

**A SECULAR ERITREAN STATE: THE ONLY NEUTRAL  
PUBLIC SPACE FOR ALL TO MEET ON EQUAL TERMS (PART II)**

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As the attempt in PART I had aimed at familiarizing ourselves with the concept of secularism (separation of religion and state in particular) and its interwoven elements, in this part (PART II), our focus remains to be on the implementation of the principle of the separation of religion and state. By referring to concrete experiences of different countries, we will try to show the diversity of implementation of the principle resulting from the creative and flexible approach each country has adopted, the challenges faced and the efforts underway, as well as the remarkable achievements different societies has made in all spheres of life. To move forward, we found it helpful to start this part with the question: ***Is the concept of the separation of religion and state applied in a uniformed manner?***

Although the concept is adopted in many countries, the depth of its application varied. That difference was the result of the legal structures used and the way different countries looked on the relationship of the two institutions, religion and the state, based on their own national peculiarities. Acting on this broad diversity, some scholars divided the application of the concept into **HARD SECULARISM** and **SOFT SECULARISM**, making the picture easier for us to grasp.

According to **HARD SECULARISM**, the state stands firm to maintain an absolute homogeneity among its population by making any show of religious symbolism illegal. The best typical example here is the French version of secularism (known as *Laïcité*), constituting the strictest form which goes as far as giving the state the right to make it illegal for an individual to wear a turban (like Muslims and Sikhs), Burqa/Neqab or even Hijab (like the Muslim women), a cross (like a Christian) or a skull cap (like a Jew) in public schools or government institutions. This version has supporters and critics as well.

Its supporters depict it as a belief that government and political issues should be kept absolutely separate from religious organizations and religious issues. Here they emphasize that the policy is to protect the state from any interference of religious organizations and at the same time protect the religious organizations from political quarrels and controversies. On the other hand, its critics argue that it is a disguised hostility of the state towards religion, accusing the policy of violating individual right to religious expression. Other examples of this version of secularism include Mexico, Albania, and Turkey of Ataturk.

**SOFT SECULARISM** could be further divided into: the US model and the Indian one. The following are the main features of each:

- Secularism in the USA and the West, in general, implies three things. These are:
  - Freedom of religion.
  - Equal citizenship to each citizen, irrespective of his/her religious affiliation.

- The separation of religion and the state in its absolute term.

The separation of religion and state, which is the focus of this article, in theory includes the following (later on, we will see the imperfections at the implementation level):

- \*Teaching universal secular values in public schools (no religious indoctrination of children).
- \*Phasing out government funding from religious schools.
- \* Removing religious references from statutory oaths and pledges.
- \* Abolishing parliament prayers.
- \* Ending state support for religious institutions and personnel.
- \* Removal of tax advantages for religious institutions.
- \* Banning the use of religious attire in schools.

This separation of religion and state, as a core principle in the West, implies that the state asserts its political authority without taking into consideration the religion/religious sentiments of any religious community among its citizenry. At the same time, it accepts every individual's right to pursue his/her religion the way he/she sees it, while everyone is equal under the law and subject to the same laws, irrespective of their religion. When we say that all citizens are subject to the same laws, it means that the state in the West does not accept religious laws of the different communities, be it Christian, Muslim, Jewish ...etc. Nevertheless, the question remains: *Is this separation of religion and state in the West 100% complete?*

In some Western countries, politicians still take an oath for an office placing their hand on the Bible, the US currency still carries the words "IN GOD WE TRUST", the US Pledge of Allegiance includes the phrase "One nation under God", legal marriages are dictated by the church, school prayers have not totally disappeared, we could sometimes see the posting of the Ten Commandments and other sectarian symbols in some government buildings, and some Western countries still maintain constitutional recognition of an official state religion (Denmark and the United Kingdom are examples). In Argentina, according to the constitution, the state must support the Catholic Church, and priests are in the payroll of the state, as if they were public servants. Moreover, there are still other assumptions on the separation of religion and state that are hard to implement in the real world. Each of the major religions in the West (Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Hindu) has laws that regulate relations between people, whether on individual basis, among families, or within the society at large. There are also other laws regarding food and drink, in addition to many other daily details related to the business of the state (For instance, special prayer room for Muslims in public venues, special grants for the Jewish Community, or special regulation for the Hindu Community etc.). All these put too much pressure on the Western politicians to compromise and accommodate, the result differing in different countries.

