

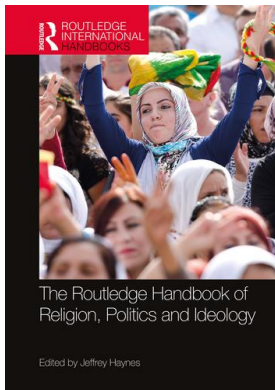
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On: 24 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology

Jeffrey Haynes

Secularism

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780367816230-4>

Linde R. Draaisma, Erin K. Wilson

Published online on: 15 Aug 2021

How to cite :- Linde R. Draaisma, Erin K. Wilson. 15 Aug 2021, *Secularism from:* The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology Routledge

Accessed on: 24 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780367816230-4>

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2

SECULARISM

Linde R. Draaisma and Erin K. Wilson

Introduction

The idea that secularism is itself a distinct ideological construct is a relatively new conceptual innovation. For the most part, it has only been in the 21st century that scholars, policymakers and practitioners have explored the proposal that, rather than constituting normal and natural reality, the ‘secular’, ‘secularity’, ‘secularization’ and ‘secularism’ are premised on distinct ideas and assumptions about the nature of ‘religion’ as a socio-political category and phenomenon, and the place of religion in politics and public life.

This increased interest in secularism is hardly surprising, however, considering what preceded it. Renewed interest in and concern about the apparent resurgence of religion in public life, when the long-prevailing assumption was that religion would disappear, almost inevitably leads to critically engaging with and rethinking the paradigm that predicted religion’s demise in the first place. As part of this critical engagement, scholars have identified that the underlying assumptions that secular ideologies contain about religion in general and religions, in particular, are not neutral and universal but subjective and particular. The result has been a plethora of sophisticated, nuanced studies that have assisted in the development of a more comprehensive view of the ideological commitments of secularism and their consequences for politics and public life across different social, political, historical and cultural contexts.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the contours of secular ideology. We begin with an exploration and contextualization of the concepts of the secular, secularization, secularity and secularism, in order to make clear how these interrelated yet distinct ideas differ from one another and the specific ways in which each is connected to the idea of secularism as ideology.

Following this brief conceptual overview, we provide a more focused analysis of secular ideologies themselves. While secularism has been understood as both ideology and as a form of statecraft, the two are interrelated and the one almost inevitably informs the other. There are a variety of secular ideologies and forms of statecraft, which we briefly discuss. Yet what they all have in common is the idea that religion is something that can be neatly and cleanly separated from the rest of human life and activity. Further, each variety of secularism is premised on implicit normative assumptions about what religion is and does. These implicit embedded normative assumptions subsequently produce a conceptual structure whereby that which is deemed religious is subordinated to that which is rendered secular, creating a system of unequal power

relations that has consequences for how individuals, communities and institutions analyse and respond to the various challenges associated with living together well as a global community in the 21st century. In the final section of the chapter, we explore how these secular ideological power relations affect interpretations and approaches to three global challenges – climate change, disease pandemics and gender inequality. Dismantling the implicit assumptions of secular ideologies, which colour these political engagements and policy areas and thereby limit the scope of vision for developing new initiatives, is an urgent task for scholars, policymakers and practitioners.

Unravelling secularism: the secular, secularization and secularity

Understanding secularism as an ideology is to describe a complex system of thought that is concerned with the power relationships between systems of beliefs and practices concerned with the existence of the transcendent; of a realm or realms beyond that which we as human beings can physically see, touch, hear and measure in some sense; between religion and nonreligion. As Casanova (2011: 1051) describes it, secularism may be understood as ‘a whole range of modern worldviews and ideologies concerning “religion”, which may be consciously held and reflexively elaborated or, alternatively, which have taken hold of us and function as taken-for-granted assumptions that constitute the reigning epistemic *doxa* or “unthought”’.

