Beyond Secularism

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J. PAUL MARTIN, MAR 19 2010

Secularism has long been the language of most public servants and many scholars in the Western world, enabling both groups to work and live as though religions were irrelevant to their respective fields. This perspective has meant that religious phenomena have been ignored or reduced to other categories such as civil society, humanitarianism or as part of a definition of "civilization." Linked with this ideology were the ideas that religions were dying out or that they were negative factors responsible for social ills such as discrimination, hate speech, identity politics and even the persecution of minorities and violent conflict. The scholars and diplomats who have subscribed to these secularist principles are, like the religions they seek to sideline, not a homogeneous entity. There are many secularisms. Indeed it has been called a black box.[1] Secularism has been more of a huge, welcoming umbrella, covering all those who object to a religious presence in public politics. In doing so, secularism has defined itself, and even been defined by its religious opponents such as the present Pope, more by what it objects to, namely religion, rather than what it is or proposes.

Secularism is as heterogeneous as the panoply of religion traditions it seeks to exclude. For their part religions are each complex and evolving combinations of beliefs, moral systems, practices, loyalties, texts, cultures, institutions and histories. These combine in different ways even within each tradition, differing also by geographic location or period of history. The net result is a very large swath of ideas, institutions and activities to be excluded by the secularism of the scholars or that of the politicians. However such exclusion has always been qualified. In practice, with perhaps the temporary exceptions of certain atheist regimes, the continuing presence of religious elements in the general culture of the society in question has meant that the exclusion of religious factors from public life has always been partial. [2] For its part, secularism has functioned as an equally generic concept, selective and susceptible to vague definitions, itself a complex of ideological premises, social science axioms, political affiliations and influential scholars and political theorists, all of which bear the marks of their respective cultural and historical gestation. In fact one of the outcomes of the resurgence of Islam has been to show how Western secularism is still deeply defined by its Jewish and Christian heritage.

Today the perception of a resurgence of religion in the public sphere is raising the question of whether the traditional political ideologies of secularism are adequate. The new diplomatic words are pragmatism and problem-solving. [3] In other words, the emerging goals are to engage with and to accommodate the previously denied religious forces, to take seriously the deep and powerful political presence of religions in public life, and to focus on common interests and collaborative solutions. It is no longer a question of ignoring religion and eschewing its presence and influence. Rather it is a question of acknowledging its influence and seeking to maximize its constructive rather than divisive forces. In such a world there is little place for an ideology that wants to ignore them.

This new approach presents a challenge for the U.S. and other government policy makers who have traditionally based their policymaking on secularist premises. The initial challenge is the ability of the existing bureaucratic apparatus to assess the political, let alone the internal religious, workings of the major and minor religions at work in the world. Foreign embassies are only beginning to engage local religious leaders and to report on religious developments in their respective host countries. Even the US Government, with its extensive annual reporting on religious freedom and its diplomatic activity on behalf of its citizens who work as missionaries overseas, has limited its perspective to freedom of religion and belief, that is relations between religions and the state. It does not, for example, take a sustained interest, let alone monitor, relations among or within religions in other countries. Few

embassies employ personnel with the expertise to understand the diverse beliefs, practices, loyalties, texts, cultures, institutions and histories of a country's religions and their relevance to regional and international security and peace.

Recent events, however, are forcing diplomats to monitor the elements of religion that can influence domestic and regional politics well before the point when they begin to underpin revolutionary or violent social action. In both their domestic and international affairs, governments need to be able to recognize and to respond when religious loyalties are co-opted by states or social movements, especially when they begin to convince young believers that their religious beliefs call for unquestioning support of the state or a given cause, especially if this calls for giving up one's own life. Islamic fundamentalism for example, is a concern of the US government, the Falun Gong of the Chinese, the Jehovah Witnesses of the French and Russian governments and Scientology of the German. Religious imperatives have also been a consistent and effective tactic of the Lord's Resistance Movement in Northern Uganda where the leader is portrayed as the infallible prophet of God who must be obeyed at all costs. Similar situations arise when states link their political goals to religious fidelity. Other than to reject and condemn such strategies, secularist paradigms have little to offer in these circumstances. Among the missing elements are timely social analyses that recognize changes in circumstances that make religious loyalties, beliefs, practices etc., susceptible to manipulation hostility on the part of other interests. These situations call for insightful engagement based on a more pragmatic perspective rather than a secularist ideology that defines a priori which empirical factors are relevant.

