

## Secularism and the Rights of Religious Minorities

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This essay is quite brief. In fact it is nothing more than a statement. Furthermore, what I have to say is in fact simple, but it is also essential to the themes addressed in this volume. Focusing on the European scene, the point I wish to make may be summarised in this way: While numerous religions are building up and religious discourse once again permeates politics and ideology, it should not be forgotten that secularism - not religion - has made the pluralistic, modern democracy possible and hence serves as a guardian for religious freedom and equality. The precondition to freedom and equality for minority religions, consequently, is the preservation of secularism. Religion, however, never guarantees secularism anything.

From a scholarly point of view it is interesting to observe how the public discourse about religion and society, by and large, takes place within a framework that allows the religions themselves to be very outspoken and influential. Even if Europe for centuries has experienced a gradual (and sometimes even accelerating) secular turn, religious arguments in questions regarding religion's position in society is very influential. In essence, secular society has allowed religious organisations, and religion in the more abstract sense of the word, to work and thrive in society with no real obstacles, and disregarding all secular structures and sentiments, religious interests definitely occupy political and intellectual space. There are reasons to be happy about this situation, but it also calls upon critical judgement.

### *Society, Religion, and Secular Virtues*

It is, obviously, a good thing that every citizen can entertain whatever mythological world view he or she prefers, and that everyone freely can build religious organisations with like-minded people. It is a good thing not because it has to do with religion, but because it has to do with freedom of thought. It is also a good thing that religious interests are free to work in society. Not

because such interests are of any special significance, but because they reflect peoples right to advocate any interest in the public. The core issue is not religion. Rather, freedom of the individual, freedom of thought and speech, and the right to form organisations, are, as we know, secular virtues, crown jewels in humanistic ideology. If there were no religious dimensions visible in the public, if there were no religious voices heard and no religious interests pursued, it would be a sign of societal suppression. Disregarding secularism in all its manifestations, religious fantasies are certainly roaming the minds of most people, and nothing indicates that this condition will change. For that very reason society must be able to accommodate any religious interest that falls within the boundaries set by ordinary laws and regulations (violent or criminal religions or religious individuals, obviously, should be met with the same repercussions as any other group or individual). The religions themselves may be of no interest to the secularly minded person, but the fact that they are operating in society should be celebrated as a victory for secularism and humanism! Since the end of the 3. century, when the Christians rose into power and prohibited other religions, the West haven't seen the kind of religious pluralism that we are witnessing today, a pluralism which has only become possible due to the Christian churches relative decline in power. Less religion in terms of societal power, has led to increasing freedom, including freedom for a multitude of religions<sup>1</sup> .

### *A Paradox*

At the same time, though, the freedom of religion may pose a threat or at least a challenge to secular society. The modern secularised state guarantees, as we have seen, the civil rights, including the freedom of religion, to all citizens. Paradoxically, however, the non-religious state guarantees the religious freedom of people who would themselves never admit secularism into their society if they were in power. Quite often religious movements do whatever then can to argue against the very idea of secularism. Sometimes in

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<sup>1</sup> Religious pluralism is regulated quite differently around the world. The best survey regarding the present conditions probably is: James T. Richardson (ed.), *Regulating Religion. Case Studies from Around the Globe*, Critical Issues in Social Justice, Kluwer Academic Press/Plenum Publishers, New York etc. 2004.

unproblematic ways, sometimes with a fervour that has to be taken seriously. When the Jehova's Witnesses in Denmark, for instance, maintain that they only abide to divine law it poses no actual problem. In practical life this remains a religious discourse that certainly reflects the feelings and ideology of the Witnesses, but it doesn't show in the concrete activities of the group. Jehova's Witnesses respect the law and ordinary public authorities with no hesitation, and accept to negotiate whatever special arrangement they, as a community or as individuals, may wish for. Their position towards the secular state is principal, not actual. This is probably also the case with the islamic movement, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, in this country, even if the religious proclamations from this group are more direct and aggressive. Hizb-ut-Tahrir insists that democracy is unacceptable given the fact that it was not introduced by Allah. Rather, the organisation maintains, society should be structured according to religious ideals as expressed in their own interpretation of Sharia. They want to realise "living in the Khilafa".