Foundational to secularism is the idea that religion is an identifiable realm of human activity that is distinct and separate from others, such as politics, economics, education and so on. Religion represents the ‘non-rational’ beliefs about what may or may not exist beyond this world. The secular and thus secularism are concerned with the ‘rational’, the perceivable in the here and now. The secular provides the neutral meeting space in which different religions can encounter one another, discuss, debate and disagree, yet not erupt in chaos and violence because they are governed by the rational, objective, neutral and universal rules of the secular sphere. Embedded in this understanding of the world, however, is the implicit assumption that the secular is superior to and can therefore govern and moderate public religion. It is these two foundational assumptions – that religion is something that can be clearly identified and that religion should be governed by the secular – that make secularism an ideology. Ideologies, including secularism, consist of patterns of ideas about the world believed to be ‘true’, codified and reinforced by political and social elites (Steger & Wilson, 2012), establishing a system of discursive and conceptual power that privileges one understanding of the world over others.

Establishing this system of ideological power rests on a series of assumptions about what religion is and does, as well as about the optimal arrangements for collective social and political life. As has been well-established by Talal Asad (2003), amongst others, the idea that religion is something that can be neatly and cleanly identified and separated out from other realms of human activity is a relatively modern invention – an invention that is entangled with the emergence and development of secular ideology. Prior to the articulation of secularism, what we now refer to as religion was seen as part and parcel of the fabric of human existence (and still is in many places). Religion was not one belief system amongst many others, as Charles Taylor (2007) describes our ‘secular age’. Rather, religion was reality. As the dominance and power of particular beliefs and institutions became increasingly questioned, religion came to be seen as one option amongst many other systems of beliefs and practices. Yet the destabilization of this power was only made possible through a series of conceptual and philosophical moves that in turn established the idea of the secular as an immanent realm of human activity, separate and distinct from the transcendent religious realm. These moves occurred over time and history, as we briefly explore below. Further, it must be noted that the emergence of secular ideology and the

understanding of religion as something separate and distinct has been shaped by the European experience, and thus many of the assumptions about what religion is and does, contained within secular ideology, are based on experiences, beliefs and practices associated with Christianity. We trace this intellectual history in broad brushstrokes by unpacking key concepts associated with secularism – the secular, secularization and secularity – before fleshing out the ideological structure of secularism in more detail.

The secular

The concept of ‘the secular’ stems from the Latin word ‘*saeculum*’, which refers to ‘time’ or ‘age’ and ‘world’. In the Middle Ages, *saeculum* was the denominator of one side of a binary system structuring the Medieval European Christian world: the religious, sacred and eternal world on one side and the secular, profane and temporal world on the other (Casanova, 2011). In this understanding, the secular and the religious were not mutually exclusive or even competing, but rather two domains of lived reality, the spiritual and the temporal.

The Christian binary system of the religious/sacred and the secular/profane has remained, developed and expanded over time, although what these categories actually entail is neither fixed nor universally agreed upon. What is considered secular and what is considered religious shifts depending on socio-historical, political, cultural, economic, theological and environmental circumstances (Wilson, 2012). Despite these differences across contexts, the secular, however defined or understood, has nonetheless become ‘the dominant category that serves to structure and delimit, legally, philosophically, scientifically, and politically, the nature and the boundaries of “religion”’ (Casanova, 2009b: 1063). This dominant place of the secular is observable in the socio-political *milieux* of Europe, North America, the former colonial territories of European powers and international institutions established to foster global cooperation and collective security (Gutkowski, 2014: 6).

Charles Taylor (2007) provides further insight on this historical development of the secular/religious binary. In *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor posits that the religious and the secular together form a dyad. Within this dyadic structure, the religious is always the opposite of the secular. The dyad slowly shifts, from being merely descriptive of equipollent dimensions of existence to an ontological hierarchy, where religion becomes subordinated to the secular. In addition to this vertical positioning of religion below the secular, religion and the secular are also placed along a horizontal temporal line of human progress and development. This is what Taylor (2007) refers to as the ‘stadial consciousness’; the notion that via enlightenment, religion can and should make way for secularism, as supposedly shown by Western Europe.

Secularization

In pre-modern times, to secularize largely meant to ‘make worldly’, to transport something or someone from the religious domain into the secular domain (Casanova, 2011). During the Protestant Reformation, for example, many properties and objects were ‘secularized’, as art was removed (or destroyed) from churches and monasteries were dissolved. In contrast, the concept of secularization in contemporary political settings is more complex. In addition to the original meaning of separating the transcendent and supernatural from the immanent and natural, secularization now also refers to the gradual restriction or removal of religious influences in the public realm through various institutional, political, legal, social and even theological mechanisms (Wilson, 2012). Peter Beyer (1999) highlights the importance of distinguishing between secularization as *descriptive* – articulating observable changes in religious beliefs and practices and

the status of religious institutions and communities – and *prescriptive* – theorizing and predicting what those changes with regard to religion will and should be. Prescriptive understandings of secularization are often referred to as the secularization theory or thesis.

