Secularism: threat or opportunity?

Myriam François-Cerrah

The author was brought up as a French/Irish Catholic but has converted to Islam

Edward Said, the Arab academic, used to say: "I'm Christian, but I'm culturally Muslim". Inversely, I would say: "I'm Muslim, but I'm culturally Christian". Christian festivities and holidays are built into my life, whether I choose to incorporate them or not. I recently returned from Paris with a traditional cake we eat in France for the epiphany, called *La Galette des rois* – I explained to my children its religious significance for Christians, which although not an event marked in the Muslim calendar, I'm happy to incorporate into our hybrid home culture, where I always emphasise the importance of gleaning the wisdom of other Divine traditions.

I mention the cake story because I'm always reminded when I return to the fatherland (my mother being Irish) that France, despite all its protestations over secularism, is also a deeply traditional country in many ways, where Christianity, although arguably marginalised from the political sphere, continues to hold tremendous importance in national culture. It dictates the holidays, the pâtisseries we eat and when; but it is also the unspoken language of birth, marriage and death – an unconscious backdrop for many, but a backdrop all the same. And I often consider how much poorer French culture would be without a Christmas '*buche*' or the cathedral of Nôtre Dame or the philosophy of St Augustine.

Reflecting on the topic of secularism I can't help but start by considering the good intentions which underpinned the secularist trend in France: the hope of ending ecclesiastical privileges and affirming universal principles including the freedom of conscience and equal rights expressed through the Declaration of Human Rights. The initial objective was to make the church a source of public morals and not the basis for politics, to guarantee that religious practices should be permitted, but with no preference given to any outlook. It was to ensure, as Rajeev Bhargava[1] describes it, that the plurality of society is met by a type of state neutrality he defines as "principled distance". Of course, today this aspiration seems far removed from the arguments about crosses or headscarves in schools or the right for women who wear face veils to move around freely.

My own view that a very specific socio-historical juncture, namely the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason dating from the 17th century, has led too many of us often to dismiss religion wholesale, without examining the rich heritage which religionS (plural) offer us. Could we actually be overlooking centuries of wisdom in so doing? Quite understandably, the excesses of the church and the abuses by institutionalised religious authorities, together with the conflict between science and religion, gave rise to a movement, the Enlightenment, which associated religion and religious people with hypocrisy: that is, a deficiency in reason and discrimination.

Many of the critiques which emerged during this period were valid and contributed to purging religion – but specifically *institutionalised* religion – of some of its worst excesses. But my own examination of religious philosophy has led me to conclude that we mistakenly threw out the baby with the bathwater. Or to quote Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, the counterview to the suggestion that the Enlightenment,

or the Age of Reason, was a move from darkness into light is the view that it was "an unqualified move into error, a massive forgetting of salutary and necessary truths about the human condition." Today, largely as a consequence of this massive reassessment of religion, its place within modern secular societies is socially contested and politically divisive.

Fears of religious folk

For people of faith the concern is that religion may become merely tolerated; it may no longer be a moral compass and a social glue, but a quirky eccentricity, derided at best, and often denounced as a form of intolerance and closed-mindedness. The fears of religious folk also vary to some extent as a consequence of their place within broader society. Church of England folk may feel rather differently than Hindus about secularism and the opportunities, or restrictions, secularism is deemed to afford. And of course, across the world, secularism takes many different forms. In the Middle East for example, secularism is associated with brutal dictatorships and religion with people power.

I recently debated the issue of secularism with a Christian colleague from Ekklesia[2] for the BBC. My friend, a committed Christian himself, argued that secularism has not gone far enough in the UK: he gave as examples the presence of bishops in the House of Lords, the fact that the monarch promises to uphold Christianity and the selectiveness permitted in enrolment in religious schools. In his words: "Jesus reserved his harshest words for the rich and powerful and for religious hypocrites. In contrast, the monarchy and House of Lords represent privilege and inequality."

