



Exploring the Idea of Secularism among Media Students

Headings

- [Introduction](#)
- [Methodology](#)
- [Results](#)
- [Discussion and Conclusion](#)
- [References](#)

Abstract: *Secularism is the most misunderstood and misconstrued term. The study analyses the comprehension of the concept of secularism in the minds of youth in Pakistan. A brief survey was conducted among 200 media students in a public university, and four focus groups were conducted to explore their understanding of secularism and its relationship with Islam. The survey was comprised of straight forward three items asking for unambiguous responses. The findings revealed that secularism, by any definition, and are not an unambiguous notion for the youth in Pakistan despite the fact that contemporary Muslim religious scholars do not view secularism as a negation of Islam. Secularism to them represents a concept in competition with traditional religion. It is essentially linked to the issues of ethical particularism rather than a neutral, positive ideology that asks for the separation of state and religion.*

Key Words: Secularism, Media Students, Religion, Islam

Introduction

Informed and tolerant citizens and balanced media are a prerequisite for healthy democracies. The primary function of media is to inform and educate people and in democratic societies, but the media also plays a crucial role in creating an environment in which people learn to tolerate difference in beliefs and opinion. Tensions arise when religious differences are not given balanced coverage and addressed insensitively by the media. The situation turns worse when media newsrooms fail to grasp the nuances of differences and not take religious sensitivities into account

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and inadvertently fuel suspicions and mistrust (Roncakova, 2012; Wright, 1997). It is important for media professionals to comprehend common religious and secular concepts and beliefs. In modern times secularism is one of the most misunderstood and misconstrued term. Very often, while reporting reference to being secular or non-secular causes misunderstandings that might lead to serious conflicts (Knott & Poole, 2014). It is, therefore, imperative to teach our future media professionals to learn to be sensitive to the sentiments of all the religious and non-religious faiths and not just to the dominant one.

It is generally agreed upon that secularism is the natural partner of democracy; that is; democracies can function best in secular states. The secular state is understood as a religion-neutral state that keeps a “principled distance” from all religions (Bhargava, 1998, pp. 493-4, 520; Bhargava, 2007, pp. 39-41; Taylor, 2010). In the Cambridge English dictionary, secularism means, “The belief that religion should not be involved with the ordinary social and political activities of a country.” The Oxford Dictionary defines secularism as “The principle of separation of the state from religious institutions”.

Literature Review

Proponents of secularism explain that secularism is a continuity of the three ideals aimed for in the French Revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity. First, liberty, which can also be described as religious liberty, i.e., “that no one must be forced in the domain of religion, or basic belief”. Second, people of all faiths, religions or *Weltanschauungen* (a German term for world view or outlook) must be treated equally by the state without any discrimination or privileged status conferred to any. That is, the state shall have no official religion. Third, all spiritual groups must be heard and included in determining society’s overall political identity and the ways to achieve them. The fourth goal he mentions can be added to the list is to maintain harmony between different religions and *Weltanschauungen*. Despite all the neatness of the schemas, secularism remains a controversial concept evoking many conflicting connotations (Taylor, 2010).

The general misunderstanding of the idea of secularism is due to three fundamental conceptual beliefs. *First*, that secularism is a stance taken about religion. The general perception of the meaning of secularism is that it is in some way against religion. Secularism is commonly equated with atheism – a total disregard for religion. It is due to the mistranslation of the term in Arabic. Arabic had no word for secularism. The translation thus made changed the perception of the idea (Tamimi, 2000). *Second*, the term ‘secularism’ represents a political doctrine, often confused with the other related terms ‘secular’ and ‘secularization’ that represent “highly general and dispersed social and intellectual and cultural phenomena and processes.” It may be noted that ‘secularization’ is a concept “that requires a redirection of either personal belief or, for that matter, any of a range of personal and cultural habits of dress or diet or...”. For instance, the renunciation of traditional religious norms and restrictions concerning praying rituals, dress codes, or prohibition of certain diets such as pork are the signs of ‘secularization’ rather than ‘secularism’. *Third*, the perception that secularism is there “to promote certain moral and political

goods”, intended to counter morals that are “conceived as harms, actual or potential”. Simply put, “Secularism as a political doctrine arose to repair what was perceived as damages that flowed from religion.” This implies that secularism has the normative force of correcting harms, actual or potential, that otherwise, religion can do to the society_(Bilgrami, 2011).

