Does Secularism Eliminate Extremism?

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Does Secularism Eliminate Extremism? A Clash of Ideology

Abstract

Secularism is a growing trend in Europe in an effort to curb the rise in extremism. Even though it is an attractive policy in the Western hemisphere, the term has developed a new modern understanding since it was coined in the nineteenth century. As extremism ravages the West, secular policies are said to dampen the rise and contain extremist sentiments. However, this has not been the case in Europe, where extremism continues to launch terror groups into action and cause growing xenophobic sentiments in the European region. Secularist ideology has been unable to contain extremism, and has in some instances taken the role of extremism itself. The paper outlines the difference between secularism and extremism and whether the former has affected the latter in any way.

What is Secularism?

Secularism is a very famed ideology that has become a contemporary ideal for many individuals and nations. However, it is rather common for the word to be misinterpreted by those who commonly use it. Secularism is generally understood as an anti-religious edict; it is seen as a philosophy that opposes religious dogma and gives birth to a world devoid of religious values. Secularism is often defined "as the quality of having no concern with religion or spiritual matters"; however, another definition holds that it is "a system which seeks to interpret and order life or principles taken solely from this world" (Jahanbegloo, 2011, p. 13). Thus, the concept of secularism is not to rid the world of religion, but instead to separate the state from religious policy and allow it to govern with principles taken "from this world". The word *secularism* is derived from the Latin word 'saeculum andsaecularis' which in essence means a world or particular world age. It helps individuals and state ideology diverge from the ancient method of rule by God's word. On an individual level, it guides one to understand life through truth and experience rather than religious explanations. Max Weber defines secularism as "the wake of scientific and technical achievement, [where] religious values diminish" (Kaplan).

Secularism has taken over Western society more evidently than in the East, where theocratic rule is still alive. Even though the West does consider itself a secular entity, there is not a rise in atheism against predominant Christian values. In a 2001 census conducted in the UK, 72% of the population claimed to be Christian, whereas only 15.5% classified themselves as those without any religious belief. Atheist made up for only 5% of the population. The figures for a similar census in the USA showed parallel results (Smith, 2008). This gives rise to the question of what exactly secularism does achieve, if not a non-spiritual society. The answer lies in the analysis of the changing role of religion in a secular society. For secular society, religion is cut off from politics and confined to the homes and private lives of individuals. It does not altogether remove religion from society, but curbs its manifestations in state policies and rule. In reference to Christianity, secularism is "the latest expression of the Christian religion" (Smith, 2008).

In the mid-nineteenth century, secularism was first used as a term by British writer George Holyoake. His concept of secularism evolved from a battle against English blasphemy laws. According to his works on secularism and free thought, he proposed that secularism was "a form of opinion which concerns itself only with questions, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life" (Holyoake, 1871). He outlined the concept of free thought in

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secularism, which was different from 'atheism', 'infidelism' and various other brands that cropped up around the word. He claimed that under free thought, one could arrive at conclusions that could either coincide with those of the Bible or rival them. Secularism thus grew as an ideology where much of Europe and the West withdrew from religious rule and the Christian imposition of values and thought. Even though secularism is often a Western phenomenon, it has taken root in India and Turkey as countries belonging to the Orient. India opted for secularist policies to eliminate the threat of religious fundamentalism including separatist movements and religious violence. The main question addressed in this paper is, does secularism really prevent the rise of religious extremism?

Understanding 'Extremism'

To determine whether secularism does indeed prevent extremism, one must first understand what extremism is and how it originates within society. *Extremism* is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "advocacy of extreme measures" whereas fanaticism is defined as "obsessively devoted to a belief, activity etc." (Oxford Dictionary). Thus, extremism did not originate from a strictly religious drive but rather a human dysfunction that in recent times is linked to extreme measures in the name of faith.

Extremism in the light of religion has always been around. From the Crusades, Jewish zealots and Islamic jihadists, extremism has taken root in every religion and is used by a few to exploit personal causes through violent means. Kjell Bondevik, when speaking on religious extremism, stated that, "All religions can be misused by extremists who are seeking to find arguments for persecution or a holy war. History has shown it again and again. We have seen it in Christianity, in the form of the Medieval Crusades, and the persecution of non-Christians and heretics right up to our own times" (International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism and Security, 2005). However, even religious extremism does not always imply a violent approach to the outside world.

