



BRILL

# The Time Has Arrived for Post-Post-Secularism

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## Abstract

Political secularism secures the disestablishment of religion by government. Religions sense an undemocratic power grab, and hence demand the disestablishment of secularism. The obvious options for political religion are few, to either promote populist majoritarianism, and/or control one or another branch of government. The options for political secularism in an age of secularization are no less momentous. Berlinerblau's book *Secularism: The Basics* should be widely read as a clarion call for post-post-secularism, where political secularism has been all along. Post-secular academics and pro-religion intellectuals are getting called to account for their erosion of republican principles and their tacit or open endorsement of religious populism. The restoration of political secularism would counteract rising tides of conservative populism threatening constitutional democracy and human rights.

## Keywords

secularism – secularization – republicanism – democracy – populism – atheism

Berlinerblau's concise definition of political secularism in *Secularism: The Basics* reveals complex origins and grounds: "political secularism refers to legally binding actions of the secular state that seek to regulate the relationship between itself and religious citizens, and between religious citizens themselves" (Berlinerblau, 2022, 5). On that definition, regardless of whether low and high levels of religiosity are present among citizens, religion gets inhibited from managing public affairs where government should prevail instead. The degree or intensity of religiosity displayed by citizens stays irrelevant. Secularism was not supposed to be about populism. While secularism was congealing into a

political theory, secularists were in the minority anyways.<sup>1</sup> Political secularism still isn't about popularity, but instead about principle. Whether a country has a homogenously religious society, or a religiously pluralistic society, or even a largely nonreligious population, that make-up of citizenry makes no difference to the core model of political secularism endorsed by Berlinerblau.

That indifference towards demographics for political secularism was never a matter overlooked by that academic tribe marching since the 1970s under their banner of "post-secularism." United in their political agitating if not so much by their speculative theorizing, they called for the end of secularism's 'undemocratic' oppressions of believers and their religious lives. According to Berlinerblau, its supporters "see secular states as not merely trying to (cynically) maintain order among religions ... [and] political secularisms engaged in a process of ordering religion" (Berlinerblau, 2022, 146). In actuality, Berlinerblau does not disagree with either observed feature. Restraining religions from inter-religious antagonisms, and constraining each religion from internally oppressing its members, is required of a state upholding free citizenship and the rule of one law. If this must be perceived as "secular" order, at least it is rationally preferable to religious disorder.

Post-secularists effusively deny any core meaning to "secularism" while verbosely describing its compression of faith into rigid memberships and doctrines. This caricature projects anti-pluralism in the wrong direction. Conservative and fundamentalist religions happily craft their own tight cages. Religions have always been far more proficient and persistent than any government at imposing their own "in group-out group" boundaries and strict duties. Religions exerting political influence fulfill that potency more concretely than any secularist ideal. Christianity after Constantine, or Islam after Caliphates, are paradigm exemplars. Political religions, with their rigid dogmas in hand, next pursue ranked citizenship, different laws for those of the "right" religion, and impositions of "true" religious law on everyone. Where religious group rights are sacrosanct, rights of individuals become overridable. The consequences are always predictable. As state restraints on religion weaken, why wouldn't freedom of religious conscience, expression, and agitation somehow manage to obtain their express political ends? Messages have meanings, and express means gain momentum, from ambition towards mastery.

America is now witnessing an example of what post-secularism's message can concretely mean anywhere around the world: women get second-class cit-

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1 An explanation of secularism in its various historical and contemporary forms is provided by Shook and Zuckerman (2017).

izenship, as precious vessels of life become vassals of pious men. Such devout piety about immortal souls has nothing to do with secularism, and also predates liberalism, capitalism, feminism, and the rest of modernity. Nor does that passionate piety have much to do with understanding technology, especially when reproductive, neonatal, and ectogenic technologies could effect compromises protecting mothers and fetuses alike. Nevertheless, a litany of post-secularist rationalizations are already lifting in chorus over academic towers. If post-secularism didn't intend to smooth the way for religious laws, wouldn't equal secular rights for all citizens have been prudent? Excepting unrepentant post-feminists, let them all say their confessions that the time for post-post-secularism has arrived. The way that post-secularism failed to adequately account for religious illiberalism only makes their conversion to secularism more compelling.