Western scholars, where on the one hand, are convinced that secularization is a global phenomenon, and no religion can remain unaffected by this idea without exception. On the other hand, they are not very sure of the inevitability of secularization in the Muslim world (Esposito, 2011; Effendy, 2003; Tamimi, 2000). “In the modern industrial-scientific society, the grip of religion on people’s life has loosened, except on the followers of Islam” (Tamimi, 2000, p. 13). Gellner, a British anthropologist, expressed his views as:

It is possible to disagree about the extent, homogeneity, or irreversibility of this trend [secularization]...; but, by and large, it would seem reasonable to say that it is real. But there is one very real, dramatic and conspicuous exception to all of this: Islam. To say that secularization prevails in Islam is not only contentious. It is simply false. Islam is as strong as it was a century ago. In some ways, it is properly stronger _(Gellner, 1992, p. 5).

For reformist Muslim thinkers, the idea of incompatibility of Islam with Secularism contradicts the fundamental belief that Islam is timeless and universal and will remain relevant at all times. They believe that it is their inherent obligation to deliberate and remove the misconceptions that Islam is not relevant to modern times, especially in relation to the harmonious coexistence of all the religions (Madjid, 1987; Sirry, 2007; An-Na’im, 2008). Since the last few decades variety of Islamic discourses surrounds the Muslim’s stance on secularization, much of the debate among Muslim scholars revolves around the questions: “Can Islam be compatible with secularism? Can it be integrated into modernity? To what extent can Islam be contextualized and reinterpreted in order to make it in harmony with liberty?”_(Sirry, 2007, p. 324).

The debate about Islam and secularism endeavors to find a definition of a secular state acceptable to all. In France and Turkey, the declared secular states, secularism appear as distinctly anti-religion doctrine bent to control and remove all religious expressions and symbols from the public sphere. Under the secular fundamentalist regimes, “the mixing of religion and politics is regarded as necessarily abnormal (departing from the norm), irrational, dangerous and extremist.”_(Esposito, 2000, p. 9).

Many Islamists are of the view that Christianity and Islam are fundamentally different concerning the part played by religion in politics. They refer to the popular Jesus’s quote from the Bible that “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mark 12:15) as evidence that Christianity inherently agrees with the separation of church and politics; Whereas, Islam commands inseparable unity in a life ruled only by God who owns both the heavens and the earth. They believe that secularism challenges the supremacy of Islam and seeks to reduce it to a private affair that Muslims must reject _(Qaradawi, 1980).

Ghannouchi argues that in the Muslim world, secularism is being used as a strategic weapon by the despots. By highlighting that authoritarian government more than often assume Islam as a synonym to fundamentalism and extremism and propose secularism as essential for democracy. He stresses that such kind of secularism, instead of promoting civil society, proves to be “an impediment to the preservation and development of civil society.” [\(Ghannouchi, 2000, p. 121\)](#). He rejects the underlying secularist assumption that religion is the cause of extremism and violence and, therefore, should be kept aside from policy decisions. However, he admits that the ideal peaceful society grounded on the principles of Islam is not possible under current circumstances, so till the time that truly Islamic state is established, the best option is a secular state based on the rules of reason would be a “less evil than a despotic system of government that claims to be Islamic.” [\(Ghannouchi, 2000, p. 121\)](#)”.

An-Na‘im emphasizes that a secular state built on constitutionalism, human rights and citizenship and neutral of religious doctrine is “more consistent with Islamic history than is the so-called Islamic state model proposed by some Muslims since the second quarter of the twentieth century.” [\(An-Na‘im, 2008, p. 45\)](#). He seems to maintain his pro-secular stance despite the controversial ‘extent’ of neutrality of secularism. An-Na‘im reminds us that religious and political authority originates from different sources and demand different skills and cannot be converged in the same authority. The only Prophet could do it and is not possible today, “because no other human being can enjoy the Prophet’s combination of religious and political authority.” (p. 53). Since such balance is not possible, political and religious leaders should exercise their authority and expertise in their respective realms.

He explains that:

“Muslims everywhere, whether minorities or majorities, are bound to observe Shari’a as a matter of religious obligation, and that this can best be achieved when the state is neutral regarding all religious doctrines and does not claim to enforce Shari’a principles as a state policy or legislation. That is, people cannot truly live their convictions according to their belief in and understanding of Islam if rulers use the extensive coercive powers of the state to impose their view of Sharia on the population at large, Muslims and non-Muslims alike” [\(An-Na‘im, 2008, p. 3\)](#).

