

RELIGION AND SECULARISM

Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri

Citation format: Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri, "Religion and Secularism ", CIFIA Global Journal, Vol 3, June 2021

Abstract

Secularism is an ideology that has philosophical, political, cultural, and social implications on human society. It is employed differently by different people. Secularism is of different types like political secularism, philosophical secularism, and moderate secularism. There are some other sub-categories of secularism as well. It is observed that moderate secularism is the best form of secularism which is one of the characteristics of an Ideal state. We have tried to answer what are the other characteristics of the Ideal State and if it can be formed under a non-secular religious society. This paper is our extensive research in this context.

Keywords – Secularism, Religion, Islamic society, Atheism, Agnosticism, Humanism

History of Secularism

The word 'secularism' was first coined by a British agnostic writer George Holyoake in his book titled 'The Reasoner' in 1851 AD. By 'secularism', he meant a social order which is *not* based on any religion. He claimed that there is a light and guidance in secular truth.

Agnostics who claim they are secular, believe that the existence of God is unknown or unknowable, as human beings cannot justify the existence of God with their rational reasoning.

Secular ideas existed from ancient times. The focus on material wellbeing of the people and shunning of all religious dogmas is documented in the works of some ancient philosophers, like (i) Charvaka of India (600 BC), (ii) Zeno of Citium (334 - 262 BC) of Greece, who was the founder of Stoicism, and (iii) Marcus Aurelius (121-180 AD) of Greece, etc. These ideas stayed dormant for a long time and over 1500 years later, resurfaced again during renaissance and reformation (1300-1600 AD) in Europe.

The secular philosophy was developed further by Western philosophers like, (i) John Locke (1632-

1704), (ii) Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), (iii) Voltaire (1694-1778), (iv) Denis Diderot, (1713-1784), (v) David Hume (1711–1776), (vi) Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), (vii) Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), (viii) James Madison (1751-1836), (ix) Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), (x) Thomas Paine (1737-1809), (xi) Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899), (xii) Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), and (xiii) Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011).

Types of Secularism

Secularism can be divided into three broad categories, namely, (1) Political Secularism, (2) Philosophical Secularism, and (3) Socio-cultural Secularism.

(i) Political secularism

Political Secularism deals with the policies of a state to keep civic life of the people free from religious domination and preference. This school of thought emphasizes that religion should be kept away from public life as far as possible. There are four types of political secularism.

(1) *Atheist Secularism*

In certain countries, the government calls itself secular. Like erstwhile Soviet Union and presently in China, the governments follow Atheism as their state religion. This is known as extreme left communism. As against this, the Atheist secularism followed in Italy and Germany before world war II was an extreme right Fascism. In these, they do not allow people to follow any religion, publicly or privately, and persecute people who follow a faith. They destroy places of worship of the people who follow a religion, persecute them, and brainwash them to shun their religion in a repressive manner. In their desire to be an atheist state, they ignore the

human rights of their people and use an iron hand to promote atheism among their subjects.

France is following the footsteps of Russia and China where their fascist ruler Emmanuel Macron (born 1977) has promulgated a law in February 2021 named, 'Law of Freedom' (from the religion) in which religious education of any kind, other than what is approved by the Government, has been banned in France and Government is suppressing the religious freedom of its citizens, particularly their 5 million Muslims, by an iron hand.

(2) *Semi Atheist Secularism*

In countries like Mexico and Canadian Quebec State, the governments allow people to practice religion privately, but do not allow them to wear religious dress or symbols in public. If people wear a cap of Jews, turban of Sikhs, Hijab of Muslims, etc., in public, workplace, schools / colleges, etc., they persecute them. The government policies are so designed that people who follow atheism feel more secure and comfortable rather than those who follow a religion.

(3) *Humanist Secularism*

Humanist secularism is a hybrid of religious humanism and atheism. Atheism rejects religions in all their formats. Religious humanism emphasizes that if you treat people with kindness, you will get a happy life after death.

Humanist secularism emphasizes that while you do not have to believe in any religion, you can acknowledge the compassion towards human beings that is the hall mark of religious humanism. Atheists and agnostics do not believe in life after death.

Humanist secularism was the idea first imagined by Philosopher George Jacob Holyoake in his book 'The reasoner' published in 1851 who proposed a human society living a happy life, ethically, intellectually, and emotionally without reliance on any faith.

