



INTRODUCTION TO SECULARISM

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Foreword

Secularism is a topic that is engaging a world increasingly riven with religious conflict.

Can secularism offer a solution to the rivalries we see not only between religions but between the different denominations of those religions? Can it protect society from the worst excesses of religious power-seeking?

These questions will need to be answered if the world is not to be engulfed once more, as so often in history, with conflict and turmoil prompted by religious differences and religious ambitions.

This short introduction sets out the basic arguments for secularism. It can only scratch the surface because this is a highly complex area, open to much interpretation. It seeks only to prompt debate, not to provide the ultimate answer.

But if we are to live in peace despite our differences in belief and culture, we must find a framework that will allow us all to be free while protecting us from increasing intolerance and extremism. Secularism might just be that framework.

Terry Sanderson

Introduction

This introduction to secularism was written for those who know little or nothing about the subject but would like to learn more. Secularism is a political philosophy that addresses the relationship between religion and the state: put briefly, it advocates the separation of religion from the state.

One of the strongest selling points of secularism is that, by separating religion from the state, it protects every person's freedom to choose what to believe or what not believe, within the law. This protects religious people from other religious people, as well as from people whose beliefs are not religious. And vice-versa. Secularism advocates that the state should not be involved in matters of religion and religion should not be involved in matters of the state.

Some media headlines illustrates why this matters:

- “Fury as David Cameron claims Jesus founded his Big Society crusade.”¹ (*Daily Mirror*, 22.05.2011)
- “Religious groups have too much freedom to discriminate: Now that faith groups are to become public service providers, the exemptions they have in British equality law must be narrowed.”² (*The Guardian*, 31.05.2011)
- “Baldry: Archbishop must stop ‘shouting’ at ministers: The Archbishop of Canterbury should stop ‘shouting’ at the government like a noisy protester in Parliament Square if he wants Church of England bishops to keep their seats in the House of Lords.”³ (*The Telegraph*, 16.06.2011)
- “How religion has clashed with secular society: Ten examples of how religion has come into conflict with the rules of secular society.”⁴ (*The Telegraph*, 01.07.2011)

¹ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/top-stories/2011/05/22/fury-as-david-cameron-claims-jesus-founded-his-big-society-crusade-115875-23146993/>

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/may/31/religious-groups-public-service-providers-equality-law>

³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/8580087/Baldry-Archbishop-must-stop-shouting-at-ministers.html>

⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8609858/How-religion-has-clashed-with-secular-society.html>

- [Christian] “Persecution claims are undermined by religious privileges.”⁵ (*Law Society Gazette*, 06.05.2011)
- “Anti-abortion group drafted in as sexual health adviser to government: Coalition appoints pro-abstinence charity Life to key sexual health forum, while omitting British Pregnancy Advisory Service.”⁶ (*The Guardian*, 24.05.2011)
- “‘Intolerant’ Christians are more militant than Muslims, says equality chief.”⁷ (*Daily Mail*, 20.06.2011)
- “Tower Hamlets Taliban: Death threats to women who don’t wear veils. Gays attacked in the streets. And all in a borough at the heart of Britain’s capital.”⁸ (*Daily Mail*, 13.05.2011)
- “Bill limiting sharia law is motivated by ‘concern for Muslim women’: Lady Cox, the proposer, says aim is to prevent discrimination against Muslim women and ‘jurisdiction creep’ in Islamic tribunals.”⁹ (*The Guardian*, 08.06.2011)
- “South Shields churchman denies hate campaign.”¹⁰ (*Chronicle Live*, 20.05.2011)
- “Militant Sikhism gradually emerges.”¹¹ (*Cranmer Website*, 29.05.2011)
- “Preventing violent extremism: A failed policy?”¹² (*BBC News*, 07.06.2011)

It’s not all difficult news; here is one positive headline that could have been written by a secularist:

⁵ <http://www.lawgazette.co.uk/opinion/letters/persecution-claims-are-undermined-religious-privileges>

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/may/24/abortion-sexual-health-coalition>

⁷ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2005536/Trevor-Phillips-explosive-claim-Christians-fundamental-Muslims.html>

⁸ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1386558/Tower-Hamlets-Taliban-Death-threats-women-gays-attacked-streets.html>

⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/law/2011/jun/08/sharia-bill-lords-muslim-women>

¹⁰ <http://www.chroniclive.co.uk/north-east-news/evening-chronicle-news/2011/05/20/south-shields-churchman-denies-hate-campaign-72703-28731876/>

¹¹ <http://archbishop-cranmer.blogspot.com/2011/05/militant-sikhism-gradually-emerges.html>

¹² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13686586>

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- “Britons need to see themselves as a single nation, says Security Minister.”¹³ (*The Telegraph*, 31.03.2011)

¹³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/8420083/Britons-need-to-see-themselves-as-a-single-nation-says-Security-Minister.html>

What is secularism?

A shorthand definition of secularism is that it advocates the separation of Church and state though beyond this there is no universally agreed meaning of the term.¹⁴ Different people mean different things by it and have done since George Holyoake introduced the term in 1846, defining it as “best indicating that province of human duty which belongs to this life.”¹⁵ Given the increasing influence in public life of religions other than the established Churches (of England and Scotland),¹⁶ a more accurate definition of secularism today might be that it promotes the separation of *religion* and the state.

Secularism in the UK is underwritten by specific values familiar to western liberal societies:¹⁷ democracy and the value of democratic institutions; equality before the law; a focus on the rights of individuals rather than groups or beliefs; political freedoms such as freedom of speech, thought, publication and assembly; a tolerance of differences of outlook and behaviours, including religious tolerance.

Drawing these strands together, secularism in the UK can be characterised as a political philosophy that addresses the relationship between religions and the state. It holds that broadly:

- there should be a separation of religion and the state;
- everyone should be free to practise their faith, change it or not have one, according to their conscience;¹⁸ and
- any person's religious beliefs or lack of them should not in itself put them at an advantage or a disadvantage.

