

**“The Secular State and Religious Diversity”
Call for contributions**

Location: (University of Ottawa)

Date: October 31-November 2, 2008

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Workshop coordinator: André Laliberté (University of Ottawa)

Religious diversity is a dimension of ethnic diversity that has yet to receive its due share of attention despite the fact that the costs of failure to accommodate this diversity are recognized widely. The dominant assumption that modern societies will become secular and that the different cultural areas of the world will converge in some liberal and value-neutral world-system is being questioned by the observation that many militant groups reject the secular state, which they see as a fundamental threat to their values and world-views. This rejection of secularism can be explained by a number of factors:

1) The treatment of all religious groups by secular states as having equal rights outside of the political sphere particularly antagonizes and threatens majority religions that previously exercised secular power and dominated minority religious groups, even to the point of denying them the ability to openly practice.

2) Secular modernity opens the possibility of leaving a religious community and threatens religious authorities’ control of the boundaries of the community, particularly its control of youth and women.

3) State and market open new cleavages of class, gender and generation within communities in which there are internal conflicts for control.

4) These cleavages fracture the religious communities ideologically and theologically, creating a variety of responses from extreme secular, atheist modernism to extreme ‘fundamentalist’ rejection of modernity.

Yet, while it is true that elites re-invent tradition to maintain existing social hierarchies, and while some argue that neo-traditionalist ideologies represent false consciousness, one cannot simply dismiss them as a phenomenon that will soon vanish. Policy makers have to deal with ongoing controversies in which many people see religious beliefs as a major source of identity and as a source of inspiration for their political agendas. This dynamic is unfolding in societies, North and South, East and West. In some cases, it is also unfolding against authoritarian states and their associated economic elites. The claim that we are assisting in a de-secularisation of the world may be exaggerated, but the challenge raised by competition within many societies between different world-views based on different religions or different interpretations within a given religious tradition is unquestionably emerging on the public agenda. Religions provide totalizing sets of values that can have an important impact on politics, on issues ranging from economic justice to gender equality. They can amplify, or they can dampen ethnic cleavages.

One of the premises of our workshop is that the diversity of religions in modern societies represent a major challenge to democratic societies because the context of globalization, far from questioning the plausibility of religious beliefs, transforms

their modes of reproduction and increases their visibility on the public sphere. Do the institutions of the secular state, set in place to manage religious diversity in the West, face challenges in the post-colonial world as both inadequate and a source of cultural oppression? Our workshop wants to respond to these claims as well as to *attempt to understand why religious institutions are currently reacting with such hostility in so many places to secular modernity and to the efforts of secular states to deal with religious diversity (Previous assurances of the freedom of religious practice for all groups can no longer meet increasingly strident and sometimes violent demands)*. This workshop also seeks to examine whether the mechanisms used to manage religious pluralism in contemporary societies are merely tools to reproduce a western *secular* model of governance insensitive to local knowledge, whether the critiques of the secular state as an ‘oppressive form of state’ represent the articulation of political discourse of exclusionary religious majorities, and how much democratic societies are more capable than authoritarian regimes in accommodating diversity of world-views.

We have paid particular attention to avoid limiting discussion of these issues of secularism and religious diversity to case studies of the United States, France, and Turkey, which are overwhelmingly the focus of such debates. We have taken the unusual first step of generating discussion from two other cases that, in our view, could generate theoretical and normative thinking on a far broader scope: India and Taiwan, two democracies that are experiencing extremely deep levels of religious diversity. *We would also like to add consideration of other key cases like Israel and post-Soviet Russia.* What are the institutions that can help democracies manage their religious diversity peacefully? How far must secular institutions accommodate local cultural traditions to be viable and effective? What pressures do states face when they try to implement such measures? How transferable are these measures to other political and cultural contexts?

We are inviting some of the major scholars in the sociology of religion and political philosophy. We are as interested in the formation of religious identities and their political mobilization as we are in the management of intra- and inter-religious differences by contemporary states.

The papers presented in the workshop will be assembled together for submission to an academic publisher. If you would like to participate, send us a short statement outlining the theme or the paper you would like to present. Send your proposal to: alaliber@uottawa.ca , rbhargav@vsnl.com and bermanb@queensu.ca ..

The workshop, to be held at the University of Ottawa on October 31 to November 2, 2008 will discuss these issues through comparison and analyses of empirical case studies from a wide range of cultural areas.

EDG Participants as of March 2008:

R. Bhargava (Delhi)
B. Berman (Queen's)
A. Laliberte (Ottawa)
A. Eisenberg (Victoria)
T. Modood (Bristol)
O. Haklai (Queen's)
Y. abu Laban (Alberta)
K. Knop (Toronto)
A. Shachar (Toronto)
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