

MIGRATION AND SECULARISM A CRITICAL VIEW OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF UNIVERSAL LIBERAL VALUES IN THE EUROPE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN

ARTICLE

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The Middle East is today undergoing significant transformations in response to settler colonialism and authoritarianism, which can lead to both positive and negative developments. These include the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the fall of a brutal Syrian dictator, mass refugee movements, and public debates on religion, secularism, gender diversity, social justice, human rights, and democracy. In this paper, I will focus on how migration challenges our conception of some features of hardline secularism in the Northern and Southern Mediterranean but also induces a more multicultural version of secularism. I criticize the French-style secularism which becomes a religion against other religions (usually foreign religions such as Islam in the West). Here, I am thinking more particularly about how France deals today with the “Muslim problem” and how these citizens who refuse to be assimilated provide French society with a mirror. A crooked, passion-laden mirror in which to see a reflection of its own identity and societal problems, and its tough conception of secularism. Instead, I propose a soft/multicultural secularism that is not so divisive and would be necessary and even indispensable to each society. The new framework of the relationship between religion and state in a post-secular society allows a certain permeability between what has been dissociated for so long: religion and state, ethics and politics, and religious and secular arguments in the public sphere. This is a multi-secularity that cannot be set up as an end in itself, sacralized and blind to the conditions under which it is implemented in each national or communal context. A secularism is merely a mechanism — albeit to a great extent — capable of effectively affirming the values of the dialogical liberal political project in society.

Unprecedented Movements

The world is witnessing unprecedented movements of refugees and labor workers all across the globe. If the 20th century was the century of refugees, then the 21st century is the one of global conflicts and human displacement, as declared by António Guterres, former UN High Commissioner for Refugees and current Secretary-General of the United Nations.¹ The global figures are alarming: in 2024, 122.6 million forcefully displaced worldwide, of whom 40 million are refugees. There are 20 million displaced people in the Arab world.

The Syrian war, which began in 2011, is one of the most severe refugee crises since the Second World War. It is a humanitarian catastrophe that has been ongoing since 2011. Syria represents

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¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/admin/hcsp/55ba370f9/global-conflicts-human-displacement-21st-century-challenges-delivered-antonio.html>

the greatest political failure of the past decade — one that historians might well come to regard as the shame of our generation, for Westerners and Middle Easterners alike. There are 13.1 million people who need humanitarian assistance, of whom 5.6 million are in the neighboring countries (UNHCR, Aug. 2018). Europe was the world's first responder. In 2016 alone, the European Union (EU) granted asylum to and resettled over 720,000 refugees — three times as many as Australia, Canada and the United States combined.² Yet asylum seeking in Europe is progressively moving from the domain of rights to the domain of administrative management. As a matter of fact, no Western country has ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (issued in New York in 1990).³

While a lot of press focuses on South-North migratory movements, the major movements are in fact South-South. For example, the migrant population in West and Central Africa amounts to 7.5 million, most of whom are coming from within that region. Some of the host countries are really poor, such as Côte d'Ivoire (hosting 2.2 million migrants) and Burkina Faso (hosting 709,000).⁴

Hostile Secularism

In my recent work, I argued that the majority of responses from the social sciences — and particularly sociology — to the pathologies of late modernity have been defined as being *classically liberal but politically illiberal*. I refer to this peculiar combination as Symbolic Liberalism (SL). Empowered by emotional and neoliberal capitalism, this kind of liberalism seeks to disregard the centrality of reaching a unified conception of justice and imposes a hegemonic and deculturized conception of the good, at the expense of a plurality of such conceptions. In this sense, it is politically illiberal, as it fails to respect how individuals deliberate their moral reasonings, thereby contributing to extremely divisive identity politics.

Secularism is crucial for the success of any liberal project, as I define it in my dialogical liberal framework, echoing the French philosopher Cécile Laborde and the Indian-American political scientist Rajeev Bhargava. Secularism is a conception of justice that establishes a safe and principled distance between religion and the state, with minimal state neutrality. Secularism as such is a mechanism for the achievement of a political liberal project and *not* a value in itself.

Symbolic liberals are often intolerant of religion, conceiving it as part of the past, and something that cannot be accommodated in the public sphere. However, religion and religiosity can equally foster social progress and resistance to colonization and tyranny, as well as unleash violent forces, encourage conservatism and sectarianism, and sustain forms of social and political oppression. In other words, the same religion can play different roles in different contexts. Yet, symbolic liberals have focused mainly on the negative role of religion.

² https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/20190306_managing-migration-factsheet-debunking-myths-about-migration_en.pdf

³ See https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-13&chapter=4&clang=_en.

⁴ <http://migration.iom.int/reports/europe-%E2%80%94-mixed-migration-flows-europe-monthly-overview-march-2019?close=true>

Here, I discuss symbolic liberals' interpretation of secularism, which reduces it to a one-model-fits-all universalist concept that often comes close to the French model. Recent exclusionary policies in France have led many to question the new French secularism and the inherent problems in its imposition both inside and outside the country.

French *laïcité* today is not really what it was in the early 20th century. Indeed, historical secularism had several virtues that gave it a universal scope in terms of the differentiation between religion and politics, as well as in terms of the protection of religion from the authority of the state and the protection of the state from the hegemony of the religious clergy. However, there is no sociological evidence to support that secularization should lead to a decline in religiosity, nor that believers should be prevented from imbuing political action with moral perspectives, as is the case in many countries around the world, not just in Muslim-majority societies.

