

Chapter

# 18

## State and Religion in Turkey: Which Secularism?

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Turkey is the only secular Muslim country which wants to be a part of a non-Muslim union, the EU. Turkish secularism is confusing to outside observers, in particular to the Europeans, and poses a problem in its integration into the EU. Turkish secularism is usually compared to French secularism. Yet there are major differences between them. The only parallel that can be found in the world to Turkish secularism is the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Chinese-style secularism where the state controls religion. The present political tensions in Turkey should be analyzed in the light of this phenomenon. The current main political cleavage in Turkey is not between Islamists and secularists, but between advocates of Western-style democratic secularism and advocates of the authoritarian-style secularism. The latter are against the Western-style democratic secularism and therefore against the EU.

In modern Turkey, secularism was introduced as synonymous with modernism during the first half of the 20th century. Therefore, secularization has become part of Turkish modernization and Westernization. It was argued that the secret of the success of the triumphant Western nations lied in their secular approach and institutions. Consequently, secularism has been accepted as a prerequisite of being modern following the model of the developed Western nations.

However, in the world, there are divergent practices of secularism. As a result, determination to make Turkey a secular country brought about another pressing question: *which secularism?* Specifically, is it the Anglo-Saxon, French, German or the Soviet secularism that Turkey should adopt? This question has yet to be answered clearly in Turkey. Some advocate that Turkey should adopt the American form of secularism, while some advocate

that the French model should be adopted. Others defend preserving the present model which — as I will demonstrate below — has striking structural similarities with the Soviet model, but it is not an exact replication of it.

Consequently, today in Turkish society, there is a consensus on accepting secularism, but there is a conflict over the meaning of it and how it should be implemented. A significant segment of the Turkish society, from majority and minority religious groups, is critical of the practices of the present authoritarian secularism, though for different reasons, and demand reform toward a more liberal and democratic secular model following the Western democratic countries. These demands increase in parallel to the progress of Turkey's membership application in the European Union (EU).

The persistent lack of clarity on the meaning of secularism is reflected in the successive Turkish constitutions. The Republic of Turkey was declared in 1923 on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire (1299–1923) following its defeat in the First World War against European powers.<sup>1</sup> The first Turkish Constitution, which was accepted in 1924, stated that “the religion of the state is Islam.” This article was removed from the Constitution in 1934. *Laicism* entered the Turkish Constitution for the first time in 1937, a year prior to the death of Atatürk (1881–1938). It has been kept in the later constitutions of 1961 and 1982.

However, all Turkish constitutions have been completely silent about what is meant by *laicism*. Why has this been so? How should we interpret this silence? What is it that the authors of the constitution aimed to achieve by remaining silent on such a critical issue? This lack of clarity regarding the definition of *laicism* and its social, legal and political implications constitute the problem I will explore in this paper. Prior to that, I will provide a brief survey of the history of secularization in Turkey to illustrate the context for those who are not familiar with it.

The silence of the Turkish Constitution on the meaning of *laicism* has been the source of great tension and controversy among politicians, lawyers, journalists, intellectuals and the general public. The still pressing question is how to understand *laicism*: Is it freedom of religion and separation of the state and religion? Is it total state control over religion? Is it atheism and de-establishment of religion? The liberals argue that secularism is separation

<sup>1</sup>For a brief survey of Turkish history from the rise of the Ottoman Empire to the present, see Feroz Ahmad (2003). *Turkey: The Quest for Identity*. Oxford: One World.

of religion and state and the guarantee for freedom of religion. Yet for the advocates of authoritarianism, secularism is the state control over religion.

Presently, Turkey has a social consensus on adopting secularism by all strands in the political spectrum, but each political group has a different and sometimes opposing concept of secularism. However, this can hardly continue for a long time without clarifying what is meant by secularism and building a consensus on the meaning of secularism as well. The future of Turkish secularism may witness efforts to build consensus on the meaning of secularism.

Since its first adoption in 1937, the secularist ruling elite has been excessively vigilant and very concerned to protect the secular nature of the Republic against possible threats from within the Turkish society by “reactionary” and ideologically “backward” segments. The official discourse, especially during the celebration of national days, explicitly reflects this angst. As a result of this anxious approach, the present Turkish Constitution, which was accepted in 1982 after a *coup d'état*, made “laïcité” an unchangeable principle of the Constitution. The Constitution prohibits even proposing or suggesting any such amendment.

## HISTORY OF SECULARIZATION IN TURKEY

The present Constitution of Turkey, which was accepted two years after the military coup in 1980, is not the first one to adopt *laicism* as the fundamental feature of the Turkish political system. *Laicism* became part of the Turkish Constitution in 1937 through a constitutional amendment. However, some historians trace the roots of *laicism* back to the *Tanzimat* era<sup>2</sup> (1839), the reform period under Sultan Mahmud II, followed by the First and the Second Ottoman constitutional periods in 1876 and 1908. As we will see below, some historians even trace it to the classical period of the Ottoman Empire.

Although *laicism* was legally accepted in 1937 by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, in practice it may be considered to have been the last phase of a process which had been initiated in 1923 when representative

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<sup>2</sup>In Turkish, “tanzimat” means reform. It refers to the reform movement initiated by Sultan Mahmud II by a declaration in 1839. The purpose of Tanzimat was to save the Ottoman Empire by reforming it following the model of Western states.

democracy was accepted. Subsequent radical reform efforts under Atatürk to build a secular state, society and culture continued.<sup>3</sup>

*Laicism* was accepted as one of the pillars of Kemalism as symbolized in the “Six Arrows” which are used to sum up the Kemalist ideology. The Six Arrows were formulated and accepted in the general meeting of the People’s Republican Party (founded by Atatürk), then the only and ruling party of Turkey, in 1927 and 1931 as part of the party statute. Soon they were included in the Constitution. The Six Arrows are also pictured in the flag of the People’s Republican Party, which ruled Turkey during the single-party regime until 1950. Placing the principle of *laicism* in its broader context may require us to take a brief look at the fundamental principles of Kemalism.

The first arrow of Kemalism symbolizes *republicanism*, meaning anti-monarchism rather than democratic *res publica*. The republican system was adopted to replace the Ottoman system which was based on Islamic political doctrine. The Ottoman Sultan came from the Ottoman dynasty and combined in himself both the religious authority as the Caliph (the leader of Muslims worldwide) and the political authority as the ruler of the state. This model of leadership was inherited by Muslim leaders from Prophet Muhammad (571–632), who served as the leader of his community in both religious and political issues. The office of the Sultan and the Caliph was separated in 1922; the monarchy was abolished and the last Ottoman Sultan, Vahdettin, was expelled from the country. In 1924, the Caliphate was abolished and the last Caliph, Abdulmecid (1868–1944), was exiled to Europe.

The second arrow of Kemalism is *secularism*, which means that there would be no state religion and there would be secular control of religion, law and education. The efforts to secularize law led to the abolition of the *Shari’ah* courts in 1925 together with the adoption of the Swiss civil and Italian penal codes in 1926. Secularization also led to the suppression of the Sufi lodges and religious schools, the latinizing of the alphabet, the

<sup>3</sup>On the history of secularization in Turkey, see Niyazi Berkes (1998). *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*. London: Hurst & Company; Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002). *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Andrew Davison (1998). *Secularism, Revivalism in Turkey: A Hermeneutic Reconsideration*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Esra Özyürek (2006). *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey*. Durham: Duke University Press; Soner Çağaptay (2006). *Islam Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* London: Routledge.

enforced change to a Western style of dress, emancipation of women, and Turkification of the Qur'an and the *adhan* (the Islamic call for prayers).

The third arrow of Kemalism is *nationalism*. Adopting a nationalist ideology was also part of the de-establishment of Islam which emphasized belonging to the global Muslim community (*ummah*). National Turkish identity was introduced to replace the global Islamic identity. The state officially promoted the idea that anyone who speaks Turkish is a Turk. From this perspective, the Turkish language identifies the members of the nation and national identity is devoid of racial, religious or ethnic sense. Instead, it encompasses all those who live within the confines of Turkish territory.

The fourth arrow of Kemalism symbolizes *populism*. It stresses sovereignty of the people as opposed to the ruler's will or religious law (*shari'ah*), the mutual responsibility of state and individual, and also the absence of social class. This principle was developed against the elitism of the Ottoman dynasty. People are expected to express their will through elections to elect their representatives. However, the single-party rule in Turkey until 1950 was justified by the claim that the Turkish people were not educated or enlightened enough to make right choices to vote for the right party, i.e., the People's Republican Party.

The fifth arrow of Kemalism symbolizes *revolutionism*. It refers to the top-down radical and comprehensive transformation of society to bring it into the family of advanced nations in the West. However, revolution for Kemalism does not mean changing the infrastructure or the class structure as understood by socialist revolutionaries. Instead, it aims to change the super-structure such as culture, alphabet, dress, social norms, law, science and technology.

The sixth and final arrow of Kemalism stands for *Étatism*. It means that the state should play an active role in economic development and in social, cultural and educational activities. It also indicates that very little room, if at all, should be given to civil society and free market economy. It resembles the socialist state practices regarding economy and society which were fashionable at that time.

We need to understand the concept and practice of Turkish *laicism* within the above-mentioned broader context of Kemalist ideology and its policies on the ground. It is, in general, a thinly formulated ideology compared to Marxism and other modern ideologies. Consequently, its view on secularism

is also thinly formulated. This is expected, because for the revolutionary of that time, theory should follow practice.<sup>4</sup>

It should also be added that there are different interpretations of Kemalism. Similar to other grand ideologies, Kemalism has also been interpreted in different ways. Some of these interpretations are extremely friendly in their approach to religion, while others present Kemalism as antithetical with religion.

It seems the purpose of formulating such a secular ideology was to replace the existing religious worldview derived from religion, namely Islam. The religious political ideology was inherited from the Ottomans and shared by the majority of the society. The newly established Republic of Turkey had to grow under the shadow of this glorious past. Consequently, it disinherited the Ottoman legacy.

