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Notions of the Secular: A Comparative Study on the Debate on “Thought for the day” in the United Kingdom and the Nepali Debate on Secularism

Keywords

Secular, Secularism, Great Britain, Broadcasting, Nepal, Constitution

I. Introduction

(author 1 + 2)

Much as its counterpart, “religious”, the term “secular” is as ambiguous as it is unavoidable. Contemporary Western societies are hardly imaginable without the distinction between the two spheres, and yet, what it precisely means for these societies to be secular (and therefore not religious) is a matter of much debate. To make things more difficult, the term secular is often accompanied by a number of related concepts, such as “secularism” and “secularization” both of which are highly contested in and outside academia in their own right. Moreover, while similar terms exist in other languages, e.g. “das Säkulare” in German, these terms do not necessarily have the exact same meaning or connotations as their English counterparts. This has to do with the fact that each society has a different history, in which religious change has occurred in often closely related yet unique ways and in which terms needed to describe these changes have been adopted, defined and re-defined at different moments in time and by different thinkers. As history has not stopped and religious change is occurring, if anything, at a faster pace than ever before, this continuous process of constant redefinitions of the secular is still going on today.

In our case studies, we look at two examples of such contemporary discourses revolving around the term “secular”. The cases chosen cannot be representative for the overall variety of the terms usage around the world, but by selecting an example from a Western, highly secularized country with a long history of secular thought on the one hand, and on the

other hand a non-Western country with high rates of religious practice in which secular thinking has only recently been introduced, should allow for rich comparisons. In both cases, the question how “secular” is understood in a given society becomes tangible through the fact that the term is debated, by different parties, in conflict situations. In the first case from the United Kingdom, the conflict revolves around the question whether or not non-religious voices should be heard in a popular, traditionally religious radio segment. In the second case, we analyze the media discourse in Nepal which developed in the course of transforming the state from the former Hindu kingdom into a secular democracy.

Despite the ambiguity of the term, which our case studies will highlight, what most people in the field of Religious Studies and related disciplines agree upon is that the basic ideas that are now commonly referred to as the secular are rather young and that they emerged in the West and therefore in a specifically Christian context (Asad, 2003). An important point of reference in all histories of the secular is certainly the Reformation and its aftermath in which the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* was first introduced (see Hölscher, 2013, pp. 37-38). Whilst it was still deemed unacceptable to have two religions (or, rather, two different Christian denominations) coexist in the same territory, the idea of equal territories adhering to different religions became acceptable. This marked an important difference to the Middle Ages, a time during which anything outside the one true faith was considered heretic. It was also in the Middle Ages when the distinction between a “spiritual” and a “temporal” sphere of life became dominant, a distinction that would shape the religious discourse long into the 19th century. Unlike the modern distinction between religious and secular, the spiritual and temporal spheres were not considered to stand in opposition to each other, despite all the differences that the foremost representatives of these spheres, the Pope and the Emperor, did have in practice. Rather, the spiritual and temporal spheres were considered to complement each other, as it were, by means of a division of labour).

“For instance, when a craftsman had offended against the civil law, civil authorities would punish him as much as the church: the one by exclusion from the guild, the other by exclusion from the sacrament. And the same kind of cooperation worked when somebody had offended against the ecclesiastical law, for instance, by being constantly absent from Sunday services.” (Hölscher, 2013, 38)

Even during the Enlightenment, a period often associated with radical change in religious discourse, the idea of a spiritual and temporal sphere with complementing responsibilities was not entirely dismissed. However, Enlightenment thinkers in the 17th century were among the first to argue not against a particular religious practice or a particular theology, but against religion as such. And yet, these thinkers did not postulate a world without religion. Rather, they argued for a world in which a different form of religion – an enlightened religion – would be dominant. It was only later, by the second half of the 19th century, when the idea of a non-religious world as an alternative to a religious one was introduced and it was only then, in hindsight, that the Enlightenment was considered a precursor to this new, secular way of thinking (Hölscher, 2013, p. 39).

