

# UNDERSTANDING SECULARISATION AS INDICATING THE PROCESS OF THE SEPARATION OF THE POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS

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## Abstract

*There is a normative position to designate secularisation thesis purely apolitical entity; and this article attempts to shed light on this mountain high debate to understand the extent to which secularisation can be called a complete separation of the religious and political. This article argues that since both religion and politics are not completely apolitical entities, therefore the complete separation of secularisation thesis has not been achieved. Maintaining the historical differentiations and cultural contexts of different countries, this research says that secularisation is best to understood from contextual and localised perspectives. Secularisation thesis does not even need to be understood as a complete separation, instead it is a process to establish an inclusive society through establishing religious freedom for all. Besides, this research also contributed in the epistemological realm through providing an alternative lens of studying secularisation and showed how this approach can help to study different genres of secularism practised in the USA, France and Bangladesh.*

**Key-words:** Secularism, secularisation, religion, politics

## Introduction

One of the key debates in social science is focused on secularization thesis and its multiple ways of understanding. Secularization, not being an exclusive thesis (Bruce, 2006), has been understood from different dynamics like modernization, separation of religious and political, religious role in public sphere, societal decline of religion, privatization and de-privatization of religion, and religious freedom. In this article, it has been argued that to some extent, secularization can be viewed as a separation of religious and political as separation of church and state in different historical differentiation and a way to achieve religious freedom for all. For understanding secularization as separation between religious

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and political only, both religion and politics must be 'apolitical'. As per these two institutions are recognised as political entities, these two are not separable completely. Instead, this differentiation was triggered to change the so-called church domination over state. This article is an attempt to explore to what extent secularisation is justified to understand as a process of the separation of the religious and political. Firstly, secularization will be analysed critically from theoretical point of views and secondly, it will be examined with three cases of secularization debate in the USA, France and Bangladesh.

### **Different Theoretical Debates**

Theorists are divided in their positions regarding secularization thesis. In broad spectrum, there are two trends of these thesis: the old school which advocates secularization should be understood as modernity and reason, where religion will be separated from political spheres and will be resulted in either decline of religion at its best or be privatised exclusively. On the other hand, there is another trend that can be called modern school (Casanova, Taylor for instances) which advocates the coexistence of religion and secular spheres side by side (Woodhead and Heelas, 2000, In: Tomalin, 2013, p.77) as inseparable part. Both trends have been critically examined to understand secularization from various contexts.

### **Differentiation Model of Secularization**

Casanova (2006) understood secularization from three points of view; societal decline of religious beliefs and practices, privatization of religion and making a boundary between religion and state, economy and science. The most popular discourse is on the third point; differentiation between religion and; state, economy and science. According to differentiation thesis, religion will be confined within private spheres and will play no part in secular spheres (Tomalin, 2013, p.77). This point supports the traditional etymological argument of the secularists to understand secularization. The European traditional supporters of secularization view it as the decline of influence of religion from society and institution; and the decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals (Casanova, 2006, pp. 7-8).

According to Gorski (2000, p, 140), this differentiation model is common in traditional theoretical schools of secularization. They view

religion as completely separable from secular spheres; i.e. state, reason, science. They differ on how to understand the differentiation of religion and non-religious spheres in both public domain and individual religiosity. Gorski (2000) divided the traditional theoretical framework in four kinds based on the changing nature of religion in relation to state and society.

Firstly, according to *disappearance* theory propounded by Comte, religion will be disappeared from the society in course of time and it will be substituted by science. Religion will find its place only in the morality related contexts both in personal and public domain. Durkheim seems to be a proponent of this disappearance theory arguing that old religious tradition will diminish. They think secularization as modernity. Secondly, according to Weberian theory of *religious decline*, the influence of religion will be declined in both public and private spheres. Science and reason will take the position of religion. Thirdly, according to the *privatization theory* of Luckmann, secularization will robust by religious declining from societal level, but religion will be a dominant element in private affairs. Finally, Parsons' *transformation theory* suggests that religious influence will be confined to private spheres, but Christian values will be pervasive in Europe. Besides these stand points, Berger maintained both privatization and transformation thesis arguing that traditional impacts of religion will remain in society but mainly in private discourse (Gorski, 2000, pp. 140-141).

