



What is secularism? (Part 2) – Introduction

KEY QUESTIONS ??

- What is secularism?
- Is secularism a religion?

STIMULUS

Things we notice

When we talk about religion in society, lots of people notice things like:

- People have different worldviews and ideas about how best to live.
- These often include disagreements over religion or irreligion.
- Some ideas about how best to live are compatible or widely shared despite different worldviews.
- Some ideas about how best to live are incompatible with or exclusive to certain worldviews.
- Religion or irreligion can be used to inspire positive social actions.
- Religion or irreligion can be used to inspire negative social actions.
- Some people experience unfair advantages because of religion.
- Some people experience unfair disadvantages because of religion.
- People's ideas of what gods want often coincide with their own desires or moral preferences.
- Making particular beliefs about religion required or favoured over others has led to bad outcomes.

Once we notice these things, there are lots of different ideas about how we should respond. One of these ideas is called secularism.

EXERCISES

Q1. What is secularism? Note down on a whiteboard or flipchart some of the answers, grouping them under themes

What is secularism?

Secularism refers to a range of different ideas and practices which seek to balance freedom of and from religion with other rights. In its broadest sense secularism is the idea that religious beliefs and identities should not be privileged or discriminated against. From this Jean Baubérot (a sociologist of secularism and religion) argues that three key principles emerge:

1. **Separation** of religious institutions from state institutions and a public sphere where religion may participate, but not dominate.
2. **Freedom** to practise your faith or beliefs without harming others, or to change it or not have one, according to your conscience.
3. **Equality**, so that your religious beliefs or lack of them doesn't put others at an advantage or a disadvantage.

People who support or oppose secularism interpret this in a range of different ways and have lots of different ideas about why this makes societies fairer or not.

Because different people can have different ethical stances informed by their worldviews, secularists believe:

- Personal ethical preferences arising from religious, non-religious or irreligious convictions should not be presumed to be of more or less worth.

So

- Personal ethical preferences aren't sufficient to compel others. Rules which affect others need to be justified.

And

- We can persuade people to agree with our personal ethical preferences, but we can't force them to.

So

- Sometimes we need to protect people from having others' personal ethical preferences imposed on them.

EXERCISES

Q2. What do you think of this definition? Discuss how it accords with their initial thoughts.

Q3. How is secularism relevant to this subject? I.e. why might you be discussing secularism in Politics, RE or Citizenship Studies?

Q4. What does "secular" mean?

STIMULUS

What does “secular” mean?

“Secular” means religiously neutral or unrelated to religion e.g. brushing your teeth is a secular activity.

Beyond this simple definition, “secular” is a contested adjective. It comes from a Latin word *saecularis* or *saeculum* meaning “the world”, “generation” or “age”. Many religious traditions draw a distinction between the temporal and the divine, or the worldly and the spiritual, considering that both have their place. In some contexts, secular is used to mean non-religious.

Potential meanings of secular:

- Being unrelated to religion
- Being related to worldly, practical or temporal concerns
- Being non-religious
- Being irreligious
- Being related to secularism
- Being justified in non-religious (rather than religious or irreligious) terms

EXERCISES

Q5. What do you think of this definition?

Q6. How might the difference between secular and non-secular be relevant to this subject?

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Write down any additional questions which might emerge related to “What is secularism?” and explore them as a group.
- Find three alternative definitions of secularism and discuss the differences.