

Secularism is a confusing term – there are a lot of differing opinions about what it means. There are many versions and interpretations around the world and all of them are under extreme pressure from determined theocratic influences.

So what does the National Secular Society stand for? What is its preferred interpretation of secularism?

After a long debate, we settled on our Secular Charter, which sets out in a simple and brief form what we would like to see if ever the day comes that we have a written constitution. It shows how we would like any future written constitution for this country should not make the mistakes of others and make concessions to any particular religion, or to the idea that religion requires special privileges that are denied to others.

At present, of course, we have the strange anomaly that sees England having an established church – the very thing that is inimical to secularism – and yet we have the fewest active worshippers.

Secularisation – death of religion by atrophy and indifference

What does secularism mean? It is not atheism as many of its opponents would like to claim. As the French Secularism Monitoring Group says: *Secularism is not the enemy of religion, any more than it is an ideology or opinion rivalling others: it is the political principle that enables all existential beliefs to co-exist harmoniously, on the basis of the shared conviction that every individual possesses the same right of expression.*

Democracy is an essential element of secularism. In France laïcité – their version of secularism – protects the state from religion, whereas in the USA the constitution protects religion from the state.

## **FRANCE**

An excellent definition of the French form of secularism from the French Secularism Monitoring Centre, which proclaims that secularism is “not just one opinion among many others, but rather the freedom to have an opinion”, adding: “It is not a belief, but rather the principle authorising all beliefs, provided they respect the principles of freedom of conscience and equal rights. For this reason, it is neither pro nor anti-religious. On this basis, adherence to a faith or philosophical belief is entirely a question of freedom of conscience for every man or woman.” A secular republic, the centre says, “ensures citizens’ equality in front of public services, whatever their convictions and beliefs”

Laïcité is the unique French take on secularism – where every citizen is equal in the eyes of the republic. Every French citizen is free to worship as they please, within the law, but their beliefs bring them no advantage or disadvantage.

In return every citizen is expected to be loyal to the republic. Freedom of religion is enshrined, but it can never be part of the state structure,

Therefore, there are no religious symbols on display in any state building, like courts, schools and so on. No religion is taught in schools – indeed, there is a strict ban on it. This also means that religion and race are not taken into account in any official statistics.

Difficult to know, therefore, how many Muslims there are actually in France. Estimates range from 3% to 9%

Came about after the French revolution when Catholic Church was overbearing and cruel.

Napoleon reinstated a lot of the church's powers in 1801

The in 1905 the law officially separating church and state came into effect.

It isn't pure secularism because, as part of the settlement in 1905, the state took ownership of every church built before 1905.

It allows the Catholic church to continue using the buildings and pays for their upkeep. There are also Catholic schools in France paid for by the state. The state doesn't pay similarly for Hindu temples or Islamic mosques. So, secularism is compromised.

And now the great debate is whether secularism is being used in France to disadvantage Muslims.

The veil debate – the girls who want to wear the veil in school – is the state denying them an education or are they denying themselves an education by refusing to comply with the law?

Laicite developed to drive the Catholic Church from political power – it drove the soutane – the black hat worn by priests – from all public institutions, hospitals, town halls, schools. But it is now argued that the soutane has been replaced by the hijab as the symbol that must be purged from the state institutions.

Some have argued that the difference is that the Catholic Church had real power, but the Muslims have little or none. Except, of course, they have the power to tie the state up in knots and thereby pose a real threat to laicite. They can create the image of themselves as innocent victims of a racist regime and that could turn public opinion against laicite. The very laicite that seeks to constrain religious power-seeking.

It all came to head in 1989 when three girls in a school in Creil – a town North of Paris – refused to remove their headscarves in their classroom. A huge national debate ensued, and eventually the State Council argued that, as long as religious garb doesn't disturb the classroom or constitute "pressure, provocation, or proselytism," it could not be prohibited.

Fifteen years later, though, the French parliament banned conspicuous religious symbols from schools, arguing that they created separation between students.

There is no law banning headscarves inside the council's building, or any other public place except in schools where teachers and employees must observe "religious neutrality". But in 2010 a law was brought in that banned people covering their face in public – and although it was claimed that this was not aimed at Muslim women specifically – crash helmets in banks etc – it clearly was.

Is this a challenge to Muslims or are Muslims challenging secularism?

90 intellectuals wrote to Le Monde decrying the "attacks and hate mongering against Muslims". But others point to the horrific attacks by Islamist radicals in France – in Nice, at the Bataclan nightclub and on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo.

Who is right? Is Islam a threat to France's laicite – regarded as precious by so many French people? Or has it been weaponised by the right as an excuse for anti-Muslim discrimination?

Macron says he defends secularism but he defends women's right to wear a headscarf in public places – except schools. His predecessors Manuel Valls said that Islam has "an archaic view of women" and Jacques Chirac said that the headscarf in schools was "an aggression".

Macron says he will announce plans soon to "normalise" Islam in France. "In my fight against separatism, against political Islam, I will be intractable," he said.

A recent poll showed that 78% of French people thought that secularism was being menaced compared to 58% three years ago.

## USA

USA Beto O'Rourke who stood for the Democratic nomination for president, was asked at a LGBT event whether religious groups that refuse services to LGBT people should have their tax-exempt status removed. He answered yes. He is no longer in the running. O'Rourke was dismissed as "far-left" for his views.

His challengers for the nomination criticised him because they realised that if you completely alienate the religious vote, you lose the election. They were anxious to reassure their core voters – the African Americans and Muslims, that they would not interfere with their anti-gay approaches.

At the same time, 1 in 3 Democrats is in the "none" category and is angered by right-wing religious views.

