



Why secularism? (Part 1) – Competing concepts

KEY QUESTIONS ??

- Why do people support or oppose secularism?

STIMULUS

Things we notice

When we talk about religion in society, whether they are religious or not, and whether they support or oppose secularism, people tend to 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. Secularism is just one response (or range of responses)

STIMULUS

Key concepts for supporters and opponents

People who support or oppose secularism generally have competing interpretations of certain key concepts. The same can be seen in other disputes over political or social worldviews. For example: John and Sasha might both value fairness and oppose oppression, but if they have different interpretations of these concepts, this might lead to John or Sasha supporting very different policies or approaches.

In philosophy, we might consider how different philosophers (and their supporters or opponents) have interpreted certain key concepts such as: free will, justice and aesthetics.

Throughout *Exploring Secularism*, you will have encountered key questions (e.g. What is religious discrimination?) and seen that people's answers to these questions can lead them to support or oppose secularism, and that both secularists and critics of secularism often find the same questions to be of great importance.

One approach to understanding why some people support or oppose different forms of secularism is to consider different answers to these questions. Another is to consider differing interpretations of key concepts.

Concept 1: Secularism

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Concept 2: Liberalism and Pluralism

Liberalism is a wide-ranging political concept which focuses on protecting and enhancing the freedoms of individuals. Liberalism is concerned with a balancing act between the need for governments to protect individuals from harm, and the need to restrain governments from interfering in personal freedom.

Supporters and opponents of secularism might disagree on whether certain courses of action that secularism (or conversely a lack of secularism) leads to, are on balance more liberal or illiberal either intrinsically, or in their outcomes.

See resources 1.03 and 1.04.

Liberalism is closely tied to the concept of pluralism – though they are not synonymous and under some conceptions might be in conflict. In philosophy, pluralism is “a theory or system that recognises more than one ultimate principle”. It can also be defined as “a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles, sources of authority, etc. coexist”. A pluralistic society is generally conceived as one where people are free to pursue their own – often conflicting – versions of “the good life”.

See resources 1.03 and 1.05.

Concepts of liberalism or pluralism which might lead people to support secularism include:

- A secularist framework allows different groups to pursue their own concepts of “the good life”, while ensuring these do not negatively impact on the rights of others.
- Religions need to be as free as other organisations, cultures and ideas to rise and fall in the “marketplace of ideas”; this is central to pluralism.
- (Accommodationist secularism) the state should support all religious or nonreligious groups to live their version of “the good life”.
- While religious power or privilege might have some liberal consequences, it is on balance more liberal to restrict this.

Concepts of pluralism which might lead people to oppose secularism include:

- Different religions have conflicting visions of “the good life” that are not reconcilable with a single secular legal authority or set of rules.
- Without state support or special accommodations, certain forms of religion would not be sustainable.
- Pluralism is not desirable or should be placed below the importance of the state supporting the “correct” religious (or irreligious) worldview.

- While religious power/privilege might have some illiberal consequences, it is on balance more illiberal to restrict this.

Concept 3: Democracy

All theories of liberal democracy (of which secular democracy is a subset) propose some form of limited democracy, i.e. where there are constraints on what a simple majority can do, this acts to constrain majoritarianism. For example, some democracies may require the people to express their will through elected representatives rather than referenda, or might have some laws which require a supermajority (e.g. 75%) to change.

See resource 1.12

Concepts of democracy which might lead people to support secularism include:

- Democracies are limited in the interests of protecting minorities and individuals. Such limits include protecting freedom of and from religion.
- Democratic arguments against secularism are undermined in increasingly religiously diverse and non-religious countries such as the UK.
- Bringing religious decisions within the scope of democratic decision-making violates individual conscience.

Concepts of democracy which might lead people to oppose secularism include:

- Governments should reflect the religious make-up and concerns of citizens. Just as a majority left-wing country would expect to have a left-wing government, a majority Christian country would expect a Christian state.
- It is wrong to exclude religiously motivated policies from the scope of democratic decision-making.
- Democracy is not desirable or is less important than the state promoting the “correct” religious (or irreligious) worldview.

Concept 4: Public reason

See resources 1.06, 1.07 and 1.08 to understand how public reason giving (although the term is relatively modern) is of central concern to secularists and their critics.

From the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: “Public reason requires that the moral or political rules that regulate our common life be, in some sense, justifiable or acceptable to all those persons over whom the rules purport to have authority.”