Casanova (1994) highlights three components of secularization theory: secularization as the decline of religiosity, secularization as the privatization of religion, and secularization as the differentiation of religion. Whereas in some contexts, secularization might indeed manifest as the falling numbers of religious adherents, it can also materialize as religion becoming something that happens behind closed doors, when it is pushed into the private sphere of people's homes. The banning of religious symbols from the public sphere is an example of secularization as privatization. Secularization as differentiation refers to the processes by which religious and political institutions and authorities are identified as distinct from one another and their separation continually managed and reinforced.

Throughout the late 19th and most of the 20th century, dominant forms of secularization theory posited the decline in religion's influence, generally taken to refer to religious institutions and beliefs (Herbert, 2003; Swatos Jr & Christiano, 1999). A key assumption of this theory, building on Weber's concepts of enchantment and mystery, is that religion is pre-modern, often irrational, based on superstition and illogical beliefs (see, for example, Apter, 1965; Smith, 1974; Swatos Jr & Christiano, 1999). Consequently, secularization theorists argued that because religion is irrational, it will gradually be excluded from society through the process of modernization (much like Taylor's concept of stadiad consciousness).

In recent years, however, scholars have challenged this predictive form of secularization theory. The perceived growth of religious violence and religious nationalism during the 1990s led scholars to re-examine the secularization thesis. In many parts of the world, secularization has not occurred as expected (Wilson, 2012). Religion's influence on society and politics has not necessarily declined but rather has taken on different forms. Further, it is not only about whether religion continues to influence society or not, but dominant conceptions of what religion is in the first place have come under increasing scrutiny, placing the very idea of secularization in question.

The transformation – rather than the disappearance – of religion challenges many of the assumptions on which secularization theory was based. Rather than revisiting these assumptions, however, many social scientists have instead employed secularization theory in a descriptive manner. '[The] value [of secularization theory] is not and never has been in predicting outcomes, but rather in offering a useful description of the societal situation in which we find ourselves with respect to religion' (Beyer, 1999: 299). In the view of some theorists, secularization theory does not predict what will happen to religion as a result of modernity but actually describes the current situation and provides an opportunity for explaining the challenges that face religion in the present time. Scholars promoting this use for secularization theory focus primarily on church attendance figures and the number of individuals who continue to profess personal religious beliefs. Attention also tends to be on formal, established traditional religions, particularly Christianity. This focus suggests that a very particular understanding of what religion is and does underpin such descriptive versions of secularization theory, an understanding that is heavily reliant on and influenced by Euro-American Christian experiences. It further raises the question as to whether secularization theory, and its related concepts of secular, secularity and secularism, have any relevance beyond (Western) European and North American contexts. Even there, experiences of secularization are neither consistent nor homogeneous.

Casanova (2011) has argued that of the three parts of secularization theory – decline, privatization and differentiation – only secularization as differentiation remains an analytically useful framework for investigating socio-political dynamics with regard to the evolution of

relationships between religious and state institutions and the place of religion in contemporary politics and public life. This distinction between religious and secular authority is embedded in the foundations of the modern state (Mavelli, 2011) and states-system, having been exported from Europe and imposed in other contexts through the colonial process (Gutkowski, 2014). The differentiation between nominally 'secular' and 'religious' authorities is observable across large swathes of the world. Yet, because the meaning of both the secular and the religious shifts as a result of context, as we previously observed, processes of secularization and differentiation between the secular and the religious also diverge widely in different contexts.

