

Why religions, too, would benefit from embracing secularism

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In a debate at the Nottingham Secular Society on 28 April, National Secular Society president, Terry Sanderson, argued that the time has come for all religions to embrace secularism. These are his opening remarks:

I think one of the most poignant headlines I've seen recently was in a Pakistani newspaper. It said simply: "Christians call for secularism".

Anyone who follows foreign news will know that in some areas of Pakistan the persecution of Christians is endemic. Churches are burned, pastors are murdered, people are forced under torture to convert to Islam. No wonder the Christians there want secularism.

They have come to understand that secularism is their best hope. It could help them gain the right to worship in the way they want to – as it would every other minority in the country. It would also help protect people who have no religious feelings – whereas at present just admitting such a thing in Pakistan – and many other areas of the Islamic world - could put your life at risk.

Secular laws would not permit particular religious doctrines to be dictated into law. A secular state has a justice system based on impartiality and not holy writ. It would not permit blasphemy laws that are so easily abused and misused. It would not contain privileges for one particular religion that put others at disadvantage.

In Burma there is a small minority of Muslims called the Rohingya. They are regarded by the Burmese in much the same way that the Roma people are regarded by most of Europe. They are mercilessly bullied and persecuted by the Buddhist monks that wield so much power in Burma.

Maybe they would find secularism would improve the quality of their lives – instead, Buddhist nationalism increases and so does the persecution and destruction of the Rohingya.

The persecution of religious minorities by overbearing majorities is rife around the world. Muslims persecute Hindus, Hindus persecute Sikhs. Recently Iran gave 80 lashes each to a group of Christians who drank Communion wine in defiance of sharia law.

Jews – well, Jews know all there is to know about persecution. When the Government issues figures on hate crimes, it will tell of a new rise in anti-Semitism in Britain. Once again, Jews are facing attacks.

What the figures don't tell is who is doing the persecuting. The collectors of the Government's statistics on religious hate crimes don't identify the religion of the perpetrators, only that of the victims.

So, you have to dig down more carefully into these cases to see that in most instances it is Islamic radicals who vent their fury at the Jewish community by desecrating their graveyards, attacking Orthodox Jews in the street and threatening Jewish schools.

Secularism can't stop this. We shouldn't forget that on paper Pakistan has a secular constitution. It has been ruthlessly overwhelmed by gun and bomb-toting radicals and their clerical bosses. A secular constitution can make it illegal for the state to engage in religious persecution but it cannot stop religions going to war against each other.

The Arab Spring started out with a great hope that secularism could be embraced by the many warring factions within Islam. That countries like Tunisia and Egypt could unshackle themselves from the extremes of Islam and bring peace and prosperity instead of sectarian suspicion and conflict.

But as soon as the dictators were overthrown, the Islamists moved in determined to use democracy to overturn democracy. They almost succeeded. The Muslim Brotherhood gained power because they promised not to be extreme in their religion. That promise was not kept.

Now the Muslim Brotherhood has been removed from power and political chaos once more reigns as factions fight for control. Attempts to create a constitution that is, to some extent at least, secular have yet to succeed.

In Syria, though, the dictator has not been overthrown and now a sectarian war of such cruelty has arisen that it beggars the imagination. As rival religious orthodoxies vie for power, hundreds of thousands of innocent lives are lost. It is unlikely that a secular constitution would stop this madness, but it might have prevented it starting in the first place.

But the motion we have before us today is: "This house believes all religions should embrace Secularism."

We at the National Secular Society believe that all democratic Governments should embrace secularism, too. It is an essential adjunct to democracy. It stops Governments being hijacked by one particular religion and then the state machinery being used to enforce in law the doctrines of that religion.

At the same time it does not repress or suppress religion. Secularism has to be a mutual compact between religion and state. They must each agree to respect the other's boundaries.

In a secular democracy the Church will not seek to dictate legal or social policy and in return the state will not interfere with the church as it goes about its business of saving souls. It will not seek to control the practice of religion, so long as those practices do not interfere with the rights of others.

There is only one nation on earth that was founded with a secular constitution and that is the United States of America. Most European countries that now have secular constitutions had to fight hard and long to free themselves from the iron grip of the Vatican.

England, of course, got rid of the Vatican only to have it replaced by the Anglican Church, something that still hangs on in our constitution to prevent us becoming a modern secular state. The people of Britain are in the main secular, in the sense that they have largely abandoned the churches. But the state remains resolutely non-secular.

The national debate last week about whether Britain is a Christian country remains unresolved. Nobody yet knows what the Prime Minister meant when he used the term "Christian country".

Yesterday, the Sunday Telegraph published an opinion poll it had commissioned from Mori, the first question it asked was "Do you regard yourself as ..." – and then a list of options that included "A practising Christian", a "non-practising Christian" or a "non-religious".

14% claimed they were practising Christians (a figure that is out of sync with the church's own count of attendance); 38% said they were non-practising Christians and 41% said they were non-religious.

Now, we are told that because a majority regard themselves as "Christian" in some sense, then this is a Christian country. But the 41% who said they have no religion and the 5% who belong to other religions and the 2% who didn't know must count for something. It is a minority, yes, but only just. They cannot simply be told that they are living in a "Christian country" that relegates them to some kind of inferior status.

But I mustn't exaggerate. The people belonging to this enormous minority don't feel inferior because to all intents and purposes Britain is a secular country. The Church of England has accepted in reality that its establishment brings very few benefits and an awful lot of disadvantages.

I heard Giles Fraser, the prominent media vicar, the other day making the case for disestablishment. He thinks the Church of England would be stronger and more honest and freer to make its voice heard if it were separate from the state. That is certainly what the churches in the USA have found. There is no establishment there, but there is certainly no shortage of Christian power.