Religious extremism can be broken down into three dimensions (Liebman, 1983, p. 76). First, it deals with the expansion of religious laws, which form the basis of any religion. Taking the case of Islam, religious law or the Shariah is to be followed by all Muslims; however, it is not followed strictly and to the letter. Thus, religious terrorism in an Islamic struggle could be to enforce and expand the rule of Shariah law to all Muslim societies. An extremist encourages people to revert back to the Islamic law, for everything outside of it is considered sin. Extremism in accordance with the spread of religious law can explain the various sects of terrorist groups or programs that are operational. Each group or individual has their own understanding of law they wish to enforce. This allows for the rise of several differing extremist ideologies in law itself.

The second dimension deals with the isolation from a society that rejects extremist norms; most extremist groups are formed in seclusion from society at large. Since present-day society is so multicultural, it is more difficult to govern under a single religious ideology. Hence, religious extremists work amongst like-minded people to expand their program and conduct operations. In seclusion, extremist groups do not have to seek legitimacy for their existence. Also, seclusion tends to reinforce their hatred and hostility towards the society they wish to purge of sin. Extremists tend to become sects in the long run, as they isolate themselves and indoctrinate themselves, forming a distinct and specific culture. In modern-day terminology, they can also be referred to as cults. Christianity offers an insight into social isolation in the basis of monasteries in orthodox Christian sects. Monks, for example, build monasteries in isolated areas and are cut off from the world and society around them. Some monks, called hermits, live completely alone; however, most monasteries house many monks and are governed by their own rules and regulations.

The third and last dimension deals with cultural rejection. Cultural rejection refers to the denunciation of cultures that are not indigenous to the religion. Strict extremist sects usually follow this path, as it restricts them from the media and various other modern-day items. The greatest example of cultural rejection is seen in the Amish culture where technology, media and any modern advancements are shunned as irreligious and unfaithful to their religious teachings and culture. In order for extremist groups to retain their original culture, they cut off channels of cultural exchanges. Meeting new people in academic institutions is an example of this; education is devised within the group to avoid a flow of differing cultural views. Similarly, media, the internet and various other global communication channels are avoided which allows the society to live within the confines of their own culture while openly rejecting and usually condemning those other their own.

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However, extremism has acquired a more diabolical and sinister face in the twenty-first century. It is perceived as a violent struggle of an ideology against the moderate masses. The link between religious extremism and terrorism is one that is commonly referred to. Many religious theological groups sanction violence in the name of God to attain their aims for a proliferation of their own religious doctrine. This violence is further pursued due to the rewards of the afterlife, where a martyr gains the ultimate reward (Iannaccone & Berman, 2006, p. 109).

Secularist Policies in Countries: A Case of Europe Vs. Islamophobia

Since a country cannot be completely purged of religion due to multicultural societies, a more secularist country policy focuses on the ban of religious symbols and practices that are not in accordance with the general majority of people, as norms and values in a country are set according to leadership and the majority of the population. When those norms and values are challenged by a religion, the government tries to subdue that religion into following society's norms under the banner of secularism. In the past few years, the rise of Islamophobia in the Western countries has caused a change in country policy that included the banning of certain religious symbols in Islam. Islamophobia evolved as an explanation to Muslim terrorism and notorious Muslim groups involved in large scale terror activities; the attacks of 9/11 are seen as the pinnacle of Muslim terror acts.

In July 2011, a Norwegian massacre claimed 77 lives including those of many children as an outcry against Muslim immigrants in the country and growing xenophobia (Bangstad, 2011). In Western countries such as France and Switzerland, there is a sizeable Muslim population. Muslims, though still a minority, have been integrated in various aspects of social life. Since Islam is commonly referred to as the fastest growing religion, many Westerners fear the rise of Islam in their own society as an inevitable future unless Muslims are deported or their religion is contained. Many Muslims living in these countries are born in the region though their parents or perhaps grand-parents were migrants, so deporting them is not possible under stricter human rights laws; the immediate solution is containment. There are many countries that have acted on growing Islamophobia, containing Islam by banning its symbols.

