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Secularism in international politics

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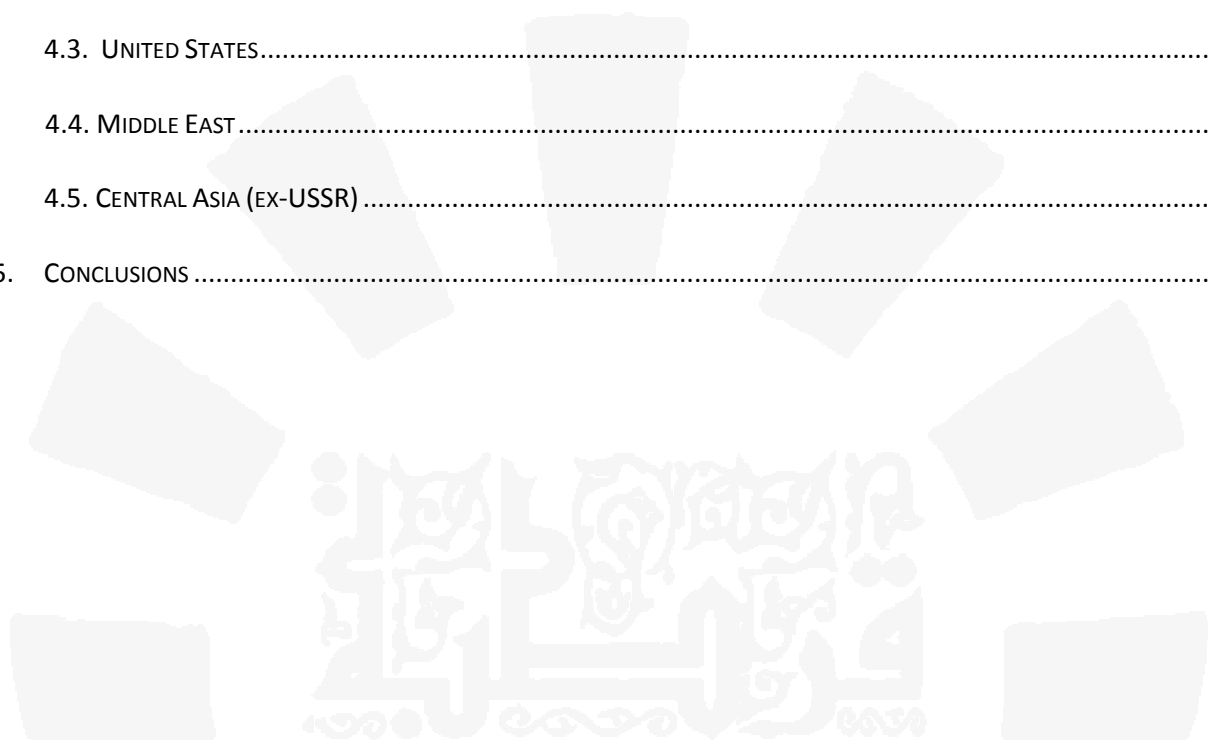


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1. INTRODUCTION

The question of the sense and definition of the terms “secular” and “lay” is both important and topical, notably in the field of international politics.

The relationship between the religious and the political, and how it should be dealt with in practical terms, is an age-old problem. Nevertheless, it appears that our era is relatively ill-equipped to meet this challenge. To do so it is necessary to consider both the relationship and the distinction between the religious and the political – in other words to have a conceptualisation which is both effective and acceptable for the parties concerned.

In practical terms, the problem can be posed as it was two thousand years ago: how to render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s. How to render to politics what is political, and to religion what is religious.

There is no single answer to this question. A certain discourse, to which perhaps unfortunately the term “modern” has been attributed, wants to see religion and politics as different parts of a static landscape. These entities, specifically the religious and the political, are conceived as institutional realities with a permanent and essential nature. According to this approach, each element simply needs to be put back in its proper place. In this way, religion and politics should be found in distinct spheres tightly sealed from one another, from where they should never have escaped.

Another approach considers the relationship between religion and politics in a completely different manner, based on a different conception of language and its role in the construction of reality. It understands the imperative to “render to Caesar...” as a rule for action, a marching order. The command is not given with the aim of achieving a final result which is known in advance, nor does it prescribe a predictable end to be achieved. It leads rather to a process of shared searching, an approach which is neither pre-programmed nor ever definitively attained either as an institutional outcome or as a set of ideas or concepts. Thus, according to this approach, the term “secularism” is not a natural state, a universal fundamental principle, a position anterior to religion or an *a priori*. It is rather the result of a certain approach, which could be described as internal to the religious, and which gives it the means to *act* in a manner, which is *independent* of but not *separate* from the religious.