### **Is Religious Influence Declining?**

Though the traditional theorists tend to view religious influence a declining trend in the society, Casanova (2006, p.22) rejected any idea of religious decline. Instead, he argued that the role of religion in public spheres is increasing day by day. According to Gorski (2000), old theoretical schools mainly tends to see of secularization as social differentiation of religion which leads to a decline of religious influence from within public and private realms. Gorski (2000) is critical to this judgement stating that though there is a possibility of decreasing religious influence from the society but religion has been playing a vital role in the public and private ethos even in the modern times. This differentiation works well in where religion has least influence such as foreign policy (Gorski, 2000, p.160). Thus, Gorski maintains that secularisation thesis should not be understood as 'declining of religion'. This position can be

supported by the 'religious authority' thesis of Chaves (1994). According to Chaves (1994, p.740), secularization does not advocate the decline of religious influence neither in society nor in individual. Instead, it decreases the scope of religious authority. This is very significant from two aspects. Firstly, this theory rejects the decline theory of religion from public sphere and secondly, it affirms the decrease of religious influence from state affairs. This decrease of religious authority increases the scope of division between religion and politics.

### **Secularization Provides the Scope of New forms of Religions**

Steve Bruce (2002) conceived secularization paradigm including two components; the presence and nature of religion and a collection of explanation of changes (Bruce, 2006, p.36). Church form religion has lost its appeal in a substantial way. But the reduction of this form will decrease church adherents and will work just as a pressure group (Bruce, 2006, P. 38). In a secular society, it is dangerous to pay more attention to religion. For instance, Bruce argued that if much importance on Islamic fundamentalism is given, this will increase the chance of the revival of Christian church as a counter resurgence and will keep negative impact on state policy as well (Ibid., 38). Though Bruce (2006) saw a significant decline in established religious activities both in public and private spectrum, he said that market oriented religious model like "*New Age Spirituality*" that includes yoga, meditation, ayurvedic for instances will play a more centralised role in individual sphere. Stating this new age spirituality as future of religion, Bruce argued that new age spirituality finds secularizing ethos in its market consumerism where yoga is conceived as exercise and meditation as a way of relaxation (Ibid., 44). This position can be supported by the following statement of Casanova (1994): "Some religions will be induced by tradition, principle and historical circumstances to remain basically private religions of individual salvation. Certain cultural traditions, religious doctrinal principles, and historical circumstances, by contrast, will induce other religions to enter, at least occasionally, the public sphere.' (Casanova, 1994, p. 221)

### **Separation between Religion and Politics is not Compulsory**

Supporting the Tocquevillean theory according to which democratization of politics enhances the chances of presence of religion in

public discourse as political entity, Casanova argued that in the European democracies, where religion was thought as a privatized matter have witnessed a robust of religious presence in politics in the recent years (Casanova, 2006. Pp. 20-21). Thus, Casanova does not view secularization as only the separation between religious and political. Daniele (2004) argued that European churches are still functional in public domain and religion is inseparable from secular identities (in Casanova, 2006, P. 14). This argument is supported by Casanova (2006) who also maintains this position. To him, Complete separation between church and state is not possible.

If the idea of democracy is considered as precondition of liberty, equality and fraternity (Taylor, 2010), the principal argument of Casanova (2006) makes a huge impact in academic debate. He argued that complete separation between church and state is not a mandatory requirement for being a democratic society. Rather, a conscious attempt to build a wall between this two ethos are counterproductive and can be dangerous. He argued that curtailing the free exercise of religion implies the curtailing of free exercise of civil rights as part of a democratic society. In this case, the ban on wearing hijab in France can be considered as a key example. Maintaining this theoretical argument of Casanova (2006), it can be said that the ban of *hijab* or *Cross* in France is a cessation of civil rights.