¹⁴ The Chambers dictionary more precisely defines it as “the belief that the state, morals, education etc should be independent of religion.”

¹⁵ Quote from Daniel Bye “Against Religious Privilege: Secularism and the National Secular Society”, a talk to the Cumbria Humanists, undated, p.3.

¹⁶ Prof. Norman Bonney describes the structure of the established church in the UK as follows: “In the United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) there are officially two state recognised Christian denominations – the Church of England (with bishops) and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland (without bishops). The Queen is Head of State of the UK and Supreme Governor of the Church of England. There is no established church in Northern Ireland or Wales but the 26 unelected Bishops of the Church of England who sit in the House of Lords influence laws that affect the whole of the UK.”

¹⁷ See AC Grayling, *Ideas that Matter: A Personal Guide for the 21st Century*, Phoenix, 2010, p.473.

¹⁸ This wording is in fact close to Article 9(1) of the European Convention on Human Rights.

This approach works both ways; it protects both religious and non-religious persons equally. Most people who call themselves secularists, whether religious or non-religious, would probably agree with this definition so far.

From this general approach many benefits follow:

- Ensuring there is **no official state-recognised church** prevents an established religious majority from persecuting religious minorities or those with other beliefs. Disestablishing the Church of England is the (long-term) means to this end;
- Promoting a **more effective democracy** means removing the 26 unelected Anglican Bishops from the House of Lords. Only in Iran do theocrats have a similar uncontested right to sit in Parliament;
- Promoting **equality before the law** means people should be free from discrimination in employment, education, and in the delivery and receipt of publicly funded services even where these are provided by religious organisations. At present churches are legally exempt from laws that other organisations have to follow;¹⁹
- Promoting **one law for all** means ending the current systems of parallel religious laws, be they the Anglican church's ecclesiastical laws,²⁰ or the more recent practice of introducing sharia law 'by the back-door' through Muslim Arbitration Tribunals and unregulated Sharia Councils;²¹
- Defending political freedoms means protecting **freedom of expression within the law**. All groups, religious or otherwise, should be open to scrutiny and criticism. Modern day versions of 'blasphemy', the spurious protestations that Christians are being persecuted at work 'just for being Christian' or other claims that religious beliefs or practices should be especially protected or be 'above the law' are not based on credible arguments;

¹⁹ The current exemptions for religious organisations in the Equality Bill 2010, which allow them to discriminate, was deliberately sought and won by Anglican Bishops in the House of Lords.

²⁰ See "Religious Privilege: A Report into the Legal Privileges of Religions in England and Wales" by James Sandbach and Robert Ashby, BHA, 1998.

²¹ See "Sharia Law in Britain: A Threat to One Law for All and Equal Rights", One Law for All, 2010.

- If everyone is free to practice what they believe, or don't believe, there needs to be both **freedom of religion and freedom from religion**. This is a balance: many secularists would argue that religion is a matter of private conscience, for the home and for places of worship, as is the case in France;
- In **protecting freedom of belief** secularists would support the right of any person to change their faith or abandon it, according to their conscience;
- **Promoting fairness for everyone** is another way of saying secularism resists religious privilege; one group's privileges are everyone else's disadvantages. All groups, non-religious and religious, should have equitable access to government influence and resources be they political, legislative or financial. Ending special considerations and hand-outs (like tax exemptions) to the select few, on the basis of this religious argument or that belief system, promotes a more inclusive, more tolerant and fairer society;
- **Promoting social cohesion** and a sense of common identity comes from educating children together, not labeling them as Protestant children, Catholic children, Muslim children, Jewish children, Hindu children, Sikh children, atheist children, agnostic children and so on. We don't for example label children as Conservative children, new-Labour children, Liberal-Democrat children and so on and for good reason; they are too young to make an informed decision on such matters.²² So why the emphasis on religious identity? The consequences of sectarianism are still with us in Ireland²³ and Scotland,²⁴ should we need to remind ourselves why this point is so important. Secularists advocate a fair and inclusive education system and this would be much sooner achieved were the state to end its support for faith schools.²⁵

²² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/may/31/faith-schools-religious-divisions>

²³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-14138356>

²⁴ <http://www.heraldsotland.com/sport/spl/celtic/sectarian-problem-is-worse-in-scotland-than-northern-ireland-now-says-shiels-1.1101165>

²⁵ A New Statesman / ICD poll reports: At present, roughly 7,000 of the 20,000 state schools in England are religious, a figure that David Cameron has pledged to increase. The vast majority (6,944) are Christian; there are also 38 Jewish, 11 Muslim and three Sikh schools. The public argument over faith schools has yet to be won: in the poll 41% thought faith schools should be abolished; 59% think not. See: <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-staggers/2011/05/education-poll-schools-fees>

These last nine bullet points are best taken in the spirit of trying to set out a ‘working definition’ of secularism, a starting point for discussion. While some secularists broadly agree with them, others will not.

All secularists would agree there should be a separation of religion and the state. There is, however, a debate in practice about the degree to which the state and religions ought to be independent of each other in the UK. Put simply, one approach is that secularism means state *neutrality* in matters of religion; the other is that the state should be *uninvolved* or *disinterested* in its dealings with religion.

At the risk of misrepresenting both positions, one might typify the ‘state as neutral’ approach as championing freedom *of* religion, a model of secularism developed in the United States of America. One might typify the ‘state as uninvolved’ approach as championing freedom *from* religion, a model of secularism developed in France. We will review both models briefly in a following section looking at secularism in practice in other countries.

Secularism and secularisation

There is a difference between secularism and secularisation, as in “the secularisation of society”. Confusing these two terms may be one reason why some people conflate atheism with secularism.

