

A REVIEW OF “SECULARISM SECULAR STATE AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM”

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In the “Secularism Secular State and Religious Freedom”, C.C. Nweke in a masterful stroke investigates the rate of religious freedom in a secular state. Using the research tools of phenomenological hermeneutics and analysis, Nweke shows that far from having unified degree of religious freedom in all purportedly secular states, the freedom varies from partial or total separation to real repression and subjugation of religious freedom. Marked by depth of research and finesse of articulation, the work proceeds by an exposition and analysis of the different shades of operational terms such as secularism, secularization, secular state and then zeroes in on assessing the rate of religious freedom in secular states, an assessment that is the major focus of the write-up. The interesting thing about the work is its match of theory with history, a combination that is simply superb and formidable, and so helped to substantially and creditably inform the conclusion of the work. Facts are facts and cannot be bent and with a good logic and scholarly presentation, a work of this nature cannot be less appealing.

From the various cited sources on secularism, the writer was very quick in recognizing the fact that secularism does not entertain a closely knit definition, it is rather “a conceptual complex.” Understood from its historical and conceptual perspective, secularism, according to the paper, is the view that government and its institutions and practices must exist separately from religion and religious belief. Thus there should be a clear cut separation between religion and the state which must refrain from imposition of any religion on the citizenry as well as giving privileges to any religion. That’s already a pointer to the historical root of secularism namely, its originating at a point when religion and socio-political life were merged and fused together. Secularism reacting to such fusion projects views that are opposed to any form of state religion. Beyond this, secularism refers to “the view that human activities and decisions, especially political ones, should be based on evidence and fact unbiased by religious influence.” (Nweke, 2015: 85) Presenting secularism as being critical of religious orthodoxy, Nweke writes that secularism is fundamentally rooted on the understanding “that religion impedes human progress and civilization due to its focus on dogma and

superstition rather than reason and scientific method.”(Nweke, 2015:85) This is the reason that the secularist purveyors have championed the cause of religion being routed out of the public sphere. The writer shows a scholarly depth when he gives secularism its rootedness in humanism, noting that the latter gives secularism its expression. Humanism blossomed during the renaissance period, a period which as the work observes rather correctly witnessed a paradigm shift “from the tenets of supernaturalism to naturalism, theism to humanism and fancies of sacral to secularism.”(Nweke, 2015:85)

No other description could be more apt of Renaissance than the work’s use of the words of Jacques Maritain as an epoch marked by “the sense of the abundance of being, the joy of knowledge of the world and freedom and the elan towards scientific discovery, the creative enthusiasm and the love of the beauty of the sensible forms.” (Maritain, 1968:15 in Nweke, 2015:87) Man, accordingly was simply exuberant of having emancipated himself from the shackles of religious domination and authority. The work is as poetic as it is real in its description of the era as “the age of son of man...in which man passes from the cult of the God-man, of the Word made man, to the cult of humanity, of sheer man.” (Maritain, 1968: 15 in Nweke, 2015:87). No better description of the age of renaissance could aid in understanding the emergence of, and concept of secularism. Making a historical connect which had been the characteristic feature of the work, Nweke links this accentuation and valorization of humanist consciousness to the catastrophe of the middle age with its sacral form which is now considered as a wedge to the wheel of human development and well being. It is in the light of this historical antecedent that secularism could be appreciated.

The work was correct in its statement that the dawn of secularism was not cataclysmic. It was rather gradual and progressive. Precisely the work hints that secularism as a distinct philosophy developed in the mid 19thC by George Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh of England with their advocacy of principle of natural morality, absolute freedom of opinion on all matters including morality, absolute separation of church and state. This was all the more reinforced with the 20thC forms of positivism for whom all beliefs, social theories and intellectual investigations must be subjected to norms of empiricity, producing thereby a mindset closed to transcendent values, metaphysics and theology. The write up observed that the foundation was already laid in the scientific revolution of 17thC championed by scholars like Galileo, Newton and Bacon, men whose intellectual escapades rocked the already dwindling boat of medieval thoughts merged in supernaturalism, providing thereby a sort of critical junctures that engendered a paradigm shift in the emergence of rational approach to faith and study of nature itself. And ever since as the writer observes, such men of letters and philosophers and

scientists of the enlightenment era that are here mentioned: Voltaire's concept of society as collection of individual interests, Montesquieu, Rousseau, D'Alembert, Diderot, thorough-going materialism of Hobbes, Hume's rejection of synthetic a priori knowledge and idealism, Locke's atomistic view of society, Kant's walling off of the noumenon to mention but a few, have furthered the secular humanism. In varied ways, these questioned and even attacked metaphysics, religion and theology, giving little or no room for God in their scientific and sometimes mechanistic conception of reality. Human reason was simply the central and determinant factor. Yet it was fusion of some theories in 19th century that ultimately led to final separation of spiritual values and religious truths from the public sphere, namely the application of Bentham's utilitarianism in David Ricardo's classical economic theory, Spencer's application of scientific law of natural selection and individual freedom within representative government and Thomas Malthus doctrine of population.