Casanova (2006, p.14-22) developed his *de-privatisation of religion* thesis arguing that religion will always have a key role in public sphere along with individualistic approach of religious practices. Similar kind of argument can be found in the literature of Martin (2014). According to him, religion was never gone out from the public domain. It has a persistent significance in public domain including both political and apolitical ethos. The declining of religious role in public life is the 'imagination' of the western intellectuals.

Talal Asad (2003) is also opposite to understand secular ethos as a space where people seek *emancipation from religious domain*. He argued that as historical category both secular and religion are intertwined and interdependent as well. He stated that once the secular was constituted with theological discourse and later, religion was constituted with secular political and scientific discourse. The emergence of globalized secularity

comes up from western secular modernity. Thus, from historical category, religion and politics are inseparable (Asad, 2003, pp. 191-192).

### **Does the Resurgence of Religion Designate the Death of Secularization?**

There is a debate in academia that if the privatization of religion or separation of religious and political are not the main agendas of secularization, then to what extent secularization survives as 'fact' and to what extent this resurgence of religion is a threat to secularization. At the same time the rise of church attendance in the USA and in many western countries have raised the similar voice. In response to this question, Casanova (1994, p. 212) writes that it will be very wrong if anyone designates secularization as myth only because of religious resurgence around the world. Instead, it requires redefining of differentiation thesis of secularization based on historical contexts and regional contexts.

Arguing religion as coexisting element in secularization process, Casanova (1994) understood secularization in USA with three phases. Firstly, formal separation of church and state was confirmed by the First Amendment to the US constitution prohibiting any establishment of any religion where religious freedom for all citizens has been confirmed; secondly, the concentration of education was shifted from theological nature to science both in schools and universities which was seen as one of the moves to curtailing theological influence from society and institutions as well; and finally, the emergence of pluralism in American ethos.

### **Secularisation as Achieving Liberty, Equality and Fraternity**

Taylor (2010) understood the success of secularization process by the achievement of three goals of a society; liberty, equality and fraternity. As part of secularization process, a secular regime is constituted with two important elements; separation between the church and the state and pluralism of society where state will follow a basic distance from religion. According to him, liberty will be understood as the freedom of religion; the freedom to exercise of one's faith irrespective of theists and atheists while he meant equity as an equal status of every person belonging to different religion in the state. Meanwhile he understood fraternity in the inclusion of all spiritual families within the state (Taylor, pp. 22-23). Thus, he brought both parties of secularisation; the old school which believe that

the role of religion must be declined in the society and state will have no attachment with religion, and the liberal secularists who think that secularization will be understood as the establishment of religious freedom and equal status of all people belonging to different faiths; theists and atheists for instance.

Taylor is very critical towards the secularization theories that view it as only separation between church and state arguing this a 'wrong model' (Taylor, 2010, p.25). But he advocates for the separation between church and state where liberty, equality and fraternity will remain as main goals to achieve. His main argument was the establishment of reason for a democratised society which is not completely persistent in the present models. According to him, secularization will not be based on neither exclusive dominance of religion nor elimination of religion. Thus, he can be considered as a theorist of coexistence thesis of secularism and religion.

Criticising the French ban on hijab as 'fetishization' of secularization, Taylor (2010) argued that secular society cannot be achieved in democracy by excluding religions. Being fundamental components of democracy; liberty, equality and fraternity can come through inclusive society which will accelerate secularization (Taylor, 2010, P. 33). Though Taylor is critical towards the elimination or decline of religion from society, he did not reject the necessity of the separation between religion and politics. Rather, he meant this separation as necessity for secularization.

In response to Taylor's argument regarding the relationship between secularization and liberty, Martin (2014), says that it is a customary idea of the western world that secularization will ensure liberty and this relationship is so condensed. Martin does not think that secularisation can bring liberty in a society because the so-called oppressive and authoritarian governments tagged by the western media are much more secular than many western countries. In these countries, secularization persists as a fact, but liberty or freedom of individuals does not exist (Martin, 2014, 466).

