

Origins of and responses to secular intolerance

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Abstract

Secular intolerance occurs when secular governments or societies marginalize religious faith and practice. Religion is forced out of the public sphere and is limited to the private sphere. Civic space is denied to those with religious perspectives that diverge from those promoted by those who are non-religious. This paper traces the philosophical roots of secular intolerance starting with the Enlightenment. It concludes with suggestions on counteracting secular intolerance.

Keywords secular intolerance, postmodernism, freedom of religion or belief.

1. Defining secular intolerance

There is much confusion around the Western sociological phenomenon we refer to as 'secular intolerance.' In other publications, it has also been referred to as simply 'secularism,' 'radical secularism,' 'aggressive secularism,' 'secular humanism,' 'marginalization of Christians,' 'intolerance and discrimination against Christians,' or 'Christianophobia.' In this paper, we seek to do justice to the heartfelt concerns of the Christian community in the West (but also outside of it), recognizing that many Christians feel marginalized because of their faith.

1.1 What secular intolerance is not

Secular intolerance is not the same thing as secularization, which describes the ongoing demographic trend in the West towards fewer people identifying as believers or engaging in meaningful forms of religious practice. It is also not the same as the adoption of legislation and policies that are considered 'liberal' and 'progressive' such as same-sex marriage, assisted suicide or abortion, though many conservative Christians, and other religious adherents, are deeply concerned about trends in those three areas. Progressive policy making and secular intolerance may mutually reinforce each other, as we will explain later, but it is important not to confuse them.

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1.2 What secular intolerance is

To understand secular intolerance, we must first understand what ‘secular’ itself means. Considerable analysis of this subject has come from philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, theologians and legal experts in recent years.

The original meaning of ‘secular’ meant simply unconnected to a religious order. For Christians, it referred to things ‘of this world’ as opposed to matters of the Church. Philosopher Charles Taylor (2007) identifies three understandings of secular: (1) institutional secularism, in which the state is separate from religion; (2) ceremonial secularism, where public spaces are stripped of religious symbols; and (3) a view that belief in God is one choice among many.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in *Faith in the Public Square* (2012), made a useful distinction between what he called “procedural” and “programmatically” secularism. We should not worry about and should even embrace the former, but the latter is a real reason for concern. Williams defines procedural secularism as a public policy that does not give any advantage or preference to any religion, in which the state acts as a neutral moderator enabling all religious or non-religious voices to express themselves in the public sphere. The historical origin of procedural secularism dates back to the Enlightenment. This view led to the understanding that the church and the state should be separated, but it does not necessarily imply any hostility toward religion. By contrast, programmatic secularism contends that the state should not be clouded by any private (religious) convictions and that any reference to religion should be excluded from the public sphere.

Williams’ distinction, although helpful, is a simplification, because similar political arrangements can be more or less intolerant towards religion depending on the context. Jonathan Fox (2013) differentiates between four categories of political secularism: (1) laicism, (2) absolute secularism, (3) neutral political concern and (4) exclusion of ideals. These perspectives encompass a range from a radical separation of religion and state to less extreme separation policies. The key factor here is not whether a state has a formal separation between church and state or even an official religion, but whether its policies are hostile to religion, particularly whether they favor one religion or discriminate against minority religions. For example, both the United States and France do not have an official religion, but in the former, religious expression in public debate is frequent,² whereas in the latter, it is not deemed acceptable. By contrast, the United Kingdom has an official religion, but even though this status gives the Church of England privileges in some areas

² We recognize that what is referred to as the “wall of separation between church and state” is not a constitutional separation but rather Thomas Jefferson’s interpretation of the First Amendment in the letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. The “wall of separation” language is used when politicians or courts wish to maintain a strict separation in their interpretation of the disestablishment clause.

(which some may criticize), it does not result in any noteworthy discrimination against minority religions.

