

# The Relationship Between Atheism and Secularism

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## INTRODUCTION

Greetings! I have been asked to speak to you on the relationship between atheism and secularism, a subject which I consider to be very important in order to orient our debates and actions, with the ultimate aim of promoting secularism in all countries of the world.

First of all, I must tell you that I speak as a secular and atheist activist, especially in the Canadian context. I have no training in law. Neither do I have any formal background in philosophy. However, to be an effective activist in this domain, one must at least have a strong interest in philosophy, which I inevitably do.

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## WHAT IS SECULARISM?

To come up with a precise definition of secularism is not necessarily an easy task. Let us begin with the following statement: Secularism is the independence of the institutions of a State with respect to religions. Thus, it is a political programme based on the principle of a strict separation between State power (political and administrative) and religious power. The secular State recognizes neither an official religion nor divine authority, and its politics are a purely human concern. Any interference of religious institutions with State institutions is forbidden, and similarly any interference of the State in the internal affairs of religious institutions is also prohibited.

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## TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF SECULARISM

Starting from the explanation just given, I propose two possible approaches to secularism

**First Approach:** Secularism is based on universal principles. The secular State is completely neutral with regard to the various metaphysical choices of its citizens. Religious beliefs and convictions (religions in the strict sense, sectarian beliefs, deism, theism, atheism, agnosticism, humanism, various spiritualities, etc.) are private opinions, and only private.

**Second Approach:** Secularism is based on universal principles which are compatible with science and independent of any supernatural concept. The secular State promotes the general interest of all its citizens regardless of their beliefs or lack of beliefs. Its goal is to maximize their freedom, in particular freedom of conscience – which includes freedom of religions and freedom from religion – by implementing a complete separation between religions and State.

These two approaches are apparently compatible, at first sight anyway. Both are resolutely anticlerical, that is to say, they both oppose the power of organized religion. However each approach emphasizes particular aspects of secularism, and may have somewhat different consequences, which will we see in a few minutes.

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## TWO SPHERES: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

This leads us to the familiar principle of two spheres of activity: the public and the private. Secularism excludes religious practice from the public sphere and limits it to the private. And yet, as the French philosopher Henri Peña-Ruiz observes, secularism must allow the free expression of every spiritual option in public space, while preventing any option from dominating. How can this apparent paradox be resolved?

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## THREE SPHERES: STATE, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

I think that the above two-sphere model needs to be nuanced somewhat by adding a third sphere, as suggested by the American philosopher Austin Dacey. In Dacey's model, the public sphere is split into two parts: State institutions from which all religious influence must be excluded; and the public sphere beyond the State, where free debate is not only permitted by is indeed necessary in order that competing ideas and ideologies – in particular, differing metaphysical points of view as well as the diverse moral systems which they imply – may confront and challenge each other.

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## SEPARATION BETWEEN WHAT & WHAT?

### Separation Between Religion & State

- especially between religious institutions and State institutions.

### Separation Between Religion and Morality

- because religious moral systems are arbitrary (as we shall see shortly)
- reject the myth that non-believers are immoral or amoral, because religion is not necessary for morality.
- reject the criminalization of immorality, because morals are a personal and private affair in most cases (but not all). The secular State criminalizes only in extreme cases (violence, murder, theft, etc.) or under formal circumstances – for example, perjury.

### Separation Between Believers & Beliefs

- distinguish clearly between beliefs on the one hand, and the persons who adopt those beliefs on the other hand. In other words, make a clear distinction between the individual and "his" or "her" religious community, recognizing first and foremost the individual and his or her rights.

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## FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

Freedom of conscience is a fundamental principle of secularism and has the following two consequences:

**Apostasy is a human right.** Indeed, freedom of religion and freedom from religion necessarily imply the right to abandon a religion in order to adopt a different religion or none at all. At any rate, the secular State does not even concern itself

with the religious affiliations of its citizens, except to defend their freedom.

**Laws which criminalize so-called blasphemy are unacceptable.** Indeed, in order for free debate to be even possible, criticism of ideas must not be impeded. Furthermore, if blasphemy is defined as an offence against the divinity, it is clearly impossible for an atheist to blaspheme, because the victim does not exist for the non-believer. For the believer, this issue must remain personal without being applied to others, and without being codified in law.