Secularity

These different processes of secularization led to different secularities. Put simply, 'secularity' refers to ways of being secular. If secularization is seen as a process of (re-)establishing the relationship between the religious and the secular, whatever form that establishment takes, the interim outcome of this process is a form of secularity. As we have argued, secularization is context-specific and not linear, and consequently, there is not one single secularity. Indeed, as Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt (2012) argue, there are 'multiple secularities' present and observable within contemporary global politics. Casanova (2007; 2009), while recognizing some parallels in processes of secularization in Western societies such as The Netherlands and New Zealand, also identifies multiple patterns within Western Europe. While Europe is often spoken of as a homogenous, unified whole, patterns of secularity and religious adherence within Europe are extremely diverse.

A secularity can operate on the individual level but also within a group, nation or civilization. Taylor (2007) argues that the West, although comprised of many different sub-societies and milieux, currently inhabits a secular age. Without ignoring the vast array of personal interpretations of and ideas about religion, he argues that there exists a 'Western secularity', in which

the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more of these [Western] milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance; whence it can more easily extend itself to others.

(Taylor, 2007: 13)

For Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt (2012), secularity predominantly operates at the level of state governance and politics, coinciding with an understanding of secularism as statecraft, which we explore further in the next section.

Secularism: statecraft, ideology and ontology

Understanding secularism as an ideology requires moving beyond the somewhat superficial focus of secularization and secularity, which are predominantly concerned with the separation of church and state or of religious and political authority. Secular ideology is, rather, a highly specific, culturally embedded model for managing the relationship between that which is deemed religious and other areas of human activity. It is not only prominent in the political domain, but it also affects culture, education and worldviews. It 'redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion' (Asad, 2003: 21–22). Secularism constitutes particular practices and ideas along the natural/supernatural binary, positioning some practices within the category of the natural or the secular, while others are placed in the category of the supernatural – religion, superstition

or fetishism – and normatively distinguishing between these practices by privileging the secular over and above the religious (Wilson, 1992).

While we have so far referred to secularism in the singular, it is important to emphasize that there is not one singular, homogenous secular ideology. Similar to understandings of religion, secular, secularization and secularity discussed above, secular ideologies manifest and operate differently across different contexts as a result of history, culture, economics, politics and multifarious other factors.

There have been two key ways in which scholars have attempted to develop a typology of secular ideologies. Most typologies or classifications are concerned with their impacts on contemporary domestic and international political institutions and structures. Ahmed Kuru (2009) identifies passive and assertive variations of secularism, while Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2008) highlights *laïcité* and Judeo-Christian secularism, and Daniel Philpott (2009) speaks of positive, neutral and hostile secularisms. Each of these typologies offers a variation on a theme, with passive secularism corresponding to positive and Judeo-Christian secularism, while assertive secularism is similar to *laïcité* and hostile secularisms.

The main point of distinction between these secular ideologies is their understanding of religion and its influence on public life. Passive/neutral/positive/Judeo-Christian secularisms either do not have especially strong views about what religion is and does or hold the view that religion can be a positive influence in public life, contributing to the common good. Assertive/hostile/*laïcité* secularisms, on the other hand, view religion as potentially dangerous, disruptive and irrational, a source of violence, division and chaos when permitted in the public sphere. Consequently, all elements of religion, including expressions of religious belief such as the wearing of religious symbols, should be excluded from politics and public life.

While it is tempting to understand these classifications as simple binaries – a political system is governed either by passive or assertive secularism – it is more helpful and closer to what exists on the ground to see this as a spectrum, with various shades of grey in between the two extremes of passive and assertive.

These kinds of secular ideologies are the ones that most often shape public policy and the governance of relationships between religious and secular institutions – what Casanova (1994) refers to as secular statecraft, aligning with Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchard's (2012) understanding of secularities. States that are governed predominantly by passive secularism may allow or even foster public expressions of religion and the involvement of religious organizations in public life. These kinds of involvement could include anything from the provision of welfare and public services to political campaigning. The United States of America is often held up as the example *par excellence* of passive secularism, though there are a number of other states that display similar approaches to governing religion. Often, however, passively secular states do not view all religions in the same positive light. Another consequence of secular ideologies is that within the category of religion, a hierarchy between different religions exists. Thus, the contributions of some religious groups to politics and public life are viewed more favourably than those of other religious groups. In passive secular contexts in Europe and North America, Christianity is often deemed a positive presence in public life, part of the liberal democratic values and cultural heritage of these regions (Beaman, 2013). As such, Christian presence in public life is permitted and at times even encouraged, while the public presence of other religions, and especially of Islam, is severely discouraged and delimited. By contrast, in India, Hinduism is the religion that holds the most privileged position when it comes to hierarchies of public religions (Nelson, 2020). In Indonesia, it is Islam (Menchik, 2015; Gruell & Wilson, 2018). Thus, while passive secularisms may not assiduously exclude all religion from the public sphere, they are also not neutral with regard to how they perceive and value different religious traditions and communities.