2. DEFINITION OF THE TERMS SECULAR AND LAY: A LACK OF CONSENSUS

“Secular” or “lay”, alternatively “secularism” or “laïcité¹”, are related terms, the latter being used in the francophone world and with a particular meaning linked to France (see below). These terms derive from religious vocabulary used for example in the Church to distinguish secular and monastic orders. The secular is opposed to, or distinguished from, the religious. Moreover, just as the term “religion” has many definitions and uses, which cannot all be reduced to the same meaning, the same is true of the term “secular”. There is thus not a stable and reliable definition, so the sense in which this term is used here needs to be explained.

3. HOW TO USE THE TERM “SECULAR”

The word “secular” qualifies an approach, which is independent of, but not necessarily separate from, the religious. “Secular” can also qualify *a posteriori* a space, which is constituted as the result of a negotiation or dialogue, but does not refer to a reality *a priori*.

In the political domain, the use of the term “secular” should be based on the practice of empirical science². The scientific (empirical) approach demands that scientific products be inter-subjectively and even inter-communally testable. They must not depend on a particular matrix of construction of reality

¹ The word is used here in French, as in English the words are not interchangeable, lay meaning “non-clerical” or “amateur”.

² An idea developed by the physician and scientific epistemologist Karl R. Popper, especially in *The Poverty of Historicism*, Routledge, 2002.

(worldview or religion) or any *a priori*. In other words, these products must be the result of an approach, which is *independent* of the religious or of religion. *Independent* of the religious does not mean *separate* (or sealed off) from the religious: each community remains free to recognise these scientific products as compatible with its values.

Likewise, in politics, the fruit of a negotiation on practical and concrete questions, linked to the concrete cohabitation of different communities, is arrived at in such a way that the concrete result is compatible with the values or rules of the religious matrix (or construction of reality) of each community that takes part in the negotiation. The product of these intercommunal negotiations is a secular space, the result of an approach, which is independent of one or the other religion, a religiously neutral approach.

The secular domain is effectively not an *a priori*: it is the result of a negotiation or a dialogue. It is not understood in the same way in all regions of the world, however. As long as communities live within a common framework of beliefs regarding how society should function, these beliefs do not pose a problem – they pass unnoticed. This is what happens at the local level. The arrival of new immigrants changes the situation: but that is another question, which is not dealt with in this paper.

4. THE TERMS “SECULAR” AND “LAÏC” IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

The use of the term “secular” varies from one context to another. It is determined in effect by the historical context in which it finds its meaning (*Sitz im Leben*). Here are some examples.

4.1. SWITZERLAND

In Switzerland, the different linguistic, cultural and religious communities that make up Swiss society have learned to live together by adopting a process of pragmatic dialogue concentrating on practical and concrete questions rather than through debates on ideas and values.

In this process of dialogue, practical solutions are found which are compatible within the value system or religious matrix of each community – and which are at the same time independent of (but not separate from) these value systems or matrices. Each problem must be treated at its appropriate level (under the principle of subsidiarity).

The religious question is dealt with at the local level through a positive or concrete approach – while the defence of one’s liberty or “negative or rule-based approach” is dealt with at the highest level (the constitution).

Swiss political culture, which is based on seeking a consensus on concrete issues through dialogue, enables society to benefit from a useful and credible experience in the “secular process”, whose essence is not anti-religious.

4.2. FRANCE

The use of the term “*laïcité*” is intimately connected with a historical conflict between the Church and the State. It should be noted here that this conflict relates essentially to the Roman Catholic Church and much less to Protestantism or Judaism. Islam, a relatively recent phenomenon in France, has given rise to a reaction modelled on anti-clericalism. In its current usage, *laïcité* is understood as a constant battle against the Church in order to maintain or re-establish a separation between Church and State, which is not

perceived as having been definitively achieved. There is a constant movement to reject public manifestations of the religious aimed at excluding its appearance completely from the public domain.

In France, *laïcité* owes its existence to the religious in both a positive and negative sense – and is therefore perhaps not as independent as it would like to believe. French *laïcité* is sometimes described as ideological or fundamentalist, and this is probably the result of its combative position and its dependence (logical, but not admitted) with regard to the religious.