It was at that same time when the idea of a secular alternative to religion was first transformed into a political (or cultural) program, and with it, the term “secularism” first emerged. One of the first proponents of secularism was George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), who is credited for first using the term “secularism” in his 1851 book *Origin and Nature of Secularism*. Since then, the term gradually caught on in a wider public, first in Great Britain, then in other countries as well. For the case of Germany, for example, Lucian Hölscher has shown that freethinkers in this country did not use the term “säkular” for their anti-religious convictions until about 1890 and the wider German public only adopted it after the First World War (Hölscher, 2013, p. 45). By coming up with this new term, Holyoake wittingly avoided the term “atheist” – a term tantamount to a worldview which was, by the time, widely

regarded immoral (Asad, 2003, p. 23). Another reason for him not to speak of atheism was that he – while himself an atheist – did not want atheism to be a prerequisite for adopting a secular worldview. Unlike other freethinkers of his time, Holyoake’s secular program, thus, was not anti-religious. Instead he aimed for a society that would not be dominated by religious doctrine, but in which everyone was free to pursue life according to his beliefs or disbeliefs (Roetz, 2013, pp. 9-11).

Thus, from the moment the term secularism first caught on, it could mean two very different things. In the more radical understanding of the term, secularism meant the freeing of society of all religion and the adoption of a new, non-religious worldview. The much more moderate understanding of the term is what Holyoake had in mind: the idea of “the secular” as the common ground on which all beliefs, religious or not, could strive. This double meaning of the term has essentially shaped the discourse on religion since Holyoake’s time and is – as our case studies will demonstrate – still very much at the center of debates today. The second term that became widely accepted in its modern-day usage at the turn of the 20th century was “secularization”. In the Middle Ages, the Latin “*saecularisatio*” had a rather narrow meaning, referring to the transition of a member of a monastic order (*regularis*) to the status of a clergyman outside the order (*canonicus*) (Asad, 2003, p. 192; Schmidt, 2014, p. 361). After the Reformation, the term was used to describe the transfer of church property to laypersons, or else, the state. Thus, today’s understanding of the term actually has a metaphorical character, indicating that something that once belonged to the church – the souls of men, as it were – does now belong to someone else: the state, the individuals or, indeed, the secular. The term “secularization”, thus, was adopted in the late 19th and early 20th century in order to describe a process, in which the secular gradually succeeded in superseding religion both from the public sphere and from the hearts and minds of individuals (see Hölscher, 2013, pp. 53-54). Early sociologists, including Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber, adopted the term in that sense and for the most part of the 20th century, secularization was widely regarded as an

unavoidable and irreversible process that signified the end of religion in the Western world and that would, eventually, gain ground in all other parts of the world on their path to modernity. In recent years, however, the secularization thesis has significantly lost followers, with more and more scholars in the sociology of religion and related fields pointing out the many ways and forms in which religion has proved remarkably persistent – albeit with strong variations across regions and demographics (Berger, 1999; Casanova, 1994; Graf, 2004). To acknowledge these differences, researchers now tend to use the plural and speak of “secularities” (Casanova, 2010, p. 30). The perception of a modern person as non-religious has sunk deep into the European mind. Casanova (2010, p. 34) emphasizes the fact that there is a tendency in the United States to the effect that people declare themselves to be more religious than they actually are, whereas the opposite is true in Western European countries. He ascribes these findings to the different notions of what it means to be a modern American, which obviously includes being religious. In the case of Western Europe it is just the other way round (Casanova, 2010, p. 34).

Interestingly, whilst Christians in Europe had first regarded secularization as a danger to Christianity and as a sign of a moral decline of society, they later developed a much more positive understanding of the concept (see Hölscher, 2013, pp. 54-55). After the Second World War, church officials would call for a new understanding of Christianity that would lay emphasis not on the differences between Christianity and secularism, but on their commonalities – which were, in turn, understood to be Christian values in secular disguise: “Thus, ‘world’ and ‘society’, ‘creation’ and ‘environment’, ‘charity’ and ‘solidarity’ were taken to be interchangeable; obedience to God was translated to social responsibility and so on” (Hölscher, 2013, pp. 54-55).