Whereas “secularism” can be summarised as a political philosophy advocating the separation of religion and state, “secularisation” is, in a sense, a turning away of society generally from organised religion. More precisely it has been taken to mean “the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose their social significance”.²⁶

As Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, illustrates “although the US has a secular constitution, it is far from a secularised country. On the other hand, although most of Europe (including Britain) is not secular in a formal sense, it is thoroughly secularised socially.”²⁷ Professor AC Grayling suggests a useful terminology here we shall adopt, which is to distinguish between *constitutional secularism* (countries which have secular

²⁶ Bryan Wilson – see <http://www.westarinstitute.org/Polebridge/Excerpts/secularization.html>

²⁷ Terry Sanderson, correspondence. 24.02.2011.

states like the USA, France, Turkey etc) and *social secularism*²⁸ (the degree to which a society has turned away (or not) from organised religions).

A religious secularist then might promote constitutional secularism, but not social secularism. A non-religious secularist might support both.

Secularism and religion in public life

There are a few popular misrepresentations or misunderstandings of secularism. A common charge is that secularism seeks to exclude all religions from having a say in public debates or a place in public life. Not so: as one Scottish Minister wrote in April 2011: “Secularists are those who believe that no religion should have a privileged place in society, and that while Church leaders have a democratic right to say what they want, there should be no fanfares when they speak. I’m on the secularists’ side on this one.”²⁹

In a democracy religious people and their representatives have as much right as everyone else to participate in public life. It is interesting to note that in the last General Election (2010) the Christian Party exercised this right and stood for election. Across the UK they polled 18,623 votes out of over 29 million people who voted; or 0.06% of the vote.³⁰

How much of a say should any religion have in a secular society? The answer, whatever it might be, is that it should be determined on the same basis as everyone else. That is the notion of a ‘level playing field’ where religious interests, as the philosopher Anthony Grayling has put it, are recast in the same mould as any other interest group so their influence is proportionate to their representational ‘footprint’.³¹ This would still result in religions being represented in public life, but on a fairer basis than exists at present.

A common defence of religious privilege in intervening in laws and public life, made by various religious groups and their leaders, is that they represent core values or common beliefs held by the majority, especially on moral issues. What evidence is there of this? The Ipsos MORI survey on Views on

²⁸ AC Grayling, *Ideas that Matter: A Personal Guide for the 21st Century*, Phoenix, 2010, p.474.

²⁹ <http://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/Article.aspx/2239420?UserKey&UserKey=>

³⁰ Figures from talk given by the Bristol Secular Society 31.03.2011.

³¹ From a debate at Wellington College 29.11.2009. “Atheism is the new fundamentalism.”

Globalisation and Faith,³² published July 2011 asked: *Does religion provide the common values and ethical foundations that diverse societies need to thrive in the 21st century?* Only 29% of people in Great Britain agreed; 71% did not. More evidence is presented in the following chapter that similarly refutes this assumed right by the churches to privileged representation in public life.³³

Another charge is that secularists dismiss religious arguments out of hand; surely if religious representatives have an equal right to participate in public debate, religious views must be given equal weight? That rather depends; consider the following example from the House of Lords. As Baroness Warnock explained to Laurie Taylor:

There was a perfect example in one House of Lords debate when Lord Lloyd of Berwick...suggested, in the aftermath of the Director of Public Prosecutions' guidelines about [right-to-die campaigner] Debbie Purdy, that one very important step forward would be to change the law of homicide so that it became possible for a jury to say to a judge that there were mitigating circumstances in some cases of murder. Because at the moment if it's murder then it's life. And Lord Lloyd wanted to be able to distinguish between gain-induced murder and a mercy killing. Every single person who spoke in favour of this was a lawyer and they all agreed that this would be an enormous improvement on the law. And then up jumped the Bishop of Winchester and said, 'Ah, but this would give the wrong message. This would show that we didn't, after all, care about life, which is sacred.' That was the collapse of all argument. That was it. That was the end of it. It was terrible.³⁴

Secularists hold that the terms of public debate should be strictly secular, whatever their motivation. This means everyone can be involved in public debate on the same terms of evidence and argument, whatever religion or belief they might hold.

³² <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/News/ipsos-global-advisor-views-on-globalisation-and-faith.pdf>

³³ See the section "The changing role of religion and belief in society."

³⁴ Laurie Taylor – *No nonsense: Laurie Taylor interviews Mary Warnock*. See <http://newhumanist.org.uk/2378/no-nonsense-laurie-taylor-interviews-mary-warnock>

Another prevalent misrepresentation of the secularist position is that it results in Christians being persecuted for their beliefs.³⁵ These arguments take a number of forms and include a number of high profile court cases such as *Islington London Borough Council v Ladele* [2009], *McFarlane v Relate Avon Limited* [2010] and *Derby City Council v Eunice Johns and Owen Johns* [2011]. In all three cases the tension was “between an individual’s Christian beliefs and discrimination law as enacted by Parliament.”³⁶

A common denominator in these three cases was, incidentally perhaps, that the actions of the individuals concerned did or would have the effect of discriminating against lesbian and gay people – McFarlane for refusing to counsel gay couples, the Registrar Ladele for refusing to conduct civil partnerships, and the Johns whose views on homosexuality, according to the local authority concerned, raised some questions about their suitability as foster carers. In plain language, the argument put was that discrimination law which applied to everyone else ought not to apply to these individuals because to do so would offend their religious beliefs.