France

France has seen a growing trend in Islamophobia that is both alarming and worrisome. In news reports, it has been stated that "in 2011 the number of anti-Muslim attacks was up 34% from the previous year … but what is happening in 2012 is alarming. Between January and the end of October there were 175 reported Islamophobic acts, a 42% increase compared with the same period in 2011" (France24, 2012). However, France also faces extremism that has launched the society into a moral panic, and in return has French society fearing a Muslim attack by these extremists. France does have a base for Muslim extremists, most of whom are found in prisons. According to French Interior Minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, French prisons are a recruiting ground for many Islamic fundamentalists (*The Economist*, 2008). Since France is fiercely secular, the governmental tolerance towards religious extremism is very low; and what is worse is that civilian tolerance towards Muslims is then not only motivated by fear, but also by nationalism.

In 2012, the French Interior Ministry deported five Muslims, one of which one was a radical militarist involved in Algerian wars, and another an extremist Imam who preached against the West and the Jews (*Global Post*, 2012). Philippe Schmidt, president of the International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism stated that, "the problem is these people are reacting to extremist Muslims, who unfortunately are the Muslims we hear about most. They're at the forefront and get the most publicity. Naturally, if this particular image of Islam prevails, most French people will say it's not compatible with French values" (*The Local*, 2013). In April 2011, the French levied the veil ban. This forbids the niqab, which is used by Muslim women to cover the entire face, leaving only the eyes in view. Though it sparked protests by the entire Muslim community, the ban was popular amongst the French civilians. (Erlanger, 2012). Since France is highly secular, it does not conduct religious based surveys, so it is highly impossible to state whether the secularist ban has led to any changes in extremist tendencies.

Switzerland

In Switzerland, another secular and rather neutral country (and one that has not joined the United Nations) also fears

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a growth in Muslim extremism. Though there have not been violent attacks in Switzerland, the concept of enforcing harsher secularist policies lies in 'pre-emptive attacks' against extremists. According to Swiss authorities, Switzerland is being used as a base for Islamic jihadists to coordinate extremism all over Europe via the internet. The extremists in Switzerland encourage and support acts of terror and violence and instigate others to commit them. Swiss authorities have observed ten trips to jihadist camps by Islamists residing in Switzerland (Kern, 2012).

In the wave of Islamophobia spreading across Europe, Switzerland banned the construction of minarets in an effort to reinstate the word of secularism in the country. Exit polls verified that 60% of the population supported the minaret ban even though Switzerland has a 5% Muslim minority. In a national referendum, Swiss voters put forth the ban proposal. A voter and organizer of the referendum stated that, "Forced marriages and other things like cemeteries separating the pure and impure — we don't have that in Switzerland, and we do not want to introduce it" (Gedalyahu, 2009). The ban campaign was led by a poster with minarets shaped as missiles, clearly showcasing the militant side of Islam.

Rest of Europe

Many other European nations have encouraged a secularist crackdown against Muslim extremism due to a rise in Muslim militancy in the European region. This militancy is no longer a terror attack by a large terrorist group, but instead the formation of smaller groups that wish to see Europe implementing Shariah law and converging to a more Muslim empire.

Shariah4Holland and Shariah4Belgium are too groups that are campaigning for the implementation of Shariah law in Western states. According to Abu Qasim, the spokesman for Sharia4Holland, "Better times will come as promised. The Muslims will [confront] this cancer of man-made laws called democracy and eradicate it. Destroy it root and branch, as far as Islam allows us, or Islam orders us to. Shariah is by far the only solution, it is the only rival left to topple democracy."

The fear of Islamic radicalism is not just an imagined threat culminating from the 9/11 attacks. Europe has seen its fair share of Islamic extremist attacks as well. The 2004 Madrid bombings, which killed 192 people, were carried out by a Moroccan group closely associated with Al-Qaeda. The 2005 London bombings that killed 52 people were carried out by British-born terrorists; however, three out of the four terrorists had recently travelled to Pakistan, which homes many Jihadist training camps. The December 2010 car explosion in Stockholm, which killed none but injured two people, was carried out by a Swede of Iraqi descent. A March 2011 firing at a bus by a Kosovo resident in Frankfurt injured many and killed two people. The murder of film director Van Gogh was motivated by extremists who were against his work on violence against Muslim women by Muslim men in Europe (Congressional Research Service, 2011).