My main concern with doing away entirely with Christian symbolism is that those symbols contribute to fostering a sense of national identity and culture. Nations need common values and perhaps more than that, common symbols of the sacred. Like the academic Tariq Modood[3] I believe it is "quite possible in a country like Britain to treat the claims of all religions in accordance with multicultural equality without having to abolish the established status of the Church of England, given that it has come to be a very 'weak' form of establishment and that the church has come to play a positive ecumenical and multi-faith role."

Prince Charles's suggestion that he seems himself as 'defender of Faith' rather than defender of 'the' Faith is one such example of this. Free democratic societies require a high level of commitment and participation which can only be achieved with a strong sense of collective identity. It seems to me that Christianity should very much play a part in that collective identity, both in terms of its historical significance but also in terms of the contribution of Christians to modern Britain, alongside that of other faith and non-faith communities. All modern societies must, and will, undergo a redefinition of their historical identity.

Christian symbolism

But also, my concern with marginalising Christian symbolism stems from the fact that this inadvertently lends legitimacy to the view that religion ought to have no presence or voice in the public sphere. This is problematic to me on a number of fronts, not least in terms of the loss of invaluable wisdom offered by diverse religious traditions, but also the potential impotency subsequently imposed on religious organisations who time and time again are shown to be an invaluable element of our social tapestry: they

support the most deprived, offering an inclusive space for the elderly, the disabled and those often marginalised by the mainstream.

A recent survey from Manchester University found a direct correlation between higher visits to religious places and lower crime figures, especially in relation to shoplifting, drug use and music piracy. The findings suggest this is because religion not only teaches people about 'moral and behavioural norms', but also because when individuals spend time with like-minded people it is less probable that they will get mixed up with the 'wrong crowd'.

The largest organiser of food banks in the UK, the Trussell Trust, is a Christian charity which has doubled the number of people it feeds over the past year. Similar initiatives are run by other faith groups, including Muslim organisations like Rumi's Cave which runs a soup kitchen for the homeless every Thursday. It remains deeply reassuring that, where the state fails, religion steps in to fill the gaps.

Interestingly, studies also suggest that people of faith are generally more content. According to data from Gallup-Healthways (which has surveyed 1,000 people a day for several years): *"Americans who attend a church, synagogue, or mosque frequently report experiencing more positive emotions and fewer negative ones in general than do those who attend less often or not at all."* Of course, this is not to say people of no faith don't also do good, through volunteering and donating, but religion, as opposed to faith, is all about the social, the societal. It is about the meta-narrative which drives how we perceive the world and our place within it; a totally secular public sphere, with all the goodwill of the Alain Bottons of the world, lacks an overarching and coherent narrative to encourage citizens to do good. Good becomes aleatory, or dependent on chance – the product of individualised and individualistic decisions about one's own relationship to the world. We must not rely on an overly optimistic (in my view) hope that people will do the right thing.

How can secularism's priorities possibly be compared with the depth of religious traditions which teach that our worth as human beings is inherently tied to the good we spread in the world? We rely on centuries of teachings about charity and selflessness, and about concern for the meek and the disenfranchised.

And so the push for greater secularisation must be approached cautiously. In some ways the attempt to create a neutral public sphere – one which might prove blind to religion or its absence – could help to foster greater tolerance. Such neutrality might ensure that the diversity of the nation which is modern Britain is reflected at all levels and that the privileges of a historically-rooted religious group do not supersede the right of all citizens, whatever their faith or lack thereof, to be represented in and influence the public sphere.

Charles Taylor argues that rather than focusing on the separation of church and state, or on the notion of removing religion from the public sphere à la French republican model, we should focus on the objectives of secularism – which he lists in line with the French revolutionary trinity as ''liberty, equality and fraternity' as well as the harmony of relations – and derive the concrete arrangements from there. In other words, what are the objectives of secularism? To defend plurality. Therefore how can the state best achieve this?

