

## **Iain T. Benson (Canada/France)**

### **The Confusions of “Secularism” and the “Secular”**

The secular as most people now understand it is a deeply anti-religious creation. The idea that “secular” means “non-religious” is a departure from its original meaning and challenges the idea that religion has a place in the public sphere. In this “religion free” idea “secular” is, in fact, an illusion, and our acceptance of the illusion poses a great impediment to the proper role of religion in the public sphere of all countries.

For a long time, the secular was understood as related to “time” rather than to anything “non-sacred.” Thus the Roman Catholic clergy were divided into “secular clergy” and “regular clergy” which, in both cases, were religious just that the “regular” clergy were in the cloister rather than in the world (the parish church).

But a quiet piece of cultural imperialism has radically altered that understanding of “secular”; and beyond the common understanding that “secular” means “non-religious” is the dangerous elision that this public sphere stripped of religion (but, note, not other beliefs) is somehow “neutral.”

It is an irony that religious citizens and their non-religious neighbours are divided by so much yet share the same misleading vocabulary of the “secular”. In this short article I argue that an illusory “secular” is aided by an obscuring “secularism” that is as significant in its cultural effects as it is widely ignored.

The “secular” did not always mean a “non-religious” zone dominated by the atheist and agnostic presuppositions which have come to dominate the public sphere under the guise of neutrality.

How and why have religious leaders and adherents have so readily accommodated themselves to this split between the sacred and the public, or private religion and public non-religion? The common expression “religion AND the secular” reflects this split; it virtually insulates all the important public order aspects (for example, education, medical ethics, law and government) from the appropriately public dimension of religious activity.

There is a tension here. The jurisprudence of most countries that acknowledge constitutional rights of religion, association and expression, regards these rights as having a necessarily public dimension. Religion driven purely into the private is not really religion practised freely. So when it is recognized that religious people have a

right to teach, manifest and disseminate their beliefs individually or through their associations, in the public sphere, religion is not “outside” the public sphere - it is, in some sense, within it. The “non-religious secular” contradicts this religiously inclusive understanding of the public sphere yet now religious believers use the stripped down version of “secular” seemingly oblivious to its claims to dominance and not surprisingly find their arguments for fairness frustrated by the way in which the public sphere is characterized under the terminology of a religion-free “secular.”

While religions and the State (as law and politics) have their own jurisdictions there are overlaps owing to the fact that the State is public and the public includes religious and non-religious citizens.

When the term “secular,” with its more recent implicit meaning of “non-religious” (in which the transcendent is ignored and treated increasingly as irrelevant), stands in for the more accurate term “public,” we lose touch with the sphere of shared life that includes both religious and non-religious citizens.

The time has come for the more inclusive meaning of “secular” to be reclaimed and this, most likely, by using other more accurate terms in place of the corrupted use of “secular.” Perhaps it is time to jettison “secular” as much as possible in our discussions of religion and the public square?

So what can be done in this confused situation to better describe the nature of the public sphere and the role of religious and non-religious citizens as equal partners in the common life of nations? And to persuade all citizens that this is good?

As a starting point, it needs to be recognized that all persons are believers and all have faith. Atheists, agnostics, religious of all sorts are believers. The question is not whether they are believers but, rather, what they believe in. In an age increasingly unwilling or unable to articulate ends and purposes (for disciplines or persons) it is not surprising that these beliefs are often buried in tradition and practice but have become as unknown, unseen and forgotten as the essential but buried roots of trees. So there are no “unbelievers” *per se* and the use of this imprecise language by religious people at all levels, who use “unbelievers” to identify other than their own “believers” obscures this truth.

Contemporary atheists who pride themselves on “not having any beliefs” are wrong but the believer/unbeliever dichotomy fails to challenge them. When such atheists or agnostics then claim that their kind of beliefs are all that should have public recognition (say in the teaching of subjects at public universities) it should be relatively simple to point out that it is they who wish to force their faiths and beliefs on others. But the compounded errors just set out blunt the capacity to make

arguments about what is actually going on. It is *not* a struggle between belief and unbelief, *not* between those who have “faith” and those who do not.

What we have is, in fact, a set of public struggles for recognition and fair treatment between competing belief systems. One of these belief systems (that of the atheists or agnostics) claims *not to be a belief system* and thereby seeks to avoid being subjected to any assessment of whether distribution of access or benefits on the grounds of one’s belief system is at all reasonable.