Does Secularism Help?

Secularist policies in Europe have not made much progress against Muslim terrorism within the state, largely because not all terrorism is motivated by religious fundamentalism. Muslim attacks within countries are fueled by varying causes.

Economic deprivation of Muslims is a very important cause of resentment against capitalism. Many Muslims are immigrants in European nations, and although many from the next generation have successfully educated themselves, Muslims as a whole still find themselves relatively unable to compete within the Western market. This lack of economic advantage leaves many immigrant families at the brink of poverty. Harsh measures against the Muslim population cause further aggravation and charge them to react to policies seen as racist and defaming.

According to a Stanford report, Karen Armstrong stated that war against terrorism has further alienated Muslims and aggravated small terror groups to recruit more people since there has been more dissent amongst Muslims in the world. In a comment against the labeling of Muslim extremism, she states that, "When the IRA was bombing Britain; we didn't call them 'Christian terrorists'. We knew [the terrorists] were common criminals. Nor were extremist

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Orthodox Serbs who slaughtered Muslims in 1995 referred to as "Christian terrorists. We recognized them as people who had lost their moral bearings" (Palmer, 2004).

She also stated that growing secularism has pushed many Muslims to fear annihilation. The fight to survive has led to the fight against secularism, and this fight is often seen by states as terrorism. Even though the struggle is against defamation of the Muslim identity, it is regarded as terrorism or extremism, which changes the dynamics of the opposition. She said, "Some, by no means all, will launch counteroffensives to fight the encroaching secular society" and also, "secularism has been implemented so quickly that it often has been experienced as–and has been–an assault" (Palmer, 2004).

According to Steven Crowder from Fox News, religious extremism is not the only sort of extremism in the world. He states that a more worrisome form of extremism has been labeled as secular extremism. Secular extremism embodies the same terrorist values but is not seen in the same way, as its battle is 'good' against that of the 'evil' religious terrorists in the world. He cites the example of James Lee, who held innocent people hostage in the Discovery Center building to further his cause of saving the environment (Crowder, 2010).

In an article published in *The Nation* in 2001, Chalmers Johnson explains the CIA term 'blowback'. He says that most extremism in the world stems from US trained juntas who have not been kept in check. 'Blowback' as a term was used by the CIA in 1953 to explain the chain of unintended consequences that result from direct CIA actions. Chalmers states that the September 11th attacks, heralded as extremism in the world, were not entirely religious in nature. He says, "The suicidal assassins of September 11, 2001, did not attack America, as our political leaders and the news media like to maintain; they attacked American foreign policy" (Johnson, 2001). Thus, religious extremism targeted by secularism is not a battle of ideologies but rather a retaliation to aggressive foreign policy of a unilateral power, the United States of America. Due to rising trends of aggression against Muslim states and communities, for example in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and various other regions, there is higher rate of extremism in this religion. Even so, other religions also sanction violence within their religious boundaries such as in the Old Testament, Jeremiah 48:10, "A curse on him who keeps his sword from bloodshed!" It can also be seen in the saying of the Pope Leo XII, "The death sentence is a necessary and efficacious means for the Church to attain its end when rebels act against it" (Crabtree, 2009). A similar religious doctrine can be found in both Hinduism and Buddhism.

Conclusion

Secularism as an ideology can contain religion and allow the bifurcation of the state and the religious institution. However, it cannot battle religious extremism. Religious extremism follows a different ideology that is a mix of the CIA blowback and a fear of annihilation by radicals who retaliate with violence. Extremism has varying forms and cannot only be characteristic of religion. Religious extremism has been exaggerated and presented more alarmingly, even though terrorism is responsible for fewer deaths than other causes of death such as gun violence in the US or road accidents. In a report titled, 'Deaths from international terrorism compared with road crash deaths in OECD countries (2005)', statistics proved that the number of deaths from car crashes was approximately 390 times greater than average annual deaths resulting from terrorism in OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries (Wilson & Thomson, 2005). Extremist secularism is also seen as a threat, which undermines the effect of secularism against extremism. Extremism can occur in any field or institution provided the environment is conducive to producing extremist tendencies. In light of the popular idiom and saying by Mark Twain, "Too much of anything is bad".

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