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Secularism in Relation to Secularity and Secularization

A Commentary on Berlinerblau's Secularism: The Basics

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Abstract

My article offers commentary about Jacques Berlinerblau's new book *Secularism: The Basics*.

Keywords

secularism – Berlinerblau – secular – anthropology – freedom of expression

About a decade ago, as a sociology PhD student, I was asked in an oral examination how I would define and distinguish the terms “secularism,” “secularity,” and “secularization.” I immediately froze. I was certain that I could talk confidently about the latter two, but I wasn't quite sure what to say about “secularism.” As Berlinerblau notes in *Secularism: The Basics*, “The first thing to understand about this term is that there is no one agreed-upon understanding of the term! There is little consensus about what this -ism actually is ...” (pg. 1). This lack of consensus may explain my own confusion about this term ten years ago, and at the same time highlight one of the key contributions of this book. Indeed, Berlinerblau's book clearly defines secularism, meticulously discusses its dimensions, and highlights key examples of different forms of secularism from contexts around the world.

What I aim to focus on in this commentary is how secularism, as defined and explained by Berlinerblau, can be understood in relation to the other two terms mentioned above—what I would call the other “cornerstone concepts” of secular studies. I define *secularity* as a neutral and overarching term that

describes the opposite of religion or the “not religious,” and *secularization* is, if defined concisely, the process of decline in the social significance of religion, including in levels of religious beliefs, belonging, and behaviors. Given that Berlinerblau’s book focuses specifically on secularism, and in particular political secularism, it is understandable that secularity and secularization are not delved into at any depth in the book. However, these terms are not used in the book at all, which is unfortunate given the potential benefits of defining secularism more precisely vis-a-vis these related concepts. Despite the difference in terminology, I largely share Berlinerblau’s perspectives on the broader connection between secularism and various secular identities (see Chapter 13) as well as on how secularism correlates—or not—with societal levels of religiosity.

Berlinerblau defines political secularism as “legally binding actions of the secular state that seek to regulate the relationship between itself and religious citizens, and between religious citizens themselves” (pg. 5). He further describes ten key principles of political secularism, namely equality, disestablishment/neutrality, reason, state supremacy, freedom of conscience, toleration, belief/acts (private versus public expectations), two powers (church and state as distinct domains), internal constraint (to the state’s authority), and order (religious practice may not disrupt laws or others’ rights). He shows how these principles have evolved over the past millennia, convincingly arguing that secularism is neither a modern nor an exclusively Western phenomenon. Berlinerblau goes on to dispel the myth that secularism has developed out of atheism, explaining that “Political secularism is an idea born of religious thinkers contemplating religious problems using a religious vocabulary to solve them” (pg. 16). The discussion of Luther’s affinity for secular governance (Chapter 3) is informative and clearly highlights that even devout religious leaders can be, and often are, secularists when secularism is properly defined. In my own conversations with Presbyterian and Lutheran ministers in Sweden and Scotland, I have often heard that they don’t want their church to be “tied up with the government.” Similarly, after learning about the difference between atheism and secularism in one of my courses, a practicing Muslim noted that (political) secularism appealed to her and expressed that she had “a fair deal in common with the atheists after all.” Although they would not self-define as such, these ministers and this student may ultimately be described as “religious and secularist,” a designation that—if moving away from the stereotype that secularism=atheism—is not contradictory in any way. Berlinerblau succinctly sums this up when he states that “secularism is not atheism, although many secularists are atheists” (pg. 96).

Berlinerblau explains that it was in the Victorian era when the association between secularism and atheism emerged. Today, secularism is viewed

as an antireligious ideology in many parts of the world. However, quantitative data can be used to support Berlinerblau's point that secularism and atheism diverge to a large degree. For example, data from the General Social Survey from 2021 suggest that, in the United States, more than half of Protestants and Catholics approve of the court ruling that "no state or local government can require the reading of the Lord's Prayer or Bible verses in public schools." Similarly, in all countries that participate in the International Social Survey Programme, more than half of the respondents who are certain of God's existence agree or strongly agree that "religious leaders should not try to influence how people vote in elections." Even if these may not serve as perfect indicators of political secularism, they do suggest that even the most devout believers think that it is appropriate to restrict the power that religion has over state institutions.