These challenges have been emphatically rejected by the courts, which drew the distinction “between the law’s protection of the right to hold and express a belief and the law’s protection of that belief’s substance or content.”³⁷ It is worth quoting Lord Justice Laws³⁸ judgement on this matter more fully:

The promulgation of law for the protection of a position held purely on religious grounds cannot therefore be justified; it is irrational, as preferring the subjective over the objective, but it is also divisive, capricious and arbitrary. We do not live in a society where all the people share uniform religious beliefs. The precepts of any one religion, any belief system, cannot, by force of their religious origins, sound any louder in the general law than the precepts of any other. If they did, those out in the cold

³⁵ See for example “How religion has clashed with secular society: Ten examples of how religion has come into conflict with the rules of secular society.”⁴ (The Telegraph, 01.07.2011)

³⁶ Quoted from Lord Justice Laws in Approved Judgement from Lord Justice Munby & Mr Justice Beatson, *Eunice Johns & Owen Johns v Derby City Council*, 28.02.2011, para.45

³⁷ Quoted from Lord Justice Laws in Approved Judgement from Lord Justice Munby & Mr Justice Beatson, *Eunice Johns & Owen Johns v Derby City Council*, 28.02.2011, para.55

³⁸ Lord Justice Laws is apparently a devout Christian and churchwarden; hardly the type who would persecute fellow Christians. See <http://www.lawgazette.co.uk/opinion/letters/persecution-claims-are-undermined-religious-privileges>

*would be less than citizens and our constitution would be on the way to a theocracy, which is of necessity autocratic.*³⁹

What secularism is not

Secularism is not atheism: Atheism is the belief that there is no God or gods.⁴⁰ Secularists only need subscribe to the view that religion should be separate from the state. You can be a secularist and hold religious beliefs or you can be a secularist and be an atheist. It really is that simple. Many campaigners for secularism are well known atheists, which may account in part for this conflation of atheism and secularism.

Secularism is not humanism: Humanism is an ethical philosophy that addresses how to live “the good life” without religion. You can be a humanist, an atheist and a secularist at the same time if you choose, but they are not the same things.

³⁹ Quoted from Lord Justice Laws in Approved Judgement from Lord Justice Munby & Mr Justice Beatson, *Eunice Johns & Owen Johns v Derby City Council*, 28.02.2011, para. 55.

⁴⁰ See *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*, Julian Baggini, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.3.

Is secularism relevant to the UK?

There are three general trends in the UK that clearly point to the pressing need for secularism, counter-trends notwithstanding. These are:

- the UK has become a highly diverse society and now comprises many different groups, interests and communities
- the importance and role of religion in society has changed significantly and is continuing to change; and
- religious conflicts and tension between groups are growing in frequency and severity.

Increasing diversity

The case for secularism is particularly strong where societies are diverse and where there is no monolithic creed or culture to which all individuals freely subscribe. As Baroness Warnock has observed for the UK “important though the part played by Christianity has been, no one doubts that the Christian religion has now lost its dominant and taken-for-granted position in the lives of the majority of citizens.”⁴¹

The UK today is a highly diverse society, not only in terms of the fixed characteristics of its citizens, such as people’s race, their sex or sexuality, but also in terms of their philosophical and lifestyle choices, be they political, religious, social or cultural. Evidence of this can easily be found from any number of Census returns, government surveys or commissioned polls.⁴²

⁴¹ Baroness Mary Warnock, *Dishonest to God: On Keeping Religion Out of Politics*, Continuum, 2010, p.1

⁴² Despite the fact that UK society is more diverse than it has been, evidence seems to suggest that we are becoming more segregated, along religious lines at least. The Ipsos MORI survey on Views on Globalisation and Faith published July 2011 asked the question “What proportion of your friends or acquaintances are of a different faith or religion from you?” For the UK the answers were: none or almost none: 35%; less than a half: 30%; about a half: 19%; more than a half: 11%; all or almost all: 6%. It is premature to conclude that religious people are retreating into enclaves of friends and associates of the same beliefs as themselves and we need robust and differentiated time-series survey data on this issue before we can come to any view on this point. But if this is happening, it would have serious implications for social cohesion and integration.

Given such diversity it is particularly relevant that individuals make their own choices about what is important in their lives⁴³ and for some this will be what they choose to believe. Any choice, at best, should be freely made, unfettered by coercion or any pressure of compulsion that lessens this choice, and informed by knowledge of the evidence, arguments and alternative views. This position requires religious toleration from all, including toleration of those who are not religious, the absence of coercive social institutions such as an established church (however benign some might argue that to be) and freedom of thought and speech.⁴⁴

Even in a society less diverse than ours this would remain a strong argument for secularism. It is one that holds value for all whether religious or not.

The changing role of religion and belief in society

In our evolving society we need to find some way to live together that we can all agree on. Why do secularists think this is particularly important when it comes to religious belief and non-belief?

First, some evidence: while exact numbers vary, statistics of the key religious trends in the UK show without doubt that we are becoming more varied in matters of belief and non-belief. This is in part evidence of the secularisation of society, or as AC Grayling terms it 'social secularism'. One source of evidence, the respected British Social Attitudes survey, looked at changes over a 25 year period between 1983 and 2008.⁴⁵ In summary it showed:

- **Religious belief is in decline overall:** 43% said they had no religion (up from 31% in 1983);
- **The decline is greatest among Christians:** When asked which, if any, religion they belonged to, 50% said they were Christian (in 1983,

⁴³ No one is required to agree with Immanuel Kant on this point of moral philosophy. I accept Mary Warnock's view that the principle that "every human being should be treated as a free and rational agent, able to make responsible choices, and in charge of their own lives" is "at the heart of morality itself". See Mary Warnock, *Dishonest to God: On Keeping Religion Out of Politics* pp.46–49.

⁴⁴ This argument, called the 'argument from autonomy', is taken from the Humanist Philosophers' Group booklet "The case for secularism: a neutral state in an open society" pp.10–12, to whom I am indebted on this point and to which you might wish to refer should you want to explore this point further. I hope I have not misrepresented their views. (The case for secularism: a neutral state in an open society. 2007, published by the British Humanist Association.)

⁴⁵ Figures published by the Centre for National Research in 2010 based on an analysis of the 4486 interviews.

that was 66%). The percentage of belief in ‘Other religions’ increased from 3% to 7% over the same period;

- **The proportion of atheists and agnostics is increasing:** When asked whether they believed in God 37% of respondents regarded themselves as atheists (“definitely don’t believe” – 18%) or agnostic (“said they didn’t know whether there was a God and there was no way to find out” – 19%). This is an increase of 12% (from 25%) since a 1998 British Social Attitudes survey⁴⁶ put these figures at 10% and 15% respectively.