Today, this understanding of Christianity as a predecessor to secularism (or rather: as a predecessor to secularity) is advocated by a number of scholars, including Charles Taylor. For Taylor, secularity is a result of changes and reforms that have taken place within

Christendom and which have had the ultimate effect that today, belief in God has become just one option among others, while before, belief in God was axiomatic. In that sense, in his eponymous study, Taylor coins the current age “a secular age” (Taylor, 2007). An important feature of that age, according to Taylor, is that religious people have accepted the secularity of this age, thus they have accepted that their religious conviction is just one option among others. This is what Taylor calls the “immanent frame” in which religious convictions exist today. Taylor, then, goes further by claiming that the general acceptance of the immanent frame is a necessary condition for modern democracies to function. He also takes the position that all societies, including the ones who have not traditionally been Christian, should accept the immanent frame. In a way, Taylor’s position echoes Holyoake’s, although the latter is absent from Taylor’s voluminous book (Roetz, 2013, p. 9). For Taylor, as for Holyoake, secular does not mean anti-religious. Rather, the term stands for an attitude of indifference towards religious or any other beliefs, an attitude that, if adopted by the state, allows for all citizens to live freely.

A fierce critique of Taylor’s position can be found in Talal Asad’s influential work *Formations of the Secular* (Asad, 2003). In it, Asad argues that precisely because secularism emerged in the context of Christian Europe, as Taylor claims, the concept cannot simply be transferred to all Non-European societies and traditions. To Asad, the very distinction between the secular and the religious is a Western invention inextricably linked with Christianity. Or, as Gil Anidjar puts it: “Secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religions” (Anidjar, 2006, p. 62). Therefore, asking other religions to accept secularity as a neutral sphere is actually asking them to accept a very specific set of rules and preconditions that was developed in the Christian West and is now governed by the state. Thus, while Asad does not deny that citizens in the secular West can adhere to any religious belief in private, he claims that they can only

enter the public sphere as a version of itself that has been tamed, as it were, by the secular state.

“From the point of view of secularism, religion has the option either of confining itself to private belief and worship or of engaging in public talk that makes no demands on life. In either case such religion is seen by secularism to take the form it should properly have. Each is equally the condition of its legitimacy. But this requirement is made difficult for those who wish to reform life given the ambition of the secular state itself.” (Asad, 2003, p. 199)

For Asad, the rise of secularism is not the story of religious differences that were successfully overcome by the mutual acceptance of a neutral, secular sphere provided by the state. Instead, it is the story of the secular state gradually establishing a position of power that would allow it to define acceptable and unacceptable forms of religion and, at the same time, relegate religion to the margins of society. In other words, it is Asad’s position that the moderate version of the understanding of secularism as a neutral sphere is actually a mask for the radical understanding of the term as anti-religious, at least when it comes to the relationship between the secular state and Non-Western religious traditions.

In today’s world, different societies struggle with secularism in different ways. Outside the Western world, secularism is often considered to be synonymous with atheism or anti-religion, which makes it hard for these societies to come up with an acceptable language, when it comes to defining the state’s relationship towards religion in the constitution. In the West, secularism is sometimes associated with strict regimes of separation between church and state, as is the case – albeit in different manifestations – in the United States and France. In other countries, including Great Britain, which will be the focus of our first case study, the understanding of secularity is broadly evocative of Taylor’s position, with the idea of equidistance between the state and any form of belief being dominant. However, in Britain,

developments in the religious field, such as the dramatic decline in church membership (Brown, 2009) and religious pluralization related to migration (Weller, 2009) have recently triggered a debate about whether the state and social system are truly indifferent towards all world views, or are actually giving preference, either by tradition or on purpose, to religion in general and to Christianity in particular