There was another reason why a secular ideology was needed: providing legitimacy for the top-down revolutions and other state actions. In the Ottoman Empire, the *ulama* (religious scholars) provided legitimacy for state actions on religious grounds. Yet in a secular regime, the views of the *ulama* would not help in justifying secular reforms. Therefore, a secular intelligentsia was called to task to produce an ideology that would bring legitimacy to state actions.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, practice counts more than theory regarding secularization in Turkey. For this reason, it would be necessary to look at the practices on behalf of *laicism*. The revolutionary policies which aimed at secularizing Turkish culture, political structure and society focused in particular on the following areas:

- **State structure:** The Ottoman Sultan was also the Caliph who was the leader of all Muslims. The Caliphate was abolished and the last Caliph was exiled to Europe. The sovereignty was no longer with the Sultan-Caliph but it was said to be transferred to the people of Turkey as represented by

<sup>4</sup>Bernard Lewis (1968). *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup>Ideologically speaking, secularization in Turkey meant transition from Islamic *Fiqh* to Western social sciences. The Ottoman *ulama* relied on *Fiqh*, which is a traditional Islamic discipline studying human action with regard to its normative aspects, while addressing the issue of political legitimacy. In contrast, secular intellectuals relied on the modern Western social sciences, in particular Durkheimian sociology, in providing legitimacy to state actions from a secularist perspective. Ziya Gökalp was a leading sociologist of the time whose ideas influenced both the Young Turks during the late Ottoman Empire and also the politicians of the Republic of Turkey.

the Grand National Assembly. Yet, Turkey was ruled by a single-party regime from 1923 until 1950. The sovereignty of the people was not allowed; instead, the ruling elite acted “for people but despite people.”

- **Law:** Islamic law (*shari'ah*) was abolished and secular codes from Western countries were adopted.
- **Education:** Education was standardized using a secularist perspective and put under the monopoly of the state by the Unification of Education Law. According to this law, only the secular state could give education, including religious education. This caused great concern within the non-Muslim minorities, whose schools came under the control of the Ministry of Education. Islamic religious education was not given at all during the early decades of the Republic.
- **Religious groups:** Sufi brotherhoods were banned and the Sufi lodges were outlawed as bastions of reactionaries. Sufism was seen as an obstacle before modernization because it did not promote rationalism and scientific progress. It was criticized for promoting laziness and inertia.
- **Pious foundations (*awqaf*):** Pious foundations in the Ottoman Empire had funded seminaries, mosques, hospitals and Sufi lodges among other religious and charitable institutions. They were formed by civil society outside the control of the state. A special ministry, Ministry of Foundations, had managed them. They were all closed down and their property was nationalized under the newly founded Directorate of Foundations.
- **Holiday:** The holiday was shifted from Friday (an Islamic holiday) to Saturday (traditionally the Jewish day for holiday) and Sunday (a Christian holiday) following the Western countries.
- **Calendar:** The Gregorian calendar was adopted instead of the Islamic calendar, the *Hijra* calendar.
- **Script:** The Latin script was adopted instead of the Arabic script.
- **Dress code:** Traditional Islamic and Turkish attires were outlawed and they were replaced by Western dress; in particular, the hat was made obligatory to wear. This was known as the Hat Revolution.
- **Clergy:** The *ulama* order, which means religious scholars and clergy, were outlawed as their knowledge was seen as obsolete and contradictory with modern science. This period could be compared to the period of anti-clericalism in France. The modern secular academicians and

intellectuals were expected to take the place of the *ulama*. The clergy (*imam* and *mufti*) were turned into civil servants. Turkey became the only Muslim country without the *ulama*.

- **Civil society:** Civil society groups, in particular religious ones, were outlawed and religion was made a part of state bureaucracy. The Presidency of Religious Affairs was established to offer religious services, control mosques and publish religious books. Traditionally, the mosques and the clergy had been funded by charitable civil groups, in particular pious foundations.

At that time, secularization was not seen as an option but as a necessity. The goal of these reforms was to make the Turkish state, society and culture a Western one. This was seen as the only way to save the nation from the backwardness and darkness of the Middle Ages. The purpose was to shift Turkey from the domain of Islamic civilization to the domain of Western civilization — a goal that has yet to be achieved completely. It was believed that there was only one civilization: the Western civilization. Turkey had to become part of it in order to survive.

One can observe from the above list, which has no claim to be exhaustive, that these changes were state actions. The statesmen made the decision about them and carried them out in a swift manner in such a way that there was no preceding public debate to convince the society about their necessity. The secularist intelligentsia produced public arguments for legitimacy following the reforms initiated by the statesmen.

As the above listed top-down reforms demonstrate, secularism or “laïcité”<sup>6</sup> has not been practiced in Turkey as the separation of state and religion.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the state has tried to control religion through the Presidency of Religious Affairs, whose president reports to a minister of the state. The duties of the Presidency of Religious Affairs are to supervise the activities concerning the beliefs, worship, and ethics of Islam, enlighten

<sup>6</sup>I use, in this paper, secularism and laicism interchangeably. The presently used Turkish word for secularism is “laiklik.” It is derived from the French word “laicism.” The usage of the Anglo-Saxon words “secularism” and “secularization” (Turkish spelling “sekülerizm” and “sekülerizasyon” or “sekülerleşme”) has started recently. Sometimes a distinction is made between “laicism” and secularism, but it is difficult to ground such a distinction. The word “laicism” was first translated into Turkish as “lâdiniyye.” Sometimes, secularization is translated as “dünyevileşmek.”

<sup>7</sup>For authoritarian secularism in Turkey, see Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im (2008). *Islam and the Secular State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 182–222.



the public about their religion, and administer the sacred places of worship. All mosques are under the control of the Presidency of Religious Affairs and the *imams* are civil servants who are paid by the state.

These reform efforts are commonly known as Kemalist revolutions. Their aim is remodeling religion and its place in Turkish social, cultural and political life. At times they amount to religion-building. They are under constitutional protection and are among the irrevocable laws.<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, some of these reforms are no longer relevant such as the legal obligation to wear a Western-style hat because presently no one wears a hat but it is still in the Constitution as an irrevocable article. This obligation was introduced by a law during the “Hat Revolution” which outlawed the old-style Turkish hats, in particular the turban used by the *ulama*. Some *ulama* refused to take off their turbans and were penalized severely for being anti-revolution.

Political sociology demonstrates that despite all these legal restrictions — if not because of them — Islam has been a strong force in Turkish politics.<sup>9</sup> Restrictions on freedom of religion had been common especially during the single-party regime until 1950. During this period, Turkey was under the ideological influence of August Comte’s evolutionary ideas which believed

<sup>8</sup>Part Five of the 1982 Constitution is dedicated to this issue. Under the title “Preservation of Reform Laws” the following is stated:

Article 174. No provision of the Constitution shall be construed or interpreted as rendering unconstitutional the Reform Laws indicated below, which aim to raise Turkish society above the level of contemporary civilization and to safeguard the secular character of the Republic, and which were in force on the date of the adoption by referendum of the Constitution of Turkey.

1. Act No. 430 of 3 March 1340 (1924) on the Unification of the Educational System;
2. Act No. 671 of 25 November 1341 (1925) on the Wearing of Hats;
3. Act No. 677 of 30 November 1341 (1925) on the Closure of Dervish Monasteries and Tombs, the Abolition of the Office of Keeper of Tombs and the Abolition and Prohibition of Certain Titles;
4. The principle of civil marriage according to which the marriage act shall be concluded in the presence of the competent official, adopted with the Turkish Civil Code No. 743 of 17 February 1926, and Article 110 of the Code;
5. Act No. 1288 of 20 May 1928 on the Adoption of International Numerals;
6. Act No. 1353 of 1 November 1928 on the Adoption and Application of the Turkish Alphabet;
7. Act No. 2590 of 26 November 1934 on the Abolition of Titles and Appellations such as Efendi, Bey or Pasha;
8. Act No. 2596 of 3 December 1934 on the Prohibition of the Wearing of Certain Garments.

<sup>9</sup>Binnaz Toprak (1981). *Islam and Political Development in Turkey*. Leiden: Brill; see also Şerif Mardin (1989). *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*. Albany: State University of New York.

that religion is bound to disappear as the society makes progress in science. Those who did not abandon their religious faith and identity were accused of being backward reactionaries and obstacles in the way to progress. They were also seen as a potential threat to secularism.

However, Islamic concerns have always been on the agenda of the major parties after 1950 such as the Democratic Party headed by Adnan Menderes, the Justice Party headed by Suleyma Demirel, the National Salvation Party headed by Necmettin Erbakan, the Motherland Party headed by Turgut Ozal, the Welfare Party headed again by Erbakan, and most recently the AK Party headed by Tayyip Erdoğan. Political parties have to respond to the popular demands for more freedom of religion and less restrictions on religious practice. However, the legal constraints would not allow them to accommodate these popular demands. Several parties were closed down by the Constitutional Court for violating the principle of *laicism*. In 2008, the ruling AK Party, which won 48% of the votes, came on the verge of being banned for being the focus of anti-secular activities. The Turkish Constitutional Court penalized the AK Party by cutting half of the state subsidy to it based on the accusation of becoming the focus of anti-secularism by using anti-secular language.

We will now take a closer look at these legal rules on secularism and freedom of religion.

## CONSTITUTIONAL PRINCIPLES ON LAICISM

Although the Turkish Constitution is completely silent on the definition of *laicism*, which gives rise to contesting interpretations and expectations, there are detailed regulations in the Turkish legal system about secularism and religion. Therefore, it would be instructive to take a closer look at the relevant principles of the Turkish Constitution to better comprehend the official view on *laicism* and its legal implementation. This exercise may also help us figure out what the authors of the constitution meant by secularism which they intentionally left undefined.

Turkey has witnessed three military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980. Each *coup d'état* produced a new constitution, but the secularism clause has been preserved in all of them. Yet, the current constitution which was prepared after the 1980 military coup strengthened its legal position by

including it among the unchangeable founding principles of the Turkish Republic.

The 1982 Constitution<sup>10</sup> asserts that Turkey is a democratic and secular republic,<sup>11</sup> deriving its sovereignty from the people.<sup>12</sup> This sovereignty rests with the Turkish Nation, who delegates its exercise to an elected unicameral parliament, the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Article 4 declares the irrevocability and immutability of the founding principles of the Republic defined in the first three Articles:

- (1) “secularism, social equality, equality before law”
- (2) “the Republican form of government”
- (3) “the indivisibility of the Republic and of the Turkish Nation.”

The Constitution bans proposing amendments to these articles.<sup>13</sup> This is because they define the fundamental features of the Turkish Republic as a secular nation-state.

For the same reason, according to the Constitution, human rights and freedoms<sup>14</sup> cannot be used to undermine the secular system. The Constitution also requires that the political parties cannot contradict this secularism in their statutes, programs, activities or ideas. Such an act would constitute grounds for closing the political party by the Constitutional Court.