Ethnocentrism

Underlying SL secularism is its “ethnocentric” character, rooted in the Christian reformist conception of religion. Symbolic liberals' version of secularism interprets religion in the Christian manner, more specifically in the manner of reformed Catholicism, by reducing it to individual belief and freedom of conscience, thereby confining it to the private sphere of the home and the church. As a result, religious rituals (e.g., displaying your fasting in Ramadan as in the case of Muslim football players in France) and other public expressions of religious affirmation (such as the wearing of the Islamic headscarf) tend to be considered an unacceptable form of proselytism.

In the name of defending the ideals of this secularism, symbolic liberals have no hesitation in transforming themselves into *faqih*s (Muslim jurists) or *muftis* to prove that the veil “is not part of Islam”, or that it is a “symbol of the slavery of women.” In a completely ethnocentric display, they project meaning and cultural interpretation onto Muslim societies that emanate only from European culture. Such arguments clearly violate the most basic freedoms accorded to all, since it is up to each individual to define and give meaning to their social behavior, as long as they do not harm others. Of course, this is also related to communitarian social norms – establishment, conformity, violation, rewards, and punishments.

The French law banning headscarves in schools and for civil servants in public institutions passed on 15 March 2004 can legitimately be seen as an explicit violation of the freedom of religion. More than anything, what drives this legislation appears to be the sheer rejection of, and genuine obsessive disgust for, the headscarf by the majority of French citizens. Martha Nussbaum (2009) argues for the condemnation of any legislation built on the subjective rejection of the actions of others. She further asserts that moral or legal judgments cannot be justified or legitimized by feelings of disgust or other forms of subjective rejection.

SLs' exclusionary secularism *à la française* has, alas, been replicated in some European countries (e.g., Belgium and Denmark), while other countries resist. Whereas French lawmakers enforce such bans on what is part of the conception of the good, their counterparts in Great

Britain (not to mention the USA, Canada and Australia, where the famous “Burkini” originated) see no contradiction in a Muslim policewoman wearing a hijab or a Sikh policeman wearing a turban. Very recently, this radical opposition was once again expressed in at least two ways. A campaign launched by the Council of Europe to promote the recognition and acceptance of diversity among women, including the freedom to wear the headscarf, was met with virulent criticism, leading to its cancellation. The French anthropologist Florence Bergeaud-Blackler (2023:143) viewed the campaign as part of a romanticization of the veil that ignored the fact that some women are “raped, vitriolized and burnt if they do not wear the veil.” Of all the members of the EU, only France — through the voice of Sarah El Haïry, in her capacity, by then, as Secretary of State for Youth, some of whose relatives wear the headscarf — officially protested against the Council of Europe’s campaign.⁵ This “secular identity”, to use Jean Baubérot’s words, transforms Islam into a religion “alien” to European culture and one that is supposedly “incompatible” with democratic values.

More than Just a Mechanism, Secularism as a “Value in Itself”

Secular liberals consider secularism not simply as an instrument of governance, but as an objective in itself. In their view, secularism is no longer a means of implementing the values of political liberalism, i.e., the values of freedom, equality and pluralism, within the framework of a democratic state, but rather an intrinsic bearer of universal values, whatever the consequences for society.

I argue here that while the concept of justice should be shared by all citizens, the notion of (liberal) pluralism should allow for the multiplicity of ideas of the “good” and, therefore, a good life for different groups in society and the individuals comprising them. In its “new” sense, however, secularism takes into account the historical conditions and cultural environment of only one segment of society (albeit a majority).

For example, while the presence of a cross in public school classrooms is considered contrary to secularism, a cross in the public square of a country characterized by its Christian architectural heritage cannot be considered as such. When the liberal conceptions of justice and the good compete, society debates this in the public sphere using public reason or moral justifications derived from culture, tradition and the influence of globalization. The affirmation of secularity poses no problem as long as the reasoning does not go beyond a sphere that is audible and acceptable to all or most citizens. It is difficult to distinguish in these reasonings between what is merely a composite vestige of religious teaching and cultural practice and other sources or moral references. For instance, is the presence of the status of Virgin Mary in a corner of a street part of religious conception of how a quarter can be protected or a simple a secular view of a heritage? This is not really important as long as there is no social group that feels excluded by the presence of this status.

Secularism, therefore, is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means — it is the grammar that makes it possible to control the shape of this debate and respect the concept of (multicultural)

citizenship while accepting, for example (in the area of religious or ethnic cults, rituals and festivals) exceptions for the benefit of minorities, as long as these exceptions do not harm society as a whole. In a society where Christians make up the majority, it is natural that certain official holidays would have Christian origins. But this should not preclude citizens of other faiths from celebrating their own holidays. In contrast to France, Germany gives such rights to other religious minorities.

A Secularism that Excludes a “Foreign” Religion

Symbolic liberals’ secularism has been weaponized for passing restrictive legislation against minority religions. In place of any public debate on aspects of the prevailing majoritarian culture, minorities with different lifestyles (including all religious practices and rituals that go into forming the “good life”) are legislated against unilaterally.

After its legislation on the headscarf, France adopted another law specifically against wearing the burka, then yet another one banning wearing the burkini, even though it is very difficult to establish that these practices would in any way harm the majority or the social contract. This normative frenzy continues in France with more recent cases, for example, the French Football Federation’s barring of breaks during matches for Muslim players to break their fast during the month of Ramadan; or the education minister’s use of the notion of “religious symbols by destination” to ban the long dresses worn by some schoolgirls (September 2023). Is this concept of “religious symbols by destination” not extraordinary? This means that anything can be banned as if it were a real (bad) symbol because it “alludes to” something. I am sensitive to this, as I have heard from some of the audience when I have given talks about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that criticizing Israel “alludes to” antisemitism. This reminds me of some Sufi interpretations of Qoran, where exegesis is unrelated to text!