Concepts of public reason which might lead people to support secularism include:

- Translating concerns into public reason is the only fair way to overcome differences which themselves might not be rationally reconcilable.
- Religious or irreligious motivations are not a good basis for state actions, unless these can be translated into non-religious concerns which are open to rational debate.
- If a religious (or irreligious) cause is justified, then expressing this justification through public reason shouldn't be a barrier.

Concepts of public reason which might lead people to oppose secularism include:

- Not all religious concerns can be translated into those that can be expressed as public reasons, or open to rational debate.
- The concerns of marginalised groups have historically been excluded from privileged groups' concept of public reason or debate.
- The decision to include or exclude certain concerns from public reason can be subjective and controversial.

Concept 5: Gods' will

Many people and societies have believed that gods have revealed their wills to humans, through natural processes, religious or political institutions, personal revelation, religious texts or traditions or the application of human reasoning. At its core, secularism is sceptical of religious power and of people or institutions claiming the authority to speak for gods. Ideas about the will of gods are therefore as central to secularism in their own way as public reason.

See resources 1.05 and 1.06.

Concepts of gods' wills that might lead people to support secularism include:

- People tend to conflate gods' wills with their own, which should encourage scepticism.
- We can never be sure if we (or others) have correctly interpreted gods' wills, so we should act in accordance with public reasoning.
- Gods' wills act on human minds, so we can exercise public reasoning.
- Gods do not exist and therefore do not have wills.
- Gods' wills are intrinsically unknowable or are not currently known.
- Gods are non-interventionist and so do not have wills or opinions which concern humans.
- Gods' wills exist but are not authoritative and should not be privileged over humans' wills.
- A god or gods specifically wills a secularist society, or the freedom of a secularist system is best able to bring about a society consistent with gods' wills.

Concepts of gods' wills that might lead people to oppose secularism include:

- A god or gods will a society which privileges certain religious authorities, ideas or institutions.
- The privileging of certain religious authorities, ideas or institutions is necessary for a society to understand or implement a god or gods' will.
- Privileging religious authorities, ideas and institutions has benefits for society, whether or not gods exist or have wills which are knowable.

Concept 6: Religion as a public good (or public bad)

Supporters and opponents of secularism might disagree on whether religion is a public good. This is particularly relevant to accommodationalist models of secularism; see resource 1.12. For example, education might be a public good (whether or not all members of the public directly benefit from it) and air pollution might be a public bad (whether or not all members of the public are directly harmed by it).

Concepts of religion as a public good which might lead people to support secularism include:

- Religion is so personal that it can only be considered a private and not a public good or bad.
- Religion can be a public good or a public bad, but state support or privilege leads to negative outcomes.
- Religion is best able to be a public good within the freedom afforded by a secularist system.

Concepts of religion as a public good which might lead people to oppose secularism include:

- Religion (or a specific religion) is more likely to act in the public good when privileged or supported by the state.

- Religion (or a specific religion) is more likely to act in the public good when privileged or supported by the state.
- Religion (or a specific religion) is an intrinsic public good that should be supported by the state.
- Religion (or a specific religion) is a public bad and should be suppressed by the state.

Other competing concepts

The six concepts explored above are not an exhaustive list. There are other broad concepts and many specific examples that supporters and opponents of secularism might disagree on, some of which come up in other resources of *Exploring Secularism*. For instance:

- Different people have different conceptions of which actions or justifications are **religious**, **non-religious** or **irreligious**.
- There are many different interpretations of **freedom of and from religion**, which are explored elsewhere.
- There are many different interpretations of what counts as **privilege**, **tolerance** or **discrimination**.

EXERCISES

- Q1.** Should liberalism and pluralism lead us to support or oppose secularism?
- Q2.** Should democracy lead us to support or oppose secularism?
- Q3.** Should public reason giving lead us to support or oppose secularism?
- Q4.** Why does your view of gods' wills lead you to support or oppose secularism?
- Q5.** Should religion having positive and/or negative effects lead us to support or oppose secularism?

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Explain how a supporter and opponent of secularism might view each of the contested concepts in the stimulus and how that might influence their other views.
- Stage a class debate on one of the following motions:
 - “This class believes that secularism is the fairest approach to freedom of religion and belief”.
 - “This class believes that anyone who opposes theocracy is some sort of secularist.”
 - “This class believes that secularism is on balance more liberal/pluralistic than religious privilege.”
 - “This class believes that to the victors go the spoils; religious rules can be imposed democratically.”
- Students on the debate team should draw on the perspectives above as well as their own, and other students should ask questions and vote.
- Contrast the use of “public reason” in the work of Immanuel Kant, John Rawls and a third philosopher of your choice. How might each of their interpretations be used to support or oppose secularism?