<sup>10</sup>For the English translations of the Turkish Constitution as a whole text, see <http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1982constitution.htm>.

<sup>11</sup>The preamble of the Constitution states the following: “The recognition that no protection shall be accorded to an activity contrary to Turkish national interests, the principle of the indivisibility of the existence of Turkey with its state and territory, Turkish historical and moral values or the nationalism, principles, reforms and modernism of Atatürk and that, as required by the principle of secularism, there shall be no interference whatsoever by sacred religious feelings in state affairs and politics.”

<sup>12</sup>At the outset, the characteristics of the Republic are defined in Article 2 as follows: “The Republic of Turkey is a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law; bearing in mind the concepts of public peace, national solidarity and justice; respecting human rights; loyal to the nationalism of Atatürk, and based on the fundamental tenets set forth in the Preamble.”

<sup>13</sup>Under the title “Irrevocable Provisions,” Article 4 states that “The provision of Article 1 of the Constitution establishing the form of the state as a Republic, the provisions in Article 2 on the characteristics of the Republic, and the provision of Article 3 shall not be amended, nor shall their amendment be proposed.”

<sup>14</sup>Article 14 (as amended on 17 October 2001) in the section on the “Prohibition of Abuse of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms” states that “None of the rights and freedoms embodied in the Constitution shall be exercised with the aim of violating the indivisible integrity of the state with its territory and nation, and endangering the existence of the democratic and secular order of the Turkish Republic based upon human rights.”

The Presidency of Religious Affairs was also founded by the Constitution. It is a state organ which is required to function in accordance with the principles of secularism.<sup>15</sup>

Article 24 under the section on “Freedom of Religion and Conscience” in the Constitution grants freedom of religion but makes the primary religious education, which can be given by the state alone, compulsory:

Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religious belief and conviction.

Acts of worship, religious services, and ceremonies shall be conducted freely, provided that they do not violate the provisions of Article 14.

No one shall be compelled to worship, or to participate in religious ceremonies and rites, to reveal religious beliefs and convictions, or be blamed or accused because of his religious beliefs and convictions.

Education and instruction in religion and ethics shall be conducted under state supervision and control. Instruction in religious culture and moral education shall be compulsory in the curricula of primary and secondary schools. Other religious education and instruction shall be subject to the individual’s own desire, and in the case of minors, to the request of their legal representatives.

No one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion, in any manner whatsoever, for the purpose of personal or political influence, or for even partially basing the fundamental, social, economic, political, and legal order of the state on religious tenets.

The most controversial element in this clause is the one about compulsory religious education which raises the following questions: Can the secular state give religious education? Which religion will be taught? How will the religious education be given? Controversy over these questions persists even today.

From the above survey, it could be concluded that for the authors of the constitution, *laicism* meant state control over religion but not separation of religion and state. However, this is not explicitly stated in the Constitution. One can easily reach this conclusion by surveying the relevant articles in the Constitution and the practices justified by them. The most recent controversial example of authoritarian secularism has been the ban on Muslim women’s headscarves (*hijab*) in the public sphere

<sup>15</sup>“Article 136. The Department of Religious Affairs, which is within the general administration, shall exercise its duties prescribed in its particular law, in accordance with the principles of secularism, removed from all political views and ideas, and aiming at national solidarity and integrity.”

including all government offices, hospitals and schools. In the universities, this ban has been applied not only to the employees but also to the students.

## SECULARIST AND RELIGIOUS CRITICS OF AUTHORITARIAN LAICISM

The existing regulations and practices of secularism in Turkey have been criticized by both secularist and religious segments in Turkish society. The criticism of each side is based on different arguments which derive from a particular interpretation of secularism. This goes back to the lack of clarity and consensus as to what is meant by secularism.

Some secularist critics and members of minority religious groups argue that the Turkish state's support for and regulation of Sunni religious institutions — including mandatory religious education for children deemed by the state to be Muslims — amount to *de facto* violations of secularism.

Non-Muslim children are exempted from the compulsory religious education. Yet the Alevi children are also required to attend these lessons. Some of the Alevis are not happy that their children learn the Sunni interpretation of Islam. It is claimed that this cooperation between Sunni Islam and the secular state arose in the 1960s during the Cold War, as the result of an anti-leftist alliance between secular and religious conservatives.

Conversely, some religious intellectuals and politicians argue that Turkish secularism unduly restricts individual religious freedom. Debate arises over the issue of to what degree religious observance ought to be restricted to the private sphere. Most famously, this critique has been raised in connection with the issues of headscarves and religion-based political parties. The issue of an independent Greek Orthodox seminary is also a matter of controversy with regard to Turkey's accession to the European Union.

Some religious intellectuals criticize the state for producing a state-theology because the Presidency of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education adopt a particular interpretation of Islam at the expense of others. This version of religion which is adopted and propagated by state institutions is seen as state intervention in religion and favoring one interpretation over others.

## WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF TURKISH SECULARISM?

There is yet another controversy about the origin of Turkish *laicism*. There are several conflicting claims regarding the origin of the Turkish model of secularism. Below I will try to summarize these claims.

The first is that it is a continuation of the Ottoman tradition because the Ottoman state was secular, and not an Islamic one.

The second is that Turkish secularism has been borrowed from the West because the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic state, a theocracy. Accepting this view raises another question: Which Western model was adopted by Turkey — the liberal democratic or socialist model?

Those who try to demonstrate that secularism is not a rootless ideology in Turkey advocate the first claim: Turkish secularism is a continuation of the Ottoman tradition. Their emphasis is on continuity. They also think that the legitimacy of Turkish secularism can be obtained from the historical precedent in the Ottoman Empire. Implicit in this approach is that secularism has not been only a Western phenomenon.

The second claim that secularism was adopted from the West is advocated by those whose emphasis is on discontinuity and the revolutionary nature of Turkish reforms. For them, justification for secularism cannot be derived from the Ottoman tradition because it was a theocracy. From their perspective, secularism is a product of modern Western civilization and it is impossible to find it elsewhere.

Below, I will critically examine these claims by summarizing the arguments of each opposing strand.

### Secularism was Inherited from the Ottoman Empire

This controversy revolves around whether the Turks had a secular political tradition before the Turkish Republic. Historians are divided on the issue into two groups.

Some prominent historians such as Halil İnalcık and Ömer Lütfi Barkan advocate that the Ottoman Empire had a secular tradition because some laws were formulated outside of religion. These laws were called *kanun*. They reflected the will of the Sultan on matters outside the Islamic law. Each sultan produced a *kanunname*.

Yet this view is rejected by other respected historians of Ottoman law such as Mehmet Akif Aydın, Ahmet Akgündüz and Halil Cin. They argue

that *kanun* was part of the Islamic legal tradition and it was also produced by the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) similar to Islamic law. Furthermore, there was only a single-court system to implement both Islamic law and *kanun*.

In my opinion, there are two conceptual problems in this debate. First, it is difficult to understand the Ottoman system by retrospectively projecting our present concepts to the history. Second, it is difficult to understand the Ottoman Empire by applying to it theories derived from Western political history. Briefly put, we need a conceptual framework for the Ottoman Empire which recognizes its differences from the West of that time and also from the present age.

For this reason, we cannot call the Ottoman Empire a theocracy or a secular state. Theocracy is a Western type of rule where the church rules in the name of God, but in Islam there is no church. The Ottoman Empire was not ruled by a church or clergy. But it was not a secular state either because it derived legitimacy from Islam, saw itself as the defender of Islam and practiced Islamic law under the leadership of a Caliph-Sultan.

However, we should also recognize that there are structural similarities between the way religion was managed in the Ottoman state and in modern Turkey. For instance, in the Ottoman state, religion was part of the state bureaucracy and the head of the clergy, Shayk al-Islam, was appointed by the head of the state. This is similar to modern Turkey where the head of the Presidency of Religious Affairs is appointed by the President of the Republic.

## **Secularism was Borrowed from Western Europe**

Turkish secularism is one of the most confusing political-cultural models in the world for the outside observers. It was introduced as part of the Westernization project during the first quarter of the 20th century. One wonders which Western country served as the model for Turkish secularism because each Western country has a different model of secularism and there are striking differences from country to country in Europe and America. Yet, this search to determine the Western origin of Turkish secularism is futile because one cannot find a parallel model to Turkish secularism in Western countries.

This is what makes Turkish secularism intriguing: it was introduced and presented inside the country and abroad as a Western model, but there is

no parallel to it in the West. Today, very few people are aware of this. The majority are under the impression that the Turkish model was borrowed from France, which has the most strict model of secularism.

However, there are serious structural differences between the French and Turkish models. In France, the church has been preserved and given autonomy. Conversely, in Turkey, the state has monopoly over religion and religious education, as the religious establishment was completely abolished and management of religious institutions has been made a part of the government system while the Turkish Constitution recognizes the Turkish state as the sole provider of religious education. In Turkey, no one is legally allowed to give religious education or open mosques other than the state. However, in France, these activities are carried out by the church.

### **Secularism was Borrowed from Socialist Countries**

If the present *laicism* in Turkey has not been borrowed from a liberal democratic European country, then where did the Turks receive this model? To be able to answer this question, we must turn to the non-Western models of secularism where religion is subjugated to state authority and government regulations. Such a model existed in the USSR, China and other socialist countries. We should also remember that during the early years of the Republic, there were friendly relations between the USSR and Turkey.

Ideologically speaking, socialist countries have seen religion as part of a super-structure, the main instrument of justification in the hands of the ruling class for the exploitation of lower classes, the opium of masses, a manifestation of alienation, and a major block that needs to be removed for the progress of the country.

Politically speaking, the socialist government model established a monopoly for the control of society without leaving any social or economic elements outside government control. Therefore, there has been almost no civil society in the socialist states.

Consequently, for these ideological, political and administrative reasons, the socialist states abolished religious hierarchy and put worship places under government control. The socialist state raised the clergy on an ideologically loaded religious education and paid their salaries. This policy turned churches into government offices and the clergy into civil servants to help the government establish an extremely strict control over religion.



These similarities may lead to the conclusion that some important features of Turkish secularism have been borrowed from Eastern socialist countries instead of Western democratic countries. However, it is paradoxical that it was installed in Turkey as part of the Westernization project and introduced to the Turkish population as a Western model.