Herein a switch from theory to praxis happens. The write-up makes it clear at this point that secularism far from being an ivory tower speculation has a political expression in a secular state. While underlining that secularism as a concept is simply neutral or at most an abstention, it highlights that the main socio-political appeal of secularism is simply to create a secular state that would be free of religious control with the aim of achieving freedom and equality for all citizenry. Accordingly it expresses that a secular state moulds its political arrangements including its laws around strict political principles with little or no attention to matters of religion. It, therefore, prevents religion from interfering in the state of affairs as well as from controlling government or exercising political powers. It does this through the process of secularization. In practical terms the process of secularization according to Nweke may include "granting religious freedom, stopping public funds to be used for a religious, non-establishment of state religion, opening up the education system, freeing the legal system from religious control, effecting religious tolerance, and allowing political leadership devoid religious affiliation." (Nweke, 2015:92) Of course the negative and abstention tonality of the submission again and immediately echoes the socio-political atmosphere that led to the emergence of this political arrangement as already seen in the intellectual circumstances that led to emergence of the thought and idea of secularism. And this again underscores the writer's good grasp of and engagement with history of thoughts. It was simply the growing multi-religious society's response to the unfortunate dominating effect of the political space by state-religion as well as to religious infighting that plagued Europe for over a century, an unfortunate situation that was endangering the emerging modern Europe and placing it on the path of self-destruction. It

became expedient that the church and state must be kept at some distance. But the writer was keen to have observed some disparities which smacks of proper hermeneutics of histories. He observes a disparity between practical and official secularism as well as partial and total separation of religion and state, disparities that show that secular states do not have uniformed practices and that the degree of secularization vary. Thus, not all constitutional secular states, the writer noted, are completely secular in practice, sometimes due to nostalgia for, or force of history or what I suppose Ronan McCrea refers to as “residual religious identity” (McCrea: 2013). Within communism, the essay observes, the enthronement of secularism was simply totalitarian.

The write up then narrows down to the question of rate of religious freedom in a secular state. Freedom and human rights, the writer notes, were the major preoccupation of secularism. Freedom of belief is thus inclusive. This is because going by history, religious states have the tendency of being repressive of other religions. Yet the writer shows a grasp of the reality of divergence of rate of religious freedom in secular states. The degree ranges from friendly to hostile separation which smacks of repression. While the friendly type is simply promoting abstention, that is curtailing the interference of the church in the state’s affair and vice versa, the hostile type is repressive of religion and its practices. With concrete historical evidence, the write-up backs up this claim. Communist countries as well as such countries like Turkey, Mexico in its 1917 constitution, French separation of 1905 and Spanish separation of 1931etc were more repressive with the last two described as the most repressive in history. It notes however that the contemporary might be witnessing a change for better in terms of this religious freedom. The work ends by noting that religious freedom must be upheld if humanity could make any progress with regard to freedom and human rights which are necessary for truly being human.

There is no doubt that Nweke really shows a mastery of the concept as well as the history of the concept under review. His knowledge historical is simply amazing and he simply did justice with the methodological tools, namely analysis, hermeneutics and phenomenology. The various dimensions of the concept of secularism, secularization, secular state were done and in a master stroke, he gives secularism a historical anchorage on secular humanism within the renaissance era and beyond. His beaming the light on the specifics in history makes the concept of secularism rather concrete and shows that secularism as he himself observed rather than being a floating concept is also practical as it is given expression in the socio-political arrangement of a secular state.

This notwithstanding, the present reviewer has a number of observations to make. First, he thinks that the question of why the disparities in the level of secularization among secular states is left unattended especially when the work itself notes that it found out that religious freedom and human rights depend in the main on the existential circumstances of any given state. What these existential circumstances are, remain at large and so a lacuna that should be filled. Furthermore, one would have expected a more phenomenological study of this nature to have dealt with the contemporary era and this must be a great omission. This is added to the fact that in the examples given of secular state relative to religious freedom, countries or separations that reflect the friendly categorization were never hinted at and so the examples appear to be most of the hostile type. This simply smacks of some lopsidedness. More surprisingly is even that the conclusion of the work proper simply only harped on the fact that securing religious freedom is paramount if humanity must progress on the path of freedom, a view which though correct by its own right, I consider alien to the whole portrayals of the write-up for the work was never predicated on the importance of religious freedom. The entirety of the studies does not in any deal with the effect or consequences of repression of religion or utter secular humanism that demeans religion and metaphysics. Perhaps it could be a matter for further research. More importantly, the present reviewer finds it rather surprising the assertion prevalent in the work that secularism is a neutral concept. To the extent that secularism is rooted in the secular humanism and one sees repression of religion in a secular state, the assertion which appeared in a number of places to the effect that secularism is neutral appears to me to be off the mark and scarcely represent the complex that is the concept and practice of secularism. Secularism is not just a political principle advocating separation of religion and state, it is also a philosophy that seeks "to interpret life on principles taken solely from the material world without recourse to religion." ("Secularism" in en.m.wikipedia.org). That is already a certain reductionism and a case of bias against religion. This is added to the fact of its rootedness in the philosophy of secular humanism which without hiding its bias against faith, makes reason and science absolutes. One wonders why a philosophy that advocates for "principle of natural morality independent of all revelation and supernatural orientation; absolute freedom of opinion on all matters, including morality; natural improvement in this life; absolute separation of church and state" (New Catholic Encyclopedia, 1967:37 in Nweke, 2015:90) can still be said to be neutral to matters of religion. Yet religion in itself does not remain purely abstract or theoretic but as Cencini and Manenti (1992:121) write, it "enters the vitality of life, where man makes decisions...it gives a foundation to our moral life, as it offers a reason for commitment... ." Little wonder that Benedict XVI observes that secularism in Europe has been aggressive in its

struggle against religion and went ahead to ascribe most of the symptoms of what in his view was a serious crisis of modern-day Europe to secularism which he referred to as "Europe's apostasy from its spiritual root." (See Pera: 2006). Thus rather than acquiesce to the so called neutrality of secularism, the present reviewer would be more comfortable to speak in terms of complexity of the concept which ranges from separation to a real discrimination against religion. There is no doubt that the historical political principle of separation of state and religion is not unmixed with the secularist philosophy, which rooted in the secular humanism, is considerably anti-religion and anti-theistic.

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