Assertive secular statecraft, in contrast, actively polices the boundaries of the public sphere to exclude religion. Legislation passed by a number of European states in the last decade to ban the wearing of religious symbols in public places offers an example of this kind of secular ideology in practice. Kuru (2007) and Hurd (2008) both highlight France as the prototype for assertive secularism's manifestation in state politics. It is important to bear in mind, however, that while a state may be predominantly governed by passive or assertive secularism, it may nonetheless shift and change its approach to religion over time, alongside changes to governing political parties, for example, and may even display the influence of different secular ideologies and assumptions on different policy issues.

The other approach to categorizing secular ideologies, developed by Casanova (2011), focuses at a more meta-level, distinguishing between political secularisms (which encompasses passive and assertive secularisms) and philosophical-historical secularisms. While political secularisms are concerned with managing the place of religion in contemporary public and political life, philosophical-historical secularisms focus on the developmental trajectory of religion and its implications for humanity. Philosophical-historical secularisms are concerned more with whether religion will survive and thrive into the future or whether it will entirely disappear. Some variations of philosophical-historical secularisms, relating to Taylor's (2007) stadial consciousness and underpinning secularization as decline, see the disappearance of religion as evidence of humanity's development and enlightenment, that as people become more educated, developed and 'modern', religion will naturally die out. Other philosophical-historical secularisms see the disappearance of religion as a potential portent of moral decline. Philosophical-historical secularisms thus contain an assumption about both what the future of religion will be and should be in the broader context of human flourishing.

Underlying each of these kinds of secular ideologies, however, whether they are political, philosophical-historical, passive, neutral or assertive, is an assumption that religion is something separate from the rest of human life and activity. In proffering this understanding of the world as taken for granted, secularism is potentially much more than an ideology. It may be more analytically useful to think of secularism, rather, as an all-encompassing ontology. Understanding secularism as an ontology enables us to see beyond the normative assumptions about the value of the religious and the secular. It allows us to comprehend how these assumptions are enacted not only through the ways people think and understand the world but in the very ways in which they behave, how they occupy spaces, the practices they embody, particularly in their interactions with others and with nature. In addition, describing secularism as an ideology, philosophy or worldview carries with it ideas of transience and changeability. Ideologies and philosophies are (often, not always) consciously held and articulated belief structures. An ontology, by contrast, is frequently not articulated or consciously held. Ontologies are rather more intuitive, ingrained in the fibre of a person's being largely through the process of being brought up with and living in the middle of it. There is something about an ontology that one feels rather than knows, or perhaps knows through feeling or experiencing rather than through conscious cognitive processing. Further, ontology seems to be one of the few concepts that are able to encompass both secular and religious ways of understanding the world. It offers us a way to think about these terms as different yet interconnected components of a broader category rather than as diametrically opposed ways of understanding the world. Understanding secularism as an ontology, then, offers a way to address the often implicit conceptual and normative inequality between the secular and religious. It enables us to think about the categories of religion and the secular without repeating and reinforcing the conceptual and ontological patterns of secularism itself.

By exploring these contours of secularism, we do not suggest that secularism is monolithic, homogenous or exclusively Western. Like religion, secularism is not a singular entity. Secular

ontologies are diverse, shifting, changing, unstable and contextually specific (Daulatzai, 2004). Indeed, while secularism emerged from local contexts and historical trajectories in Europe and the US, through globalization, it has merged to constitute a globalized agglomeration of ideas and practices that vary at the level of the local. What secularism means in The Netherlands, for example, is very different from what it means in India, Bangladesh, France, Canada and so on (Hurd, 2008; Kuru, 2007).