### **Change of Power Dynamics between Church and State Instead of Separation**

After the protestant reformation and the renaissance, the power dynamics between state and church were changed. But this change did not

designate the complete separation between church and state. Earlier, state was dominated by church and alternatively, church started to be dominated by state. This is a change of power relationship instead of separation. After this change of power, in some countries for instance which are mostly Lutheran, subjugation of church was a direct attempt by the state while this subjugation was indirect (with accountability) in Calvinist countries (Gorski, 2000, p. 159). For this reason, Gorski (2000) for termed the centuries after the reformation as era of 'de-secularization'. In this way, secularization as a separation between religion and politics can also be questioned.

### **A New Approach to Understand Secularization**

If this de-secularization is conceived as universal, then the idea of secularization as the separation between church and state becomes less prominent. Thus, it is very problematic to understand secularization as only the separation of religious and political. Instead, there requires a common basement that will help to understand secularization with more universal approach. Therefore, for avoiding more complexities and giving a more universal approach to secularization, it has been proposed here that 'secularization' should be understood as establishment of 'active freedom' of religion and equal status and equal opportunity of every citizen in every sphere. In this instance, three cases can be considered in the following discussion. Firstly, secularization in American constitution, secondly, the ban of hijab in France and finally, secularization and state religion debate in Bangladesh.

### **The Secularization Model of America**

American secularization is based on two promises; separation of church and state, and the freedom of religion. Unlike European countries, this separation between religious and political has been made by acknowledging the public role of religion. American secularism was not born out of the hegemony of churches in like Europe. That is why American secularization had more religious components than European countries (Casanova, 2006). According to the American model of secularization, state will not be run by any specific religion (though this religion was meant to be different sect or denominations of Christianity. In course of time, the meaning of religion got universal approach

acknowledging all mainstream religions in American society). At the same time, state will ensure the rights of everyone to believe and to disbelieve and to practice religions according to their choices. The essence of American secular spirit can be found in an 1786 Act that says:

no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no way diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities. (Majumdar, 2013. p.21).

This designates two important things; the importance of religion in public life and the right of individual to practice his religion. This constitution seems to be very respectful towards individual religiosity as well. For instance, though state is separated from church, presidents have been seen taking their oath on the Bible. This violates neither the secular spirit nor civil rights of a president as an 'individual'. Thus, the American constitution ensures 'active freedom' of religion.

### **Ban on Religious Symbols in France and the Cessation of Individual Rights**

The second case of the French ban of wearing religious signs or clothing in public schools including headscarf or hijab of Muslim girls, yarmulkes of Jewish boys, large Christian crosses, and turbans for Sikh boys in public schools is an expression of hard-core separation of political and religious in public life (Majumdar, 2013. 219-220). French societal evolution of secularization is different from American process. Taylor writes: "*laicite* came about in a struggle against a powerful church. The strong temptation was for the state itself to stand on a moral basis independent from religion" (Taylor, 2010, p.27). The formal separation of church and state, in France, was meant to be all about controlling religion under state (Ibid, p. 27). He mentioned two possible reasons for banning hijab or head scarfs in schools. On the one hand, girls were compelled by their families to wear hijab and on the other hand, to establish a common identity excluding religious symbols in public spheres (Ibid. p. 29).

This ban directly ceases the civil right of an individual to wear hijab in public places. As religion is clearly separated from the political domain of France, the 'fetishization' of national identity in terms of liberty (Taylor,

2010) is unnecessary. In France, religion is conceived as totally privatized matter and to conceive it as national identity is a contradiction. In this circumstance, considering hijab as threat means that national identity is not safe and can be threatened by religious symbols. This kind of thinking might express the weakness of the national identity. Moreover, this ban can be taken for granted if this ban can be justified by ensuring equal rights for all. Instead, this is a violation of people's right which is a clear contradiction. It is true that in France, secularization is meant to be a clear separation between church and state but the violation of individual right is a contradiction to the French spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity.