- Secularism in India is the other version of the **SOFT SECULARISM**. The main inspiration for secularism in India is believed to be Mahatma Gandhi, who is quoted as saying:

“I do not expect India of my dreams to develop one religion, i.e., to be wholly Hindu or wholly Christian or wholly Mussalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side with one another.”

The Indian Constitution states that the state should be secular. It provides that the government should realize its objectives to ensure the following:

- That one religious community does not dominate another.
- That some members do not dominate other members of the same religious community.
- That the state does not enforce any particular religion and at the same time does not take away the religious freedom of individuals.

***How does the Indian State work to prevent the domination warned against by the constitution?***

\*First, it uses a strategy to distance itself from religion. This means, state is not run by any religious group and it does not support any one religion. Government spaces like courts, police stations, and government schools are not supposed to display or promote any religion.

\*The state follows the strategy of non-interference. India has one of the biggest Muslim populations in the world. In fact, there are more Muslims living in India than the whole Middle East. Some of India’s 28 states and seven territories are mostly populated by Muslims. These states may introduce certain laws and rules that suit their population, just like the states in the US.

\*It has a strategy of intervention only when necessary. For instance, it banned the caste-system which was religious-based exclusion and discrimination. The intervention also took the form of support. The constitution grants the right to religious communities to set up their own schools and colleges.

To give some examples about how secularism works in India, I want to share two stories I had read in some Indian sources (the content is paraphrased below):

**First story:** A group of friends who bought scooters met to go for a ride together. Read the following dialogue between two of the members of the group:

**A:** (The First Person):

Hey, I hope you have a helmet. You know the law in Delhi requires that you wear one. Why aren't you wearing a helmet? Do you want to be fined?

**B:** (The Second Person):

Why do I be fined? For Sikhs to wear a "pugri" is a very important part of our religion. The government cannot force me to wear a helmet. Don't worry, I will not be fined.

**Second Story:** In a government school in Seemapur, students wanted to celebrate a religious festival. Read the following dialogue between the school principle and a student:

**A:** (Student)

Sir, there is a big religious festival next month. We never celebrated it in school. Can we do it this year?

**B:** (School Principal)

I'm afraid that is not possible. This is a government school. We cannot give importance to any one religion. Private schools may do that. Government schools do not celebrate festivals in the school premises. Most religious festivals are a public holiday so that we can celebrate them at home.

As we have tried to show, it is incorrect to say that the implementation of secularism is smooth. Among the serious challenges we delayed to raise above are, resistance of the religions to the leading role and monopoly of the state on education and its syllabus, and issues of sensitivities that arise every now and then among the different religions (examples are cartoons, violence, the burning of holy books and religious symbols...etc.). In this connection, the biggest challenge of the state is summarized by the question: ***How does the state tackle these problems ensuring the satisfaction of all sides?*** There are suggestions on this regard:

- Some say that the state should be very strong on matters related to the constitution and should protect freedoms, including freedom of religions.
- Others think that the problem is not the strength of the religions but the inability of the secular state to handle diversity and pluralism. Regarding this point, some suggested two solutions:
  - The secular state should promote, as much as possible, "active communication and mutual understanding among all groups of a society."
  - The secular state should accept that some conflicts between the secular state and religions could not be solved and that the conflicting sides should agree to disagree.

We have tried to examine the strong points and weaknesses in the implementation of secularism. From those discussions, one thing is quite obvious: there is no such thing as completely secular state. We saw this both in the West and the East, taking the US and India as concrete examples, where we could still see the existence of religious tendencies. Nevertheless, some go as far as questioning if the state in India is really secular, turning a blind eye to the religious tendencies in the West (including the US) , raised in detail.