### **PRESENT CLEAVAGE IN TURKISH POLITICS: WHICH SECULARISM?**

Complete state control over religion — although it is not explicitly stated in the legal documents — has thus far been the dominant practice of *laicism* in Turkey, which shaped the ensuing practices in the legal, political, cultural, educational and religious domains. This understanding and practice has, as mentioned above, no parallel except in the former socialist countries like the USSR. Yet those who have viewed *laicism* as freedom of religion based on a separation of religion and the state have objected to such an authoritarian definition of *laicism* and the resulting restrictive practices.

The increasing realization that the present model of secularism in Turkey and the practices justified by *laicism* have no parallel in the modern democratic countries of Europe and America makes it more questionable and objectionable, particularly for the liberal-minded new generation. There are four important factors that contribute to the critique of *laicism* as conventionally understood and practiced in Turkey:

- (1) The collapse of the USSR, which demonstrated that the model adopted by Turkey had failed in its own homeland.
- (2) The process of accession of Turkey to the EU, which pushes Turkey towards adopting Western standards of freedom of religion and the relations between religion and the state.
- (3) Globalization and the media, which increased the familiarity of the Turkish population with the way secularism is practiced in the democratic Western countries where a democratic approach to secularism is adopted.
- (4) Upward mobility and the rise in the educational and economic levels of the population, in particular those religious segments who used to be seen as the periphery.

The current cleavage in Turkey regarding secularism is not about whether Turkey should remain secular or become an Islamic theocracy, but whether Turkey should reform its secularism following Western models and abandon the present model which failed even in its home country (the USSR).

Turkish liberals, be they religious, a-religious or non-religious, advocate the view that *laicism* is freedom of religion, and the state should not put unnecessary restrictions on the practice of religion. These liberal-minded religious politicians, academicians, intellectuals and journalists defend their claim for reform by referring to the liberal practices of secularism in Western democratic countries.

Yet they are frequently accused by the defenders of the present model of authoritarian secularism as being Islamists and anti-secularists. In the polemic over secularism, it is used at times as a political weapon to attack political opponents and rivals. For instance, the current ruling party, the AK Party, is accused by the People's Republican Party as undermining the secular system.

Accusing the AK Party for being pro-Islamist and anti-secularism is not always convincing to the public as Turkey is the only Muslim nation which seeks to become part of a Western club, namely the EU. The paradox lies in the fact that the policy of EU accession has been pushed more by the politicians who are accused by their opponents as being Islamists, such as Turgut Özal and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, than their colleagues who present themselves as the champions of secularism. The population therefore sees that it would be unimaginable for a pro-Islamist, anti-secular politician to push Turkey's membership in a non-Muslim union.

## CONCLUSION

The fact that the Turkish Constitution is completely silent about the definition of *laicism*, despite its repeated and excessively detailed emphasis on *laicism*, has caused wide-ranging controversies in Turkey. Consequently, a conflict has emerged between those who understand *laicism* as freedom of religion and separation of state and religion, and those who understand it as complete state control over religion.

The most striking feature of *laicism* in Turkey is that religion is not left to civil society; instead, it is made a part of the state apparatus. There is an

increasing awareness among the Turkish population that the present model of *laicism* has no counterpart in the West. As a result, there is a growing critique and demand for reform following the European democratic models of secularism.

The EU has recently emerged as a new actor in the controversy over the meaning of secularism and the way it should be implemented. Both the liberals and the advocates of authoritarianism attempt to elicit EU support for their particular camp. When the ECHR (European Court of Human Rights) sided with the authoritarians regarding the ban on the headscarf of women in universities, the liberals were greatly disappointed with the EU. It is possible that the EU may play a constructive role in clearly defining what is meant by *laicism* from a liberal democratic perspective.

The present cleavage in Turkey is not between defenders and enemies of secularism, but between the advocates of liberal and authoritarian models of secularism. "Which secularism" is the pressing question to be answered in the near future. A social consensus must be built around the concept of secularism because presently, the society is divided between those who want to conserve the present authoritarian model and those who want to reform it following liberal democratic models in the West.

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Chapter

# 19

## Pragmatic Secularism, Civil Religion, and Political Legitimacy in Singapore

KENNETH PAUL TAN

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This chapter analyzes the discourse and practices of Singapore's nation-state as a kind of civil religion, identifying in particular their "religion-like" elements that have played a part in securing the People's Action Party (PAP) government's political legitimacy since the country attained independence in 1965. The chapter locates the evolution of Singapore's civil religion within a public sphere defined by a "pragmatic" mode of secularism and the contradictory tendencies of transactional and transformational modes of leadership that the government, endeavoring to secure the economic and moral bases of its authority, has tried to control.

The discourse and practices of Singapore's nation-state are a kind of civil religion. In particular, their "religion-like" elements have played a part in securing the People's Action Party (PAP) government's political legitimacy since the country attained independence in 1965. The chapter locates the evolution of Singapore's civil religion within a public sphere defined by a "pragmatic" mode of secularism and the contradictory tendencies of transactional and transformational modes of leadership that the government, endeavoring to secure the economic and moral bases of its authority, has tried to control.

### SECULARISM

José Casanova differentiates three different propositions that are often confounded in discussions about secularization: (1) "secularization as decline of religious beliefs and practices," (2) "secularization as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms," and

(3) “secularization as marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere” (Casanova 1994, p. 211).

In contemporary Singapore, proposition 1 is not supported by the most recent census data of 2000: 42.5% of the population say that they are Buddhists, 14.9% Muslims, 14.6% Christians, 8.5% Taoists, 4.0% Hindus, 0.6% that they belong to other religions, and 14.8% that they have no religion (although some from this category may practice certain religious rites). Over the decades, Singapore’s multi-religious character has continued to be strong, with a major decline in Taoism, but a clear growth in Christianity and strong indications of a revival in Buddhism. Since 1980, the percentage of Singaporeans with no religion has increased by less than 2% (Tong 2008). In ultra-modern Singapore, there are tensions between industrial and post-industrial values — tensions which have not led to a decline of religious belief and practices, but to their revival. Often, individuals look to religion for thick community, moral anchors, and higher meaning to escape the alienation of a capitalist-industrial society. As one of the most open economies in the world, Singapore is set to face more frequent and perplexing periods of economic crisis, creating conditions that could induce people to turn to religion. At the same time, the logic and resources of capitalism have provided religion with new techniques for expansion, in many cases through the dynamics of mass production, marketing, advertising, and customer satisfaction. Religious organizations in Singapore’s civil society, traditionally active in performing their welfare and social service roles, have become more confident, empowered, and skilful in articulating their views with regard to matters of public importance.

Proposition 2 most adequately describes the Singapore case, where the state and politics are insulated from religious institutions and norms, whose de-politicized forms are allowed and at times even encouraged to flourish in the community life of a multi-religious society as long as inter-religious harmony and public order are maintained. Eugene Tan notes how freedom of religion, as provided in the Constitution, is interpreted according to a “belief-action distinction,” where religious adherents are free to believe the tenets of their respective faiths (including proscribed faiths), but acting on these beliefs in ways that are contrary to law and order will be deemed as illegal (Tan, E. 2008). The Penal Code and Seditious Act are available for dealing with criminal offences that relate to religion; but in more

serious cases that require pre-emptive action, the Internal Security Act provides for preventive detention without trial or judicial review, for two-year periods that are renewable. A less draconian measure to prevent the mixing of religion and politics is the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act introduced in 1990. Through this Act, religious leaders who engage in politics can be issued with restraining orders.

While the secular state prohibits the politicization of the religious sphere, it also secures its moral authority over a multi-religious society by not taking sides, performing a crucial role as a reliably fair and neutral arbiter in the settlement of possible disagreements among religious communities. The state's authority, rather than being derived from or aligned to the divine mandate of a dominant religion, actually depends on its demonstrated equidistance from all religions and their respective logics and beliefs in the settlement of contentious matters. According to a Hobbesian logic, religious minorities and majorities, in their own ways, stand to benefit from ceding some of their freedoms to a neutral authority collectively in order to secure peace and self-preservation. Although the government maintains "a policy of strict neutrality," Thio Li-Ann observes a "qualified secularism" practiced in Singapore. The government is, for example, required by the Constitution to protect racial and religious minorities, and to safeguard the "special position" of the Malays in particular, which includes promoting their religious interests (Thio 2008). The Malay-Muslim community receives government assistance in mosque-building efforts and tertiary education fees, and Muslims can refer to separate *shari'ah* courts for legal matters pertaining to marriage and divorce. This qualified secularism, however, has not been carefully rationalized, and appears implicitly to draw arguments from both "indigenous rights" thinking as well as "positive discrimination/affirmative action" approaches to leveling the playing field for an effective meritocracy.

To maintain hegemony, the state — through the use of persuasion and (often as a last resort) coercion — continually works to align and articulate with the dominant ideology the contradictory interests of classes and forces in society, including religiously defined ones (Gramsci 1971). While the law and the state's instruments of enforcement make up the coercive framework, the state also relies strongly on its ideological apparatuses to get the religious groups to buy into the system. Multiracialism and meritocracy, for example, have been codified as Singapore's version of multiculturalism that all should

adhere to, lest the racial riots of the 1950s and 1960s — vividly documented in *The Singapore Story* — should re-emerge to tear apart Singapore society.

The state's ideological work is greatly helped by its skilful practice of state corporatism, where the traditional leadership of religious communities and groups is, to some official degree, co-opted, making it more difficult for them to challenge the state since their legitimacy is also derived from the state. No less than two-thirds of the membership of the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, whose function is “to consider and report to the Minister on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore which are referred to the Council by the Minister or by Parliament,” is constitutionally required to be made up of representatives of the major religions in Singapore. Administrative bodies such as the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) and the Council on Education for Muslim Children (MENDAKI) for the Malay-Muslims, the Hindu Advisory Board and Hindu Endowments Board for the Hindus, and the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board and Sikh Advisory Board for the Sikhs are heavily supported by the state, which also has a strong influence on the appointment of their office-holders. After the events of 9/11, the government set up Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (now called Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles) and Harmony Circles to promote dialogue and build confidence at the constituency and workplace levels respectively. The government also initiated a “grassroots” project that saw religious leaders coming together to work on a code of conduct for religious communities called the Declaration of Religious Harmony, which reads:

We, the people in Singapore, declare that religious harmony is vital for peace, progress and prosperity in our multi-racial and multi-religious Nation. We resolve to strengthen religious harmony through mutual tolerance, confidence, respect, and understanding. We shall always recognize the secular nature of our State, promote cohesion within our society, respect each other's freedom of religion, grow our common space while respecting our diversity, foster inter-religious communications, and thereby ensure that religion will not be abused to create conflict and disharmony in Singapore.

