

I'm grateful every day that I live in a secular society – and so should we all be

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By Anne Marie Waters

I've been hearing and reading a lot of debates recently about secularism; what it is, what it isn't.

There are several viewpoints flying around, lots of "militant" and other hyperbolic words; many designed, no doubt, to stir up trouble and discredit this increasingly popular political position.

There is a sophisticated conversation going on, and one with all sorts of philosophers and politicians and academics adding their tuppence worth. What is missing though, as is so often the case, is any description of what secularism really means to ordinary people's everyday lives – this is of course the most important argument of all. So I'll make it here.

Secularism simply means that our laws are based on our human experience, objective evidence, and human empathy and compassion, rather than anything written in a holy scripture. Our laws are created by MPs who are elected by popular vote and therefore representative of broad public thought (to a degree at least). But how does secularism impact on our day-to-day existence?

Let me give some examples.

1) Your marriage has broken down. You have grown apart and are no longer happy together. You don't have a great deal of money so divorce (which is expensive) can wait. For now, you'll separate and get on with your lives.

You start seeing somebody new – a new lease of life even. It's exciting and life is fun again. The idea that the police will knock on your door and asks questions about your new relationship is ludicrous. It's your own business. It's your private life. Your love life. Your sex life. The thought that the state should interfere and tell you who you can sleep with doesn't enter your mind.

That is because you live in a secular country. If you lived in a theocracy, not only are the police likely to knock on your door, but you may well be executed – by being buried up to your chest and having stones thrown at your head until you die. This is what happens in many Islamic states today (which are not secular) and it would also happen if the Bible were our legislator – this also demands death for adultery.

2) Your marriage has broken down. You have grown apart and are no longer happy together. You apply for divorce by mutual consent. You both realise that life is short, and it is time to move on and create a new reality.

But, there is no divorce. Divorce is a sin. Living apart is a sin. If you commit this sin, the police will come and you may well be sentenced to death. Ridiculous? That's because you live in a secular country. If you lived in a theocracy, divorce would be difficult to obtain (at least for women) and it would be at the discretion of religious authorities. End result: stay together and be miserable.

3) You are a woman. Your husband is violent. He rapes and hits you on a regular basis. You fear

he will do the same to your daughters. You never agreed to marry him in the first place but you had no choice. You want out – you want a divorce. You want this fear to go away – you are tired of feeling nothing but fear from morning to night. You are tired of the humiliation. He treats you like a slave. He demeans and degrades you. He physically and sexually humiliates you. Your confidence is gone, you feel worthless.

There is only way to save yourself (and your daughters) and that is to get out. You need a divorce, but there is one problem. This can only happen if your husband agrees to it. Either that or a group of clerics who believe that he has every right to treat you the way he does agree to it. "You are trying to break up a family" they'll say (*you* are breaking up a family, not him). "You're so selfish" they'll say.

That's that – no divorce for you. You'll have to take the abuse because you are worthless anyway and it would be a sin for you to claim otherwise. Too cruel to be real? No. This is how sharia law works. It is also similar to how Catholicism worked when it had political power. Women in secular countries don't have to put up with this; because they live in secular countries.

4) You are a woman. You might like to get married one day but there are things you would like to do first. You think you might like to build your career, travel a bit, have a few relationships before you settle down. You eventually find someone you would like to settle down with and you get married (or not) but you're not quite ready to have children yet as your career – which you've worked incredibly hard for – is in a great place and you would like to put off pregnancy until you feel ready, both for your own sake and that of the child.

So you go to your doctor and have a coil fitted, or get a prescription for the pill. This will allow you to have a sex life with your new husband but also to control if and when you have children. The idea that the police would knock on your door and demand you hand over your contraceptives, have sex with your husband whenever he wants, and you've got no say whatsoever over any of it is completely ridiculous. That is because you live in a secular country. If you lived under religion, there would be no contraceptives, you'd be forced to have sex whether you liked it or not (because it is your duty), and you would be pregnant over and over again – whether you liked it or not.

5) You are homosexual and you know that only a same sex relationship will make you happy. You are free to have same sex relationships, you can have a civil partnership, your rights at work are protected and your right to equal access to goods and services also. The idea of the police knocking on your door to interfere in your relationship and question what you are doing with your partner is ridiculous. That is because you live in a secular country. If you lived in a theocracy, you would be murdered in the most appalling ways by the state. Just as happens in Islamic states (which are not secular) today, and as happened in Europe when religions held political power.

6) You grew up surrounded by religion but there's something in the back of your mind. It just doesn't sound plausible to you. You want to believe it because almost everyone else does and it is a huge burden on you to have these niggling doubts. You want to dissent, to ask questions at the very least. Some of the scripture seems contradictory to you. Some of it seems callous and cruel. Something isn't right. But you can't say that, you can't express this because if you do, the police will knock on your door and you may well be sentenced to death. This is what can happen in Islamic states today, just as it did in Europe when religion had control.

7) You're a scientist. You have discovered something that could change the course of human history, prevent mass suffering, and push humanity forward.

But there's a problem. Your discovery proves that holy scripture (or some of it) is false – a claim

that will bring the police to your door and may well result in you being sentenced to death.

This is what happened in Europe when religion was in control. Declaring the Koran to be false can get you killed in Islamic states today. So, you decide to keep your discovery to yourself. Life can carry on as before.

There is no exaggeration in the above descriptions. They are an entirely accurate reflection of life under religious rule.

We need to remember this.

We need to remind ourselves over and over again.

As interesting and important as they are, academic and philosophical debates within university walls are not nearly as important as ordinary people truly understanding the value of secularism, and understanding what it would mean to them if it disappeared.

Some will argue that we are not a secular country because we have an established church of which the Queen is the head and there are Bishops in the House of Lords.

I oppose these things and they do complicate matters. But the very fact that women are free, homosexuals are treated like human beings, and we are allowed to express our opinion on religion or dissent from it entirely, are solid signs that secularism has won; and it has done so to such a degree that we no longer even recognise it as secularism. It is simply a taken-for-granted part of everyday life.

Constitutions do not make a country. People make a country, and the people of this country are overwhelmingly secular – including the religious people.

I am genuinely grateful every day of my life for secularism; as a woman, even more so.

We need to remember and everyone needs to know and understand just how thankful we should be for secularism.

See also: [Russian Patriarch says women should stay at home and do as they're told](#)

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