(4) *Moderate secularism*

Moderate secularism can be termed as neutrality of the state in a multi-religious, multi-cultural society to protect the rights of their citizens

irrespective of their choice of following a religion or non-religion. Moderate secularism is distinct from Humanist Secularism in the sense that, in it, the religion is not a subject of rejection or criticism. Believers and non-believers both are treated with respect and welfare of all is ensured by the state. This is followed in many countries like India, Japan, etc. The governments in these countries declare themselves secular, meaning there is no official religion of the state.

(ii) *Philosophical secularism*

Under philosophical secularism, anti-theistic polemics are organized. Even protests are conducted to counter religious extremism in society. People are warned from attending religious gatherings, functions, and festivals where they are potentially susceptible to get brainwashed and radicalized. Followers of this philosophy work tirelessly by writing books, articles, organizing seminars and public events. Followers of atheism, agnosticism and some free thought people are involved in it. Some well-known authors in this context are (a) Sam Harris (born 1965), (b) Richard Dawkins (born 1941), and (c) Daniel Dennett (born 1942).

(iii) *Socio-cultural secularism*

The difference between socio-cultural and philosophical secularism is that the former works at micro level while the latter works at macro level. Followers of atheism, agnosticism and some free thought people are at the forefront in this context. They preach people to keep religious restrictions at the back burner and lead a liberal life of happiness in the multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society. They promote inter-religious marriages, people living in partnerships, same sex marriages, and having families whose members are free to follow any religion or non-religion.

What is an ideal state?

An ideal state is a perfect blend of (i) democracy, (ii) moderate secularism, (iii) people's welfare, and (iv) controlled capitalism.

(i) In a democratic state, people have the freedom to choose lawmakers of their choice.

(ii) In moderate secularism, believers of all religions, and non-believers / atheists / agnostics, are treated with respect.

(iii) In a welfare state, equitable distribution of wealth, equal opportunity, and protection of the weaker sections of the society is ensured.

(iv) In controlled capitalism, Governments keep watch on the Corporate sector so that they do not create monopoly in the market and the wealth of the nation is not accumulated into the hands of a few individuals.

Can an ideal state be established in a religion-based state?

To answer this question, we will have to answer the following questions which are interrelated with each other.

(i) What are the essential requirements of a religion?

(ii) There are countless religions in the world whose authenticities are subject of debate. The question is, has there been an original first religion of the humankind that was followed by their first generation? If yes, then did it fulfill the essential requirements of a religion?

(iii) If the answer to the above question is yes, then is there a religion, among the religions of the world, closely related to the original religion of human beings?

(iv) If the answer to the above question is yes, then does the teachings of that religion fulfill the criteria of an ideal State which is described above?

We have tried to answer the above questions in the following.

(i) The essential requirements of a religion

There are two essential requirements of a religion, viz, belief in God and belief in the creation of this Cosmos.

Both these beliefs are rejected by Atheists. When they deny the existence of God, surely, they will deny the creation of this Cosmos by God. Then how do they prove the existence of this Cosmos? They say that the Cosmos got evolved by itself.

The subject of 'creation and evolution' is vast, and has been debated by philosophers, theologians, biologists, medical fraternity, etc., for over 100 years now. We have described a brief account in the following.

Creation and Evolution

Since 'creation' and 'evolution', are theories, they do not have any bearing on religious beliefs. Philosophical theories keep on changing all the time and so far, both these theories stand their ground because the facts established by scientific investigations so far, could not conclusively reject either of the theory, 'creation' and 'evolution', so far.

When we analyze the theory of creation, we realize that the creationist theory was misunderstood by the people in the sense that they claimed God created every specie. This belief is wrong as it limits and restricts the continuous creation in the Cosmos. God's creation of things can be direct and by selection and evolution. The evolution is a form of creation and the things that are naturally selected for evolution of different species is a subject of infinite research.

Similarly, when we analyze the theory of evolution, we realize that their claim of human beings to have evolved from apes or apelike creature is based on limited evidence and knowledge.

The idea of human beings evolving from apes, or humans and apes both, having a common ancestor was first coined by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) a British naturalist, in his book titled 'The Origins of Species', in 1859.

There are two theories in this context, (i) life evolved from non-living material, and (ii) human beings descended from Apes or Apelike creature.

As far as human beings are concerned, the scientific community is more inclined to believe the second proposition, rather than the first.

(i) Life evolved from non-living material

If the above theory is true, then it may have so happened that God created the living things first, we do not know how many, then many species may have evolved from them by natural selection.