Some scholars, including Jürgen Habermas, have called the new religious situation that Western countries find themselves in “postsecular”. In short, postsecular societies are “post”-secular in the sense that they have lost their faith in the secularization thesis and the expectation of the disappearance of religion that went along with it. Instead, they have, in Habermas’ words, “come to terms with the continued existence of religious communities and with the influence of religious voices both in the national public sphere and on the global political stage” (Habermas, 2013, p. 348). Public discourse in Great Britain and other Western countries, then, revolves around the question as to how these societies should adapt to this new “postsecular” situation. The major challenge lies in the fact that, historically, when it came to religion, these societies had to deal with an almost exclusively Christian population which translated into a number of structures, practices, and laws, that now appear “custom-made” for the Christian population, but not for other religions or non-religious groups. In dealing with this legacy, states and social institutions have developed widely different strategies, ranging from the complete dismissal of all privileges historically awarded to religion to the broad extension of privileges from the Christian churches to other religious communities. In this context, it can become an issue whether such extensions of privileges should be awarded not only to religious groups outside Christianity, but also to communities based on secular belief-system – as is the case in our first case study, which will focus on the debate on the inclusion of secular contributions to the religious BBC radio programme

Thought for the Day.

When analyzing non-Western societies it should be kept in mind that the concept of religion developed alongside the notion of the secular and is based on specific notions deriving from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Western modernity subsumed the diversity of all pre-modern and non-secular ideas, practices and institutions into what was termed “religion”. In turn, all societies outside the Occident were considered to be essentially religious and, as Schmidt claims, it was only in wake of this development and in contrasting them with secularization and modernity, that Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam emerged as “religions” (Schmidt, 2014, p. 363).¹

This notion of religion as the opposite of modern secularity is not necessarily shared by non-Christian religions or societies and therefore huge conceptual difficulties arise when the concept of secularity is applied to it. With reference to the German religious survey study Religionsmonitor 2008, Schmidt demonstrates how a specific understanding of religion as “belief in the transcendent” leads to contradictory results. Whereas 99 percent of the Indian and 95 percent of the Thai population identify themselves as “religious”, their convictions lack a clear relation to the transcendent, which, in turn, leads to them being categorized as belonging to a more immanent-secularist naturalistic *Weltanschauung* (Schmidt, 2014, p. 358). Clearly, the distinction between secular and religious is meaningless in this context. We will come back to that in our second case study about Nepal.

The Indian political theorist Rajeev Bhargava suggests taking the example of the independent Indian state as a working model for increasingly multireligious societies. He speaks of two main features: a) principled distance and b) contextual secularism. Principled distance means the principal right of the state to intervene in religious matters, which has to be guided by secular principles. Not all religions are treated in the same way, but stately intervention is undertaken considering the peculiarities of each religion. The second feature acknowledges the fact that not in all cases an implementation of abstract principles is

possible, but a sensitive balancing of different values and claims has to be aimed at (Bhargava, 2010, p. 119, p. 122).

In Nepal, as our case study will show, the notions of the secular and secularism have to be put under close scrutiny. Keeping in mind the difficulties of defining Hinduism as a religion and defining its role in society, the effort to separate ‘the religious’ from ‘the secular’, in the Nepali context, is destined to fail.

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¹ “Es ist nicht übertrieben zu behaupten, dass Judentum, Christentum, Hinduismus, Buddhismus, Islam konzeptionell als ‚Religion‘ hier erst entstanden – d.h. in europäischer Wahrnehmung im Sinne von entwicklungsgeschichtlich zusammengehörenden Teilen eines Gesamtphänomens ‚Religion‘ in Opposition zu ‚Säkularisierung‘ und ‚Moderne‘ einerseits, sowie andererseits einem verbindenden Bedeutungskern in Gestalt des ‚modernen‘ Religionsbegriffs und seiner Derivate wissenschaftlicher Definitionen“ (Schmidt 2014, p. 363).