These initiatives on the ground, which Eugene Tan describes as “soft-law instruments” (Tan, E. 2008, p. 73), have all been part of the government's strategy to secure ideological hegemony.



If the state is sensitive to the potential for resistance and opposition from religious quarters and the threat they pose to hegemony, the state is just as aware of religion's usefulness for building and strengthening hegemony. A significant number of organs within civil society such as schools and voluntary welfare organizations are managed by religious groups, which receive substantial state funding support to supplement their own fundraising efforts. Through these organizations, the government is able to sustain its ideological resistance to comprehensive state welfare while making sure that, through voluntarism and indirect state assistance, people in need are not left uncared for. Religious groups are, to the government, a very important component of civil society, not only in their performance of a vital welfare and social service role, but also in their widespread promotion of the spirit of voluntarism in the service of others. The government's preference for a de-politicized "civic" society — as opposed to the more liberal notion of "civil" society — is well-illustrated in its enthusiasm for the religious communities' service roles while discouraging any turn to political advocacy. Eugene Tan observes how

religious groups are entitled to preach their values and beliefs to their communities, [but] they must not mobilize their congregations to be confrontational in their engagement with the state. Neither should religious groups undermine the government's authority, legitimacy as well as the democratic process (Tan, E. 2008, p. 70).

In the 1980s, the government made direct use of religion as a moral and cultural resource to deepen its own efforts at nation-building. The years of industrialization and socialization following political independence had led to a realization by the government that Singaporeans may not have adequate moral and cultural bearings to make sense of, and to act sensibly in, a more complex world, presented at the time in terms of negative influences from the West. Economic development and growth, for instance, were starting to put pressure on the patriarchal family unit as wives and mothers were actively being recruited into the workforce, their traditional family roles being taken over by an influx of migrant female domestic workers from the region. Masses of Singaporeans, once the power base of militant trade unions, were being trained to be good industrial cogs, docile enough to be part of an attractive industrial infrastructure and tax incentive package that the government used to lure foreign investors and multinational companies.

Singaporeans, reduced to being merely efficient worker-consumers, may be too thinly rooted to their country and perhaps to the government, since such rootedness would be almost entirely dependent upon their material gratification rather than anything more spiritual and inspirational.

In 1982, the government decided to introduce Religious Knowledge into the secondary school curriculum as a compulsory and examinable subject. Students could choose to study Bible Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Islamic Religious Knowledge, Hindu Studies, Sikh Studies, or Confucian Ethics. Although Confucianism was not generally regarded as a religion, it was probably the most important option offered for Religious Knowledge as far as the government was concerned. The 1980s saw East Asian countries like Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore reaching double-digit growth rates and, aside from being collectively known as “Asian tiger” economies, these countries and their remarkable success were being explained in neo-Weberian fashion in terms of their Confucian values. Confucian respect for learned authority and its somewhat rigid notions of hierarchy were also viewed positively by an authoritarian government whose leaders were selected mainly on the criterion of academic success and whose deep and wide exercise of power required cultural as much as material reasons for obedience.

The Religious Knowledge experiment was short-lived. In 1986, the Internal Security Department published a report that detailed a rise in “religious fervor” in Singapore, “over-zealous” proselytizing by evangelical Christian groups, and religious leaders who preached political messages from the pulpit. In 1987, 22 people were detained under the Internal Security Act, charged for conspiring to turn Singapore into a Marxist state. They were in fact a group of socially conscious individuals ranging from social workers, lawyers, theater practitioners, women’s issues activists, opposition party members, and Roman Catholic church workers, volunteering to advance the rights and well-being of low-skilled migrant workers who were mainly in the construction and domestic service sectors. The religious connection drew attention to the radical activities of proponents of liberation theology that appeared to be gaining ground in Southeast Asia, especially in the Philippines. In 1990, Religious Knowledge stopped being a compulsory subject in the curriculum. The favored Confucian Ethics option turned out to not be as popular as expected, with most students electing to read

the more overtly religious Buddhist Studies and Bible Knowledge options instead. Subsequently, students were given the option to study Religious Knowledge as an O-level subject, but they had to take classes held outside of school hours. Before long, the subject withered away on the vine. In its place was a new and overtly more secular Civic and Moral Education subject.

While Thio Li-Ann observes a “quasi-secularism” operating in Singapore (Thio 2008, p. 80), what many religious leaders and their communities are nervous about is the prospect of this non-dogmatic practice of secularism transforming into Casanova’s proposition 3: that religion would be exiled from the public sphere into a very limited private sphere where — though it is celebrated by the state for its good works in social services — it is effectively marginalized in ways that curtail its moral force for advocating good in the world. Thio also fears the “religious cleansing of the public square” and a “religious apartheid” that attempts to “de-legitimate and silence religious voices” (Thio 2008, p. 93). One manifestation of this is a complete evacuation of religious reasons from the public sphere, dominated by reasoning that is dictated by the profit-making and consumer-driven imperatives of the market and the technically rational policy-making and legitimacy-generating imperatives of the state. This marginalization of religious reasoning, they fear, could be justified by setting up a false dichotomy between secular and religious modes of understanding and judgment, with the religious modes unfairly classified and characterized as dogmatic, unscientific, emotional, irrational, and therefore inadmissible in any universal and reasonable sphere of argumentation. Already, Anglican Bishop John Chew, in a newsletter to his congregation, has lamented what he perceives as a “crooked and perverse generation” in a more liberal Singapore:

Singapore has to be a “fun” city attractive to its own and open to the world, so they argue, albeit with moderation but evolution as time and tide of society norms change. In order to be globally attractive and competitive, society has to loosen up and be in tune and in line with the progressives, the so-called “mature,” so they say. In the midst of all these, for God’s faithful people, Paul’s sentinel call should be voiced and heard clearly once again: “Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God, without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you

shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life..." (Phil 2:14-16; also 2 Tim 4:1-4). But don't get Paul wrong! He is challenging us to build up extra robust capacity over the childish level of debate and controversy, and it could not be more timely and urgent (Chew 2003).

In a study of religiously inflected "anti-gay" arguments represented in letters published in the Singapore media, I concluded that:

formalizing a public secularism that excludes all religious reasons from the public sphere can effectively distort the capacity for more open public dialogue motivated by a collective pursuit of higher-order knowledge of what is good. A strict and formal secularism can have the effect of demonizing religious reasons and transforming them into a defensive discourse. Complexity, subtlety, variety and engagement are distorted into simple "us" versus "them" modes of reasoning. In the case study, it is clear that religious people and even authorities can have a range of views that are anything from conservative to the most liberal. However, a siege mentality reduces discussion into a battlefield of rigid notions of good and evil and right and wrong, all marked by suspicion and hostility between the forces of religion and secularism. The capacity to step into "other people's shoes," that is, to think with empathy and an enlarged mentality, is severely diminished (Tan, K. 2008b, p. 429).

Demerath identifies in the US a paradoxically symbiotic relationship between its clear separation of church and state on the one hand, and its civil religion on the other. Each legitimizes the other by guarding "against the other's excesses." Demerath observes how the pronounced existence of "overarching civil religious ceremonies" ensures that the "substantive separation of church and state in important matters of government policy" is "never a total rupture" (Demerath 2003, p. 355). In a loosely similar though certainly more complicated way, perhaps, Singapore's separation of religion and the state (as well as politics) needs the countervailing influence of a civil religion. As well, since a Singaporean civil religion cannot be substantively based on any one particular existing religion, it will have to be constructed in a much more pragmatic than dogmatic way, and adherence to it will need to also be tempered by a pragmatic approach. But it is also pragmatism itself — demonstrated in the government's economic opportunism and response to crisis at the global level — that creates ideological tensions in the hegemonic struggles to contain resistance and opposition from the religious sphere.

## PRAGMATISM

In Singapore, pragmatism is understood to mean doing “what works.” Looking back at Singapore’s history of economic success, Lee Kuan Yew explained, “If a thing works, let’s work it, and that eventually evolved into the kind of economy that we have today. Our test was: Does it work? Does it bring benefits to the people?” (Lee 1998a, p. 109). However, the actual meaning of the term shifts according to circumstances.

At times, Singapore-style pragmatism describes an opposition to the kind of arguments and positions that it dismisses as naively idealistic, unrealistically utopian, or hypocritically high-minded. In this way, pragmatism offers a mode of deflecting criticisms based on ideals such as individual freedom, equality, democracy, and human rights, as well as those based on religious doctrine and values. At other times, Singapore-style pragmatism opposes substantive ideologies such as Marxism and liberalism, falsely assuming and asserting that pragmatism itself is not ideological. The fact that pragmatism’s association with capitalism is obscured, and that the ideological roots of both are actively disguised, makes pragmatism deeply ideological — since ideology masks its own ideological condition.

Yet, at other times, pragmatism reflects an aversion to systematic approaches, generalizations, and theory that seeks to universalize. Chua Beng-Huat describes pragmatism as an “operant” concept “governed by ad hoc contextual rationality that seeks to achieve specific gains at particular points in time and pays scant attention to systematicity and coherence as necessary rational criteria for action,” contrasting it with “utopian rationality [that] emphasizes the whole and at times sacrifices the contextual gains to preserve it, if necessary” (Chua 1997, p. 58). According to pragmatism, policies need to be terminated or adjusted if no longer effective. Policies need to adapt to changing circumstances so as to avert crises and to seize opportunities. Neo Boon Siong and Geraldine Chen have argued that systems and institutions of governance need to be dynamic by ensuring that they have the capability to “look ahead,” “look across,” and “look again” (Neo and Chen 2007).

Often, Singapore-style pragmatism prefers to learn best practices from other systems and to adapt them to local context in a sensitive and meaningful way, rather than to reinvent the wheel. Copying from others helps to accelerate development as well as avoid the costs of experimenting with

new approaches. Singapore-style pragmatism is concerned with adopting and perfecting “value-free” means, techniques, and methods for achieving given ends, but the ends themselves are not generally open to philosophical, much less religious, investigation. Chua argues that Singapore’s overriding end is “continuous economic growth” (Chua 1997), and so questions of efficiency and profit will always be at the forefront. As far as pragmatists are concerned, modes of reasoning must involve concrete and quantifiable evidence to support arguments that are linear and free of metaphysics. Otherwise, they are inadmissible in any public debate and will be ignored. The public sphere, then, is reduced to technical considerations expressed purely in problem-solving mode; questions of larger philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic significance are rendered meaningless.