What is meant by 'natural selection'?

Broadly speaking, 'natural selection in evolving species' consists of appropriate blend of four factors' namely, (a) the potential for a species to increase in number, (b) the heritable genetic variation of individuals in a species due to mutation and sexual reproduction, (c) competition for limited resources, and (d) the proliferation of those organisms that are better able to survive and reproduce in the environment.

(ii) Human beings descended from Apes or Apelike creature

As we have described, the scientific community tend to believe that human beings descended from Apes or an apelike creature. Their claims are based on the fact that there are more similarities between the apes and human beings than are the differences. It is a fact, but this is not a conclusive proof that human ancestor was an ape, an animal? Is it not possible that it was the other way around? Human beings were first created, and later apes were evolved.

There is a reference in this context in the Quran - 'When they (a colony of Jews in Prophet Dawood's عليه السلام time) persisted in doing what they had been forbidden, We (God) commanded them: 'Be apes, despised.' (7-166).

It is believed that after this command by God, they became apes. An argument can be made that this might be the reason that there are striking similarities in the DNA of apes and human beings. Earlier they were human beings and from the wrath of God they turned into apes.

When the DNA sequence is compared between apes and humans, it is reported to be 96% identical.

However, we cannot say for sure that apes in our times are the descendants of the humans who were turned into apes in Prophet Dawood's (عليه السلام) time. The apes may have been in existence from before.

The gist of the above discussion is, there exist a benevolent God who is the creator of this Cosmos. And the essential requirement of a religion is to accept Him as the Creator of this Cosmos.

(ii) The original authentic religion

It is an accepted fact that the entire Cosmos and whatever in it, including its creatures and human beings are made up of matter. What is matter? Matter can be anything which occupies (i) a space and (ii) has a mass. Therefore, it is evident that matter cannot exist without space. It means, before the creation of matter, space was created to accommodate it.

What is the chief characteristic of 'mass' of the matter?

The chief attribute or characteristic of the mass of the matter is, if it is stationary, will remain so until some force makes it move? And when it is moving, it remains so, unless a force makes it stationary.

Evolution is a movement, a natural disposition. The forces that drive evolution are, natural selection (as described above), random genetic drift, mutation, population mating structure, and culture. The question is who is mixing all these in a perfect mix every time to create an evolutionary specie? Because various forms of the matter joining together to evolve in a new form cannot be automatic. One must accept that there is a force which is making them move and join in specific ratio as per the requirement of the time.

The above is a clear evidence that there is a force which is causing changes / evolution in things.

Human being is made up of matter. He can move around at will, shows that he was created and provided with a force / spirit / soul by God to use his free will to move around in the open space provided to him on this planet.

Human being is provided with 'intention' or free will. This is not an attribute of matter with which his body is made.

As we have described earlier in answer to question # 1 above, that to consider human's ancestor father to be an ape, is not appropriate. Surely, human being was created.

We have references in this context in the Quran.

(a) It in Quran – 'Verily We (God) have created human being from the quintessence of clay. (23-12).

(b) It is Quran – ‘So when I (God) have proportioned him (Adam عليه السلام) (from clay) and breathed into him out of My Soul. (15-29).

(c) It is in Quran – ‘And they ask you about the soul. Say (O' Prophet ﷺ) the soul is the command of my Lord. And mankind has not been given of knowledge except a little (17-89).

Human beings were multiplied in the world from the single father and mother. And their first generation must have followed a religion which is the original first religion of human beings.

Scottish anthropologist Andrew Lang wrote that Urmonotheism or urreligion was the original religion of mankind which is also known as Original Monotheism or Primitive Monotheism. Andrew Lang concluded that all non-monotheistic and polytheistic religions were later evolved as a degenerated form of this Urreligion.

German scholar Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), published a 12-Volume treatise, titled, ‘Der Ursprung der Gottesidee’ (The Origin of the Idea of God) during 1912-1954, explaining Primitive Monotheism. He wrote, the primitive religion of all the tribal people of the world was monotheism of one benevolent God. Later, men and women began to worship several gods. He criticized the ‘revolutionary/evolutionary monotheism theory’ which claims that the emergence of monotheistic thought was the result of the gradual process spanning the Bronze and Iron Age polytheistic religions of classical antiquity. He provided evidence from Native American mythology, Australian aborigine, and other primitive civilizations in support of his views. In 1930s he wrote, the Supreme Being became dim only among later peoples.

