



Justice without religion? – How progress through secularism is slowly dividing society

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Article Info:

Article type:

Research Article

Article history:

Received:

3 February 2026

Received in revised form:

22 March 2026

Accepted:

5 April 2026

Published online:

15 June 2026

Abstract: In the past, religion and state were intermingled in Western society; however, with the dawn of Enlightenment, the state was considered the only legitimate political actor with religion being dethroned. While this is often regarded to be a progress in humanity, the author wants to show that secularism leads to anti-religiosity and anti-religiosity to social division because the fundamentals of a society are based on metaphysics. The common understanding of law and justice are shaped by faith-based understanding through and through. As such, the author argues that anti-religious secularism is a factor in fueling social rupture which is why faith-based actors remain important in “healing” the society.

Keywords:

religion, secularism, social cohesion, identity

Cite this article: Schmitz, T. (2026). Justice without religion? – How progress through secularism is slowly dividing society, *Philosophical Meditations*, 15(Special issue: 37), 133-140. <https://doi.org/10.30470/phm.2026.737255>

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Publisher: University of Zanjan.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30470/phm.2026.737255>

Homepage: phm.znu.ac.ir



Introduction:

In the past, in Western countries “religion and state were effectively mixed” (Onwuegbuchulam 2019, 2). Following the Era of Enlightenment, there is a “supposed dethronement of religion, its replacement with a system upholding human reason and challenging theological doctrine” (ibid.), and thus, nowadays, in contrast, “a liberal democracy envisages that the state takes on the role of sole agency in realising the values of equal liberty and distributive justice to its citizens” (Onwuegbuchulam 2019, 1). This means that the role of religion changed a lot within these countries as “Throughout history, religion has been a cornerstone of societal structures, providing a moral compass, fostering community cohesion, and influencing governance.” (Riviş-Tipei 2023, 113). Obviously, the legitimacy of churches as universal savior institutions is not taken for granted anymore. Wilkins-Laflamme argues that “On the one hand, in contexts of secularity, people allegedly no

longer understand it as necessary to remain even loosely linked to a religious institution” (Ribberink et al. 2018, 212), while “On the other hand, if they do remain religious in those contexts, they are allegedly more likely to participate fully and with increased commitment, as this constitutes an active and positive choice” (ibid.). Thus, an advantage of not being linked to a religious institution despite being religious is the individual commitment. Indeed, in the 21st century, individual choices become more important as being part of democratic organization in civil societies in liberal democracies, while institutions lose importance. But even further, we find a polarization between believers and non-believers in these countries. Ribberink et al. “demonstrate that religious polarization is stronger in the most secularized countries and in countries with a Catholic religious heritage” (2018, 209). Thus, in this paper I want to ask what it means if the state is the sole agent creating policies and how anti-religiosity shapes a secular society.

Methodology:

The author wants to meditate on the topic by combining qualitative and quantitative sources. For instance, Ribberink et al. (2013; 2018) have conducted empirical research giving hard facts as a framework. On the qualitative level, the author discusses the meaning of metaphysical terminology, such as “justice”. It has to be logically deduced if justice can retain its meaning when it is slipped of its metaphysics. By combining the empirical results of other researchers with philosophical logical discourse, the author meditates on secularism.

Results and Discussion:

Traditionally, religious institutions had an impact on societal identities: “Religion has historically also served as a catalyst for community formation, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity among believers. This sense of communal unity often extends beyond religious practices to influence social and cultural norms.” (Riviş-Tipei 2023, 115). A shared belief meant that everyone in society could agree

on the same norms, identified as part of the group and actively engaged within this framework. So “it is important to note that religion plays a pivotal role in shaping individual and collective identities” (ibid.). Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that “Religious principles [...] have frequently played a role in establishing social norms and maintaining order” (ibid.). As such, religion did not only play a role in the public, but also in the private sphere, connecting the private with the public. In other words: it created the basis for interpersonal relationships (cp. also ibid.). Despite that, “increased religious participation or religious density is associated with positive socio-economic outcomes such as increased earnings, educational attainment, and lower engagement in risky behaviors” (Lozano n.d.). However, it is also true that “when economic growth or income is the explanatory variable, increases in income are associated with less religious participation, and reduced religious beliefs” (ibid.). So, if religion has an important impact on developing

a common identity, shared moral understanding, being the interface between the private and public sphere, socio-economic positivity and fostering social harmony as a whole, what does the neglect of religion mean? At first, if the state is the sole agent, then religion is not a necessary precondition anymore, which means that everyone is free to believe whatever one wants. This personal freedom has the advantage that personal commitment becomes a pivotal point. The religious community thrives because one is not forced to believe in a religion, but one does so out of free participation. This means that we can assume a rise in sincerity: Those who attend church service do so out of their own conviction. On the other hand, one is also able to freely decide not to follow any religion. There have been assumptions that “the predominant attitude toward religion in today’s massively secularized Western European countries is not so much one of hostility, but rather of disinterest” (Ribberink et al. 2013, 102), while others “assume that non-religiosity logically and inevitably

manifests itself as rationalist anti-religiosity” (ibid.).

