



Breaking the ‘Cloud of Inevitability’ in the Religion- Development Nexus?

*How varieties of secularism affect development practices (on
child protection) in global development politics*

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Overview

- › A brief word on definition
- › Secularism as a ‘Cloud of Inevitability’
- › Religion as a Political Category
- › Religion, Secularism and Development
- › Child Protection & SRHR
- › Conclusions & Recommendations



Definition

Secularism: Secular world-views which may be either consciously held and explicitly elaborated into historico-philosophical and normative-ideological state projects, projects of modernity and cultural programs or as an epistemic knowledge regime that may be taken for granted as a normal, neutral or universal, as a modern doxa or as an “unthought.”



‘The most dangerous ideas are not those that challenge the status quo. The most dangerous ideas are those so embedded in the status quo, so wrapped in a cloud of inevitability, that we forget they are ideas at all.’

- Jacob M. Appel



Secularism as a ‘cloud of inevitability’

- Secularism perceived as a neutral position
- Secularism perceived as natural/universal
- Secularism linked to progress/development
- Gender equality and sexual liberty
- Modernization goes hand in hand with secularism



Religion as a political category

- Religion constructed as juxtaposing category: irrational/backwards/prone to violence/private
- Secularism: force that liberates societies from the ‘yoke of religion’ (Keane 2013: 163) > justifies relegation to the private domain
- Relies on the notion that religion is a clearly identifiable category that can be easily separated/isolated from other domain of life
- Based on European developments and experiences with privatized Judeo-Christian faith
- Western notion of time & idea that societies are man-made and malleable: future shaped through human activity.



In development discourse

‘Resurgence of religion’ leads to re engagement, but:

- ‘Good’ religion vs. ‘bad’ religion
- Religion merely included as instrument, not incorporated as an integral element of holistic development approaches
- This reinforces secular ontology: one ‘reality’ > secularism comes closest to this reality. Other cultures are still assumed to follow the footsteps of the West



Religion, Secularism and Development

- Linear notion of development
- Secular knowledge prioritized
- Reinforces a superior-inferior relationship
- Reproduces ‘Europe’s erroneous ideological image of itself’ (Halperin 2006)
- Does not account for alternative developments in other (non-Western) contexts: multidynamic roles of religion and different relationships between the secular and the religious



Religion, Secularism and Development

- › Alternative ontologies and epistemologies in which gods, spirits, angels, demons and ancestors are perceived as real agents with real power and influence are marginalized or excluded (Wilson 2017)
- › Emphasis on individual (sexual) freedom and agency, rather than social relationships/community and interdependency



Convention Rights of the Child (1989)

Preamble:

‘Child should be fully prepared to live an **individual** life in society’

CRC Article 14:

a) ‘State Parties shall respect the right of the child to **freedom of thought, conscience and religion**’

CRC Article 29

e) ‘States Parties shall promote and encourage international cooperation in matters relating to education in particular with a view to [...] facilitating access to **scientific and technical knowledge and modern teaching methods.**’



Universal Declaration of Sexual Rights (WAS)

- › Right to sexual freedom (individuality)
- › Right to sexual pleasure/right to sexual privacy (individuality, public/private distinction)
- › Right to sexual information based upon scientific inquiry (what about other forms of inquiry/knowledge?)



Child protection and SRHR

- Context always crucial: childhood/child rearing practices influence future SRHR

In India:

- Child considered as gift from God > prayers important part of child rearing
- Indian parents rely on spiritual, philosophical and religious sources for guidance with regard to how a child is ought to behave (individually and socially) (Isaac, Annie & Prashanth 2014: 39)
- Spirituality & religion deeply enrooted in society: affects perceptions of childhood and child rearing (f.e. son preference, choice of marriage)
- Adult/Child boundaries more blurry
- Social identity > individual identity: family and kin honour, room sharing > sexual privacy/pleasure/liberty?
- Private (religious) laws big influence on gender/sexuality: result of secularism > private/public, male/female, religious equality.



Conclusion & Recommendations

- › Dominance of secularism forms a serious limitation to inclusive development aid: often marginalizes or excludes voices/knowledge systems/ontologies that pose a threat or challenge to secularism
- › Religion only included when it adheres to secular agendas; otherwise it is perceived as an obstacle
- › Recognizing the limitations and vulnerabilities of secularist discourse and meaningmaking key in making development aid more inclusive
- › Studying and acknowledging alternative notions of childhood important, also in the context of SRHR