### **Secularism and State Religion Debate in Bangladesh**

The third case is about secularization of Bangladesh. Secularization of Bangladesh was premised on two basic notions; ban of political use of religion and religious freedom of all. The role of religion has been acknowledged in both public and private spheres. Bangladesh constitution has both secularism and state religion that seems to be contradictory (Islam and Huda, 2016). Article 12 of Bangladesh Constitution explains secularism as follows: "The principle of secularism shall be realized by the elimination of Communalism in all its forms, the granting by the state of political status in favour of any religion, the abuse of religion for political purposes and any discrimination against or persecution of persons practicing a particular religion (Bangladesh Constitution, 2011, p.4).

The constitution of Bangladesh has guaranteed the freedom of religion to all the citizens of the state. As per Article 28, the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of religion, race, cast, sex or place of birth (Ibid., p.8). According to Article 41(1), every citizen has the right to profess, practice or propagate any religion and every religious community or denomination has the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions (Ibid., p.12). Article 41(2) further mentions that no person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instructions, or to keep part in or to attend any religious ceremony or worship, if that instruction ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own (Ibid., p.12).

Thus, Bangladesh is a secular state where the secular constitution has guaranteed the freedom of religion to its every citizen. The constitution of

1972 banned religion based politics to ensure the freedom of all religious faith and to establish secularism in a firm basis (Anisuzzaman, 2015, p.56). Though religion based politics have been allowed since 1977.

Though according to 1972 constitution, religion based politics were banned, Bangladesh did not have any atheistic nature in secularization process from the very beginning. Instead, it was understood as equal status and establishment of active religious freedom for all. This will be clear from the following parliamentary speech in 1972 by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh: "Secularism doesn't mean faithlessness, much less atheism. It is meant to ensure the right of each citizen of the country to practice his/her religion. We do not want to ban the practice of religion by enacting laws, nor shall we ever... The only thing that we will not allow is the use of religion as a political weapon." (Islam and Huda, 2016, p.2).

There are at least two positions of secularization of Bangladesh where question can be raised. Firstly, unlike United States, there is no commentary on those who do not believe in any established religion. Secondly, most confusing provision of Bangladesh Constitution is the insertion of Islam as state religion by 8<sup>th</sup> amendment. Now, Bangladesh has both secularism and state religion which might seems to be contradictory. This opens the scope to label people belonging to other religions as second class citizen. If this is considered according to UK model where there is a state church and does not violate the rights of other religions, then it reduces the tension. In that case, main consideration should be given on to what extent this religious freedom is given to all irrespective of religious differences.

In Bangladesh, this is more like a US model secular constitution. On the other hand, from state religion perspective, it can be compared UK model constitution. Another striking aspect is that in Bangladesh state provides funding to all religious institutions and grants public holiday on the special days of each religion including Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism.

It can be said that Bangladesh has not been strict to its earlier premises on the separation of religion and politics. At the same time, this does not mean that Bangladesh is not a secular state. Besides, providing state funding does not reduces the possibility to be a secular in broader scope.

For instance, Bush administration has initiated Faith Based office to accelerate the works of the Faith based organizations around the world (Tomalin, 2013.212). Thus, religious inclusion by the state is also not uncommon. Besides this, the key motto should be equal treatment for all.

## Conclusion

It is undeniable that secularization started as a process to free state from the hegemony of the churches. Later, secularization changed the prevalent church – state relationship by the establishment of hegemony of the state over the church. In this paper, it has been argued that secularization cannot be understood only from the perspective of separation between religious and political. Instead of understanding secularization only as separation between religion and politics, it is more convenient to understand it as establishment of religious freedom and equality for all irrespective of religions. This understanding has more inclusive approach. At the same time, secularization process has different contextual aspects. Therefore, American secularization process cannot be judged normatively from the secularization of France. There is no unique model of secularization which can be applied universally. So, secularization should be understood based on historical, cultural and social contexts. Moreover, secularization remained as a process of religious change instead of hard separation between religion and politics.

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