

# Secularism: A Religion of the 21st Century

Written by Shafi Md Mostofa

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/04/25/secularism-a-religion-of-the-21st-century/>

SHAFI MD MOSTOFA, APR 25 2023

The contentious relationship between religion and secularism has been a debated topic for over a century. Undoubtedly, secularism emerged as a response to religion or religious establishments dismissing metaphysical matters as irrelevant to human life on Earth. Scholars have predominantly studied secularism as a political ideology rather than a religion. Consequently, it has been posited that as societies advance, the influence of religion would decline. However, contrary to expectations, religions have also adapted to address the challenges posed by secularism or 'secular religion'.

To substantiate my argument, I draw on the etymological meaning of religion, which is "to bind people." From this perspective, secularism can also be seen as a religion, as it has the power to bind people together. If we consider Durkheim's definition of religion as "beliefs and practices related to sacred things," we can see that secularism also encompasses beliefs, practices, and sacred concepts. For instance, a fundamental belief of secularism is that "man is inherently good," as suggested by Rousseau, which reinforces Locke's idea of laissez-faire or individual freedom. This belief is central to the theory of individualism, which holds that man has the ability to determine their own future well-being. As such, secularism regards humanity as sacred, with the flourishing and fulfilment of human desires being of utmost importance. This perspective allows for concepts such as same-sex marriage to be recognized as a fulfilment of human pleasure, in contrast to religious perspectives that prioritize marriage and procreation. Secularism also encompasses practices such as non-religious national (for example, Anzac Day in Australia and New Zealand) and cultural events (for example, New Year Celebrations across the globe), which can be seen as secular rituals that bind communities together. It is noteworthy that certain Asian religions, like Buddhism and Jainism, do not subscribe to the belief in a god, yet they are classified as religions and have millions of adherents.

Thus, it appears that secularism, often seen as a replacement for religion, is itself a belief system with its own set of beliefs and practices. The question of whether 'secular religion' can accommodate people of all faiths arises, but it is important to recognize that like other religions, it cannot accommodate everyone. Secularism emphasizes individual freedom, which may conflict with some religious values. For example, while same-sex marriage may be allowed in a secular belief system, it may not be allowed in some religious belief systems. In cases such as the *hijab* ban on Muslim women in France and India, secularists may be seen as discriminatory, as they are not respecting religious practices and the right to belief and religious identity. This indicates that 'secular religion' is failing to accommodate Islam as a belief system. If this is not the case, then 'secular religion' is demanding Islam to change its dress code policy, thereby forcing it to comply with 'secular religion'. Thus, as Asad notes, secularism not only involves the separation of politics and religion but also actively interferes with and reshapes religion. In both situations, 'secular religion' conflicts with religion, indicating a failure to accommodate religions.

Secularism can also be used by governments to justify their suppressive actions towards certain groups. For example, in India, the ruling party's affiliation with a cultural-religious ideology (*Hindutva*) undermines the country's secularism, and policies such as the *hijab* ban may target a particular religion rather than preserving secularism. Similarly, in France, the ban on the Islamic headscarf is primarily done to reinforce national unity and identity, rather than for the purpose of secularism itself. Therefore, secularism can obscure a government's true intentions and be used as a justification for attacking a specific religious group.

Like other religions, 'secular religion' also believes in 'Self-Greatness'. Generally, as a state principal, secularism

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aims to establish equality between religious and non-religious entities in the public sphere, rather than excluding religion from it. However, the term itself can be paradoxical as it prioritizes non-religious involvement in decision-making and create a disparity in society. This can lead to a burden falling on religious citizens who are excluded from public debates, and secularists obstruct religious arguments from influencing public debates. In essence, secularism should create a level playing field for all political worldviews, including religion, rather than privileging one over the other. But, in reality, 'secular religion' does not allow religious voices, thus keeping its 'Greatness' high.

Religions at times are also modifying themselves to cope with challenges of 'secular religion'. As secularism values reason, scientific evidence, and a separation of church and state, religions may modify their beliefs, practices, or traditions to remain relevant and address contemporary issues. For example, some religions may adopt more inclusive and progressive stances on social issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights, and environmentalism, to appeal to younger generations and maintain their relevance in a changing world. For example, Pope Francis said that gay individuals should not be excluded from society but instead should be integrated. "If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?", he said.

Thus, it can be argued that secularism, like other religions, aims to replace traditional religions with putting stress on rational thinking and individual freedom. Scholars such as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber predicted that religion would decline with societal progress, but their understanding of secularism as merely a political philosophy is flawed. They failed to recognize secularism as a religion in itself. Thus, their vision of a completely secular society has not been realized, and traditional religions have not disappeared. However, these religions have had to adapt to the challenges posed by the emergence of secularism. It is important to note that just as the emergence of a new religion did not eradicate previous religions, the rise of secularism will not necessarily diminish traditional religions, but it has to be realized that 'secular religion' would be a dominant religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## About the author:

**Shafi Md Mostofa** (PhD) is a theologian and security studies scholar with broad interests in political Islam, authoritarianism, modern South Asian history and politics, and international relations and the clash of civilizations. He is an Associate Professor of World Religions and Culture at Dhaka University's Faculty of Arts and an Adjunct Lecturer at the University of New England, Australia. He has published with Routledge, Springer, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, SAGE, Brill, Wiley and Blackwell; and in *Politics and Religion*, *Politics and Policy*, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *Diaspora Studies*, and *Asian and African Studies*. He is the author of "Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Pyramid Root Cause Model" (Cham, Springer) and "Dynamics of Violent Extremism in South Asia: Nexus between State Fragility and Extremism" (Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan). He is also a guest editor of the Journal of World Affairs, SAGE.