

The Virtues of Secularism

TT Humanist paper presented by Shane Collens
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In Trinidad and Tobago, “secularism” is a dirty word. So let’s define secularism. According to the Oxford Dictionary, secular means, “*not subject to or bound by religious rule*”. So that’s why! Many people believe this country should be run by religious rules.

Humanists believe in freedom of religion. We also believe in freedom from religion. Unless society is organised for people to be free from religion, then freedom of religion may also be in danger. This is the basic purpose of the principle of separation of church, mandir and mosque from the state. This principle is practiced in all modern societies - although only three countries - France, India and the United States - actually have it written in their constitutions. Many people think this principle is to prevent religions from interfering in the state. This was not the original reason for the practice of this principle in Western political systems - quite the other way.

Philosophically, secularism arose out of humanism. The core idea was that happiness could be achieved in this world. People did not have to live their life hoping for eternal bliss after death. Humanism, in fact, was the basis of many movements to improve society - from poverty relief - to abolition of slavery - to women's rights. But philosophies by themselves do not bring about social change. The philosophy of humanism also happened to blend with political requirement. Conflicts between various branches of Christianity became so divisive that the European rulers realised the only way to maintain social order was to keep religion out of politics.

Also, in 1797, American president John Adams signed the Treaty of Tripoli, which declared - “*the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.*” This motion was intended to prevent war with Muslims and was carried unanimously by the American Senate. The United States, thanks to its founding fathers, was really the first nation to encourage dissent and ensure the right to doubt.

In contrast, George W. Bush is a born-again believer. Church-goers in America have risen from 25 to 65 percent in the past 70 years, and a recent survey by the University of Ohio found that 52 percent of Americans actually believe in the statement - “*Christians should take dominion over all aspects of society.*”

Returning to history, secularisation eventually resulted in equal freedoms for all religions - initially the Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity, but extending to all religious belief systems. A secular state is the only political system which can treat all religions equally - that is simply a reality of human nature and of politics. Even believers would admit their own religion must, inevitably, contradict some other religion.

The Catholic Church's official position is that theirs is the only true path to salvation. Archbishop Edward Gilbert has said - "*a person would only follow their religion if they thought it was the only true one*". Muslims believe - "there is no god but Allah" which means the Muslim god is primary to other gods. Of course, everyone has this right. The problem is that, once you believe your religion is true, you must believe that someone else's religion is false. From then on, it is a short step to insist that false beliefs should not be allowed. So, because religions inevitably contradict each other, letting religions have too much influence on the state inevitably leads to one group worrying about another group getting an unfair advantage.

Therefore, it works against any religion, in the long run, to impose its beliefs on the laws of the land. Even the Bible says, "*Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.*" When it comes to politics and social issues, then of course religious organisations have the same rights as any other group to present arguments. But, to allow common ground, arguments should be based on reason and evidence. Arguments based solely on religious belief - and assumed authority - do not allow common ground.

The point about finding common ground is crucial to creating a stable society. Especially crucial in a plural society like ours, where there are many diverse beliefs, viewpoints and attitudes. How do we manage the challenge of respecting all these views, without letting them divide our society to the extent that our government, our economy, and institutions become undermined? The only answer is to find common ground. Can such common ground be found in religious belief systems? Can they be found in racial ideologies? The answer is No. A secular system is the only one that provides a basis for finding common ground, because a secular system sees people, first and foremost, as citizens with equal rights. This is the common ground, from which all other issues have to be worked.

Democracy and republicanism can only function effectively in a secular system. Let's emphasise republicanism on Republic Day, because most totalitarian systems began in a democratic way. For example: The Russian Revolution - the election of Hitler as German chancellor - the Communist Revolution in China, - and the installation of Ayatollah Khomeini - were very democratic events. Unchecked democracy can also lead to mob rule, - which in

turn - becomes rule by an oppressive elite. Also, a republic may be described as a hierarchical democracy - from citizens to government officials - and is governed by rule of law. To quote Churchill - *"It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."*

A humanist view is - a system is as good as the ethics of those in it and who operate it

Of course, many people argue that there is a better system - one not created by humans. Apart from the impossible task of proving religious text is not also man-made, history shows that theocracies cannot create or run a modern state. These systems are oppressive and economically inefficient. You cannot use the Bible or the Qu'ran or the Bhagavad-Gita to run your country, because those systems were created for tribal societies who existed many hundreds of years ago. A modern society, in order to provide material goods and basic freedoms for its citizens, must acknowledge "reasonable pluralism" - in other words - a diversity of views and needs. A secular society, by insisting on certain basic rights for everyone, can accomplish this. A theocratic society, because it inevitably denies certain rights to certain people, cannot manage conflict - in fact - creates conflict.

But, an argument we often hear is, "unless people believe in a god and follow religious rules, they have no moral values and society will collapse". But to quote Jesus from the Bible - "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." In any case, the data do not confirm this belief. There are several studies which show that atheists and agnostics are just as, or even more, honest or charitable than believers. Children who go to church - and those who don't - gave the same answers when asked about the likelihood that they would commit a crime. Older teenagers who go to religious schools are just as likely to cheat as atheist and agnostic students. A survey by psychologist David Wulff finds that people who are very religious are more likely to be ethnocentric, bigoted, inflexible, and authoritarian.

Also data from the World Values Survey finds that the most religious country in the world is Nigeria. According to Transparency International, it is also the most corrupt country in the world. There is also a positive correlation between a society where there is no strong belief in religion and development. It is societies with widespread literacy, education, affluence, and security that tend to be the most secular. We are not saying that religion is the cause of underdevelopment, but it does seem progress depends on secular values for the basis of political organisation.

Trinidad and Tobago is supposed to be a secular society, yet the first clause in our Constitution states that the nation is "founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God." And we guarantee that no one, including those who wrote this, could



explain the meaning of this. Chapter One, Part 4, sub-sections (h) and (i) of our Constitution also guarantee freedom of conscience, thought and expression - which must mean freedom to disbelieve and to express disbelief in a god or religion. In practice, our society often ignores secular principles.

If we were secular, there would not be a controversy over the re-naming of the Trinity Cross. If we were secular, there would not be a law against blasphemy on our statute books. If we were secular, religious organisations would not be exempt from taxes, except of course, where they do charitable work subject to public audit. And, if we were really secular, an ecumenical pageant, like a token accommodation confused as “secular”, would not be included in official observance, as it is for example, in the ceremony marking the opening of the law term. There would be no special privilege extended to any particular “interest group”, out of the many hundreds registered in this country, who may claim a similar right.

These are just some of the laws and practices we need to re-examine. Our overall purpose as humanists is to promote rationalism and ethical values in the discussion that shapes public policy. That task will be more difficult as long as Governments do not respect the separation of State from church, mandir, and mosque, or, from any belief system that cannot bring evidence and reason to the table.