Equally excluded by many secularist ideologies is a role for the public authorities with respect to relations among the various religious agencies within their territory. Modern pluralism and religious diversity call here again for attentiveness, informed knowledge and pragmatic responses rather than simply seeking to exclude religion from the public sphere. Equally challenging in such a post-secularist world is to re-define the place of religious leaders in debates on public policy. Reciprocally religions need to find and adopt modes of operation that recognize both religious pluralism and the processes of public debate and political compromise. States and international organizations cannot stand on the sidelines, nor be merely referees. Reducing domestic tensions with religious components, such as in Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, India, Iraq and Uzbekistan, requires facilitating a dialogue among the religions adapted to the very different circumstances within each state or across states where religious tensions are shared. In question is the classic dilemma: what to do politically with diversity? Left alone, diversity tends to move in the direction of tension and conflict. Moving towards dialogue, collaboration and positive interaction requires positive theoretical and pragmatic inputs on all sides. Other authors have argued that current paradigms of constitutionalism need to be re-visited on the grounds that human rights principles such a human dignity, rule of law and freedom of religion and belief are often violated when secularist principles define public institutions and policies.[4]

Finally, it is important to note that the world's major religions are also powerful international networks in their own right. They are readily mobilized to support fellow religionists in other parts of the world. Many religious groups support well-funded international relief and development agencies linked closely with home governments and the major international agencies. The presence of religious institutions is also visible at the UN, especially when debates focus on the rights women and freedom of religion and belief. Both issues remain controversial and there is little normative change on the horizon. The 1981 UN *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance or Discrimination based on Religion and Belief* is not likely to lead to a treaty in the foreseeable future. This is not likely to change in a post-secularist world. On the other hand religions are not sedentary entities. They come alive from time to time, often with serious implications for their neighbors. Thus just as states need to be pro-active in working with the religions within their borders, so there need to be international institutions which focus, systematically not just occasionally, on working with and reducing tensions among the world's religions, especially those that threaten international security.

To summarize, secularism is not a viable paradigm to define the place of religion in public life. The grounds are that (a) it is intellectually pre-emptive, (b) it is defined heterogeneously, mostly by what it negates rather than what it stands for, (c) the versions with Western roots retain deep imprints from their Judaeo-Christian roots, (d) it is ill-equipped to grapple with the diversity of, and especially relations among, the world's religions, (e) it thus also ill-equipped to analyze those associated powerful political forces and political crises that verge on major threats to international security and domestic stability, and (f), equally importantly, western secularisms are not concepts acceptable to religions such as Islam and Tibetan Buddhism. The international community is thus faced with the

challenge of finding new common "rules of the road" to enable diverse the world's religions to mingle peacefully in an increasingly globalized world. This calls for an approach to both freedom of religion and belief and inter-religious relations that will probably be quite different from the one espoused in the 1981 UN*Declaration on the Elimination of Intolerance or Discrimination based on Religion and Belief.* The thinking needs to begin sooner rather than later.

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Paul Martin joined the Barnard Faculty in 2007, after 29 years at Columbia, where he had been the founding executive director of the Center for the Study of Human Rights (CSHR) at Columbia University. Prof. Martin first went to Africa in 1964 to spend three years teaching and as dean of residence at the then University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. He later came to Columbia University where his Ph.D. dissertation examined the role of missionaries and other Europeans seeking to educate the Sotho from 1833-1884. At the CSHR, Dr. Martin sought to promote interdisciplinary research, teaching and training at Columbia and overseas. One of its most effective programs has been the Center's twenty-year old, annual four-month Program that has enabled ten or more grassroots human rights leaders from developing countries, including at least four from Africa, to receive advanced training and to share their experiences with Columbia faculty and students.

[1] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2008), "Politics of Secularism and IR," e-International Relations

[2] For example, Alfred Stepan (2001) 'The World's Religious Systems and Democracy: Crafting the "Twin Tolerations"' in *Arguing Comparative Politics,* Oxford U. Press pp. 213-253

[3] See Chicago Council of Global Affairs (2010), "Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for US Foreign Policy" found at http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/taskforce_details.php?taskforce_id=10

[4] Alicino, Francesco (2010) "Constitutionalism as a Peaceful "Site" of Religious Struggles," *Global Jurist,* 10, 1, Art.#8. **DOI:** 10.2202/1934-2640.1340

About the author:

J. Paul Martin is Director of Human Rights Studies at Barnard College, Columbia University. Professor Martin's professional experience has been built around his 29 years as Executive Director of Columbia's Center for the Study of Human Rights, of which he was a co-founder, along with Law and University Professor Louis Henkin. Previously, and later simultaneously, he was Director of the Earl Hall Center at Columbia University; a lecturer in the School of International and Public Affairs; and Adjunct Professor at Teachers College. He has also served as Director of the Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs concentration at the School of International and Public Affairs, as well as Academic Advisor for the human rights concentration in the master's program of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Professor Martin's early publications were on moral education. More recently he has focused on human rights and human rights education. He has edited three collections of human rights documents and contributed to the *Oxford Encyclopedia on Political Science* and *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East*.