Regardless of the overall numbers of believers and non-believers, the British Social Attitudes survey revealed some other interesting facts:

- **Only a small minority of religious people are especially devout:** When asked to assess their own religiosity, 7% said they were “very or extremely” religious; 30% said they were somewhat religious; 22% said they were neither religious nor non-religious whereas 26% said they were “very or extremely non-religious”.⁴⁷
- **Many religious people disagree on important issues with the opinions of their church leaders:** On matters of right and wrong, only six percent thought it was important to faithfully follow their religious leaders and teachings on one’s religion. There are very clear differences for example on key issues such as assisted dying, abortion, contraception, human rights, stem cell research and the use of condoms in the fight against AIDS.
- **Most people think religion and politics should not mix:** When asked about religious leaders trying to influence how people vote in an election, 75% said that they shouldn’t, while 67% think religious leaders should stay out of Government decision-making.

There is then a large, growing and informed section of the population that simply do not ‘do religion’ – nearly 40%. Of the 60% that are religious – to whatever degree – these are split across many different religions and even within religions there is a wide range of views on both spiritual and worldly matters. Put alongside this what we know: that while there are profound

⁴⁶ Figures reported in the National Secular Society e-bulletin *Newsline* – 15.01.2010.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

differences of beliefs between some of the religions what many have in common is the desire to proselytise, which unfortunately often translates into religious organisations trying to impose their values and behaviours on everyone else.

So we come back to the question: in our democracy, given our differences, how do we find some way to live together that we can all agree on? Clearly, the key point is that the solution needs to be one that is fair to everyone. A fair arrangement, it is argued, is where “no one system of belief dominates or has a privileged position in the institutions and practices of society”.⁴⁸

This again is a strong argument for secularism and holds value for everyone, whether religious or not.

Increase in religious conflict and tension

The more religiously divided a society is, the greater is the need for secularism. This follows because the more differences there are between people, the greater the risk that one group might try to dominate and impose its values and behaviours on others, however well intentioned or not, however directly or indirectly, however openly or subtly.

Is this relevant to the UK? Consider the following headlines, all recent, all concerning the UK:

- “New Scottish police unit to tackle sectarianism.”⁴⁹ (*BBC News*, 11.07.2011)
- “Muslim gang launched horrific attack on religious studies teacher they did not want teaching girls.”⁵⁰ (*Daily Mail*, 24.05.2011)
- “Radicalism fear over children’s faith education.”⁵¹ (*This is Devon* website, 06.04.2011)

⁴⁸ This is called ‘the argument from fairness’. Please see “The case for secularism: a neutral state in an open society.” 2007, published by the British Humanist Association, pp.12-13.

⁴⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-14105881>

⁵⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1390082/Muslim-gang-launched-horrific-attack-religious-studies-teacher-did-want-teaching-girls.html>

⁵¹ <http://www.thisisdevon.co.uk/Radicalism-fear-children-s-faith-education/story-11724488-detail/story.html>

- "Private Christian school seeking to become state-funded."⁵² (*Yorkshire Post*, 01.02.2011)
- "Secular education is the way to keep Jews Jewish."⁵³ (*Jewish Chronicle*, 07.07.2011)
- "Photographer shot in second night of Belfast rioting: Police say about 700 people have been involved in a second night of sectarian violence near a Catholic enclave in east Belfast."⁵⁴ (*BBC News*, 22.06.2011)
- "Extremist Islamic Forum of Europe sponsors a man who "calls Jews 'germs' and 'monkeys'."⁵⁵ (*The Telegraph*, 15.06.2011)
- "Muslim councillor receives death threats over blasphemy case."⁵⁶ (*The Telegraph*, 02.02.2011)
- "Aid budget used to pay for Pope's visit."⁵⁷ (*New Scotsman*, 03.02.2011)
- "Ban homophobic clerics from mosques, gay rights campaigners urge: Activists call upon London mosque leaders to stop allowing their premises to be used to 'promote gay-hate campaigns'."⁵⁸ (*The Guardian*, 09.06.2011)
- "Faith-based welfare could bring discrimination against marginalised groups, say Unitarians."⁵⁹ (*Newsline*, 03.06.2011)
- "Council 'to pull plug' on religious festival funding."⁶⁰ (*Harrow Observer*)

It is easy to lose oneself in worrying headlines so it is important to balance this and note that our society generally works well and we should not overplay its problems. But there are problems and they appear to be more frequent and are increasingly serious and sometimes violent.

⁵² http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/around-yorkshire/local-stories/private_christian_school_seeking_to_become_state_funded_1_3054208

⁵³ <http://www.thejc.com/comment-and-debate/comment/51273/secular-education-way-keep-jews-jewish>

⁵⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-13869210>

⁵⁵ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/andrewgilligan/100092424/extremist-ife-sponsors-a-man-who-calls-jews-germs-and-monkeys/>

⁵⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/8298715/Muslim-councillor-receives-death-threats-over-blasphemy-case.html>

⁵⁷ <http://news.scotsman.com/news/Aid-budget-used-to-pay.6709720.jp>

⁵⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/09/gay-rights-london-mosques>

⁵⁹ *Newsline*, National Secular Society, 03.06.2011

⁶⁰ <http://www.harrowobserver.co.uk/west-london-news/local-harrow-news/2011/07/07/council-to-pull-plug-on-religious-festival-funding-116451-29014269/>

Robust evidence to support this last point is difficult to come by though there is proxy evidence from one of the findings of the Ipsos MORI survey on Views on Globalisation and Faith.⁶¹ In a section of the survey entitled “Religion: force for good or not?” it asked “*How real do you feel the threat is of a violent conflict breaking out between ethnic or minority groups in your country happening in the next twelve months?*” 43% of UK respondents thought this threat was real. 43% is a high figure, particularly if you think that ethnic and minority groups in the UK can be synonymous with religious affiliations.

The point is often made that religions across the world have been the architects of centuries of strife and bloodshed. It is also commonly observed that the more intensely religious the believer, the more readily they are prepared to die for and kill for their faith. The London bombings of 2005 are a clear reminder of this fact. Unless we can all learn to live together despite our differences the consequences could be just too dreadful for any person or group to accept.