These distinctions are important because political secularism, as a political ideology, is not monolithic, and not all forms of secularism are necessarily undesirable. A neutral state in which all religious voices can freely express themselves and all religions are respected is preferable to an undemocratic but theocratic form of government in which the clergy of a particular religion wield temporal power. But a society in which religious voices in the public sphere are silenced in the name of secular neutrality can hardly be considered pluralistic and open to democratic debate, because it discriminates between political convictions that are based on religious worldviews and those that are not (see Wilson 2017).

Following Williams' understanding of programmatic secularism, secular intolerance can thus be conceived as a radical expression of secularism that seeks to exclude religion not only from the public domain but also from various private spheres.³ It is based on the indifference to, rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations based on the conviction that religion should not have a visible influence on society, particularly on education and politics (Petri and Visscher 2015).

1.3 Distilling the two dimensions of secular intolerance

We can take secular intolerance as an umbrella term to describe two inter-related things: the intolerant dimension of political secularism that Williams calls programmatic secularism – *modernism* – and the intolerant dimension of the gender, sexual and racial diversity agenda – *postmodernism* – both of which marginalize religion. The connection between the two, as Roger Trigg explained in a personal interview in 2018, is that in the former, religion is ruled out based on the belief that only rational (i.e., scientific) arguments should be considered in public debate, whereas in the latter religious arguments are viewed as having meaning only at a subjective level (religion can't claim truth) and can therefore not be a basis for political positions. In both cases, religious arguments are readily discarded.

The definition used by the World Watch List of Open Doors International integrates both aspects. The World Watch Research Unit describes secular intolerance as follows:

³ Some examples include a private Christian university in Canada, Trinity Western University, which applied for approval of a law school but was denied on the basis of its code of conduct prohibiting homosexual intimacy. A Christian hospice in Canada, the Irene Thomas Hospice, was closed down because it refused to provide medical aid in dying (euthanasia) even though it was willing to transfer patients to another facility that would. The US Supreme Court overruled the City of Philadelphia, which cancelled a contract with Catholic Social Services, an adoption agency, because it refused to place children with same-sex couples.

the situation where Christian faith is being forced out of the public domain, if possible even out of the hearts of people. Its drivers seek to transform societies into the shape of a new, radically secularist ethic. This new ethic is (partly) related to a radically new sexual agenda, with norms and values about sexuality, marriage and related issues that are alien to, and resisted by the Christian worldview. When Christian individuals or institutions try to resist this new ethic, they are opposed by (i) non-discrimination legislation, (ii) attacks on parental rights in the area of education, (iii) the censorship of the Cross and other religious symbols from the public square, (iv) the use of hate-speech laws to limit the freedom of expression, and (v) Church registration laws. Most of this is not violent, although arrests of pastors and other Christians have taken place. An example of this engine is compulsory sexual education based on secularist gender ideology in nursery and primary schools in some countries, and the serious threat against parents who want to withdraw their young children from these lessons.

1.4 Secular intolerance as persecution

A final problem is whether secular intolerance should be considered as persecution. The answer to this question depends on how one defines persecution. If persecution is defined on a scale, as the World Watch List methodology does, then indeed secular intolerance should be considered persecution, albeit of a lower intensity than the persecution that takes place in the top 50 countries of the World Watch List. We tend to agree with Paul Marshall (2018) that some evangelical organizations are too quick to say secular intolerance is not persecution because they have an implicit understanding of this concept that reserves the term persecution for the most physically violent incidents.

The key issue to consider is to what extent secular intolerance effectively restricts the freedom of Christians in the West in various spheres of life. The articles in this issue of our journal describe some of the types of restrictions Christians have faced. These include, for example, government requirements that religious institutions must adhere to secular norms or be excluded from government benefits. Individual believers have also been required to adhere to secular norms of diversity and inclusion or face government sanction, loss of employment or closure of a business. States can also impose general restrictions on all religious believers, such as laws prohibiting wearing religious symbols or dress, that have an impact on Christians. Conservative Christian perspectives on certain issues are often excluded from public debate. Clearly, these impacts lie on a spectrum of severity, but Christians and Christian organizations are often experiencing marginalization because of secular intolerance.