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## RELIGIOUS MORALITY

To understand fully the importance of keeping religion out of the affairs of State, it is necessary to pay particular attention to what is, in my opinion, the most important aspect of religion, the aspect which explains why religion continues to enthrall the hearts and minds of so many human beings. I am referring especially to theistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which are predicated on the revealed existence of a personal, creator "God." To speak of religious morality is equivalent to speaking of the will of this "God." The believer, to be a moral person, must respect god's will, and to do so must know god's will. However, in order to know what god wants, it is necessary to complete successfully each stage in a three-part process:

1. establish the existence of god;
2. establish that god has a will;
3. establish a means of learning what that will is.

Now, each of these three stages presents insurmountable difficulties. Firstly, all the so-called proofs of the existence of god have been refuted, including the proof from design. Secondly, the qualities of perfection, omniscience, omnipotence and eternity which are normally attributed to a theistic god are incompatible with a state of desire, because to want something implies a desire to change an unsatisfactory situation, but how can a perfect creator be dissatisfied with his or her own creation? And thirdly, revelation and so-called "holy" scripture do not in any way constitute trustworthy means of gaining information about that will even if it existed. We are led to the inevitable conclusion that no-one can know the will of god and that any claim to speak in the name of "God" must be mere illusion.

The unavoidable implication of the above observations is that theistic morality is completely arbitrary. One can claim that "God" says this or that or whatever, but there is no way to confirm or invalidate such claims, nor is there any way to resolve incompatibilities between competing claims. Thus, divine will turns out to be a very poor basis on which to found legislation or the functioning of a State. Those who attempt to use such a basis leave themselves entirely at the mercy of religious authorities who claim to have knowledge of divine will.

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## ATHEISM

Atheism is basically the absence of theism, the absence of belief in god(s). On the other hand, the definition of atheism as the assertion of the non-existence of "God" or gods is stronger than necessary, because the burden of proof of the existence of such agents falls on believers. Atheism is not fideistic, i.e. not faith-based. Rather, it is simply the inevitable result of applying the sceptical method to theism. It is

sufficient to refrain from giving credence to theism.

When I speak of atheism, I generally mean materialistic atheism, implying the rejection of the supernatural. This usage is not 100% accurate, because it is possible to reject god-belief while still maintaining belief in other supernatural phenomena, such as reincarnation. However, non-materialistic atheism is untenable because it is inconsistent to reject only a subset of the supernatural. An atheist with intellectual integrity must necessarily be a materialist and a monist, not a dualist. The consistent atheist does not grant a priori recognition to any so-called "spiritual" plane distinct from the material plane – which is the only one we know.

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## **ATHEISTIC MORALITY**

Given that religious morality and divine will constitute a dubious foundation for legislation, because of their arbitrary nature, they are similarly a poor basis for a personal morality. Now, if the origins of human morality cannot be found in the will of god, where are they to be found?

Clearly, it is in biological and cultural evolution, in the necessity of living in societies, that human morals originate. We human beings are social animals, thus we are moral animals. In general, every human being – except of course those who manifest a psychological pathology (sociopathy, psychopathy) – is equipped with an innate moral sense. But this moral sense may be perverted by irrational beliefs (such as religious beliefs) or by unrealistic political ideologies (for example, utopian programmes).

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## **HUMANISM**

Humanism is simply materialistic atheism considered from the point of view of morality. Humanism is human morality freed from dysfunctions engendered by supernatural or utopian beliefs.

Humanism is not a substitute for religion, because there is no need to replace religion with anything. Neither does humanism add any further value to materialistic atheism: the atheist is a moral human being like everyone else.

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## **ATHEOPHOBIA**

It would be remiss to discuss atheism without mentioning atheophobia, a term which is not yet current but which I use frequently to describe anti-atheist prejudice, a phenomenon which is unfortunately very widespread although it is utterly baseless. Atheophobia is the old prejudice which claims that atheists are immoral or amoral. It seems that everyone is afraid of atheism, sometimes even atheists themselves.

Atheophobia is very common among religious believers, for the obvious reason that religious leaders promote it out of self-interest, to inflate their own importance.

But atheophobia is also sadly widespread among non-believers who have assimilated the religious propaganda which claims that atheism is dubious, or

dangerous, or worse. This attitude is of enormous advantage to the power of religions. It is common to put forward a caricature of atheism. Indeed, one often hears atheism defined in very narrow terms where positive qualities are involved, but in much wider terms if the context is negative.