Singapore-style pragmatism often takes on an elitist complexion, dismissing democratic participation as a noisy, uneducated, distorting, and irrational force in public policy-making, threatening to corrupt the purity of coordinated technocratic solutions to complex technical problems. The selection of Singapore’s political leaders and public managers has been described as stringently meritocratic, so that meritocracy itself comes to be seen as a principle of good governance, held as an alternative to the checks and balances prescribed by liberal democracy (Tan, K. 2008a). Public consultation is conducted according to agendas set by the government, in the hopes of obtaining useful inputs and feedback from the ground and frontlines without necessarily committing to taking these views seriously, especially if they differ significantly from the preferred official lines. Chua argues:

Since it admits no inviolate principles, pragmatism as the basis for government will not contribute to democratization. Instead it may stand in its way because, for democracy to be established, certain principles must be maintained regardless of contingent societal conditions (Chua 1997, p. 192).

In many ways, these various meanings of pragmatism would all seem to point towards Casanova’s third proposition: Religious reasons — viewed as naively idealistic, unrealistically utopian, doctrinally inflexible, and mostly unquantifiable — should not be democratically admitted into Singapore’s rational public policy debates, especially when they stand in the way of economic growth. However, the PAP government has not generally

marginalized religious voices by calling for a “religious cleansing of the public square”; paradoxically, also for pragmatic reasons.

To maintain hegemony, the government has had to balance two quite different modes of leadership: transactional and transformational (Burns 1978). Transactional leaders motivate their followers through the mechanism of an exchange: For their success or compliance, followers are rewarded, and for their failure or disobedience, they are punished. Singaporeans have generally offered their votes and obedience to the PAP government in exchange for material comfort and security, which the government has for the most part been able to deliver, or indeed to convince Singaporeans that they have been able to deliver. However, this instrumental, utilitarian, and largely conditional acceptance of the government’s authority based on material advantage and gratification constitutes only one form of legitimacy. Without an overarching framework of public morality and sense of belonging to a meaningful community, this legitimacy may be too fragile, particularly at a time of frequent crises witnessed on a global scale.

The government, therefore, also needs to be active moral agents attempting to transform citizens into moral beings with purposes that are higher than the pursuit of material benefit in the private sphere. Transformational leaders work towards achieving a deep and lasting relationship with their followers. Through this relationship, both leaders and followers are mutually elevated to higher levels of motivation and morality, especially in relation to conduct and ethical aspirations. Transformational leadership is built upon moral authority, while transactional leadership is led by pragmatic reasons and materialistic goals. As self-declared pragmatists, the PAP government knows the importance of being able to deliver the economic goods, but also appreciates the importance of effecting a transformational and moral basis of leadership, if only to motivate and inspire Singaporeans in ways that are conducive to nation-building, economic flourishing, and state legitimacy.

In this regard, culture, values, and morals — the vocabulary of transformational leadership — can be viewed pragmatically as a synthetic technology for capitalism which can motivate, support, and justify the desired productive and consuming behaviors. It is really pragmatism, then, that explains the Singapore government’s interest in constructing and

reconstructing an official Singaporean culture and value system, variously appropriating “Western values” such as rugged individualism and “Asian values” such as thrift, diligence, group orientation, and respect for authority that are imagined and strategically drawn up to describe the ideal Singapore worker-consumer-citizen. The state also excluded “unsuitable” values such as Asian superstitiousness and contempt for merchants and soldiers, as well as Western individualism, freedom, equality and mistrust of government, all loosely associated with classical liberal democracy.

Clearly, this latter set of values also contradicted the PAP government’s authoritarianism, which partly explains why the government invoked an essentialist language of Confucian values mainly in the 1980s and Asian values mainly in the 1990s to repel its liberal and human rights critics mostly based in the West. In this sense, the “Asianization” of Singapore was really a thoroughly modern project that employed the “traditional” as cultural materials for the economy and authoritarian politics. Today, it is a pragmatic project — an inauthentic transformational leadership — that picks and chooses useful and harmful values for the nation-state’s survival and prosperity, marks them off arbitrarily as “Asian” and “Western,” and then promotes and demotes them respectively under these labels to generate a synthetic Singaporean culture conducive to and supportive of Singapore’s performance within the context of neo-liberal global capitalism and, simultaneously, the government’s political legitimacy.

## HEGEMONIC NEGOTIATIONS

As part of the continuous ideological work to maintain its hegemony, the PAP government has had to ensure that it fully exploits the opportunities of being a global city plugged into the neo-liberalized global economy, while exerting strong political control to mitigate the crises and social divisions that inevitably accompany neo-liberal globalization. Part of this state control will have to involve transformational leadership abilities to motivate Singaporeans to make sacrifices for their nation-community and to come together as a cohesive and resilient nation.

Richard Florida’s account of the creative class helps to explain the strategies and policies that the PAP government has adopted in order to fully exploit the global economic opportunities. Florida argues that US



cities with high-performing economies are closely correlated with high levels of technology, talent, and tolerance — the last signaled by the concentration of immigrants, artists, and gays living and working in the city. Since homophobia is thought to be the last bastion of bigotry, a city that is welcoming of gays sends a very positive signal about tolerance to the creative class which include “nerds,” “geeks,” eccentrics, and people who have chosen alternative lifestyles (Florida 2002). In a 2003 interview with journalists for an article in *Time* magazine, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong replied to a question about the then unimpressive results of Singapore’s foreign talent policies, with an announcement that his government adopted a non-discriminatory hiring policy that made it possible for openly homosexual employees to be placed even in sensitive civil service positions.

Gay activists saw an opportunity to move forward in their efforts to gain acceptance for homosexuals in mainstream society and to convince the government to decriminalize gay sex; but this was met by anti-gay arguments and objections that emerged from the more conservative end of the religious communities, the most well-organized of which were the Christians (Tan with Lee 2007). In a letter published in *The Straits Times*, an emboldened reader issued a veiled threat to the government for appearing to ignore the wishes of the silent majority: “a government that does not appease the wishes of its people may not last long ... the Government has shown quite clearly by its action that it has lost its moral authority” (Lim 2003). To bring closure to the heated public debates in cyberspace and the print media, Goh stated emphatically in his National Day Rally speech that he did not “encourage or endorse a gay lifestyle,” nor any policies that would “erode the moral standards of Singapore, or our family values.” In the speech, he warned gays of a possible “backlash” from the “conservative mainstream,” and praised conservative Singaporeans and religious leaders for articulating their views on the matter in a clear and responsible way (Goh 2003).

The following year, in 2004, the government decided to allow two casinos to be built in Singapore as a way to give the global city more of a buzz in order to attract tourists and foreign talent. Although the matter was extensively debated in public where economic and social benefits and costs were clearly stated and evaluated, and even though there appeared to be as many Singaporeans who were against the casinos as there were for them, the government went ahead with the decision. The main objections predictably

came from the religious communities; but this time, their views were not heeded, other than through government assurances that it would do its best to contain the mainly social problems that could arise from having casinos in Singapore. In this regard, the government put in place a prohibitive entry charge for Singaporeans and made sure that the developments were not just casinos but integrated resorts housing cultural, educational, and family-oriented entertainment facilities as well.

Why did the government choose to appease the conservative religious communities (by playing the moral authority and transformational leadership card) when it came to the gay issue, but not the casino decision? Were the outcomes simply the result of the government's careful technical evaluation of the various arguments in the public sphere? Was there more at stake in the casino decision than in the gay issue? And if so, was the government being tactical by losing one battle in order to win a more important one? Pragmatism in these sorts of hegemonic negotiations needs to be carefully managed, or else the government's ability to lead with moral authority may quickly lose its appearance of authenticity. If the government is going to make a show of taking religious claims "seriously" when it suits them and then overturn these religious reasons by mouthing the pragmatist (and even secularist) rhetoric whenever it seems more profitable to do so, then the government will need a higher and more compelling account of nationhood to maintain hegemony. For a pragmatic approach to policy-making in a secular public sphere that does not exclude religious reasons, the government will need to upkeep a civil religion that transcends any particular religion and provides a sense of identity, common framework of morality, a shared culture, and a fundamental basis for stability.

## CIVIL RELIGION

In the final years of the last millennium, a time marked by prolonged pessimism provoked by the Asian economic crisis of 1997, independent Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew wrote his memoirs in two separate volumes. His older testament chronicled the monumental events that had led to the creation of a nation-state, whose pre-creation narrative dovetailed in a strangely logical way with the protagonist's own coming of age — the memoirs were, in fact, titled *The Singapore Story* (Lee 1998b). Lee's

newer testament was a synoptic revelation of the teleological story of nation-building, of how Singapore developed “from Third World to First” (Lee 2000). Through this second volume, Lee codified the articles of faith that have come to dominate the way Singaporeans are meant to understand and relate to their nation and state. The principles of “good government” that have included meritocracy, pragmatism, and honesty have not only served as a moral-political compass in Singapore, but also as doctrinal resources to secure widespread obedience to an authoritarian state.

Goh Chok Tong, Lee’s successor from 1990 to 2004, ushered in a new period of kinder and gentler government that promised to be more open and consultative. Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore’s third prime minister, envisioned a more compassionate, open, and inclusive society for his new Singapore and spoke in a somewhat visionary way about a “vibrant global city” (Lee 2005), loosely analogous with prophetic visions of New Jerusalem. Goh, too, had adopted such psalmic imagery as “valleys” and “highlands” in his National Day Rally speech in the gloomy climate of 2003. And Lee Kuan Yew, in his first National Day Rally speech in 1966, explained how “It is in the nature of things that we must talk in parables. And the older I become, the more I am convinced that sometimes perhaps, the Prophets spoke in parables because they had also to take into account so many factors prevailing in their time” (Lee 1966). In its outlines, independent Singapore’s political history resonates with Biblical language, figures, narratives, tropes, motifs, and iconography.

The PAP also appears self-consciously to model itself after a kind of priesthood. Party members wear an all-white official uniform — a kind of priestly vestment — to strongly signify purity and incorruption. Party candidates for parliament do not generally come from the Party rank and file, but are talent-spotted and invited to meet with the Party’s inner sanctum at fabled “tea sessions” through which the patriarchs decide if they are worthy to be anointed. In his memoirs, Lee explains how he devised the PAP’s cadre system which he adapted from the Vatican system in which the Pope nominates the cardinals, who in turn elect the Pope (Lee 1998b, p. 287). The PAP Central Executive Committee (CEC) — most of whose members are also Cabinet ministers — appoint an estimated 1,000 secret cadres from ordinary members, who in turn vote every two years for the members of the CEC. A cult of secrecy mystifies the internal workings of both organizations.