At the same time, while secularism does not mean the same thing from one place to the next, there are certain family resemblances that characterize ideological forms of secularism across their different manifestations. These family resemblances exist in the following basic assumptions:

- (a) religion is something tangible and identifiable that can be clearly distinguished, defined and separated from the secular, which can also be clearly defined. Not only that, but
- (b) religion should be clearly distinguished and separated from other areas of human activity, such as politics, economics, law, education and so forth, that are grouped under the secular (Asad, 2002: 116) because
- (c) religion is subjective, particular, individual and irrational (Hurd, 2008; Wilson, 2012), as opposed to the secular, which is neutral and universal, and
- (d) religion is what people disagree about more frequently and violently than anything else (Cavanaugh, 2009); thus religion is the fundamental cause of violence, intolerance and chaos; therefore
- (e) religion must be kept out of the public sphere and relegated to the private to preserve order and peace (Taylor, 2009; Wilson, 2012), meaning that the distinction between religion and the secular is managed through the existence of public and private spheres (that are equally as unstable and problematic as categories of religion and secular). Finally,
- (f) religion is always subordinated to the secular, in that, even if religion is viewed as something that can positively contribute to politics and public life, its interventions should still be regulated by so-called secular authorities and institutions.

These underlying normative assumptions about that which is rendered religious have significant consequences for how public life is carried out across multiple contexts. It renders certain kinds of knowledge and evidence less valuable than others, excluding or marginalizing people and groups whose ways of being and knowing in the world do not align with dominant secular ontological structures (Wilson, 1992; see also De Sousa Santos, 2014).

It is important to stress that critics of secularism are not arguing that it should be dispensed with, nor are they unconscious of the many important achievements that secularism has enabled. Secular approaches to public life are bound up with questions of justice and equality. As Mahmood (2016: 21) notes: 'To critique a particular normative regime is not to reject or condemn it; rather, by analysing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future'. Critiques of secularism are an attempt to recognize the vulnerabilities and shortcomings of secularism, so as to contribute to the development of alternative, more inclusive futures.

Secular ontologies and global challenges

In this final section, we explore the consequences of the normative assumptions underpinning dominant secular ideologies/ontologies by considering responses to three global challenges: climate change, disease pandemics and gender inequality. In responding to global challenges,

the organizations mandated with protecting humanity's safety and welfare (World Health Organisation, United Nations Security Council, Conference of the Parties, amongst others) rely almost exclusively on scientific, technological and economic solutions. This emphasis on science, technology and the economy stems in no small measure from the secular ontological assumptions we have outlined above. These assumptions, which are also connected with other frameworks such as modernism and colonialism (Asad, 2003; Wilson, 2012), have come to dominate particular arenas of global politics and policy (Ager & Ager, 2011; 2015; Gutkowski, 2014). They shape a) who is considered to be a legitimate actor in global politics; b) which rights and freedoms are considered inviolable and which are nice to have, as well as who is entitled to those rights and who is not; c) what kinds of knowledge and evidence are viewed as acceptable; and thus, crucially, d) the kinds of policy responses that are deemed appropriate.

The overlap between the binary oppositions of secular/religious, reason/emotion, culture/nature along with male/female and tradition/modern all contribute to the privileging of particular actors, rights, sources of knowledge and the exclusion and marginalization of others. Firstly, secular ontologies affect who we deem to be religious actors and nonreligious actors. This designation has multiple implications in the area of human rights law, especially freedom of religion or belief (Sullivan, 2005; Hurd, 2015), yet also affects global health policy, gender equality and climate politics. Initiatives to engage religious actors in responding to global crises make assumptions about who these religious actors are, which can lead to the exclusion and marginalization of other actors who are not religious but who also do not fit the accepted mould of a rational, secular political actor. This can result, for example, in a preponderance of religious leaders – individuals, usually men, who hold official, often national or international positions of authority within religious institutional hierarchies – while religious communities that are not organized around hierarchical structures are not represented, or leaders at the local community level, frequently women, are marginalized (Bartelink & Wilson, 2020).

