

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

(PART I)

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“When the government puts its imprimatur on a particular religion it conveys a message of exclusion to all those who do not adhere to the favored beliefs. A government cannot be premised on the belief that all persons are created equal when it asserts that god prefers some.” (The American Supreme Court Justice Harry A. Blackmun (1908-1999))

In order to avoid any misunderstanding about what a person is suggesting, proposing, opposing ...etc., it would be wise to define the terms being used. From this point of departure, I will head to the definition of the term “secularism” from which the adjective form “secular” is derived. I will do the same thing with the term “state”, “religion” and other terminologies I use in this article. Nonetheless, for the sake of convenience, I opt to delay the definition of the term “secularism” to the next paragraphs, due to the complexity of the concept, for the time being defining the terms “state” and religion” in this part of the introduction. To that effect:

- The term “state” is defined by some as a sovereign people occupying a certain defined territory, whereas others define it as the organized government set up by the people.
- The term “religion” refers to two broad categories:
 - A relationship between the individual and the Creator.
 - The religious institutions and their system of faith and worship.

As regards the concept of secularism, there is a lot of confusion surrounding the meaning. Though many people think that they are referring to the same idea when talking about secularism, in reality, they are discussing different distinct concepts. This indicates that there is no global consensus on what the term refers to. Put differently, it means one thing for one and a different thing for another; the list of meanings including as many as listed below:

- Anti-clericalism (as opposed to the power and influence of religious institutions in secular or civil affairs).
- Atheism (the doctrine or belief that there is no God).
- Disestablishment (the removal of a policy of having an official governing religion).
- State neutrality and equidistance toward all religions.
- The rejection of religious symbols in the public sphere.
- The separation of the public and private spheres.
- The complete separation of religion from politics, or more narrowly, just the separation of the institutions of the state from the influence of religion.

Some scholars suggest that a simple way that would help us have a relative clarity about secularism is to think about the concept in relation to three core disciplines in the social sciences. These are philosophy, sociology and political science. What does secularism mean in each discipline then? The following sums up the answer:

- Philosophically, it refers to the total rejection of the spiritual or anything beyond what is perceptible to the senses (this is the question of spirit opposite to matter). This is not our concern here.
- Sociologically, it has something to do with modernization that is seen as a gradual process of the advancement of science and technology, through which, it is believed, the influence of religion declines in social institutions, communal life and human relations. This is not our concern either.
- Politically, secularism has to do with the separation of religion and state. This is the aspect that will be at the centre of the discussion in this article.

Though the first two variants or categories above are not our concerns here, interestingly enough, some scholars emphasized that the three categories are not mutually exclusive in the sense that one could be philosophically non-secular or thinks metaphysically, and at the same time sociologically non-secular, meaning that his life is influenced by religion, and on the contrary, be politically secular in that he/she supports the separation of religion and state. The same scholars put Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, millions of Americans, Indians and others in this group, indicating that they are philosophically and sociologically non-secular but politically secular. Can't this conclusion be applied to us too, as Eritreans? As a matter of fact, appreciating this central point and familiarizing ourselves with the concept of secularism and its implementation in the world is very essential in order to develop a firmer grasp of the topic. Setting out in this journey, one would begin by raising the question: What does separation of religion and state mean?

“Secularism” is a principle which contains two basic prepositions. The two prepositions could be put, in summary, as follow:

- One is the separation of religion and state, which states that the state authority is basically neutral, in the sense that everybody can follow his/her own faith freely, as long as he/she does not interfere with other people who have a different religion. The separation of the two institutions also means there will be no law that favours a given religion, in detriment of others. In other words, according to this separation, no one should be privileged or disadvantaged on grounds of his/her religious or non-religious beliefs. I hope nobody would be offended when we say that this protection should include non-believers. We have just to think in terms of citizenship; not in terms of our own beliefs.
- The other preposition in the concept of “secularism” is that people of different religions and beliefs are equal before the law, which means they have equal protection of the law. That is to say, no religious or political affiliation gives advantages or disadvantages; all believers and non-believers are citizens with the same rights and obligations as anyone else.