Although the distinction between secularism and atheism is indeed an important one to make, and one that is effectively explored throughout the book, it is also helpful to acknowledge that secular(ity) and secularism are related, yet different, terms. As noted above, secularity is a neutral umbrella term that refers to the opposite of what is religious, and secularism is thus a more narrowly defined term focusing specifically on the relationship between religion, the state, and the citizens. At times, especially when referring to individuals as opposed to states, this distinction becomes blurred in the narrative of the book, such as when mentioning "non-secular atheists" as opposed to "non-secularist atheists" (pg. 156–157) when discussing atheists whose views do not align with political secularism, or when explaining that "Religious minority status might be one of the most likely predictors of a self-ascribed secular identity" rather than "secularist identity" (pg. 163). From my perspective, atheists are secular, but not always secularists. While I agree with Berlinerblau that *most* atheists are likely secularists (this is also confirmed, to some extent, using the data and variables from the GSS and the ISSP discussed above), there are exceptions. Consider for example a Swedish woman who I interviewed who identified as an atheist, who did not practice a religion, and who did not believe in a god or a transcendent being. At the same time, she thought that the secularist push toward removing public school graduations from the national (former state) church was "nonsense" and was in favour of the national church receiving certain privileges on behalf of the state, given their unique position as a cultural and historic heritage. Although there are different nuances to secularism, to some degree, this woman could be described as a "secular, non-secularist, atheist." Berlinerblau notes that "we cast doubt on the claim that all atheists are secularists ... it is much more accurate to say that not all secularists are atheists" (pg. 163). I thoroughly agree that it is much rarer to find "non-secularist atheists" than "religious secularists," although the former certainly do exist.

The stereotype that secularism is closely associated with atheism or anti-religious sentiments has certainly contributed to the misconception, particularly among the general public (e.g., in the United States), that secularization is an inevitable outcome of political secularism. However, as Berlinerblau shows, in a given society, political secularism and low levels of individual religiosity do not always go hand in hand. His discussion of political secularism in Africa (see Chapter 15) is particularly insightful on this issue. Berlinerblau notes that secular constitutions are common in Africa and uses Ethiopia as a prominent example. At the same time, Africa is the least secularized continent in the world and individual religious beliefs and practices remain high (and currently show little evidence of declining).

Decades of research into theories of religious decline shows that secularization is a complex process with causes that go far beyond a separation of church and state. The statement that “we are half a century into a global conservative religious revival” (pg. 178) needs to be carefully considered alongside a discussion of global patterns of secularization. The United States serves as a useful example of this. Although recent events with the Supreme Court overturning abortion rights indicate that the separation of religion from the state is shrinking in this context, trends of religious beliefs, behaviors, and belonging show that the United States is secularizing rapidly and has been for at least two decades.

My final example brings me back to the European context. Although, based on my definition above, I would not call some of the most secularized nations in the world “non-secular nations” (perhaps, to some extent, non-secular *states*) as is done in the discussion of England and Denmark (pg. 180), these contexts offer an example of how some remaining religious ties to the state do not mean that secularization is not taking place nor, as shown in the narrative, that the governments with state religions necessarily implement religious laws and policies. However, it is also important to note that political secularism *is* gaining ground in many highly secularized countries with former state churches. Although their ties to the state may not be completely severed, recent movements toward more church-state autonomy are for example seen in Sweden and Norway, which disestablished their respective state churches in 2000 and 2012.

In conclusion, I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Secularism: The Basics*, and I would recommend it to anyone interested in secularism or secular studies more broadly. If I had read Berlinerblau’s book as a graduate student, I would have been more confident in not only defining secularism, but also in discussing its complexities. There is no doubt that anyone reading it will come away with a great deal of new information and knowledge.