Where liberalism falters, illiberalism is ever ready to rise up. Illiberalism understands perfectly how to make the weak feel strong to march in large numbers. Was post-secularism really about defending the small against the great in the name of democratic liberty? Greatness, like power, is a relative matter. No religion engaging in politics thinks that its divinely-approved mission is anything less than cosmically great, while preparing followers to undertake almighty deeds. Nor are militant followers likely to admit fallibility or show flexibility about supreme values. Shall we assess the capacity of a religion to impose its own will over a state or region as the victory of the small over the great? Protecting the few from the will of the many is a religious priority only so long as a religion is in the minority.

A politically motivated religion sees democracy as a convenient vehicle to convey its customs into public law precisely when its power is superior, while viewing any majority regulation of its customs as oppression. Democracy for its own sake was never fundamental for intolerant religions in the political sphere. Intolerant discrimination against persons deemed as sinful or subordinate was the established policy of theocrats long before any secular state could get accused of discrimination against intolerant religions. Secularism never inspired a minister to burn a witch or a pope to approve of slavery. No academic with sound historical sense could fault secular toleration among religions for politicizing them into theocratic stands.

As for the toleration among citizens enabled by secularism, that principle separating churches from the state was never fundamental for democracy as a political model. As Europe's history taught well, the spectacle of religious 'sects' and 'denominations' competing over governmental favoritism eroded civil order and peace. The view that religious citizens should be able to have religion-friendly government has long made solid majoritarian sense. That

power of popular religion(s) was confirmed in the traditional democratic right to one's religious liberty—not one's freedom *from* religion.

Neither theocracy nor secularism sets out from any intrinsic respect for majoritarian democracy, nor do they respect majorities simply for their numbers to this day. What distinguishes their approach to democracy is their stance towards *equal plurality*: respecting to the full equality of all citizens regardless of their identity, heritage, diversity, or lifestyle. Theocracy cannot respect equal plurality, but secularism can. That secular respect finds inspiration from the political theory known as *republicanism*.

The classical foundations of republicanism going back to Cicero (not to be confused with a Republican party) support governing frameworks such as disestablishment, separationism, and laïcité. For republicanism, the state must regulate dominations occurring within civil society, among groups able to incidentally harm or deliberately oppress other groups. This original position of republicanism in turn grounds the principle of one rule of law for all. Uncivil deviations from equal citizenship, equal opportunity, and equal rights, threatened by segments of society itself on other parts of the population, must be prevented or at least mitigated by law and policy (Pettit 1997).

Because a religion is quite capable of imposing undue costs, harms, and coercions on those deemed to be not religious enough, the republic must anticipate that arbitrary influence and justly intervene in the name of equal status and protection for all citizens. As a necessary corollary then, no church (organized religions) should gain effective control over state (governing branches). Any exercise of such religious control in politics, no matter how “populist” demographically or “democratic” procedurally, would contravene the republic's neutrality towards each religion and all citizens regardless of religiosity.

The leading Constitutional scholar A.E. Dick Howard recounts James Madison's decisive argument for the new American Republic's treatment of religion:

Madison ... wrote his *A Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments*—a document that furnished the intellectual roots of the First Amendment's ban on an establishment of religion. Religion, said Madison, “must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man,” religious freedom being an “unalienable right.” Government support of religion, he argued, is not necessary for the health of religion; to the contrary, its legacy has been “superstition, bigotry, and persecution.” Moreover, aiding religion at public expense would “destroy that moderation and harmony which the forbearance of our laws to intermeddle with Religion has produced among its several sects.” Government's role, Madison concluded, is simple: “protecting every Citizen in the enjoyment of

his Religion with the same equal hand which protects his person and his property; by neither invading the equal rights of any Sect, nor suffering any Sect to invade those of another.”