Secularism provides such a means to learn to live together: it offers a pragmatic solution to religious conflict by ensuring first that the state is not a party to such differences: a secular state would not advocate any one religion or take any sides. Second, a secular state would protect every person’s right to be free to choose what to believe or what not believe, within the law. This approach does not guarantee an end to religious conflict, but it does provide a mechanism to lessen it.⁶² This again is a strong argument for secularism – “Secularism Protects” – and holds value for all, whether religious or not.

An atheist perspective on secularism

This section has presented so far several strong arguments for secularism in the UK. These are arguments most religious and non-religious people should be able to accept. There is one final argument for secularism to review and this can be called the ‘argument from atheism’, though it should probably more fully be called an argument from atheism and agnosticism.

⁶¹ <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/News/ipsos-global-advisor-views-on-globalisation-and-faith.pdf>

⁶² This argument, called the ‘the pragmatic argument’, is articulated more fully in the Humanist Philosophers’ Group booklet “The case for secularism: a neutral state in an open society” pp.14–16.

Before we review this position, two points should be made: first, an atheist justification for secularism is not the same as promoting an atheistic state and any attempt to conflate the two would be disingenuous. Second, while the case for secularism stands strongly without the atheist argument, if you are an atheist it seems obvious to include it in any rationale for a secular state.

The argument from atheism is perhaps the clearest of arguments for a secular state and is, we have seen, one that around four in ten of the UK population⁶³ would agree with. Taking as read the customary 'ifs', 'buts' and caveats that attend most expositions of atheism, the argument put simply runs: there are no gods, claims to knowledge or authority or truth based on such supernatural justifications, whether that is through personal revelation, through some holy book or however arrived at, are not reliable. The actions of the state in managing our society should be founded on claims reliably supported by strong evidence and good arguments.⁶⁴ In this view, while there may still be a place for religion in public life, it is alongside other equally unprovable and improbable philosophies and should carry the same weight.

At this point there are many further arguments one can enter into for and against the atheist position. This introduction however addresses arguments for secularism, not atheism. If the reader is interested in atheism then Julian Baggini's book *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* is a good place to start.

⁶³ This is a conservative assertion if one recalls that the 2008 BSA survey found 18% of the population 'atheist' and a further 19% 'agnostic'.

⁶⁴ See Julian Baggini's book *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*, Chapter 2.

Does secularism work in practice?

In promoting the case for secularism in the UK it could be helpful briefly to look abroad at existing secular states and to ask what might be learned from them. The countries chosen here are those whose *constitutions* declare themselves to be explicitly secular. A number of observations can be made, principally:

- Secularism works in many widely different societies; they are not without their challenges but secularism provides the best framework for resolving differences fairly and safely;
- Secular states are not 'atheist states';
- There are different models of secularism to draw from.

Secularism works in other countries

The USA, Mexico, France, Turkey and India all have secularist principles in their constitutions and are therefore unambiguous illustrations of secular states that allow us to make a few general points. While they are all democracies they differ geographically, historically, politically, economically, socially and in terms of religious beliefs (granted that Mexico and the USA have some shared characteristics). An illustration of these differences can be seen in the United Nations Human Development Index for example (a measure combining indicators of life expectancy, educational attainment and income) which ranks the United States 4, France 14, Mexico 56, Turkey 83 and India 121st on its Index.⁶⁵

As one might expect in a secular state there is a constant tension between those who want to change existing secular arrangements and those who want to maintain them. This seems so regardless of how long established the secular constitution might be; and some are long established: the USA since

⁶⁵ See: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>.

1776, France since 1905, Mexico since 1917, Turkey since 1924 and India since 1950.⁶⁶

A review of recent stories (2010 onwards) published in the media illustrates some of these tensions:

USA

- “Without secular government, there is no religious freedom.”⁶⁷ (*Washington Post*, 03.01.2011)
- “Scary Court Decree: U.S. Gov Can Promote Religion.”⁶⁸ (*Opposing Views* website, 15.04.2011)
- “Rev. Franklin Graham: ‘Secularism is anti-Christ’.”⁶⁹ (*Secular News Daily* website, 26.04.2011)
- “Florida Legislature Proposes to Repeal Separation of Church and State.”⁷⁰ (*Care2* website, 13.04.2011)

France

- “Burqa Ban: Islamophobia verses the Enlightenment.”⁷¹ (*Afrik News*, 18.04.2011)
- “French Panel Debates Secularism and Islam.”⁷² (*New York Times*, 05.04.2011)
- “A fight for values in France.”⁷³ (*Pakistan Observer*, 20.04.2011)

⁶⁶ The Republic Day of India commemorates the date on which the Constitution of India came into force replacing the Government of India Act 1935 as the governing document of India on 26 January 1950. (See: “Introduction to the Constitution of India”, Ministry of Law and Justice of India, 29 July 2008.) The word ‘secular’ itself was only formally inserted in the Preamble to the Constitution of India by the 42nd Amendment of 1976. (See “Forty-Second Amendment to the Constitution”, Ministry of Law and Justice of India, 28 August 1976.)

⁶⁷ http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/spirited_atheist/2011/01/islamist_violence_strikes_another_blow_against_secularism_and_religious_freedom.html

⁶⁸ <http://www.opposingviews.com/i/scary-court-decree-u-s-gov-can-promote-religion>

⁶⁹ http://www.secularnewsdaily.com/2011/04/26/rev-franklin-graham-secularism-is-anti-christ/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+paliban%2FRDkF+%28Secular+News+Daily%29

⁷⁰ <http://www.care2.com/causes/florida-proposes-eliminating-separation-church-state.html>

⁷¹ *New York Times*, 05.04.2011

⁷² See *New York Times*, 05.04.2011.