What is Urreligion? When we go back into the history of mankind, it is generally accepted that the first human being created and inhabited the Planet earth was Adam (عليه السلام), followed by Eve (Hawwa عليها السلام), who are the father and mother of humanity.

Those who insist that human beings’ ancestor father was an ape, or an apelike creature may not agree that their forefather was Adam (عليه السلام).

However, as we have mentioned above, there are many scholars who believe that the original

religion of human being had two essential features, (i) believe in God, and (ii) the creation of this cosmos and human beings.

Since Adam (عليه السلام) was created and he was the natural teacher of his children, after him, it was necessary that teachers appear in his progeny, at certain intervals, to continue his teachings to his following generations. Thus, all Prophets sent to humanity taught the same Adamic religion (Urreligion). There are references to this affect in Tora, Bible and the Quran which were given to different prophets over a period of thousands of years.

(iii) Is there are religion, among the religions of the world, that matches with the original religion of human beings?

Islam preaches that all prophets were human beings, sent by God to revive the teaching of monotheism, which include Abraham (Ibrahim عليه السلام), Moses, (Musa عليه السلام), Jesus Christ (Isa عليه السلام), and others. And the teaching of monotheism remained the same from the first person on planet earth, Prophet Adam (عليه السلام) to the last Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله و سلم).

In Tora it is stated that ‘God, the Cause of all, is one. This does not mean one as in one of a pair, nor one like a species (which encompasses many individuals), nor one as in an object that is made up of many elements, nor as a single simple object that is infinitely divisible. Rather, God is a unity unlike any other possible unity. (Yesode Ha-Torah 1:7).

In the Quran,— Say (O Prophet ﷺ), Allah is one. Allah is independent. He does not have children. Nobody has given birth to him. Nobody can match Him or equal Him.] (112: 1- 4).

(iv) Does the teaching of the authentic religion fulfill the criteria of an ideal state described above?

We have described that an ideal state is a perfect blend of (i) Democracy, (ii) Moderate Secularism, (iii) Peoples’ Welfare, and (iv) Controlled Capitalism.

A detailed research is required to find out which is a perfect democracy, what is meant by

moderate secularism, what is a perfect welfare state and what is meant by Controlled Capitalism? A perfect mix of which is our Ideal State. Also, can an ideal state be established in a religious based society?

Conclusion

From the above discussion two things can be concluded, as follows. (i) Islam is the only religion which is based on the first original religion of Humanity, and (ii) Moderate Secularism is an indispensable part of an Ideal State.

Bibliography

1. <https://www.secularism.org.uk/what-is-secularism.html>, retrieved Dec 2020
2. Holyoake, G. J. (1872). *The Reasoner*. Holyoake. p. 100. Archived from the original on 2020-08-18. Retrieved 2017-10-04.
3. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber, London, Routledge Classics, 2001, pp. 123–25
4. Richard Dawkins, "When Religion Steps on Science's Turf: The Alleged Separation Between the Two Is Not So Tidy Archived 2006-12-25 at the Way back Machine", *Free Inquiry* vol. 18, no. 2
5. Beckford, J. (2012). Public religions and the post secular: Critical reflections. SSSR Presidential Address. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 51(1), 1–19
6. Bhargava, R. (2006). The distinctiveness of Indian secularism. In T. N. Srinivasan (Ed.), *The future of secularism* (pp. 20–53). New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press
7. Bhargava, R. (2010). States, religious diversity, and the crisis of secularism. *Hedgehog Review*, 12(3)
8. *Is Atheism Consistent with Morality?* paper (2001) by Mark I. Vuletic
9. Council for Secular Humanism. "10 Myths About Secular Humanism". Archived from the original on 12 May 2015. Retrieved 12 June 2015
10. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-secular-life/201808/what-is-secularism> by Phil Zuckerman Ph.D. Retrieved Dec. 2020
11. <https://centerforinquiry.org/definitions/what-is-secularism/> retrieved Dec 2020
12. <https://centerforinquiry.org/definitions/what-is-secular-humanism/>, retrieved Dec. 2020

13. Marshall, Thomas Humphrey (1950). *Citizenship and Social Class: And Other Essays*. Cambridge: University Press

14. Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri, "Religion: A Historical Perspective ", *CIFIA Global Journal*, Vol 2, January 2021

About the author



Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian and poet. He is the author of *Tafseer-e-Asedi*, *Irshad Al Asedi*, *Fusus Al-Iman* and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of *CIFIA Global Journal*.