HOWARD 1985, 26

The Republic cannot inhibit the freedom of one’s religious practices, but it must prevent religious pieties from reducing the freedoms of others (Pangle, 1990; Sheehan, 2015). Religions too often confuse these paired principles. A political religion regards any obstruction to its agendas for legally regulating everyone as an unreasonable restraint upon its own faith. Republicanism at its core is incompatible with aggressive political religion, unable to see why religiosity renders a right to dominate others involuntarily. A democratic republic risks devolving into illiberalism, fascism, or worse whenever it is tolerating sources of domineering intolerance. Republicanism’s priority was never pluralism no matter the fractious consequences, nor was it solidarity no matter the homogenizing means. A Republic secures the constitutional groundspace where democracy’s course of experiments in civic life have safe opportunities to foster both diversity and communality in multitudinous and inventive ways. There is no need to uniformly secularize discourse among the citizenry so long as the universal rule of non-domination is upheld by the government.<sup>2</sup>

That grounding of political secularism in republicanism has been shaken by the earthquake of fast-rising secularization since the early 1900s. In many countries, even among people still proclaiming personal faith, smaller percentages rely on religion to shape public institutions and guide their civic lives. Religion continues to be less important, as revealed even by polling, where most people admit how their church attendance is far less frequent than their prayers.<sup>3</sup> No governmental laws or policies can be faulted, unless guarantees of such things as fairness in housing, employment, medical care, credit and finance, and marriage in the name of non-discrimination and individual liberty have to count as adverse and adversarial to religion. Yet such guarantees of equality have been counted as anti-religious by would-be saviors of religion.

Over the last three centuries around the world, religions have generally enjoyed less and less dominion over the lives of countless millions, with mil-

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2 John Dewey perceived better than Jürgen Habermas how public speech’s freedom can gradually liberate concepts from dogmas, requiring only negotiation rather than translation (Shook, 2014).

3 Even America no longer seems like a persistent religious outlier, resembling secular Europe more and more (Campbell et al. 2020).

lions more liberated every decade, except where theocratic-minded governments assist religion's control over social institutions and public life (Bruce 2011). Post-secularists take that modernized and secularized world for granted even as they keep denouncing secularism by implicating it with deleterious impacts of colonialism and globalization. That is precisely why religion's friends instead highlight sparse polling where personal belief in god(s) has steadied or increased—lending hope for a return of religion's influence across society and government. Those revivals do occasionally arrive, in lands as different as Afghanistan and America. Just as trends of global warming still forecast cold winters, nothing about the thesis of secularization denies religion's chilling convulsions (Bruce 2011).

As post-secularists themselves acknowledge, the cultural past is never quite *past*. So let us take the past seriously. Domination was hardly the exclusive privilege of secular powers; religious imperialism has a far older genealogy and memory. Neither secularism nor populism should get anachronistically faulted for that venerable heritage. While traditional religions—whether in the guise of right-wing nationalism or leftist insurgency—are presently re-colonizing vulnerable populations, post-secularism looks unprepared to critique present-day events, or explain what has so undemocratically gone wrong. If post-secularists do think that religious domination over populations appears to be healthy democracy, let them declare their true allegiance.

Berlinerblau's book should be widely read as a clarion call for post-post-secularism—that place where secularism has been all along. Post-secular academics and pro-religion intellectuals are getting called to account for their erosion of republican principles and their tacit or open endorsement of religious populism. The restoration of political secularism would counteract rising tides of conservative populism threatening democracy itself (Marzouki et al 2016).

Beyond Berlinerblau's analysis of post-secularism, tracking the rise of illiberal populism and the erosion of liberal pluralism is beyond his book's scope. However, he does attend to the Nones—those unaffiliated with religions or uninterested in anything religious—and their fate in the new age of nonreligious pluralism. Berlinerblau proposes more than a two-fold divide between church and state, by postulating a *triangulation* among religious citizens, unchurched and nonreligious citizens, and the secular state. "Thinking of political secularism in terms of three powers (e.g., secular state, religions, and Nones including non-believers) benefits both atheism and secularism. Each can develop and be defined on its own terms." (Berlinerblau, 2022, 186) His plan is not misguided about clarifications of terminology and ideology that would result. My final observations raise questions about whether his clarification of

secular politics comport with republicanism and its plan for secure civil order. Secularists, and nonbelievers generally, may not actually want to live under a secular state.