2. Origins of secular intolerance

Secular intolerance is the result of a series of parallel and complementary philosophical and ideological trends, some of which started more than a century ago and

whose consequences we can now observe, both in how they have shaped Western culture and in how they inspire legislation and public policy. We will briefly describe some of these trends here.

2.1 From the Enlightenment

The Enlightenment promoted the institutionalization of the principle of separation between church and state, implying that the church should not interfere in government and that the state should not meddle in the internal affairs of religious institutions – “procedural secularism”, to use Rowan Williams’ concept. This correction of the unhealthy symbiotic relation between church and state that had developed ever since Constantine’s embrace of Christianity was a good thing. But some Enlightenment actors went further. In France, an extreme form of separation between church and state was adopted in 1905, known as *laïcité*, which in practice is anti-religious, outlawing any form of religious expression in the public sphere.

Even though other European nations have milder models of separation, a growing discomfort with public expressions of religion has been observed throughout the twentieth and at the beginning of the twenty-first century – Rowan Williams’ “programmatically secularism.” More and more often, the principle of separation between church and state is mistakenly understood to require a separation between faith and politics, with the result that it is becoming less and less acceptable to base one’s political positions on religious convictions. The Dutch historian and legal scholar Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, in his seminal collection of lectures *Unbelief and Revolution* (1847), compellingly argues how absurd this is, because neutrality in politics (and in life in general) is impossible. In his view, everyone bases their political positions on something, whether it is an ideology or a set of religious beliefs.

2.2 Secularization

Secularization and secular intolerance seem to be two mutually reinforcing trends. The opening up of the religious market as a result of the Enlightenment allowed many persecuted religious groups to worship freely, but it also opened the door to a steady process of secularization, with ever larger numbers of people abandoning Christianity altogether. Of course, secularization is a complex sociological phenomenon that deserves a more thorough analysis, but it is indisputable that the regime of religious toleration created the legal possibility – and a culturally accepted personal option – for people to abandon the church, a point Charles Taylor makes in *A Secular Age* (2007).⁴

⁴ Weakening the significance of secularization theory, Philip Jenkins (2007) argues that the penetration of Christianity in Europe during the Middle Ages was not as deep as is commonly thought.

Groen van Prinsterer goes even further by arguing that the Enlightenment did not lead to secularization; rather, in his view this revolutionary wave was itself the result of “unbelief” in society (1847). This is a controversial point, because, of course, people cannot be forced to believe in God. In any case, the end result of the process set in motion by the Enlightenment is that the demographic size of Christianity in Western countries is now much smaller than it used to be.⁵

Secularization has also led to growing religious illiteracy in Western society, i.e. an increasingly misinformed understanding of what religion entails, with the corollary that public policies and legislation reckon less fully with religious sensitivities. And once certain laws have been adopted, they influence what people believe, which in turn leads to increasing intolerance of opposing positions. For example, now that same-sex marriage has been approved in most Western countries, it has become increasingly unacceptable for people to express opposing points of view.

2.3 Modernism and Postmodernism

The eras of modernism in the 17th century and postmodernism in the 20th century have proved to be antithetical to a religious worldview. Both developed in the West and both contributed to the advance of secularism.

The rise of Modernism was characterized by two approaches. Rene Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” is emblematic of rationalism. John Locke and Francis Bacon, meanwhile, focused on the empirical approach according to which reality must be measured and proven. Both of these approaches negate the value of faith. The Bible was subjected to scientific scrutiny and fell short, even though it was never intended to be a scientific treatise; believers value it as the Word of God. Because the biblical narrative could not be proven scientifically, the rise of empiricism led to widespread doubt as to its veracity.