India is a secular state; no doubt about that. Secularism is explicitly expressed in the constitution of the country and is energetically implemented. This should be taken as a big achievement when we look at things from the history of the country, the problems it had inherited, specially the Hindu nationalism, which is the biggest obstacle for the secular state, and the concerted efforts the state is showing to fix the existing problems. Here it should be noted that the question should not be whether India is a secular state or not rather than if secularism in India would survive, given the presence of such big Hindu Nationalist Party, which is struggling to change the direction of the country, though the constitution and the people did not allow it to do that. Of course, nobody could say that secularism is firmly established in India and that there is no fear on its future. However, experts are cautiously optimistic, but they believe that the success of the secular state in India will depend on, “stable leadership, a growing economy, population control, and a number of factors.” One of the experts, Donald Eugene Smith, says, “The secular state has a far more than an even chance of survival in India.”

I think the Indian success on this path is a big hope for countries that have a multi-religious society like ours (though not of that degree of complexity), and we have to look to India as a model to be emulated, in its general direction, and the implementation of the principle of separation, taking the realities of the religious communities and the national peculiarities into consideration. If India, with its harsh history, complicated religious diversity, and sometimes violent religious strife could maintain a secular state: ***Isn't it easier for us, as Eritreans, to follow that path and even grab the spotlight from India as a model in the East? Is that too much over-ambitious?***

If some folks have doubts that the separation of religion and state is a solution in Eritrea, they would be asked to suggest an alternative for a multi-religious Eritrea and enlighten us on that. But one would ask the reader to imagine that he/she is a Muslim and answer the question: ***What would you feel if the Eritrean state is purely Christian and you have no place in it?*** By the same token, the same reader would be asked to imagine that he/she is a Christian and answer the question: ***What would you feel if the Eritrean state is purely Islamic and ruled by the Shari 'a?*** Again believers of both faiths are challenged to imagine that the assumedly instituted prayer in schools reflects a religious content that has nothing to do with his/her religion and that the school syllabus is religiously biased against him/her. ***Could such dangerously damaging changes take place in a secular state?***

Eritreans should know that the principle of separation of religion and state is one among the few core principles, if not the most important one, that made it possible for the US to become the greatest and the strongest country ever in the history of the world. Let us imagine the difference between the US and other countries in which religion and state are not separated (take the Middle East for instance). Americans have greater freedom of worship, freedom of speech and freedom of press, a better justice system, greater opportunity for education and economic success, the best medical care and a

higher standard of living. ***Is it without a reason that people from over the world want to live in the US?*** By contrast: Is it without a weighty reason that Christians in the Middle East who were 20% in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are now down to 5%? Could we imagine the devastating damage caused to the economy, culture, history, national prestige and pride, and the credibility of the state due to the brain drain or the loss of the skilled intellectual and technical labour? Could anybody think that it would have been possible for the American Jews to achieve their present excellent status and financial well-being free from persecution to which they were subjected in Europe had it not been for the separation of religion and state?

***Aren't all positive and negative experiences raised exciting enough for Eritreans to draw lessons from?*** If the societies whose experiences we raised above have substantially benefited from the implementation of the principle of separation of religion and state and have shown a remarkable success, then we have to face the following two questions:

- What makes the doubts some try to express about the principle as a solution for a multi-religious society valid?
- To what extent is what we hear about the incompatibility of this principle with this religion or that true?

In conclusion, I would say that we are justified to believe, what has been proved to be good and beneficial for other peoples of the world and tested by time, should be good enough for our Eritrean people too, unless we prove that we are a unique people and have nothing in common with others elsewhere. It is acting from this conviction that we emphasize that the path of separating religion and state in future Eritrea, as the only source of permanent stability and harmony of the society, has to be seriously studied and advocated for.