On Berlinerblau's proposal, confusions about secular politics would subside, even if religious antagonism against atheism would not. Letting secularism sound too supportive of secularization and secular segments of society carries costs. To point out how a *constitutional republic* includes a framework for *minimal* political secularism is both accurate in theory and proportionate in practice. By contrast, by inviting the rise of a *secular state* in its entirety, aren't the worst fears of religions getting confirmed? A secular state, by its very label, elevates secular priorities over all religious priorities. The secular state, practically by definition, protects civil rights and liberties of secular segments of society, and deploys public institutions to preserve advances of social and political secularization, against any religious agendas for civic or personal life. In short, a secular state deploys a constitutional framework for *maximal* political secularism: it prioritizes public obedience to secular solidarity, along with citizen compliance with public institutions enforcing that secularity.<sup>4</sup>

Shall the secular state seek its own form of populism? Secularism now stands at a crossroads too, much like post-secularism. The advance of secularization now permits democratic majoritarianism to seem to be a tempting path towards secular supremacy.

Set in contrasting political terms, a *secular* state may not sound more appealing than a *religious* state. A common perception among believers and atheists, that religion and secularity are locked into a zero-sum contest over what proportion of the population shall be religious, would be starkly confirmed. The long-standing suspicion that a secular state favors the secular side over the religious side couldn't have a more convincing confirmation from both theory and practice. When friends of religion next conclude that the state itself requires that a counterbalancing branch of government (perhaps the Senate, the Presidency, or the Supreme Court) has to favor religion, would that be a miscalculation about raw forces of political power? Berlinerblau's endorsement of the label "secular nationalist" (Berlinerblau, 2022, 159) appears to further entrench that political zero-sum game. If secular nationalists are perceived to

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4 Variations on this "secular state" are not just theoretical, but observed today around the world. For example, French *laïcité* limits religious expressions viewed as "uncivil" and anti-secular, while it subsidizes one religion (Catholicism) far more than others. See Laborde (2008) for a defense of state support to each religion, since the disestablishment of Catholicism is unrealistic. This is not genuine republicanism, however, in the original sense defined here, since subsidized religion assists religious interferences and impositions within society.

be using government to advance secularity, religious nationalists are handed an excuse to do the same thing on behalf of religiosity.

Promoting the secular state could threaten the prospects for pluralism as well. Where secularization gets viewed as religion's common opponent, theology can afford to get lazy about inter-religious dialogue. Each religion can agree about resisting secularism's supposedly pernicious agenda, without having to dialogue and compromise among themselves to reduce strife and intolerance. Historically, impressive efforts at religious ecumenism and syncretic theology over the centuries have occurred where nations were neither establishing one official religion nor alienating the religious apart from government. Politically, the fortunes of the nonreligious may be more secure under a constitutional republic maintaining legal neutrality among all citizens regardless of religious or nonreligious lifestyles. The spectre of illiberal secularism is not unknown to Eurasia.

The original point of political secularism was to reduce the amount of control that religion and government can exercise over each other. One social effect from its undeniable success over recent centuries is an emerging pluralism (however unsteady) in many countries; another is a growing (albeit uneasy) toleration between religion and nonreligion. But desired effects should not get erected into prior establishing causes. Unbelief (from atheism to agnosticism and apatheism) is not any sort of political identity, but it could have a powerful impact nonetheless. Secularism in general cultivates unbelief; why not indirectly flush religion from government by directly reducing the number of religiously motivated voters?

Diminishing religion's social influence was indeed the original point of secularism as a worldview and a social movement. Should secularism take on a majoritarian mission, anticipating the day when its numerical dominance secures its political supremacy over all religion? There is little reason to think that nonreligion would prosper democratically if secularism resorted to populism politically. If political secularism gets re-defined as the paramount agenda of secularists for the supremacy of the secular state, that official establishment of secularity would further destabilize a fragile civic peace.

Political secularism secures the disestablishment of religion by government. Religions sensed an undemocratic power grab, and next asked, "What shall secure the disestablishment of secularism?" The obvious options for political religion are few: either promote populist majoritarianism, and/or control one or another branch of government. The options for political secularism in an age of secularization are no less momentous.

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