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## **WHAT DO SECULARISM AND ATHEISM HAVE IN COMMON?**

This brings us to the heart of my presentation: what indeed is the relationship between atheism and secularism?

Secularism and atheism have a common foundation: the non-recognition of divine authority. For the individual atheist, this means not recognizing such authority in matters of personal morality. For the collectivity – i.e. the secular State – it means not recognizing such authority in matters of legislation and in the functioning of State institutions. (One cannot say the "rejection" of divine authority, because it is impossible to reject something which does not exist, or, to be more precise something which is utterly unknown and unknowable, as explained above.)

Thus, the intersection between secularism and atheism is the independence of morals and ethics from religious tenets.

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## **QUOTATION FROM BARACK OBAMA**

How can the secular State maintain its independence from religious morality without compromising its neutrality with respect to its citizens? Barack Obama (senator at the time) had something very relevant to say on this topic:

Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.

Senator Barack Obama, 2006-06-28

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## **SECULARISM AND HUMANISM**

Thus, in the functioning of its institutions and in the development of its legislation, the secular State requires that participants set their particular beliefs aside and respect universal principles, based on the real world, values to which everyone can pay allegiance.

These values are humanist values. The secular State functions, as does science, according to a materialistic methodology, which is in no way incompatible with its respect for freedom of conscience. For the secular State is not explicitly materialistic or atheistic, just as the scientist as an individual is not required to adopt a materialistic philosophy in order to practice his or her scientific activity.

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## ANOTHER LOOK AT THE TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF SECULARISM

Let us now reconsider the two approaches to secularism which I described near the beginning of my talk. Both approaches promote neutrality with respect to citizens. However they differ in how they perceive non-belief.

The first approach is symmetric. It presents belief and non-belief on an equal footing. The second approach is asymmetric. It recognizes that non-belief, i.e. atheism, is **not** a spiritual option like religious beliefs. Both points of view promote a State which is neutral with respect to its citizens, regardless of their belief or non-belief, but the first extends that neutrality to the convictions themselves. The first approach is, I believe, more widely followed among those who favour secularism, while the second is more in line with the principles of our association AFT.

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### I OPT FOR THE ASYMMETRIC APPROACH

As you have probably guessed by now, I favour the second approach to secularism, because an attitude of neutrality between belief and non-belief is, in my opinion, untenable, indeed a major error, because such neutrality is incompatible with the non-recognition of divine authority. The first, symmetric, interpretation of secularism is self-contradictory.

Can we at least say that non-belief in general and atheism in particular constitute "spiritual options" like beliefs? In my opinion, no, not at all. Firstly, atheism is not a choice, but rather a scientific certainty – not an absolute faith-based certainty, but a certainty beyond all reasonable doubt, as is the nature of scientific conclusions. Secondly, atheism does not recognize the so-called "spiritual" plane (in the religious sense of the word "spiritual"); it would recognize a spiritual plane only if the plane's existence were implied by a rigorous observation of our world.

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### IS THE SECULAR STATE ANTI-RELIGIOUS?

Aristide Briand, in 1905, declared, "The State is not anti-religious. It is a-religious." (quoted in *La Raison*, no. 570, p. 20) Of course! But why must the State be a-religious? Because the arbitrary nature of religious morality makes religions dangerous and incompetent when they hold power. A certain anti-religious critique is therefore necessary in order to support the secular programme. Otherwise, why would it be so important to keep State institutions independent of religions? This necessary critical attitude towards religion is more explicit in the asymmetric interpretation of secularism discussed above.

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### SUMMING UP

Atheism and secularism have in common their non-recognition of any so-called "divine" authority. Secularism needs the support of a healthy critique of religions, and that critique is the intellectual heritage of materialistic atheism. Without it, secularism runs the risk of deteriorating into a parody of itself such as the ideology known as "open" secularism. This does not mean that it is the secular State itself which will perform this critique, but the State must be sure to avoid any supernatural, religious moral considerations in the foundations of its legislation.

In my opinion, in order to promote secularism effectively, it is absolutely necessary to denounce the anti-atheist prejudice which I call atheophobia. Major religious leaders regularly promote the idea that secularism is a threat to morals and to the moral and "spiritual" health of society. They do not hesitate to equate secularism with atheism, and then to equate atheism with moral degradation. As for the first equation, they are not entirely wrong. But as for the second equation – the myth which associates atheism with immorality and amorality – they are promoting an age-old prejudice which is as reprehensible as racism.

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