Not wearing a religious symbol is just a somewhat more vague way of showing what one believes and doesn’t. A head scarf, a yarmulke, a turban or a cross, are more specific ways of showing beliefs than the wearing of a T-shirt mentioning the long passed goddess Nike. It seems permissible to advertize that goddess (in commercial form) in the classrooms of laïcité. The gods of consumerism are invisible, it seems, even when they openly use old pagan names.

In order for religion to inform or be in discussion with the contemporary orders of law and politics, the terminology that is employed must emerge from an accurate anthropology of the human person as a believing person and that the role of the faiths chosen by citizens must emerge from under the false cloak of “neutrality” in which the presuppositions about the person, morals, community and the ends of culture are avoided in a mass rush to what amounts to metaphobia (or the fear of metaphysics).

All believers are in greater or lesser communities of social networks that share their beliefs and faith positions. So when religious people speak of “communities of faith” meaning only “religious communities” they further compound the difficulty of exclusion. Added together these misuses of “secular”, “belief”, “faith,” and “faith communities” create a powerful set of barriers to religious inclusion in the public sphere.

Religions, pluralism and multi-culturalism would not be understood as challenges to the “secular State” unless we accept that there IS a “secular State” as opposed to a State, filled with the express and often inchoate beliefs of the contemporary drift of cultures. This drift in the understanding of the State has its analogous drift within religions as well. For there are different meanings given to pluralism and to multi-culturalism and if we accept the ateleological strands of either, those that implicitly and continually affirm that “shared goods” do not exist or that there are no virtues but only “values” of our own choosing - - each as valid as another by virtue of the choice alone, then we shall speak past each other. We shall not challenge the anonymous or ambiguous secularisms of our age.

And what about secularism? It is an obscuring influence.

It is interesting that secularism is almost never defined in public discourse. Even in great works dedicated to discussing the “secular age” or in learned essays commenting upon such works, “secularism” appears in subject indexes but is discussed as “secularization” (or some variant) in the text. This absence is as startling as reading a book on African wildlife that omits any mention of lions. The lions need identifying, and in this case, the movement known as “secularism” which had a particular goal and strategy, needs to be understood for that strategy has been largely successful.

When George Jacob Holyoake first used the term “secularism” in 1851 he had a precise meaning for it and it was not, as so many subsequent sources (simply repeating Holyoake’s own claims) assert, a neutral project. It was designed to minimize the public involvement and influence of religion and to construct the public on a “material basis.” That is not a neutral project and it is not an analogous term for “secular” which, as we’ve seen is a deeply confused term in any case.

The fact that important works simply took Holyoake at his word and repeated the claim that the “secularism” movement was “neutral” when it was not, were a sign of what was to come in the continued failure to examine the content and strategy of secularism in times closer to our own. Holyoake entitled his book on *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief*.<sup>i</sup> It is a pity that this set of beliefs is so rarely examined and commented upon since the ideology of “secularism,” of the minimization of the public place of religion in law and politics, is very much alive and well amongst us but due to our failure to identify it, often unchallenged. Not knowing lions are present does not mean they will not eat you.

At the moment there is a haze of confusion in which “secular” is often misunderstood by the very religious people (and their groups) who wish public involvement. Their language of “religion AND the secular” keeps religion from its proper place of public involvement. Meanwhile a corresponding failure to understand atheism and agnosticism as belief systems in key ways analogous to religions, leaves, all too often, atheistic and agnostic believers and their communities in control of a discourse about “neutrality” that is not neutral. Similarly a failure to be aware of the strategic goals of the movement known as “secularism” and all sorts of unclear meanings for the term “secularism” (some that actually suggest it is “open” or friendly to religion and many which read it as meaning “secularization” or “neutrality”) leave the actual movement and its consequences unexamined.<sup>ii</sup>

Religion, pluralism and multi-culturalism, capable as they are of containing completely different understandings (relativistic and non-association/subsidiarity supporting or moral and association/subsidiarity defending to take one possible opposition but

there could be others) are not *per se* capable of challenging the “secular” since it all depends on what religions and ethnic groups understand the “secular” to be.