4.3. UNITED STATES

The American concept of secularity is very different from that in France and essentially dynamic. Its principle is summarised in the First Amendment to the Constitution: “*Congress shall not make law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*” The State may not intervene *either* positively *or* negatively. It is a position, which is religiously neutral and not opposed to the religious (with regard to its manifestation in the public domain). This approach derives from a pragmatic and liberal political philosophy³ in the sense of believing in and respecting the liberty of the individual, who is placed before the State.

If in France *laïcité* is understood as a movement of separation and rejection and for the protection of the State in relation to the Church, in the United States, for historical and cultural reasons, secularism is understood as a movement to protect the domain of civil society from intrusion by the State.

³ Which corresponds to a school of thought referred to from the Middle Ages on as “modern”.

Between the United States and France, one is confronted by two fundamentally different intuitions of reality in the domains of knowledge and language (pragmatism versus rationalism). In France, there is a tendency to attribute a fixed significance to a sign or symbol – for example with regard to wearing the headscarf. Meanwhile in the Anglo-Saxon context a symbol does not have significance in itself: all depends on the way it is used, and there is no logical reason to prejudge its usage (i.e. its meaning).

In Switzerland, secularism is practised in a way, which is close to that of the United States.

4.4. MIDDLE EAST

In the Middle East, the origins of the use or meaning of the term “secular” are completely different. Use of this term cannot be dissociated from the political conflict, sometimes violent, between feuding brothers: secularists and Islamists. Since the end of the 1970s, the secular parties, which emerged from the independence movements, have seen their hold on power as “mortally” threatened by a rising political alternative consciously built on an Islamic base.

To position oneself as secular in the Middle East is to take part in a conflict. In addition, the term does not have the same meaning as might be believed – from any Middle Eastern points of view. For most of *faith-based* civil society in the Middle East, secular means wearing a tie, dressing in Western fashion – particularly for women, with all that that implies – drinking alcohol and being associated with the imperialist powers.

“Secular” states in the Middle East are not in fact secular since they maintain control of religion at the security level through their interior ministry, at the political level

through the Islamic High Council, administratively through the ministry of religious affairs, economically through the control of religious foundations (Awqaf), the latter sometimes being managed through a ministry of Awqaf.

4.5. CENTRAL ASIA (EX-USSR)

Even when the presidents (in particular) of the Central Asian republics position themselves publicly as Muslim, which was necessary at the time of independence due to the requirements of democracy, the post-communist elites of these countries understand the term secular through the Soviet prism, which denote an anti-religious position. This posture towards religion is backed by a desire to control ideologies and currents of thinking in the name of “ideological security”. This concept derives from the theory, typically Soviet but existing elsewhere, that a belief or discourse has predictable and necessary practical consequences⁴. Thus, for example, a utopian group that believes in the necessary disappearance of the State, even if it has never acted on that belief and potentially lives its belief in its own dream-world, must be arrested, imprisoned and destroyed for the sake of State’s security needs.

Thus in practical terms, although governments should establish laws on religion, ensuring the separation of the State from religious organisations, in fact *all* the countries of Central Asia, including

⁴ This conception derives from the basic intuition – which is also on theory among other possible theories, of what language is, i.e. a role of mirroring reality. A similarity can be recognised here with the intuition regarding the function of language and concepts in what has been mentioned above in the French model, in contrast to a pragmatic approach.

Kazakhstan, following the Russian model, have established repressive laws to keep tight control over religious organisations. They thus enter into conflict with the Muslim-majority population groups (as well as with other religious communities) whose

religious practice is intensifying. These sections of society are demanding that their governments adhere to a definition of secular as the separation of the State from religious organisations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The question of secularity gives rise to stormy if not violent debate in different regions of the world. In order to conduct this discussion in a critical and constructive fashion, it is necessary to be prudent in the use of this term and to bear in mind its meaning in a particular context. There are several approaches to the notion of secularity that derive from different historical and sociological contexts. Awareness of this situation will facilitate depolarisation in contemporary conflictual debates, for example in the Arab-Muslim context where “anti-secularists”, starting from a false assumption, liken “secular” to “anti-religious”. Such a differentiated approach would facilitate a convergence of different points of view and would contribute significantly to the promotion of peaceful co-existence.