In the school system, students stand in front of the national flag at assembly every morning to sing the national anthem and recite the national pledge (“We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people regardless of race, language, or religion...”). On the back page of their exercise books are printed a list of the five Shared Values which were officially codified in 1991 to anchor a Singapore/Asian identity and value system at a time of heightened sensitivity to global opportunities and threats:

- Nation before community and society above self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Community support and respect for the individual
- Consensus, not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony.

Once a year, since 1966, Singaporeans become grandly transformed into a national congregation through the spectacle of their annual multi-million-dollar National Day Parade, meant to commemorate national independence gained on 9 August 1965. Since the mid-1980s, in addition to a traditional ceremonial and mainly military segment, these parades have included multimedia-saturated mass performances that mostly re-enact the official Singapore Story before climaxing in a grand display of fireworks. In one of the country’s most blatantly nationalistic activities, Singaporeans — enraptured by the multi-sensory spectacle — drop any inhibitions they might have about patriotic expression and participate enthusiastically in the celebration of their national challenges and achievements, the latter attributed to the courageous and prophetic efforts of pioneer leaders of the PAP. The parade begins with the mass singing of patriotic songs before the solemnly announced arrival of members of the ruling party who, dressed in their all-white uniforms, ceremonially enter and take their seats on the grandstand, as the people cheer them on. The program’s format, that remains very much the same each year, is a liturgical sequence of rituals and congregational singing of national “hymns.”

A couple of weeks after the parade each year, the prime minister addresses the nation through the National Day Rally Speech, Singapore’s version of the United States president’s State of the Union address. Carefully staged before a hand-picked audience/congregation meant to represent the cross-section of Singapore society and televised with translations into every official

language, the speech–event enables the prime minister — speaking in Malay, Mandarin, then English — to take stock of Singapore’s accomplishments for the year and to chart the way forward. Its predictable format always includes a reiteration of Singapore’s vulnerabilities, challenges, and achievements; a rallying call for Singaporeans to unite against adversity; and a slew of policy announcements for the year. Embedded in the speech are national values and principles such as “survivalism,” “multiracialism,” “meritocracy,” and “pragmatism.” The tone is generally hyperbolic and the style is meant to inspire the wider citizenry (Tan 2007).

The discourse and practices of Singapore’s nation–state are clearly an example of “civil religion.” The intellectual tradition of Emile Durkheim’s sociology of religion, on which is based the orthodox thinking about civil religion today, is described by Michael Hughey (1983) as holding

that every relatively stable society will possess a set of shared beliefs and symbols that express the highest values of the society and that are considered sacred. Against the many conflicts present in everyday life, the collective sharing of these values serves to remind members of society of what they hold in common, thereby providing for the order, stability, and integration of the society as a whole. Periodic collective rites, during which the shared values are celebrated and reaffirmed, constitute the specific mechanisms through which these states are attained and sustained (Hughey 1983, p. xiii).

Similarly, N.J. Demerath III, in a discussion of civil society and religion in the United States, defines civil religion as “any society’s most common religious denominator which consecrates its sense of nationhood and pivots around a set of tenets and rituals forged in the fires of a shared history” (Demerath 2003, p. 353). While he identifies the Judeo-Christian tradition as a “passive cultural legacy” which has formed the basis of American civil religion, the case of Singapore’s civil religion — as described above — is much more like what he describes as “an activist political decision” (p. 354), but one that also seems to rely for its form, style, and imagery on a Judeo-Christian tradition which, oddly, is held by only about 15% of Singapore’s multi-religious population.

Demerath argues that civil society and civil religion are mutually dependent, where the former in all its diversity requires “some degree of shared cultural bearings” for successful coordination in the name of civility, which the cultural climate defines. In the competition for public

endorsement, those agents of civil society “that cleave closest to the civil religion are,” according to Demerath, “best able to use it as a source of both legitimacy and cultural power.” In turn, civil religion requires the infrastructure of a coordinated civil society in order to be activated when necessary (p. 357). The “religion-like” elements of Singapore’s nation-state discourse and practices have played a small part as a source of civil society legitimacy and cultural power, but they have played a much greater role in securing the PAP government’s political legitimacy.

The evolution of Singapore’s civil religion can be located within a public sphere defined by a pragmatic mode of secularism obtained largely through transactional leadership. To fill the moral authority deficit created by overly pragmatic and materialistic policy-making, and exacerbated by strategic but unsustainable appeasements to religious communities, the government has had to develop a civil religion that transcends each particular substantive religion while retaining the form and style of religion. As Singapore becomes more deeply embedded in the global network of opportunities and threats, its government will have to work harder at securing both the economic and moral bases of its authority.

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## Index

- absolutism, 104, 105, 115, 120–122  
Abu Zayd, Nasr Hamid, 239, 257, 258  
*acquis communautaire*, 81, 89, 90  
adultery, 202  
Advani, L.K., 176  
afterlife, 7, 8, 12  
agnostic, 11, 96, 110, 111  
Ahmadiyya, 195, 198, 201, 204, 208  
AK Party, 328, 336  
al-Azhar, 239, 244, 248, 249, 253, 259–261  
al-Banna, Hassan, 255  
Al-Qaeda, 205  
al-Sa'id, Refa'at, 241, 249, 254, 260  
Amin, Galal, 240–242, 244, 245, 247–249, 251, 260  
*Analects*, 107, 109–122  
Anglicanism, 79  
Anglo-Saxon, 319, 326  
apostasy, 239, 257  
Asad, Talal, 236, 246  
'Asfur, Jaber, 251  
Ataturk, 320, 322, 329  
atheism, 96  
atheists, 11, 12, 16  
authoritarian, 101, 104, 105, 319, 320, 326, 330, 331, 335–337  
autonomy, 103, 104  
Awami League, 215–218, 223–228  
  
Bajrang Dal, 180, 181  
Balagangadhara, S.N., 18, 19  
Bangladesh, 213–221, 223–233  
belonging, 83, 88–90  
Bengali culture, 218  
  
Bhutto, Zulfikar Ali, 198, 202  
bigotry, 33  
BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party), 171, 175  
Blasphemy Law, 202, 204  
BN (Barisan Nasional), 283, 298  
BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party), 215  
Bradlaugh, Charles, 96  
Brelawis, 186, 187, 195  
British, 170–172, 175  
Buddhism, 100, 106, 108, 301–303, 305, 312–315  
Buddhists, 206, 340, 344, 345  
*Bumiputera*, 279, 283  
burdens of judgment, 16  
  
Caliph, 322, 324, 333  
capitalist-industrial society, 340  
caste, 20, 169–171, 173–175, 177, 179, 180, 182, 183, 193, 194  
Catholic Church, 123–126, 134  
Catholics, 11, 12, 16, 85, 86  
CCP (Chinese Communist Party), 102  
Central Sikh Gurdwara Board, 342  
Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 82  
Chirac, Jacques, 78  
Christianity, 12, 18–20, 96–98, 100, 101, 106–108  
Christians, 340, 344, 351, 355  
citizenship, 263, 264, 269–271, 276–278  
civil religion, 339, 346, 352, 355, 356  
civil society, 340, 343, 355, 356  
Communism, 101, 304–306, 309, 313, 315  
communitarism, 129, 130

- compassion, 157, 159, 162, 165–168  
 Comte, August, 8  
 Confucianism, 95, 99, 100, 104–109, 111, 112, 114, 115, 119–122, 302, 303, 313, 314, 344  
 Confucius, 104, 105, 107–114, 116–122  
 consociationalism, 282  
 conversion, 18–20  
 cultural heritage, 23, 24, 30, 34  
 cultural imperialism, 103  
 Cultural Revolution, 99, 102  
  
 Daoism, 100, 106, 108, 301–303, 305, 312–315  
 DAP (Democratic Action Party), 283, 296, 299  
*Dar-ul-Harb*, 200  
*Dar-ul-Islam*, 200  
 De Roover, Jakob, 18  
 de-secularization, 302  
 Declaration of Religious Harmony, 342  
 Delors, Jacques, 77, 80  
 democracy, 185–188, 193, 196–199, 206–209, 256  
 democratic, 237, 240  
*demos*, 124  
 Deoband, 171  
 Deobandis, 186  
 diversity, 9, 16, 17  
 “Document No. 19”, 305–307  
*doxa*, 86  
 Dravidian castes, 180  
  
 ECHR (European Court of Human Rights), 135, 337  
 economic reform, 301, 304  
 emancipation, 127, 128, 130, 131  
 England, 125  
 Enlightenment, 25, 27, 29, 30, 33  
 enlightenment (*tanwir*), 237, 239, 244, 251  
 Erbakan, Necmettin, 328  
 Erdoğan, Recep Tayyip, 336  
 Ershad, General, 215, 225  
 EU (European Union), 77, 78, 80–82, 84, 87–91, 135, 320  
 euhemerism, 81, 84  
  
 Eurobarometer, 81, 85, 86, 88  
 Europe, 24, 25, 32  
 European Constitutional Treaty, 136  
 European Convention on Human Rights, 84  
 European Values Survey, 85, 86  
 extreme secularism, 305, 306, 308, 309  
  
 fairness, 14, 15  
 fallibility, 12, 13  
 Falungong, 100  
 family values, 351  
*fatwa*, 263, 269, 271, 275, 276, 278  
 filial piety (*xiao*), 109, 111  
*Fiqh*, 191  
 Fischer, Joschka, 79  
 Foda, Farag, 238, 255, 257  
 fornication, 202  
 Foucault, Michel, 236, 246  
 France, 124–126, 130, 133–136  
 freedom, 9–11, 15, 17, 19, 20  
 fundamentalism, 19  
  
 Gandhi, Indira, 176  
 Gandhi, Mahatma, 25, 27–30, 33, 173  
 gay, 346, 351, 352  
 Ghazali, 191  
 globalization, 88, 89  
 Golden Rule, 15  
 Gourgouris, Stathis, 78  
 Greece, 125, 126, 134  
 Gujarat, 174, 178, 181  
  
 Habermas, Jürgen, 78  
*hadith*, 189, 190, 208, 209  
 Hanafi, Hassan, 245, 253  
 hard secularism, 96, 101  
 Harmony Circles, 342  
 Hat Revolution, 325, 327  
 Haydar, Haydar, 261  
 Heaven (*tian*), 110, 114  
 hegemony, 341–343, 349, 350, 352  
 HINDRAF, 283, 298  
 Hindu Advisory Board, 342  
 Hinduism, 18, 20