The signs are not always encouraging. With such lack of clarity about what all these central terms mean and clarity being essential to appropriate public engagement, it is time for a careful and strategic re-evaluation of the language that religions use to engage (and even discuss) the public sphere today. Such an evaluation must be informed by an understanding of the historic movement and antecedents of “secularism” itself not understood as some neutral movement akin to secularization (if that can be so understood) but as a political movement designed to aggressively exclude and minimize religions by all possible means. By “movement” I do not mean one that consciously links attacks on religion from issue to issue since, today, many of these attacks function issue by issue in the chambers of law and legislatures.

So it is time to expose the competing visions of pluralism that underpin these different usages.

What will challenge the State dominated by secularism are not religion, pluralism and multi-culturalism *per se*. We must first define what we mean by pluralism.

English philosopher John Gray identifies two competing versions of “liberalism”. Convergence liberalism poses a threat to genuine liberalism because rather than endorsing living together with disagreement (which Gray calls “*modus vivendi*”) there is a risk of moving towards “one size fits all” or convergence.<sup>iii</sup> Gray says that the future of genuine liberalism will involve turning its face away from the assumption that tolerance will eventually bring us all to agreement (using law as the means of effecting convergence).

There is, to be sure, a necessary core of commitments needed to sustain a civil community such as the rule of law, social justice and so on. But we are well past that in most modern societies.

Beyond that level of convergence, we need to claim the social space implicit in Gray’s idea of “*modus vivendi*.” We need to replace convergence pluralism with accommodation pluralism. The development of the principles of *modus vivendi* (including the principles of the accommodation of differing beliefs and the respect for associational rights), rather than convergence, will most likely be what differentiates freedom from illiberal control in the future. Modern states, in both their political and legal aspects need to learn the implications of such genuine diversity in relation to matters foundational to beliefs and for that reason sometimes not shared across ethnic and religious lines.

The misuse, however of terms such as “secularism” as equivalent to “secularization” (an effect of a movement away from public religious influence) or the corresponding misuse of the term “pluralism” is deeply problematic. They obscure a prevailing strategy of religious exclusion and minimization. New and clearer terminologies are needed.

We might start by speaking of “public” when we are tempted to use “secular.” We need to stop speaking of “non-believers” when we should address those who believe other things than we do. And we might begin to use the expression “accommodation pluralism” in describing the obligations of the State.

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### **Short Biography:**

Iain T. Benson is a writer, lecturer, academic and lawyer who lives in France and works internationally. He has been named by the Government of Canada and the Aga Khan Development Network to the Founding Board of the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa, Canada. His work on the nature of the “secular” and “secularism” has been cited with approval by the Supreme Court of Canada and the Constitutional Court of South Africa.

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<sup>i</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief* (Chicago:Open Court Publishing Co., 1896). Holyoake’s conception of “secularism” is discussed in Iain T. Benson “Considering Secularism” in Douglas Farrow ed. *Recognizing Religion in a Secular Society* (Montreal: McGill Queens, 2004) 83 – 98

<sup>ii</sup> This is clear, for example, in a recently published series of important articles commenting upon Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2007). In Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen and Craig Calhoun, eds. *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) throughout the articles and subject index when one is led to entries on “secularism” all too often the text does not refer to secularism at all but to secularization and where secularism is mentioned it is far from clear what is being discussed since secularism is never defined. This is not simply a subject index error but reflects the terminological inexactitude of some of the articles. With respect, Charles Taylor’s larger work exhibits a similar failure to address the political secularism that acts as an aggressively exclusionary set of strategies against religious practices. Taylor makes no reference at all to Holyoake, the man who coined the term “secularism” and set out its program. The practical details of political secularism matter a great deal. Though “secularism” itself is, on occasion in the essay volume, discussed alongside *laïcité* (French) and *laiklik* (Turkish) the implications of a political secularism are not analyzed alongside other uses of the term. Generally it seems as if the terms secularity, secularization and secularism are used interchangeably. When “secularism” itself is deeply ambiguous, adding terms such as “open” to it, as in “open secularism” (as occurred in the Taylor/Bouchard Commission Report in Quebec), just adds to the lack of clarity of what is meant.

<sup>iii</sup> Iain T. Benson, “*The Case for Religious Inclusivism and the Judicial Recognition of Associational Rights: A Response to Lenta*”, Vol. 1 (2008) *Constitutional Court Review* 297- 312, at 298 – 299 citing John Gray, *The Two Faces of Liberalism* (2000), London: New Press, 105