⁷³ <http://pakobserver.net/detailnews.asp?id=87665>

Mexico

- “Mexico reasserts its secular credentials.”⁷⁴ (*National Secular Society website*)
- “Bishops in Mexico City, frustrated by liberal reforms, say Government behaving like ‘secular Taliban’.”⁷⁵ (*Newsline, 07.01.2011*)

Turkey

- “Selective religious freedom is not freedom: The Turkish Case.”⁷⁶ (*Hurriyet Daily News, 06.06.2011*)
- “Beware the ‘Turkish model’.”⁷⁷ (*The Jerusalem Post, 04.03.2011*)
- “Turmoil in Turkey: Secularist military vs government rooted in Islamist sensibility.”⁷⁸ (*Al Aribiya News, 30.07.2011*)

India

- “Secularism in jeopardy in India.”⁷⁹ (*Gulf Times, 15.05.2011*)
- “What price freedom of expression now?”⁸⁰ (*The Guardian, 12.06.2011*)
- “Afghanistan worst place in the world for women, but India in top five.”⁸¹ (*The Guardian, 15.06.2011*)

All these countries, despite such disputes, remain stable, democratic societies. Secularism once established clearly needs to be defended and this can be done on the basis that it provides all individuals with a fairer and safer framework for managing differences than any theocratic alternative.

⁷⁴ <http://www.secularism.org.uk/mexico-reasserts-its-secular-cre.html>

⁷⁵ See *Newsline* from the NSS, 07.01.2011.

⁷⁶ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=selective-religious-freedoms-are-not-freedom-the-turkish-case-2011-06-06>

⁷⁷ <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Editorials/Article.aspx?id=215010>

⁷⁸ <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/07/30/160072.html>

⁷⁹ *Gulf Times*, 15.05.2011

⁸⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jun/12/nick-cohen-mf-husain-censorship>

⁸¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/15/worst-place-women-afghanistan-india>

Secular states are not ‘atheist states’

Some people may assert that a secular state is by definition an atheist state. This is simply not true: the United States is probably the most religious western nation in the world: 78% say they are Christian (principally Protestant).⁸² Another study found that 59% of Americans said that religion played “a very important role in their lives”.⁸³ In India, home to 1/6th of humanity, around 81% of the population is thought to be Hindu.⁸⁴ In Turkey around 97% of the population are officially Islamic.⁸⁵ Catholics are the largest religious group in Mexico at around 84% of the population⁸⁶ and, in absolute terms, Mexico has the world’s second largest number of Catholics after Brazil. While the French government by policy keeps no official statistics on religious adherence⁸⁷ a poll from 2009⁸⁸ suggested that around 64% of the population were Catholics. (Incidentally only around 31% of those surveyed had no religion, despite the strict form of secularism applied in France).

Different models of secularism

The United States provides perhaps the widest known example of secularism in a constitution. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution begins “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” What this meant, according to Thomas Jefferson in a letter to the Committee of the Danbury Baptist Chapel of 1st January 1802, was there existed a “wall of separation between church and State”.⁸⁹ It is generally agreed that this part of the First Amendment implies both that there should separation of church and state and that there should be freedom of religion. In practice this has meant the US Supreme

⁸² “Religious Composition of the U.S.” U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007.

⁸³ “Among Wealthy Nations...U.S. Stands Alone in Embrace of Religion”, Pew Global Attitudes Project. Pew Research Center, 19.12.2002.

⁸⁴ See “The World Factbook”, Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>.

⁸⁵ “Religion, Secularism and the Veil in daily life”, KONDA Research and Consultancy, 20.06.2011.

⁸⁶ See “Volumen y porcentaje de la población según profese alguna religión y tipo de religión, 1895 a 2010”. <http://www.inegi.org.mx/Sistemas/temasV2/contenido/sociedad/rel01.asp?s=est&c=22436>.

⁸⁷ See the section “Statistics” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_France.

⁸⁸ See: <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2010/01/collapse-of-church-in-france.html>.

⁸⁹ Quoted in “The Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” See <http://www.nobeliefs.com/Tripoli.htm>

Court has banned any activity in public schools and other government-run areas that can be viewed as a government endorsement of religion. With some exceptions, nor can the government display religious symbols in public schools, courts and other government offices.⁹⁰

Mexico has no official religion. In March 2010, the lower house of the Mexican legislature introduced legislation to amend the Constitution to make the Mexican government formally “laica” – meaning “lay” or “secular”. Issues such as the legalisation of abortion in 2007 and of gay marriage in Mexico City in 2010 appear to have soured what were already difficult relations between the Catholic bishops and the Government. The Catholic Archbishop Aguiar Retes commented in 2010 “Nobody disputes the appropriate and healthy separation of Church and State...Defending the secular state is the least of [the government’s] concerns. ... What they want to do is diminish the religious freedom of Mexico’s citizens.”⁹¹ In Mexico the government does not provide any financial contributions to the church; nor does the church participate in public education.

In **India** its constitution declares the Union of India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic.⁹² Judgements since 1962 from the Honourable Supreme Court of India, which is regarded as the guardian of the constitution in India, point to two shifting themes in Indian secularism: a principle of religious toleration and the western concept of secularism based on separation of the Church and the State.⁹³ Accordingly, its constitution guarantees religious freedoms to citizens of all faiths, that there should not be discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion and the state is kept separate from religion. This requires that the state should not legislate on the basis of any religion. There are regardless some examples of religious violence in India’s recent past and its record in addressing the injustice of the caste system takes the shine off some of the country’s higher principles. It does nonetheless aim for a secularist ideal.

⁹⁰ See section “Contrast with the United States” in discussion on Laïcité at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laïcité>.

⁹¹ Quoted in *Christian Telegraph*, ref. <http://www.christiantelegraph.com/issue8752.html>

⁹² See “Introduction to the Constitution of India”, Ministry of Law and Justice of India, 29 July 2008.

⁹³ Secularism and Indian Constitution- Is the Secular Character of Indian Democracy Under Threat, Vivek Salathia. Ref: [http://www.ialsnet.org/meetings/constit/papers/SalathiaVivek\(India\).pdf](http://www.ialsnet.org/meetings/constit/papers/SalathiaVivek(India).pdf).