But David French, a Harvard Law School-trained religious liberty specialist said:

"Right now, Democrats have to focus on all those white, secular, online progressives ... who are extremely hostile to small ... orthodox religion. But party leaders also know they "have in their coalition the least religious and the most religious cohorts in American life. ...

"There is that coalition of woke Democrats, but there are also millions of African American churchgoers. ... That's an issue Democrats will have to deal with sooner or later."

Constant claims that religion is under attack

Attorney General William Barr, speaking at Notre Dame's law school, [condemned societal ills](#) on conspiring American secularists.

"We see the growing ascendancy of secularism and the doctrine of moral relativism," he said. "Basically every measure of this social pathology continues to gain ground." schools for having expelled religious teachings: "This moral lobotomy of public schools has been based on extremist notions of separation of church and state or on theories of moral relativism which reject the notion that there are standards of right or wrong to which the community can demand adherence."

Barr went on to identify the decreasing influence of religion in American life and that people he thinks of as secularists do not have the live-and-let-live philosophy.

“The secular project has itself become a religion, pursued with religious fervor,” he said. “It is taking on all the trappings of religion, including inquisitions and excommunication. (How ironic!) Those who defy the creed risk a figurative burning at the stake — social, educational and professional ostracism and exclusion waged through lawsuits and savage social media campaigns.”

Finally Barr comes out clearly to declare the culture war between people of faith and the secularists who, according to his beliefs, threaten our way of life.

“Secularists, and their allies among the ‘progressives,’ have marshalled all the force of mass communications, popular culture, the entertainment industry, and academia in an unremitting assault on religion and traditional values.”

He described several social issues as “consequences of this moral upheaval.”

“Along with the wreckage of the family, we are seeing record levels of depression and mental illness, dispirited young people, soaring suicide rates, increasing numbers of angry and alienated young males, an increase in senseless violence and a deadly drug epidemic.”

“This is not decay. This is organized destruction. Secularists and their allies have marshaled all the forces of mass communication, popular culture, the entertainment industry and academia, in an unremitting assault on religion and traditional values.”

## **CANADA**

Recently the province of Quebec introduced a law of secularism – Bill 21 – that bans some state employees like policemen and teachers from wearing religious symbols while they’re on the job. Bill 9 imposes a duty on would-be immigrants to sign up to “Quebec values.”

Again, it has caused a huge and ongoing backlash, with Muslim women arguing that they can no longer take jobs as teachers in public schools.

## **TURKEY**

Erdogan is following the classic path of a dictator/ He has demolished any opposition in the media, neutralised the courts, imprisoned his critics and rigged elections.

He has also begun to dismantle the secular constitution brought about by the moderniser Kemal Ataturk. Who took control of the country in 1923. He abolished the monarchy and created a republic based on secular principles.

These included religion-free schools and a ban on any Islamic dress in public. Women were not permitted to wear scarves in any state context and were discouraged from doing so in public. He wanted to bring the country into the modern world.

Since Erdogan was elected, headscarves have returned, religious schools have been established and although democracy is still there in theory, the possibility of unseating Erdogan by democratic means now seems remote.

Yesterday I signed a petition aimed at getting the release from prison of a Turkish woman politician, who is a human rights activist and has been critical of the Erdogan regime. She has been charged with blasphemy against Islam and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

This is the classic tactic of dictators - enrol religion to their cause and then use blasphemy as a handy tool to rid themselves of critics. Her case has one more appeal before the sentence is upheld, so we are hoping international pressure will cause a change of tack.

On the topic of blasphemy – Greece abolished its blasphemy law last year and then last week announced that it would be reinstated. Any criticism of the Orthodox Church would result in prosecution. Fortunately, the proposal caused such an outcry.

## **INDIA**

The secular constitution of India has been under attack for many years by the Hindu nationalist parties. Gandhi thought that all religion had truth and error and that in order to thrive and live in peace, it was necessary for none of them to have ultimate power. This idea was popular for a while, but we have seen the results of religious warfare in India, something that Gandhi's secularism could not contain.

## **RUSSIA**

During the Soviet era, Russia was avowedly an atheist state. Religion was repressed, although not entirely eliminated. Such was the adherence of the population to the Orthodox church that some allowances had to be made for it. Now that the Soviet Union is no more, the Orthodox Church has revived itself and returned to a position of power and influence.

Putin has taken the opposite point of view and has recruited the Church into his orbit in order to reinforce his own power. In exchange he grants the Orthodox Church influence that it feels it is entitled to.

## **CHINA**

Another atheist state where religion is forcefully discouraged because of its potential to stir dissent. As we are now seeing in Hong Kong, the Communist state of China does not take dissent lightly.

Xi Jinping recently reminded party members that they must be "unyielding [Marxist atheists](#)" and also "institute a broad campaign to suppress all forms of dissent."

In eastern parts of China, the Uyghur Muslim population is now being suppressed and hundreds of thousands, even millions, of religious minorities, have been interned in concentration camps for "re-education".

The Catholic Church in China has recently tried to revive itself and the Vatican has negotiated one of its notorious "concordats" with China. But unlike most of these agreements with other nations, this one does not favour the Catholic Church and the

Chinese government agreed to allow a certain limited practice of Catholicism, but insists that it chooses the bishops, to ensure that none is installed that might create any kind of dissent from the party line.

In the Chinese province of [Zhejiang](#) alone, over 1200 [Christian crosses](#) have been removed from their [steeple](#)s since 2013. Churches are bulldozed and any expression of religion is brutally suppressed.

It has also been reported that human organs have been harvested from religious minorities that are detained in concentration camps.

## **MEXICO**

[Constitution of Mexico](#) states that "Congress cannot enact laws establishing or prohibiting any religion."