerated development ("rapid combustion", p. 181) of political secularism since France's 1905 law on *laïcité*, reverberating in revolutionary Russia, Mexico, or post-Ottoman Turkey; and third, on the *global* and not only European history of secularism, notably in Africa in the 20th century. As a fourth, empirical theme one might perhaps add: more intensified comparative field research on peoples' opinions on and experiences with secular (state) policy; this could be done along the lines of the Pew Research surveys, but then augmented with more context study, in-depth interviews, and case studies, so as to go beyond mere survey research and getting to understand 'folk models' of secularism.

Berlinerblau also offers three 'innovations' to extend the persuasiveness and promise of secularism arrangements. The innovations are: a) substituting the binary state-religion with a 'trinary': state, religious communities and the (growing) religiously non-affiliated people: the latter can no longer be left out of the equation; b) reconsidering/redefining secularism beyond the confines of individual states as a *global* phenomenon; and c) strengthening (political) secularism as an impartial, *neutral* referee, and not as one tacitly backing one specific (historically dominant) religion. Real fairness of the state toward all religious traditions will enhance its legitimacy.

These are all attractive ideas, and Berlinerblau thereby makes reasonable and nuanced proposals that reflect the perpetual negotiated nature of secular state orders: there is no rigid solution, and it is even good that there is none, because responsiveness to change is essential. The nature of politics as the art compromise, for the largest number of people in a pluralist societal order, is nowhere better reflected than in debates and legislation on secularism.

It sometimes seems today as if secularism as a political arrangement is ending and the 'post-secular age' has started (p. 178). Both religious spokespersons and post-modern critics like to assert this. But this viewpoint largely amounts

to propaganda. No doubt, in many countries religious pressure on politics is increasing, and problematic religion-based laws subverting the secular legal order are being adopted.[11] Muslim-majority countries probably face the greatest challenges. But the complexity and pluralism of contemporary societies in the West, in Latin America, or in Africa—and basically everywhere—make it a necessity to develop religion-neutral political orders that balance the clash of religious/lifestyle communities.[12] Berlinerblau even says: "Secularism […] can't be eliminated because the problems it addresses never go away" (p. 181). Re-imposition of religion-based values will always be contested, more than the maintaining of a 'secular' political regime—which is nothing more than an order seeking to install the largest common denominator for the 'living together' of different denominations and (sub-) communities. So, secularism—developing a *modus vivendi* with religion, not prohibiting its expression or abolishing it—has a great future.

Concluding, this book is a great read; indeed, I could hardly put it aside. It is intellectually rich, gives quite convincing arguments, great examples, and is highly engaging and accessible.[13] Whatever one's position on religion, state and secularism, this book is a must, for both believers, non-believers, and doubters, and all those in-between. Helped by the author's three proposals for 'innovation' of political secularism theory (p. 185 f.), the book will foster more dialogue and mutual understanding—if people from all camps are willing to learn something new.

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11 Like in Turkey under Erdogan's AK-Party (step-by-step subverting Atatürk's secularist-republican principles) and like in the US under the current highly conservative Supreme Court (cf. its contested reversal of Roe vs. Wade in June 2022, going against a majority view among the American people that country-wide access to abortion should remain possible). See on this also: www.reuters.com/legal/government/us-supreme-court-takes-aim-separation-church-state-2022-06-28/.

12 Cp. Igwe, op. cit., note 9.

13 Some technical remarks: the book unfortunately has no index. And several key citations of other authors are not acknowledged, e.g., on pp. 142–143, p. 147, or on p. 151.