Once this distinction between religious and nonreligious actors is made, religious actors are then imbued with particular characteristics on the basis of core secular assumptions. These can range from traditional secular assumptions that religious actors are irrational, violent, conservative, patriarchal or more recent assumptions stemming from the 'good religion/bad religion' view (Hurd, 2015; see also Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014:), where religious actors are deemed either good or bad depending on how well they align with prevailing secular liberal norms and values. These assumed characteristics affect the position an actor has or the way they are viewed and valued within global political arenas. In humanitarian responses, this instrumentalization of religion is a common strategy, and some might argue that it can be mutually beneficial (Ager & Ager, 2015). It is also important to highlight that religious actors themselves can reinforce the assumptions of secular ontologies by endeavouring to demonstrate their 'added value' to secular programming (Ager & Ager 2011: 460). A case in point concerns the capacity for religious actors to contribute to gender equality, a frequent discussion within development studies and policy and non-governmental organization (NGO) circles. Donor agencies are often sceptical of the capacity of religious organizations to promote gender equality. Conversely, some religious development organizations are eager to demonstrate their credentials in this area. World Vision International and Tearfund UK, for example, have developed training programs aimed at promoting gender equality and reducing gender-based violence that explicitly utilize scripture and theology (Bartelink & Wilson, 2020). Either way, it demonstrates an imbalance of power between secular humanitarian organizations or states and religious communities, where the latter are often only recognized when they are deemed useful to the undertakings of the former.

Second, in the midst of severe global challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-change-induced disasters and migration, amongst others, governments can all too easily curtail

individual rights and freedoms, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, in the name of ‘saving lives’ (Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2016; McGowan, 2020). Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights pronounces the right to freedom of belief as universal and inalienable, in the face of global disasters, religious freedoms are deemed optional and selectively applied. India’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point. While nominally a (passively) secular state, a clear double standard emerged between religious practices that were permissible for Hindu communities while Muslim communities had to suspend their gatherings (Nelson, 2020). The saga surrounding the burkini that emerged in Europe in the summer of 2016 offers another example. Women were issued with fines for not wearing an ‘outfit respecting good morals and secularism’ and forced to publicly disrobe (Quinn, 2016), while French Prime Minister Manuel Valls claimed that naked breasts were more representative of French freedom and values than a headscarf (Chrisafis, 2016b). The headscarf, burka and burkini, so the argument goes, is a symbol of women’s oppression. It is antithetical to the values of secularism that include gender equality and emancipation. This argument can be found in previous rulings by the European Court of Human Rights on wearing headscarves in public (see, for example, European Court of Human Rights decision on *Dahlab v. Switzerland*, 2001), as well as statements from politicians in countries such as Australia (Cullen, 2014), The Netherlands (Agerholm, 2016), Germany (Hamblin, 2016) and France (Chrisafis, 2016a), and were aired in relation to the burkini ban. Thus, Muslim women’s right to manifest their religion is deemed secondary to the broader goal of achieving gender equality, which is cast in the debate as a secular aspiration.

Yet, as both Joan Wallach Scott and Wendy Brown have highlighted, the process of establishing the modern secular nation-state by no means heralded a new era of freedom, emancipation and autonomous agency for women. According to Brown (2006), the feminine became even more privatized and sexualized as part of the process of secularization and the establishment of the modern state. Discussing the differences between how the ‘Jewish Question’ and the ‘Woman Question’ were dealt with in the 19th century, Brown notes that while Jews were increasingly racialized in order to clearly distinguish them from ‘native’ citizens, women were overly sexualized in order to emphasize their differences from men. Scott (2007; 2011) points out that laïque and secular efforts forcing Muslim women to ‘de-veil’ because of their belief that the veil is a symbol of women’s oppression, epitomized by the burkini saga, are in fact just as oppressive and discriminatory as the practice of forced veiling itself.

Thirdly, secular ontologies also influence the kinds of knowledge and evidence that are considered acceptable or reliable. Knowledge that stems from science and scientific research is deemed more reliable in some contexts than forms of knowledge drawn from local cosmologies and religious ontologies (though the danger of romanticizing local indigenous cosmologies within the climate justice movement, for example, or instrumentalizing religious and indigenous actors must also be acknowledged). All of this influences practical programs, funding, collaboration and which actors are given a platform and which are not. Certain religions and religious actors, in particular Christianity, enjoy a level of acceptance and legitimacy within global secular ontologies and institutions influenced by secular ontologies because they are interconnected, and the one arguably grew out of the other (Asad, 2003; Casanova, 2011). Other religious actors do not enjoy this same level of acceptance and legitimacy. Thus, there exist not only inequalities between secular and non-secular ontologies, but within the dominant secular frame, there are inequalities amongst different religions.

