

# Philosophy and Politics - Critical Explorations

## Volume 23

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Jonathan Laurence  
Editor

# Secularism in Comparative Perspective

Religions Across Political Contexts

 Springer

*Editor*

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# Foreword

Imagine a radically religious state, a genuine theocracy: it is governed by divinely authorized and religiously trained rulers; they rule absolutely since God's representatives cannot be challenged. Imagine a radically secular state: it is governed by officials elected by the body of citizens, which includes men and women of many faiths and no faith; these officials have nothing at all to do with religion. Neither of these ideal types exists in our world. Iran probably comes closest to the first, but it has an elected Assembly where (cautious) opposition to the religious hardliners is tolerated. France probably comes closest to the second, but the French state actually funds (some) religious schools. Between these two compromised versions of theocracy and secularism there is a lot of space, and it is filled with an extraordinary variety of political and religious arrangements.

This book explores what we might think of as the secular half of this space and considers some of the many different secular institutions and ideologies. But there is much to learn about the religious half here, too, for the truth is that secular/religious isn't only a dichotomy but also, at the same time, a long series of entanglements. These have many forms; some reflect the natural politics of religiously homogeneous countries; some are aimed at making religious diversity possible and peaceful. Some are imposed; some are negotiated. One asymmetry is worth noting. Beginning long ago in the Islamic world and most visible in the West from the time of the Protestant Reformation, there have been many religious arguments for a secular state—but no secular arguments for a religious state. That makes sense, since secularism as an ideology, and especially its more militant forms, is a reaction to one or another version of clerical domination. There are, however, secular arguments for accommodating religion—and even for establishing religion, so long as the establishment is controlled by state officials.

There have been many arguments, and they are well represented here. The most important academic arguments are probably those that have taken place among Indian social scientists. Gandhi and Nehru, the odd pair who defended a secular state, have provided a wonderful starting point for intellectual engagement. The most lively political debates have taken place in France among defenders and critics

of *laïcité*. The headscarf worn by religious Muslim women has provided a vivid focus for these debates, which have extended to other European countries. The most learned theological disputes have taken place across the Islamic world from North Africa to Indonesia. The political authority of religious scholars has been central to these disputes.

Our aim is to recount these arguments, debates, and disputations in both critical and appreciative ways and to describe some of their outcomes in actually existing institutions, policies, and practical arrangements. All of these are contested to greater or lesser degrees, and readers should be warned that this or that arrangement may not survive in its present form between this writing and their reading. But I am fairly sure that the arguments, debates, and disputes will continue roughly as they appear in our chapters.

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# Contents

|                                       |  |            |
|---------------------------------------|--|------------|
| <b>1</b>                              | <b>Introduction</b> . . . . .  | <b>1</b>   |
|                                       | Jonathan Laurence  |            |
| <b>Part I Secularism at Large</b>     |  |            |
| <b>2</b>                              | <b>Islam, Political Governance, and Secularism:<br/>Examining a Fraught Relationship</b> . . . . .                   | <b>9</b>   |
|                                       | Asma Afsaruddin  |            |
| <b>3</b>                              | <b>Languages of Secularity</b> . . . . .   | <b>25</b>  |
|                                       | Sudipta Kaviraj  |            |
| <b>4</b>                              | <b>Islam and the State from a Shi'ite Perspective</b> . . . . .  | <b>57</b>  |
|                                       | Mohsen Kadivar   |            |
| <b>Part II Secularism in Contexts</b> |  |            |
| <b>5</b>                              | <b>Catholicism, Colonial Encounters and Secularism in Asia</b> . . . . .   | <b>83</b>  |
|                                       | José Casanova  |            |
| <b>6</b>                              | <b>Secularism in the French Context</b> . . . . .  | <b>101</b> |
|                                       | Carol Ferrara  |            |
| <b>7</b>                              | <b>The Absence of Secularism in Senegal</b> . . . . .  | <b>121</b> |
|                                       | Seulgie Lim  |            |
| <b>8</b>                              | <b>Secularization in North Africa</b> . . . . .  | <b>135</b> |
|                                       | Jonathan Laurence  |            |
| <b>9</b>                              | <b>Rethinking Secularism and State Policies Toward Religion:<br/>The United States, France, and Turkey</b> . . . . . | <b>155</b> |
|                                       | Ahmet T. Kuru  |            |
| <b>10</b>                             | <b>Secularism in US State and Society</b> . . . . .  | <b>171</b> |
|                                       | Michael Walzer   |            |