While the Jehova's Witnesses are accommodating, Hizb-ut-Tahrir have employed on a more provoking strategy. Secular society, however, leaves space for both of them, although not naïvely: Hizb-ut-Tahrir's religiously based campaign against Jews, for instance, has called upon severe criticism, and legal authorities have considered the possibility of abolishing the organisation with reference to the Danish Penal Code that explicitly forbids racism and everything pertaining to it. At this point (March 2005) nothing has happened, apart from the fact that Hizb-ut-Tahrir's statement regarding Jews (including an obligation to kill them) has been removed from the organization's Danish (but not international) home page on the Internet.

Indeed, Hizb-ut-Tahrir has done nothing more than the insignificant Danish Nazi Party and they have been around for decades, so why bother? Obviously there are reasons for concern when radical religious groups violate basic tenets of public law in their discourses, but this far the reaction of secular society has put freedom of speech and thought above everything else. The legal and political strategy has been to let them think and speak as they wish, while any action against other people would be regarded as an entirely different business.

The structural conflict between groups or persons within secular society and “society itself” also shows in less dramatic ways. Member of Parliament, Søren Krarup, who is himself a minister in the National Church, for instance, insist that the very concept of Human Rights is “ungodly” and “depraved”. Man has no rights, he says. Only obligations towards God. Secularism, therefore, is a dangerous and sick ideology, a kind of *maladie* that prevents Man from understanding his real nature. Krarup sees any reference to Human Rights as an expression of pseudo-religious ideology that leads humans away from everything good and decent. In all three cases (Jehova’s Witnesses, Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Søren Krarup of the National Church) the divine laws of mythological entities are preferred to pragmatic, rational political systems, and in two of the examples explicit or implicit social delimitations are introduced. Neither Hizb-ut-Tahrir, nor Søren Krarup believe all human beings to be equal (neither does the Jehova’s Witnesses, but their distinctions only apply to a mythological level, not society here and now). Those in favour, obviously, are those who abide to the religious doctrines. Krarup explicitly states that his religion places next of kin and countrymen prior to everybody else, and Hizb-ut-Tahrir maintains that only muslims of the right mind are decent - and thus real - human beings.

Both examples are distinctively anti-secular and both position themselves in contrast to humanism, so despite gross differences in specific religious notions, the two parties are very much in ideological accord. Krarup would probably nod his head to the principles of this statement made by Hizb-ut-Tahrir: “We will never consider the Human Rights, which were invented by humans, more important than islam, which is a revelation from Allah. We do not believe that these rights are universal as they have come into being as the result of a certain historical development in Europe”<sup>2</sup>. Krarup, however, would not agree in Hizb-ut-Tahrir’s total refusal of democracy which, says the organization, is anti-Islamic.<sup>3</sup> He accepts democracy, but he

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<sup>2</sup> Press release, Denmark, October 4. 2001 and Interview with spokesman Fadi Abdullatif in the newspaper Information, May 14. 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance: <http://www.khilafah.dk/explore/explore.html> where muslims are urged to turn their back to elections that are seen as sinister “instruments in the process of integration” (“integration” is considered a master plan designed to surprises islam).

would certainly not consider it “Christian”: Democracy (and whatever it entails of humanism and secularism) will never be able to offer that which is most precious to humans. It has to come from the Church. Søren Krarup’s Church, of course<sup>4</sup>.

The point I wish to make is simple: Even religions that disregard secular society or straightforwardly counteract it, are able to function perfectly well in that very same society. There are no, or very few, restrictions upon them, and no single members of such congregations are being wrongly treated due to his or her religious affiliation. Secularism even makes it possible for priests that go against Human Rights to argue their case from the most prestigious platform in society, the rostrum of parliament. In fact from representing a fringe minority some 15 years ago, these representatives for a new religious conservatism have risen into power. It is a paradox, but in fact they owe everything to democracy, and thus secularism and humanism, which they hate.