When we say that religion and state are separated, it means citizenship rather than religion is the basis for belonging to the state. It is so because different citizens could have different religions. In any case, as this concept of separation of religion and state or secularism, in general, is mostly misunderstood or intentionally distorted by many, we will try to give some additional explanations as to what the concept of “secularism” and its preposition related to the separation of religion and state are and what they are not:

- When we speak about the separation of religion and state, we are speaking in terms of separating the religious institutions from exercising undue influence over the state, and vice versa. We are not speaking in terms of separating the people or individuals from their relationship with God. It should be made clear here that the relationship of the believer with God, the Creator, is a fundamental component of a person’s life that goes beyond the range and limits of all organized systems, whether governmental or religious.

- “Secularism” is neither atheism (already defined above) nor humanism (an outlook or system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matter). It is just a concept indicating the separation of religion and state, and eliminating discrimination on the basis of religion. This way, it adds to democracy by protecting the rights of religious minorities. To give a clearer picture, I would add that many secularists are religious and many religious people (recognizing the value of keeping religion and state separate) are secular.
- Atheists would most definitely have obvious interest in supporting secularism. Nevertheless, secularism itself does not seek to challenge the tenets of any particular religion or belief. At the same time, it does not seek to impose atheism on anyone. It simply provides a framework for a democratic society in order to ensure equality throughout the society in politics, education, the law and elsewhere, for believers and non-believers alike. I suspect that this particular view might have given rise to the misguided attempts of wrongly associating secularism with atheism.
- One would ask: Is secularism positive or negative? The answer is, “Secularism” is neutral. It can neither be taken as a dogma nor as a doctrine. It should rather be seen as an abstention from favouring one religion over another or favouring atheism over religious beliefs. In few words, it is a political principle that aims at guaranteeing the largest possible co-existence of various freedoms.

With the explanations given above, it is hoped that we have increased our familiarity with the concept of “secularism” so much so, but we still need to dig much more; this time on another important aspect, raising the question: **Why is the separation of religion and state necessary?**

It is not a generalization to say that most countries have citizens who belong to different religions, except a few. I personally know, at least in our region, only Somalia, the Gulf countries, and probably Israel, among countries having a religiously homogenous population. It is always the case that one of the religious groups makes the majority of the population. What happens when the majority religious group has access to and control over state power? It could constitute the tyranny of the majority, as history has shown throughout ages, using the state power and financial resources to persecute and discriminate

other religious groups, though all are tax payers equally supporting the state. That persecution could take many different forms, including all types of coercion, the act of preventing them from practicing their religion, killings ... name it. These acts of discrimination could take place more easily if one religion is given official recognition by the state at the expense of other religions. It is from this perspective that any form of domination based on religion constitutes a violation of the rights of citizens (fundamental human rights) a democratic society guarantees, irrespective of the religion of the citizen.

In summary, the attempt above was to emphasize that the state or the government is the state/government of all citizens; not the state/ government of one denomination or one religious tradition. It is for this reason that the state/government has to guarantee the largest possible co-existence of various religious freedoms and protect all citizens from any religious tyranny of one religious group or tradition so that no one should be privileged nor disadvantaged on grounds of his/her religious or non-religious beliefs.

To conclude this part, I would say, there is no doubt that matters of faith are and should absolutely be a personal issue in any democratic society, like the one we are aspiring to build in Eritrea. At the same time, no doubt that freedom of religion is also a basic human right, recognized by the Charter of the United Nations and the international laws. Though these assertions are not controversial, separation of religion and state is necessary to protect this right and other liberties too. In fact, this separation is the most effective mechanism and the most precious gift to mankind.

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Please note that this article will be continued as PART II. The article was split into two parts just to control the size and to make it more convenient for the readers. PART II will focus on the implementation of secularism or its preposition related to the separation of religion and state.