Nurcholish Madjid, one of the most influential Islamic scholar and thinker, suggests that “secularization” should be perceived as “desacralization.” He argues that the Quran nowhere mentions the creation of an Islamic state. Madjid gave his honest observation that the Muslims have abandoned critical thought and have suffered stagnation in religious thinking. He pointed out that the huge majority of Muslims are unable to differentiate between transcendental and temporal values. They confuse what is transcendental and what is temporal, so “the hierarchy of values was often the reverse; transcendental values were conceived as temporal and vice versa. Everything was likely to be perceived as transcendental, and therefore, without exception, valued as divine.” [\(Effendy, 2003, p. 328\)](#). As a result of this approach of religiosity, “Islam is [viewed as] equal in value as tradition; and becoming Islamic is comparable to becoming traditionalist.” [\(Madjid, 1987, p. 207\)](#). He compared the “modern constructions of an Islamic state to a profane

ideology, easily manipulated by those who want to impose their own views in the name of religion. He equated it with the sin of polytheism (shirk) or idolatry”_(Esposito, 2011, p. 12). He advised that Sharia law is not essential to make society more Islamic. The “true spirituality and religiosity comes from an inner transformation (individual and national). Rather than imposing Islamic law, what is needed is a spiritual and cultural path that fosters ethics in society instead of an Islamic state”_(Bakti, 2004). Nurcholish suggested two things, education and open dialogue with the world can transform individuals and societies _(Barton, 2007).

Reformist Muslim scholars agree that the concept of secularism, not an anti-religion concept; rather, it has evolved into a concept of religious harmony and tolerance that restrain states from practising religious discrimination, which is completely in harmony with the fundamental Islamic principles. Therefore, it would not be irresponsible to say that “Islam is fully compatible with secularism.”_(Zakaria, 1989, p. 22).

Muslims, despite acknowledging the importance of liberal and progressive western ideals when asked, do not approve of the complete adoption of western models of democracy and secularism. The majority does not want a theocratic state, but they do want to see the Shari’a principles in their legislation and constitution. Simply put, they want to ensure that laws in their countries should not contradict or against the principles and values of the Quran and Sunna. (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

Regarding the implications, the scholars believe that religious beliefs significantly affect political opinions and actions and, therefore, can help in understanding and predicting the political attitudes and preferences (Smidt, Kellstedt, & Guth, 2009; Layman, 2001). It is established that more than often, an individual’s with religious inclinations hold a conservative political stance on political issues as compared to those with less religious conviction (2001; Samuel L. Perry, 2020; Bretherton, 2020; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2010). As religion have deep political consequences; therefore, it demands careful examination. Despite the importance of the citizens’ religious trends in political orientations, less attention has been given to understand the youths’ idea of secularism. Though the religious perspective is not the only factor influencing political preferences, especially in the age of social media when a number of new identifiers have appeared defining personality outlook still the centrality of religion cannot be ignored (Livingston, 2020; Şafak-Ayvazoğlu, Künüroğlu, Vijver, & Yağmur, 2020). According to the UN Population Fund report (2017), in Pakistan, 63 percent of the population comprises youth between the age of 15 -33 years. It is thus, worthwhile to find out how they balance religion and contemporary political ideas?

It is relevant to mention that the influence of today’s secularist environment is not limited to political ideologies; rather, it profoundly affects educational and professional realms. Western standards in both these realms are viewed as normal and desirable, while any deviation from these is deemed as abnormal (Cooling, 2010; Cooling, 2011). Being professional and objective means to keep personal religious values separate from your professional life. However, this does not apply to atheist, agnostic and non-religious beliefs_(Revell & Walters, 2010). Critics point to the

fact that secularism is assumed unquestionably as a default neutral stance rather than an identifiable belief position (Revell & Walters, 2010; Haydon, 1994). Contemporary western education and training philosophies deem religious beliefs a problem that has to be managed and demand silence on the matters that are of central importance to the peoples living in religious societies, especially in the Eastern cultures (Haydon, 1994; Greenawalt, 2005; Monton, 2009). In contrast, atheistic and secular beliefs are considered an asset. Presently, secularism has become a dominating ideology, and its inclusion in ideological debates has become essential. Not accommodating secularism threatens the individual with being labelled as backwards, politically incorrect at best and a religious extremist at worst.

This paper has three objectives. First, it aims to briefly analyze the notion of secularism and its political connotations among Muslims. Secondly, it aims to examine how the media students understand secularism in political terms and thirdly, would they like to be identified as a secular person? Secularism in this study is conceptualized as a political ideology that advocates the separation of state from religious institutions and no discrimination against anybody in the name of religion. The relevant research questions are as follows

RQ1: What does secularism mean to the students of Pakistan?

RQ2: Do they want to be identified as secularist?

RQ3: Do they believe that Islam and secularism are compatible political ideologies?

Methodology

The paper has two parts. In the first part, in order to analyze the notion of secularism, an extensive review of the literature was carried out. For the next part that encompasses the last two of the three objectives/research questions, a straight forward three-item survey was conducted among 200 undergraduate media students in a public university. The first item was a statement with multiple responses. The statement was, “what does secularism mean to you?” The responses were (a) separation of state and religion without any oppression; (b) forceful separation of state and religion, (c) equality of individuals before the law irrespective of religion. The second item was a simple question “would you like to be identified as a secular person”. The third question, “Is secularism is compatible with Islam in today’s world?” After the brief survey, the willing students, who wanted to talk about secularism and Islam, were asked to participate in a focus group session. Four focus groups, comprising of 10 participants in each group, were conducted, sharing and discussing their ideas about secularism, particularly relating to their responses in the survey.