In 1781, Immanuel Kant published the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which signaled a seismic shift away from classic Aristotelian philosophy and schools of theological thought (such as Thomism) which built upon this foundation. In this work he developed his “Copernican revolution” which is based on the assumption that there is no objective truth and morality. His views are commonly considered as a precursor of postmodernism and proved to be a major influence on the works of such culture-shaping philosophers as Hegel and Marx. It has been criticized by many thinkers throughout the years, including C. S. Lewis and Roger Trigg, because of the problems implied by the invalidation of any objective claim to truth. Such a stance not only rules out religion as a valid narrative to base one’s life on, but it also

⁵ This assessment raises a thought-provoking question: Does this mean that more religious freedom ultimately weakens religion?

leads to a society in which everything is relative and subjective and in which anyone should be free to determine their own fate. This means there is no basis to define such essential concepts as justice or security. Because of its societal implications, this is more than just a philosophical discussion.

Postmodern French philosophers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault were foundational in the movement towards deconstructionism, questioning the very foundations of Western values and ideals. Lyotard defines Postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarrative.” Since Christianity is founded on a metanarrative found in the Bible, it is subject to this incredulity. Derrida argues that language is a construct with oppressive tendencies; Foucault argues that language is about power. Christians believe that God created humanity with innate characteristics and that he orders society for the public good. Postmodernism thus undercuts the foundational beliefs of Christianity.

This movement views political structures, law and language as oppressive and therefore calls for their deconstruction (Balkin 1987). We have seen an example of how this philosophy works in the movement to defund US police forces as a result of racist practices by some American police. Christians and religious institutions that posit that there are foundational principles in society that should be followed are viewed as oppressive. Similarly, when Christians publicly argue in favor of a right to life for the unborn or in favor of traditional marriage, they are characterized as intolerant and oppressive. This is where we see secular intolerance at its height.

2.4 The rise of anti-religious sentiment

Nussbaum (2013), while almost exclusively referring to cases of intolerance against Muslims, has analyzed the sharp rise of anti-religious sentiment in the Western world, especially since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In essence, the terrorist attacks confirmed many in their belief that religions are inherently violent, and that therefore any religious engagement in politics is to be avoided. This view is a caricature, yet it is held to differing degrees in wide portions of the media and academia. The recent abuse scandals in the Catholic Church have been widely interpreted as a confirmation of this prejudice against religion. Both Islamic terrorism and sexual abuse, and perhaps also other issues such as the extreme punishment of apostates in some Muslim communities, warrant intervention by the state, but can also lead to pressures for the state to broaden its regulation of religion. The resulting increase in state power therefore constitutes an obvious danger for religious freedom.

3. Addressing secular intolerance

Now that we have identified the roots of secular intolerance and some of its foundational beliefs, we can see the challenge Christians face in responding to it. If Chris-

tians are, by definition, characterized as oppressive, it is hard to respond with any effective counter arguments, since all objections will be viewed as further oppression. Pro-life arguments are characterized as oppressive to women. Pro-traditional marriage arguments are characterized as oppressive. Despite all Christians may think they and their predecessors have done to make the world a better place, including the provision of healthcare, education and democracy, in many countries that were subject to colonialism these activities are seen as colonial legacies.

As Western countries have become increasingly diverse due to immigration, a plurality of religions is present in most Western countries. Although some Christians have had difficulty accepting the demise of a Christian Europe or a Christian America, it is more compelling to argue in public for robust and flourishing freedom of religion or belief for all than for a privileged place for Christianity. Christians should therefore argue for true pluralism, including state neutrality towards religion.

Charles Taylor co-chaired a commission on reasonable accommodation of religion and culture in the Canadian province of Québec in 2007-2008. The Bouchard-Taylor Commission called on Québec to adopt what it termed “open secularism” (Bouchard and Taylor 2008:45). It identified four principles of open secularism (Bouchard and Taylor 2008:46):

1. The moral equality of persons;
2. Freedom of conscience and religion;
3. The separation of church and state; and
4. The neutrality of the state with respect to religions and deep-seated secular convictions.

Although these principles focus mainly on individual rights, the Commission strongly affirmed that the state must respect religions and religious convictions. Unfortunately, the government of Québec has not followed this counsel, but it is an approach that upholds freedom of religion or belief and that religious adherents can support. Given that one of the world’s leading philosophers on secularism was one of the authors of this report, it can, perhaps form the basis for a framework that can be supported by a broad array of religious leaders and states alike.

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