In addition, secular ontologies can contribute to erroneous understandings of who the trusted and legitimate actors are in particular local contexts, an issue that is particularly significant for efforts to promote climate justice (Daulatzai 2004). For actors and institutions embed-

ded in secular ontologies, so-called ‘secular actors’ – NGOs, grassroots movements, civil society networks, universities, to a lesser extent states – are the trusted power brokers, negotiators and mediators. This can lead to the marginalization of religious actors or actors who do not conform to the strict secular/religious binary, in research, policy and advocacy by institutions and actors embedded within secular ways of being. This is not the case the world over, however. In many small island nations, countries in the Middle East and on the African continent, states and secular actors are often distrusted, in part because of a history of failed secular politics in certain countries and regions (see, for example, Nunn, 2017). However, it is also because, in these contexts, secular ontologies just do not make sense. They are not the way people understand the world. Many people do not inhabit secular worlds. Yet, this also indicates a further way in which secular ontologies are implicated in the politics of global challenges. Secular ontologies are a central structuring logic in global discourses and policy-making around how we understand and respond to global challenges, largely because of the pivotal place they have in the development of the modern state and states-system. The dominance of these secular ideologies and ontologies makes it difficult to move beyond scientific, technological and economic fixes to these challenges, fixes that are already proving to be inadequate in the face of the scale of global pandemics and considering the speed of the changes that are occurring in our climate. Creating more space to listen to and learn from other ontologies in global policy arenas is vital if we are to develop more innovative and creative responses beyond business as usual to these global challenges.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored secularism as a distinct ideological construct, based on subjective and particular assumptions about what religion is and where religion belongs in politics and public life. These assumptions can be recognized in a form of statecraft, when a role is assigned to religion that is separate from politics and public life, but also – and often in relation to this statecraft – as an ideology. Through an exploration of the formative concepts of secularism – the secular, secularization and secularity – we have suggested that although secularism is context-specific and ever-changing, it nonetheless represents a particular conceptual ordering structure that contains normative assumptions about ‘religion’, legitimating and reinforcing unequal power relations between actors deemed secular and those deemed religious. Further, through colonial processes, this structuring logic has come to dominate contemporary global political institutions and frame and delimit the ways in which we analyse and respond to contemporary global challenges.

We have argued that, while secularism is an ideological construct, secularism can also be understood as being more than an ideology. Secularism is not only a view on the way the world should be but rather *is* the world that some people inhabit, a world that is utterly antithetical to the worlds occupied by those for whom the supernatural and transcendental form a real lived component of their everyday experiences (Viveiros de Castro, 2013; Blaser, 2013). Secularism, for this reason, is not a structure that can easily be abandoned or exchanged for a different worldview or ideology. It is because of these foundational and often unconsciously held assumptions about humanity and the world that we suggest secularism is an ontology, as well as, or in addition to being an ideology.

We suggest that recognizing secularism as an ontology not only does justice to the all-encompassing nature of secularism’s impact on people’s being but also allows us to go beyond the concepts of religion and the secular as being mutually exclusive. Secularism as an ontology allows us to see the religious and the secular as components of the same broader category and enables us to recognize the power imbalance between the two.

Furthermore, we have suggested that secular ontologies are a crucial component of the way in which we presently make sense of and respond to global challenges. Secular ontologies rely on binary distinctions between reason and emotion, modern and traditional, nature and humanity, to reinforce the central binary of secular and religious. Reason, modern, the secular and humans (especially men) are privileged above emotion, tradition, religion and nature (and women). This logic helps to exclude particular kinds of knowledge and evidence as illegitimate from contemporary politics and therefore as inappropriate for responding to global challenges. Secular ontologies also generate hierarchies of religions, privileging some religions (usually, though not always, Christianity) and marginalizing others, especially Islam and indigenous ontologies. This leads to certain (Christian) voices and narratives having (symbolic) influence in global politics, while other (non-Christian) religious voices are ignored. Addressing the dominance of secular ontologies and their associated assumptions opens up space for other ways of thinking and being in the world to contribute to more creative and innovative responses to collective global challenges.

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