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The Confusion over Secularism

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

During Singapore's 2025 General Election, questions were raised about the relationship between religion and the secular state, but the discussion has often been confused and contradictory. If we want to discuss this, we must understand why we cannot easily distinguish the secular from the religious and also why we must.

COMMENTARY

We imagine that secularism and religion are opposites. Some even see them as inherently antagonistic. Yet we also hear of a religion-friendly secularism. What we forget, however, is their symbiotic relationship.

In their current meanings, both terms took shape in Western contexts from about the sixteenth century but solidified only in the nineteenth century. Each term also relies on the other: the secular is that which is not religious; the religious, that which is not secular. In other words, like hot and cold, the words only make sense because we understand the other term. But like the Chinese yin and yang symbols, where we see yin within the yang, and vice versa, this symbiotic tension means each contains some seed of the other. We should not, however, confuse them.

The Invention of Religion and Secularism

In modern times, sectarian divides between Catholics and Protestants influenced people's devotional allegiances. One early principle was *cuius regio, eius religio*, meaning "whose territory, whose religion". In other words, the citizens of a nation follow the ruler's religion.

But thinkers also looked beyond Europe to empires that lived with diversity. The Ottoman Empire inspired thinking about freedom of religion, and China was envisaged

as a country where politics was not beholden to religion. George Holyoake, who coined “secularism” in 1851, explicitly referenced Confucius as an exemplar.

As Europeans became aware of America and the vast expanses of Africa and Asia, they discovered they needed new vocabulary. Religion gradually changed from meaning Christian devotion to referring to whole traditions. [In Southeast Asia](#) and elsewhere, colonialists transitioned from an older semantic range of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Paganism/Heathenism, to speak – if inadequately – of many “world religions”, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

The Nation, Religion, and Secularism

The notion of the nation, or nation-state, arose in the same period. This has been an evolving concept existing alongside religion and secularism. Gradually, especially with the founding of the American states and the French Revolution, two principles solidified: freedom of religion and freedom from religion. In other words, leaders should not coerce people to follow their religion, and the principles of any religion should not be laid into laws that affect all citizens.

However, for historical reasons, religion was often bound into states that also saw themselves as, or were becoming, secular. The United States proclaims itself “one nation under God”, the United Kingdom has a monarch who is head of both church and state, Germany collects religious taxes from its citizens, Singapore has AMLA (the Administration of Muslim Law Act with the Mufti as a civil servant), and the People’s Republic of China has the National Religious Affairs Administration as part of its governmental structure, to name a few examples.

Legislating Religion

This confused separation of [religion and the secular](#) is a historical artefact. It is also a conceptual and definitional issue with multiple layers, including what counts as religion, the border between the secular and religion, and legislation on religion.

Western and Protestant norms created the term “religion” in our modern sense, creating definitional problems we are still untangling. For instance, in the US, it was [only in 1978](#) that the practices and beliefs of the indigenous peoples were accepted as “religion”. Earlier, it was often classed as “superstition”. Again, thinkers of Europe’s Enlightenment struggled with whether Jewish people could be included in their nations, given how this identity could be understood as a religion, a race, and a nation.

The distinction between religion and the secular relied upon distinct domains within a modern, elite, and Western Protestant milieu. Religion is often seen as private, internal, and personal, whereas the secular is seen as disclosed, external, and public. Hence, morality and belief are seemingly religious, and economics and politics are seemingly secular. But we do not want economics and politics devoid of morality, while religion informs people’s economic and political choices.

There has also never been, beyond ideals, an absolute separation. But we must not overstress the Western heritage. As noted, the ideas arose in a globalised discussion, including the Ottoman Empire and China. Meanwhile, principles that look like modern

secularism have previously arisen: Muslim ulama, for instance, often argued in premodern times for separating their authority from the temporal authority of caliphs, and medieval Catholic bishops sometimes defined their authority against kings.

Legal questions include what a religion is and what it is not. This affects not only what is protected under freedom of religion but also legal ramifications, such as whether an organisation has tax-exempt status in some jurisdictions, and whether religious parents can refuse lifesaving medical treatment for their child. In other words, secular governments and legal systems must be involved in religious matters. What religion is and is not has been variously defined.

Contradictions and Distinctions

Because our concepts of “religion” and “secular” have a history, they are not natural terms that describe things in our world. It is a particular social arrangement that says some things are “religious” and some are not. For instance, Confucianism is a religion in Indonesia, but it is not seen that way in Singapore or China.

However, like our example of hot and cold, each existing only because of the other, the words are not meaningless. We may disagree about what is warm or cool, but this does not change the fact that boiling water and exposure to freezing temperatures can kill us. Hot and cold, like religion and secularism, are culturally variable terms, but they are social realities, and we need them for very good reasons.

Globally, we have seen how entwining [overt religious narratives](#) with politics creates tensions and [even violence](#). Especially where nation, race, and religion become markers of political and identity difference, turmoil and exclusion follow, with killing often the result. Secularism developed, in part, because of people wishing to avoid sectarian violence and exclusion.

While some frame secularism as hostile to religion, this is not inherent. The early modern thinker Hugo Grotius was a devout Christian who nevertheless argued that in international relations, given sectarian strife, we should operate “as if there were no God”. In other words, by not making our arguments “religious”, we can relate well together without bringing God into the equation. Contemporary political theorist Jürgen Habermas has described our world as [post-secular](#), arguing that religious voices should have a say, but by appealing to public reasons, not sectarian language.

Political Discourse and Living Together

Many have asserted that religion and politics, i.e., religion and the secular, are utterly distinct or different. Others have countered that religion should have a say or is already embedded within the political system. Both stances are partly correct. While there is no *cordon sanitaire* analytically, we can pragmatically make calls based on our common humanity. Our modern terms, religion and secular are loaded with contradictions because of their history and development, but similar principles have arisen throughout history for human flourishing. Each also has a [pragmatic social referent](#).

To avoid harmful outcomes, we should uphold four principles relating to the “religious” and the “secular”. These are not exhaustive but serve as a necessary baseline for democratic and multicultural living in a diverse and open society.

- Religion should not be used as a political identity or invoked to support one candidate or party over another in domestic politics. If race and/or national identity alongside religion are invoked, it becomes especially dangerous. Such language should debar the speaker or candidate from the debate, as it risks inciting tensions and, potentially, violence.
- Religious voices may argue about our common spaces from their tradition. Still, their arguments must be directed toward the common good of all and expressed in ways others can understand, relate to, and endorse. Such post-secular language allows the inclusion of all viewpoints.
- Governments should not exclude any religious voice or tradition, except in cases where there is a threat to life or the common good. However, minority voices must not be excluded or silenced because they are unpopular, contrarian, or at odds with the majority.
- The common good and human flourishing must be protected at all times, with governmental and legal measures to ensure no single lobbying group, religious or secular, has undue influence. While it is impossible to prevent intellectual or financial capital from conferring some groups greater discursive power in the public sphere, we must act as though no “god” (whether a religious vision or monetary greed) has greater worth than the realisation of every individual human being’s potential and the thriving of our shared ecosystem. This principle can unite people across religious and secular divides.

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