- Hindus, 169–171, 177, 179, 187, 192–195, 206
- Holyoake, George, 95
- Hoodbhoy, Pervez, 191
- Hudud*, 285
- human dignity, 82, 83
- Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 203
- humanism, 84
- Husain, Zakir, 173
- Hussein, Taha, 247–249, 253, 259
- Iban, 283
- Ibrahim, Sa'ad Eddin, 250, 251
- ijtihad*, 191
- 'Immara, Mohammad, 254, 256, 257
- immortality, 8
- India, 98, 99, 169–175, 178, 179, 181–183
- Indian National Congress, 170–172, 186, 187, 199
- individual freedom, 103
- “Indonesian person”, 269, 270
- Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles, 342
- Internal Security Act, 341, 344
- Iqbal, Sir Muhammad, 194
- Iran, 191, 204, 207
- Islam, 18, 19, 98, 100, 106, 238, 244, 245, 248, 249, 253, 254, 256, 259, 260, 320, 322–324, 326, 327, 331, 333
- Islam Hadhari*, 285–288
- Islamic democracy, 188, 193, 196, 198, 199, 208
- Islamic fundamentalism, 199
- Islamic jurisprudence, 191
- Islamic state, 185, 186, 188, 189, 196, 199–201, 206–209, 279, 280, 284–289, 291, 293, 297–299
- Islamism, 199, 201, 202, 208, 209
- Islamist positions, 187
- Islamists, 185, 187, 188, 196, 198–202, 204–209
- Islamization, 200, 204
- Israel, Jonathan, 246, 247, 260
- Italy, 126, 134
- Jacquemond, Richard, 261
- Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, 229, 230
- Jamaat-e-Islami, 215, 225–229, 231, 232
- Jiang, Zemin, 102
- jihad*, 188, 201, 204, 205, 208
- Jinnah, Mohammad Ali, 170, 185, 194, 221
- John Paul II, 123, 125
- Juncker, Jean-Claude, 84
- jus soli*, 279
- justice, 155, 157, 159, 162–168
- Kadazan, 283
- kaifirs*, 201
- Keightley, David, 105
- Kemalism, 322–324
- ketuanan Melayu*, 283
- Khan, Liaqat Ali, 197
- Khan, Mohammad Ayub, 197
- Kothari Commission, 173
- krisis*, 77, 78, 81, 91
- laïcité*, 123–125, 130, 133–136
- laicism*, 320–324, 326, 328, 330–332, 334–337
- Lamassoure, Alain, 88
- Lambert, Yves, 86
- laos*, 123, 124
- legitimacy, 339, 342, 343, 345, 349, 350, 356
- legitimacy (legitimation), 114–117, 119, 120
- liberal democracy, 98, 101
- liberals, 98, 101, 122
- liberation theology, 344
- liberty, 9–11, 13
- Lisbon Treaty, 81, 83, 84, 91, 135, 136
- Lithuania, 86
- Locke, John, 11
- logic, 160, 162
- love, 157, 159, 161–165, 167, 168
- Lukács, Georg, 78, 90
- Madan, T.N., 23–25, 27–29, 31, 32, 87, 90, 98
- Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, 341

- Malay, 341, 342, 355  
 Mandal Commission, 177  
 Marxists, 196  
 Maududi, Abul Ala, 199  
 Mecca, 188  
 Mehrez, Samia, 252, 261  
 Melayu, 281, 283, 285  
 MENDAKI (Council on Education for Muslim Children), 342  
 meritocracy, 341, 348, 353, 355  
 metaphysical, 9  
 MIC (Malayan Indian Congress), 280, 299  
 Mill, John Stuart, 8  
 modernity, 24, 25, 28, 32, 35, 96, 97, 101, 192, 205, 206, 235, 237, 246, 247, 258  
 modernization, 24, 32, 95, 96, 194, 237, 249, 258, 302–306, 309, 312, 315  
 Mongols, 191  
 moral authority, 341, 349, 351, 352, 356  
 moralism, 115, 120  
 MPR (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat*/People's Consultative Assembly), 266  
 Mughals, 191, 206  
 MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore), 342  
 multiculturalism, 77, 80, 81, 341  
 multiracialism, 341, 355  
 Munir, Muhammad, 196, 201  
 Musharraf, Pervez, 205  
 Muslim Brothers, 238, 239, 252, 253, 255, 260  
 Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 198, 203  
 Muslim League, 185–187, 195, 199, 201  
 Muslims, 170–173, 175, 177–181, 340–342  
  
 Nandy, Aishi, 26–28, 30, 33  
 Narain, Jaiprakash, 176  
 nation-building, 30, 32  
 National Day Parade, 354  
 Nazi Germany, 27  
 NDA (National Democratic Alliance), 182  
*Negara Berkebhajikan*, 288, 289  
 Nehru, Jawaharlal, 32, 172  
 neutrality, 18  
  
 non-violence, 157  
 Nussbaum, Martha, 11  
  
 Ottoman, 189, 191, 206, 320–325, 332, 333  
  
 pagan, 15, 18–20  
 Pakistan, 170, 176  
 Pakistan Constituent Assembly, 194, 197  
 Pakistan National Assembly, 204  
 Pakistan People's Party, 198  
 Pakistani nationalism, 187, 195  
 Pancasila, 263–271  
 PAP (People's Action Party), 339  
 PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia), 280, 285  
 peace, 163, 164, 166  
 Penal Code, 202, 340  
 People's Republican Party (Turkey), 322, 323, 336  
*Perda*, 263, 271, 272  
 Pines, Yuri, 108, 118  
 PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat), 299  
 plural society, 279, 281–283, 297  
 pluralism, 16–18  
 Poland, 134, 135  
 polygamy, 198  
 pragmatism, 346–349, 352, 353, 355  
 PRC (People's Republic of China), 99  
 Presidency of Religious Affairs (Turkey), 326, 327, 330, 331, 333  
 Presidential Council for Religious Harmony, 342  
 Prophet Muhammad, 322  
 proselytism, 18, 20  
 Protestant, 16  
  
*Qisas*, 285  
*Quaid-e-Azam*, 196  
 Qur'an, 174, 323  
 Quran, 188–190, 197, 202, 208, 209  
  
 Rahman, Ziaur, 215, 226, 228  
 Ramjanambhoomi temple, 177, 179  
 rationality, 192  
 rationalization, 235, 236

- Rawls, John, 16  
*Reformasi*, 288  
 reformism, 260  
 reformists, 259  
 religion, 23–34  
 Religion of Humanity, 8, 9  
 religious freedom, 96, 97, 99, 102–104, 122, 132  
 religious inheritance, 135, 136  
 Religious Knowledge, 344, 345  
 religious revival, 301, 302, 315  
 renaissance, 237, 258  
 ritual (rite), 101, 108–111, 113, 115  
 RJD (Rashtriya Janta Dal), 175  
 rootedness, 88  
 RSS (*Rashtriyaswayam Sevak Sangh*), 173, 175
- Safavids, 191, 206  
 Said, Edward, 236  
 Sarkozy, Nicolas, 86  
 Saudi Arabia, 204, 207  
 scientific temper, 27  
 secular, 169–172, 174, 175, 177, 178, 180–183  
 secular citizenship, 263, 277, 278  
 secularism, 7, 14, 16, 17, 23–34, 77, 79–82, 86, 87, 155–158, 185, 187, 188, 194–196, 207–209, 213–215, 217–220, 224, 233, 235, 236, 238, 239, 241, 246, 248, 254, 339, 341, 345, 346, 356  
 secularization, 77–81, 85, 86, 88, 91, 98, 100, 103, 107, 339, 340  
 Sedition Act, 340  
 Semitic, 18–20  
 separation of church and state, 13, 17  
 separation of religion and politics, 102  
 September 11, 99  
 Shah Bano, 177, 178  
 Shared Values, 354, 355  
*shari'ah*, 322, 323, 325, 341  
 Sheikh Hasina, 218, 233  
 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 213, 214, 218, 224, 227, 228  
 Shias, 189, 191, 201, 204
- Sikhs, 171  
 SIMI (Students Islamic Movement of India), 181  
 Six Arrows, 322  
 slavery, 193  
 Slovenia, 134  
 soft secularism, 96, 99  
 Sommerville, C.J., 79, 86  
 “soul for Europe”, 77, 80  
 SP (Samajwadi Party), 175  
 state, 25–27, 29, 30, 33, 34  
 state corporatism, 342  
 subsidiarity, 82, 90  
 Sufi, 186, 195, 217, 322, 325  
 Sunna, 189, 197, 202  
 Sunnis, 186, 188, 189, 191, 193, 195, 201, 204  
 survivalism, 355  
*syariah*, 285–287, 289, 291, 293–298
- Taliban, 205, 207  
*Tanzimat*, 321  
 Taoists, 340  
*taqlid*, 191  
 Taylor, Charles, 97  
 Taylor, Rodney, 105, 107, 113  
 terrorism, 244, 245, 249, 254, 255, 257, 258  
 Tharamangalam, Joseph, 90  
*The Singapore Story*, 352  
 theo-democracy, 188, 199, 208  
 theological, 8  
 tolerance, 25, 27  
 tradition, 17–20, 27, 29, 30, 33–35  
 traditional secularism, 313, 316  
 transactional leadership, 349, 356  
 transformational leadership, 349, 350, 352  
 truth, 9, 10, 12, 17–20, 155, 159, 161–163, 165  
 Turkey, 319–329, 331–337
- ulama*, 171, 172, 186, 194, 195, 197, 198, 201, 203, 204, 324–327, 333  
*ummah*, 287

UMNO (United Malays National  
Organization), 280, 285  
United States, 205  
universal values, 23  
universalism, 123, 125, 127  
USSR, 319, 334–336

Vaidic, 155, 158, 159, 167  
Vatican, 102, 123, 125, 134  
violence, 14, 19  
*Vlaams Belang*, 90

Wang, Gungwu, 99, 101–103  
Weber, Max, 79, 86, 89  
Willaime, Jean-Paul, 88  
Williams, Roger, 11  
women's rights, 185, 203, 209

*zakat*, 188, 204  
Zia, Khaleda, 225, 226, 231, 232  
Zia-ul-Haq, Muhammad, 202  
Zubaida, Sami, 237–239

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