### *The General Picture*

Most religious people living under the secular state are themselves highly influenced by secularism and probably don’t identify the boundaries between “pure secularism” and the ways of the easy-going religious commitment they display themselves. Hard-core secularists remain a rare breed, and therefore it is only natural that various religions function (in all possible ways) within the boundaries set by secular law. After all 85% of the Danish population are members of the same Church, and thousands upon thousands of people are members of other denominations and religious groups. Only a fraction is actually non-religious people with no religious affiliation whatsoever. Bearing this in mind we must acknowledge the fact that secularism doesn't stand in fierce opposition to religion. Rather secularism signifies a societal situation where religion most of the time is quite easy going and deprived of absolute political or economic power. Secularism provides a certain kind of sociological space where “soft” religion dominates, but where all kinds of religions may in fact exist.

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<sup>4</sup> A brief but comprehensive presentation of Søren Krarups ideology is given (in Danish) in Klaus Rothstein, *Tid til forundring*, Tiderne Skifter, København 2005.

In effect the religions owe much to secularism. By deliberately disregarding the theological discrepancies represented by each religious community or congregation, secular law admits in principle all religions into the fabric of modern society, as long as they don't violate the general legal conditions. In Denmark some 90 different religious groups have formally been recognized by the state and thus given full credentials to pursue their own interests in society. This arrangement has come into being in order to compensate for problems caused by one particular religion's special position in society; the National Church, which, according to the constitution, is the church of the state and therefore entitled to special support. In secular society this is not acceptable without additional rules. The existence of a National Church (which in itself is a paradox in an otherwise secular state) means that citizens are treated differently depending on their religious affiliations. Consequently the state has developed compensating systems that allow almost the same privileges to every religious group. Secularism has actually ensured the religious rights for 89 religious groups - to put it rather bluntly.

#### *Final Remarks*

It is secular humanism that has made the contemporary welfare system possible - not religion. Human rights and democracy was, from a historical point of view, argued against religion, and the presence of religious people who are making a point out of the very same positions simply reveals the impact of humanism (and thus secularism) upon religious ideology. In many ways secularism and religion are opposing positions, but not entirely. Non-religious positions and the intellectual legacy of humanism have to a large extent influenced the theory and behaviour of religious people in today's world. In effect religious ideology has absorbed a number of basic tenets from non-religious ideas of how society should be structured, and how it should work. In contemporary Christian discourse it is often postulated that the significant welfare of Western society is the product of Christian ethics, and that societal "values" therefore basically are Christian. As I see it, however, this is not entirely true. In fact it is only true to a very limited degree. It may be that secular humanism is carrying ideological elements regarding the

human condition that were originally conceived within a Judaeo-Christian setting, but it remains a fact that it took secularism to make these ideals become social facts. It also remains a fact that the influence of humanism and secularism has reduced the power-drive otherwise imbedded in Church-ideology. Democracy was by and large won in conflict with religious, conservative interests. At best the Churches allowed or accepted the rise of humanism (and thus secularism). They never promoted or encouraged it - why should they?.

But the virtues of secularism and humanism are not respected everywhere. Certainly not. Presently secular societies such as France, Germany, Belgium and Russia have a hard time accepting the religious pluralism. In France special rules are set up to restrict islamic behaviour and appearance, and in Belgium, Germany and Russia members of new religious movements are being severely maltreated by the authorities. It is claimed that this is done to protect the secular state, but in fact this kind of political strategy violates the very nature of secularism. Scholars that study new religions know very well that the allegations presented against these groups usually are wrong, and that government officials and the Christian as well as secular lobbies that are fighting the new religions are manipulating facts, sometimes to the extreme. It is also well known that the public image of islam in Europe very often is based on misinformation and prejudice. The obligation of the secular state is to see through all this and treat every citizen in the same way. Denmark has been fairly successful in terms of the new religions, while the rights of muslims are being somewhat neglected in the current climate of xenophobia. One resource in the ordinary aversion to islam is a growing Christian self-awareness among many Danes. The challenge of secular society, then, is to accommodate even that without giving away to political forces that eschew Human Rights. This is why a strange alliance sometimes is building up between sworn secularists and muslims, and this is why strong conflicts sometimes arise between Christians that embrace secularism and humanism, and Christians who do not.

In short, religious freedom and other Human Rights are best ensured in secular environments.

## Bibliography

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