As I said, secularism can't stop religions hating and fighting each other. It cannot stop fanatics trying to impose their religion by violence and murder. But our motion asks should religions themselves embrace secularism.

Actually, this is the only solution.

If, in some fantasy time in the future, the many religions and their many off-shoots could say: "We embrace secularism" and mean it, an unprecedented peace would fall on the earth.

Religions would respect each other's right to exist even if their doctrines are entirely contradictory. They would accept that their teachings are mutually blasphemous, as they are, but would not try to eradicate each other because of it. They would accept that none of them could have temporal power and that the neutrality of Government and politics would be accepted.

Fantasy? Yes, fantasy.

You only have to look at the way some religions regard human rights to see the impossibility of what our motion asks. Universal Human rights – as expressed and defined in the charter of the United Nations – are an innovation of genius. I will accept that many of those who drafted that charter were Christians and I salute their inspiration.

But human rights, with their respect for the individual's right to construct their own lives in their own way so long as they remain within the law and do not trample on the rights of others, is not a concept with which religion always sits easily.

People making their own decisions and living by their own conscience might mean they do not always live in the way that religion wants to dictate for them.

To get round this, we now have the Organisation of Islamic Countries, which likes to present itself as a sort of United Nations of the Muslim world, inventing its own Charter of Islamic Human Rights.

Islamic Human Rights? Think about it. In what way are Islamic Human Rights different from Universal Human Rights? What human rights could a Muslim have or not have that a Christian or a Hindu could or could not?

And so the ultimate secular document – the United Nations Charter of Universal Human Rights – is immediately balkanised. Human rights become a sectarian issue.

Although Islamic nations have signed the UN Convention, they carelessly disregard it. Some make changing religion into a criminal offence, punishable by death. They abuse it when they render women second class citizens, they demean it when they refuse to employ people because of their religion or their gender or their sexuality, they undermine it when they introduce blasphemy laws or stone adulterers to death.

It isn't anywhere near that in this country and that is, of course, because – as I said - we are secular in all but name. But the principle is the same. When equality legislation was proposed in our parliament – an extension of the concept of human rights that protects individuals from unfair treatment in employment or in the receipt of goods and services – immediately there were calls from faith groups for religious exemptions.

Exemptions that go beyond merely protecting directly religious jobs such as vicars and imams and extending it to having the right not to employ homosexuals or people who are similarly morally unacceptable to a particular religion.

We've allowed that in Britain. In some state-sponsored schools, namely those that are, for some unfathomable reason, still run by religious organisations, it is permissible to deny employment to people who are not of the same faith and to dismiss people who get pregnant outside of marriage or cohabit without matrimony.

Only last week a man in Cardiff was sacked from his job as head of a Catholic school (which, incidentally, is paid for by the taxpayer) because he had split from his wife.

Religious exemptions such as these make a mockery of the ambition of equality for all. They make real the Orwellian concept that all men are equal but some more equal than others. But there is no such thing as "partial equality" – it is an oxymoron. But as far as homosexuals are concerned, that is their status in equality law. Their "equality" is compromised.

Religions have been accustomed to enjoying power and privilege. The Church of England is no exception. Right from its beginning in Tudor times it has exerted extraordinary power.

In the 19th century it had the power to control who entered parliament (only practising Anglicans) and who had a university education (only practising Anglicans). It had the right by law to coerce people into church and to levy hefty tithes on them.

Much of this influence has now been taken away from it as society has gradually secularised. But it still enjoys an exceptional and privileged place in our constitutional arrangements.

Now that it cannot fine people for not going to church, and attendance is truly voluntary, its congregations have dwindled. Its influence on the personal lives of the population at large has declined to almost nothing. No-one takes seriously any more its admonishments or its more

eccentric prohibitions.

The Church of England is now a very small denomination in a country mainly indifferent to it. Its position as the church established by law is unsustainable. It cannot continue for much longer. We hope that it will be able to accept this situation and to remove itself from its constitutional place with dignity and good grace. I hope, after all, it won't have to be kicked out.

In other words I would like the Church of England to embrace secularism. And I would like the Catholic Church to do likewise and the Muslim community and the Hindus and Sikhs and even the Scientologists and the Moonies. They might think this an extraordinary idea, but I refer back to the headline I cited at the beginning from the newspaper in Pakistan. "Christians demand secularism."

The religious demographics of this country are changing rapidly. If present trends continue, non-believers will be the majority quite soon. Other religions are expanding while Christianity declines. Soon there will be more Muslim worshippers than there will be Anglicans or Catholics or all Christian sects put together. Soon Muslims will have a good case for having a place in the state along with the Anglican Church.

I don't want that, and I suspect few others want it, either, including many Muslims. Which is why I think religions should embrace secularism and should observe the demarcation line that is so essential between the various faiths and the state.

Individual Christians and Muslims and so on can, of course, take part in the democratic process, just like all other members of society. Individual religious believers would enjoy the full protection of the human rights and equalities laws. But religious organisations would not. Human rights are for humans, individual humans, not for organisations or ideologies.

So, to sum up, I think religious people must stop regarding secularism with suspicion, as a bogeyman that's coming to get them. It is not their enemy. It is not "militant atheism" out to "ban religion" or crush their faith. It simply says that your faith is as important – but no more important – than anyone else's.

If we could all agree that, we could make real progress in interfaith relations. Peace would be easier to maintain (but given human nature, not that easy - there are plenty of other things to fight over besides religion).

But religious hostilities can only cease if religion takes it upon itself to embrace secularism.

(Opposing the motion was David Hilborn, a theologian, and his speech can be read [here](#).)

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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