Such an anti-religiosity is tragic in certain regards. At first, however, it is noteworthy to point out that it is completely unproblematic that people question societal norms. This is a common stage of progress and every generation usually questions the norms of their predecessors. This is known to the Ancient Greek as well as to the Semitic peoples. In Judaism, thus there is the common framework “*dor dor v’doroshav*” which means that the religious law itself is held for true, but its interpretation varies from generation to generation (cp. Tabick, 2021). In the same way, Christianity underwent a reformism in which it was reminded that only faith (*sola fide*), only Scripture (*sola scriptura*), and only grace (*sola gratia*) is important for justification in front of God. This was a reply to the established Christianity, such as Catholicism, in which the belief alone was not sufficient enough anymore which peaked in the selling of indulgences. This indulgence trade was heavily criticized by Martin Luther, leading to countertheories by

Tetzel and Wimpina (cp. Walter, 2017): “Unlike Luther, Wimpina and Tetzel do not see penance as a lifelong task, but as a sacrament that is necessary in certain cases. While Luther understands this declaratory, following early scholastic views, they consider it, in a good Thomistic sense, as effectively forgiving sins.” (Walter 2017, 633). What sounds like a minor theological dispute in fact had much deeper roots: How to ensure forgiveness of our sins to reach the Kingdom of God? The idea to buy oneself free from sin obviously contradicts the basic Christian paradigm which teaches that Jesus through dying at the cross took away all our sins, which is why the belief in Jesus Christ is the main argument for justification. Those who belief in Jesus Christ as their savior and repent their sins are washed through Christ’s blood. So obviously, no worldly authority can be placed above Scripture, none of their promises can replace grace. It is the wholehearted belief in God and His Word alone which makes us worthy in front of Him. Only through His grace do we reach paradise, not through

earthly financial benefits for one’s personal gains.

Obviously, Luther’s criticism against indulgence trade was legitimate, and in the same way, criticism against religious institutions today are legitimate. But when religion does not play any role anymore, we are deprived of metaphysics, and here is the tragedy as announced before: justice is a metaphysical term, not a secular one. As Keller points out: “The social consensus on morality and justice that Enlightenment thinkers thought they could achieve by leaving religion behind has not been realized, and MacIntyre explains why. In his famous wristwatch illustration, he shows it is impossible to determine if a watch is a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ watch unless you know what it is *for*.” Now there have been a lot of tries to give secular replies to what justice is for and how it is designed but this comes to short, because one first has to understand what human beings are for: “Likewise, unless you know what human beings are for, you will never come to any agreement as to what good or bad behavior is and therefore what justice is” (ibid.). Some

radicals go so far to claim that life has no meaning: it is meaningless and simply there due to evolutionary processes, but in such a constellation, one cannot really make any moral agreements anymore. Indeed, one could create moral conventions, but they will always remain tense because there is no necessity that they are the way they are. There is even no necessity to law at all anymore and it just exists to avoid anomaly. But then, one has to ask: What is anomaly, since there is no normality, as nothing is considered normal? Finally, in such a society, justice would become a personal feeling, one can feel just or not, but it is up to the human being. Morality is nothing than an empty word because everything and nothing is moral at the same time in this constellation, and so everyone is always just and unjust, depending on who is asked. The witch hunt would return in the 21st century, in the name of self-proclaimed saviors and moralizers. In such a society, no one can try to lead a good life anymore, because there will always be someone who thinks life is bad. Conversely: If someone gains

the insight that they have done something wrong, there is no one left who can redeem them from this guilt, because the idea of guilt no longer exists and therefore any form of redemption would be void.

Ribberink et al. point out that “Anti-religiosity is strongest among disbelievers and among the higher educated in the most religious countries and among the older generations in today’s most secularized countries” (2013: 101). Thus, anti-religiosity is not only present in secular countries, but also countries which are very religious tend to have an anti-religious milieu. Anyways, “anti-religious attitudes are primarily related to people’s individual characteristics. [...] Nevertheless, compared to believers, non-believers are on average significantly more anti-religious in their attitudes, which is, of course, what we would expect to find.” (Ribberink et al. 2018: 218). Actually, this is not very surprising: Non-attenders of a church express their dislike for the institution already through not attending the church (cp. *ibid.*), while of course those

who do not believe in any religion usually do not see any sense not just in not following any religion but also in religion per se. It is only logical that non-believers feel bothered if policies are designed through religion because why should they adhere to norms of an institution whose validity they do not believe or a religious conviction they do not share? On the other hand, Onwuegbuchulam showed that even in secular countries, religious actors make important contributions to the society: "The utility of religion and faith-based actors and their ability to contribute to the socio-political sphere of society is anchored on their potential to 'heal', which can be conceptualised as encapsulating the spiritual and physical realms [...]. Hence, religion and faith-based actors serve as points of reconciliation and peace in divided societies [...] and also contribute to the task of delivering social services" (2019: 2). This clearly emphasizes the importance of religious institutions and faith-based actors in mediating social cohesion.

Conclusion:

Religion is something basic to every society. In a pluralistic society, it might not define the social identity anymore, but it defines the heritage of identity and it continues to shape the normative understanding. While there is dissent on how much religion has benefits for socio-economic success and while higher educated classes usually tend to neglect religion, the absence of metaphysics leads to a lack of orientation within a society. The author therefore assumes that secularism fuels anti-religiosity which then leads to a social rupture, while faith-based actors have a healing function in society. Faith-based actors and institutions offer important social services, which is why even liberal democracies in the West could not get rid of them, which means that the state cannot be the sole distributor of social justice, but welfare is a shared responsibility.

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