Results

The responses of the students revealed that the predominant perception (95%) of secularism is the separation between state and religion without any oppression. Very few students (5%) turned out to envisage secularism as the separation that involves oppression or force. Equally few (5%) understood secularism as equality of individuals before the law irrespective of their religion (Fig

1). In response to the second question, how they would like to be identified, 92% chose not to be identified as a secular person. Only 8% seem to prefer to be identified as secular (Fig 2). Responding to the third question regarding the compatibility of Islam and secularism, 78.3% of students responded ‘No’. The remaining two option, ‘yes’ and ‘to some extent’ was selected by an equal number of students, i.e., 10.9% each (Fig. 3).

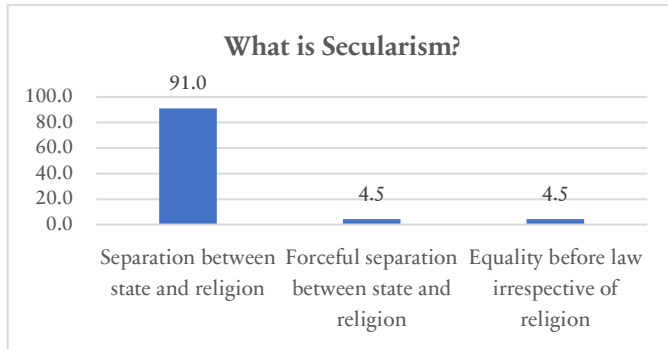


Figure 1: Percentage Graph of the Definition of Secularism

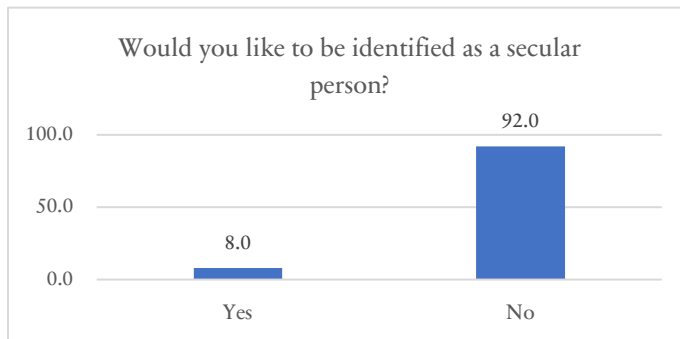


Figure 2: Percentage Graph of Proclaiming Secular Identity

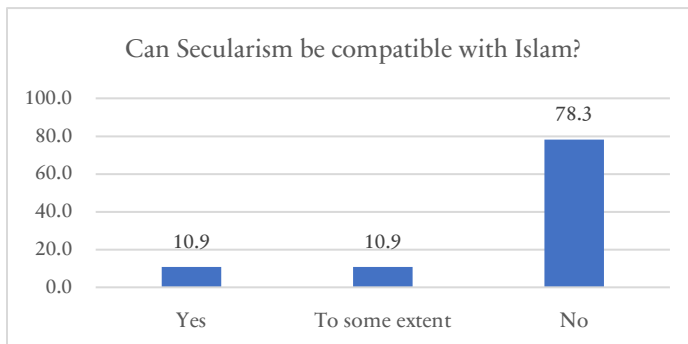


Figure 3: Percentage Graph of the Students’ Opinion about the Compatibility of Secularism with Islam

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite discerning secularism as a political ideology that favors the separation of religion and state, they intuitively associate it with individual morality and religious commitment. In qualitative interviews, a large majority of students seemed to believe that, in essence, Islamic beliefs are in harmony with the secular ideals such as safeguarding individuals' human and legal rights as a citizen, irrespective of religion. But it is significant to note that they discuss secularism in relation to various social ills and moral issues, particularly mentioning rejection of religion, promiscuity, and abortion laws.

Understanding the concept of secularism as a political ideology and possessing secularity as an identity does not satisfy any easy correspondence for Muslim consciousness. While secularism refers to the state institutions and administrative sphere, secularity concerns individual and social characteristics. Students were found genuinely concerned about the implications of being secular. For them, publically professing secular identity means abandoning Muslim identity and being perceived as *'la deen'*, which is not acceptable at any cost.

It is, therefore, concluded that secularism, by any definition, and is not an unambiguous notion for the youth despite the fact that contemporary Muslim religious scholars do not view secularism as a negation of Islam. Secularism to them represents a concept in competition with traditional religion. It is essentially linked to the issues of ethical particularism rather than a neutral, positive ideology that asks for the separation of state and religion.

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