Like many people of faith I have profound reservations about the radical secularism

being pushed from some quarters in an attempt to depict religious views as antiquated and outmoded at best, and archaic and discriminatory at worst. Such currents pose a significant challenge to religious communities because of the intransigent assumptions concerning the assumed universality and immutability of liberal norms.

A few months ago the Grand Mufti of Atheism[4] himself waged his own mini-war against *The Times* for referring to "Muslim babies" in an article, contending that babies are not Muslim or Christian or otherwise. Tim Stanley wrote a rather brilliant response to him in *The Daily Telegraph* pointing out that this ignores how religion and culture work; Muslim or Christian or Hindu parents are adherents of a narrative which includes their loved ones within it. Of course, Muslim parents have Muslim babies because that is how Muslim parents perceive things.

The underlying issue, of course, is a much deeper one, the idea pushed by radical secularists that the state, rather than creating a neutral public sphere in which all religious views can coexist, must impose a pseudo-neutrality which banishes any trace of religion from our midst. This is a worry, not least because, as fully-fledged, taxpaying citizens, religious folk have as much right as anyone to see their views respected by the state.

In academia, modernisation theory, although widely discredited, continues to influence how many of us perceive the world. It holds that all societies are evolving according to a linear model, with Western industrialised societies selected as the epitome of human development and so-called primitive, i.e. preindustrial, cultures viewed as backward and doomed. We assume that technological development is concurrent with human, social and ethical development.

In line with modernisation theory there is a widespread assumption that progress means becoming more secular. Here in Britain half of those brought up in a religion say they have abandoned it. We often assume that our economic success and relative wealth are tied to this secularisation, noting as many do how much of the third world remains deeply religious – giving evidence, some claim, of their economic and moral backwardness. And yet, the somewhat large exception to the secularisation and development rule is the United States which was, and continues to be, very religious and also very modern. In the US, surveys suggest, 92 per cent of adults believe in the existence of God or some kind of universal spirit, while 70 per cent are 'absolutely' certain of God's existence.

In their book[5] *God Is Back: How the Global Rise of Faith Is Changing the World*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, both of *The Economist* magazine, trace how in the 19th century the most influential thinkers predicted that modernity and secularisation would go hand in hand. Throughout most of the 20th century, it seemed this was the case. But by the late 1960s and the 1970s religion began to reappear in the public square and in the lives of individual people, confounding modernisation theorists who could not understand how we could be DE-evolving!

Europe is different

In this sense, not only does the post-Enlightenment period in which religion disappeared from the European public and private spheres appear to represent a small blip in an otherwise consistent presence of religion throughout human history, but that blip is a distinctly European phenomenon which is at odds with the manifestation of

religion globally.

While just half of Britons say that faith is important to their life (only 44 per cent identify themselves as Christian) according to a poll conducted by Ipsos Mori, almost all people in Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and India say faith is important to theirs. If, as some theorists speculate, religion is not only *not* disappearing, but is actually reshaping and re-emerging in new shapes and forms (less institutional, more individualistic and personalised), the question of how we define secularism and how it relates to the religious dimension becomes ever more pressing. I urge you not to allow the term secularism to be hijacked and reframed by those who wish to use it as a means of consigning faith and its adherents to the margins of the public sphere.

Secularism contains both an opportunity to express better the plurality of religious traditions and a contradictory threat that religion could be increasingly evicted from public life. It is my hope that people of faith will recognise the value of a moderate, accomodationist secularism and help to redress the imbalance in the perception of secularism and its goals.

This talk was given to the Ealing Circle on January 16th, 2014

1   Rajeev Barghara is a noted Indian political academic who was professor of Political Theory at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi
2   Ekklesia describes itself as a Christian political think tank
3   Tariq Modood is a British Pakistani Professor of Sociology, Politics and Public Policy at the University of Bristol
4   A tongue-in-cheek reference to Richard Dawkins
5   Published by Penguin Books (paperback) at £9.99