France takes perhaps a more dispassionate approach to religions than America. “Laïcité” is a core concept in the French constitution.⁹⁴ This broadly translates as the strict separation of state from church. The separation was established in 1905 when a new law declared France to be a secular country. Its first two articles read: “Article 1: The Republic guarantees freedom of conscience. It guarantees the free exercise of religious practice subject only to the restrictions in the interest of public order... Article 2: The Republic neither recognises, financially supports nor subsidises any religion...” Article 1 of the French constitution of 1958 formally states that France is a secular republic. The effect of this is that the French state officially regards religion as a private affair and the notion of laïcité has broad backing across the political spectrum in France from the centre right to the centre left.⁹⁵

In **Turkey** the founding principles of its Constitution assert that it is a secular and democratic republic that derives its sovereignty from the people. Like France there is a concept of “laïcité” that reaches into both the government and religious sphere.⁹⁶ While the rights of individuals to practice their religion is broadly tolerated this right does not extend to all religious communities and in practice some groups have more rights than others.⁹⁷

In summary, secular constitutions it seems can contain any of the following elements:

- A separation of church and state;
- The state is not to legislate on the basis of any religion;
- The state does not recognise, financially support nor subsidise any religion;
- There should be freedom of religion;
- There should be free exercise of religious practice subject only to certain restrictions in the interest of public order;
- A principle of religious toleration;

⁹⁴ Drawn up in 1958 – it states “La France est une République indivisible, laïque, démocratique et sociale.”

⁹⁵ See “France is a secular state. But what does this mean?” at <http://www.frenchentree.com/societe-francaise/DisplayArticle.asp?ID=20486>.

⁹⁶ See “State Secularism in other countries: Turkey” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La%C3%AFcit%C3%A9>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

- Forbidding discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion;
- Freedom of conscience.

In practice this has meant:

- Not permitting any activity in public schools and other government-run areas that can be viewed as a government endorsement of religion;
- Not displaying religious symbols in public schools, courts and other government offices;
- The state makes no financial contributions to the churches;
- The churches are not allowed to participate in public education;
- Religion is to be regarded as a private affair.

The principal lesson from this review is that a secular state in the UK is quite practical and would need to be shaped around our society's values, demography, institutions and political arrangements.

What next?

This short introduction to secularism has sought to describe what secularism is and has argued that it is relevant to the UK. It also looked briefly at existing secular states to see how secularism works in practice.

Interest in secularism grows as more people become concerned at the impact of religious intervention in their daily lives. The quotes below are reproduced with permission of the National Secular Society. They are excerpts taken from correspondence to the Society. They are only a few of hundreds of similar views:

Through my work in the community sector in Bradford I have seen how the increased influence of religion in public life is causing an increase in tension and conflict. In our multi-faith society, secular values are for me more relevant than ever.

I find particularly worrying the increasing tendency for Western leaders to refer to their faith as a guide when making policy decisions.

The nearest primary school to us is a church school and will not accept us – in fact they will accept all members of other faiths before they accept a local child who does not attend the church. We are in a position where we fundamentally do not want our children to go to a faith school, but we aren't in catchment for any local secular (community) schools.

I'm concerned by the special pleading by religious organisations for exemptions from the Human Rights Act and other legislation.

I work in medical research and it concerns me when religions attempt to interfere with scientific progress in general and fertility and abortion issues in particular.

I decided to join the NSS after reading about the Islington registrar who refused to conduct Civil Partnerships on religious

grounds...I found that case absolutely astonishing and felt it necessary to do something to help defend equality.

I have recently been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and have been thinking more about my legacy and end of life issues. I am concerned about assisted suicide being currently illegal in the UK; this is a policy area which suffers from strong religious lobbying.

I was stunned recently by comments made by the Archbishop of Canterbury regarding Sharia law. As a barrister who has been schooled in the rule of law and requirements for each and every person to be subject to the same law, I read in disbelief his entire speech.

These examples demonstrate important areas of public life – health, law, education, politics, equality and human rights – where there is a potential for growing conflict within our society. So what can be done?

Other countries provide inspiring examples of what can be achieved; there are many examples and these are just a few:

- Sweden provides a good illustration of how to separate the church and state. The Swedes disestablished their church in 2000 and appear to be doing perfectly well since;⁹⁸
- In Holland the Dutch Parliament in 2011 voted to ban the halal and kosher slaughter of animals.⁹⁹ They join Sweden, Norway and Switzerland where such slaughter is also prohibited;
- In Ireland the state is taking action (July 2011) to take education out of the hands of the Catholic Church. This initiative has been given greater emphasis with the Irish government's reaction to the Cloyne Report into institutional child abuse and with the indignation resulting from what the Irish Prime Minister, Enda Kenny, called "an attempt by the Holy See

⁹⁸ Report in *Newsline* – 17 June 2011

⁹⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8603969/Dutch-parliament-votes-to-ban-ritual-slaughter-of-animals.html>

to frustrate an inquiry in a sovereign, democratic republic".¹⁰⁰ This led one observer to comment, even in this most Catholic of countries, "let's hope that the result is a long-overdue debate about separation between Church and State."¹⁰¹

The challenges for secularists are to explain secularism, describe their vision of how a secular state would benefit and protect people of all faiths and none, to set out the steps necessary to implement this vision and then to make it happen.

Want to know more?

If you want to find out more about secularism a good place to start is the National Secular Society website: www.secularism.org.uk. There you can also subscribe to *Newsline*, a free weekly e-mail bulletin with a good analysis of the week's news on matters of interest to secularists.

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/joan-smith/joan-smith-ireland-squares-up-to-the-vatican-2319524.html>

¹⁰¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/joan-smith/joan-smith-ireland-squares-up-to-the-vatican-2319524.html>

Further Reading

The following sources used in this introduction may be of interest.

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