# CAN RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND SECULARISM CO-EXIST?

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**Secular government is broadly characterized in one of two ways: aggressively anti-religious — an alpha competitor in the public arena that will brook no rivals, as in the French *laïcité* and also the 2013 Quebec Charter of Values — or secularism as a benign facilitator, accommodating religion in the public arena, so long as it doesn't aspire toward monopolization.**

***Le gouvernement laïque est généralement caractérisé de deux façons : agressivement antireligieux — un joueur alpha dans l'arène publique qui ne tolère aucun concurrent, comme dans la laïcité française et la Charte des valeurs québécoises de 2013 — ou la laïcité comme facilitateur bénin, qui accommode la religion dans l'arène publique, tant qu'elle n'aspire pas à la monopolisation.***

I will argue that the possibility of a benign relationship between "religious diversity" and "secularism" depends on how these concepts are interpreted. Religion, I argue, must be properly understood as both a private and public phenomenon. Secular government, therefore, can only be acceptable to religious persons if it provides for both the private and public expressions of religion.

It is necessary to clarify the operative terms: "religion" and "secularism." I will begin by scrutinizing the use of these terms in popular discourse. The resulting definitions will then be used to test their complementarity. So then, how are "religion" and "secularism" typically characterized?

Let us begin with religion. I believe section two of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms may serve as an expedient point of departure. For, under the headline of "fundamental freedoms," the first listed is "freedom of conscience and religion." The yoking of "conscience" to "religion" by way of a conspicuous "and" suggests an intrinsic relationship between the two. If this is the case, then religion, like conscience, should have something to do with an inner moral compass. And, indeed, this definition is prevalent in public discourse. Consider, for instance, "conscientious objection" and its typical association with Christian pacifists. A second popular convention is to speak of religion as an assembly of persons who worship together on a regular basis and who furthermore share certain beliefs and principles in common. This idea of religion is further associated with a litany of sacred festivals and holidays (Sabbath, Diwali, Ramadan etc.) as well as with distinct "religious" apparel (Cassock, Hijab, Yarmulke etc.). If the first definition is somewhat private and personal, the second is public and corporate. That said, the marriage of the two ideas (private, personal conscience and public, corporate practice) produces yet a third definition; namely, religion as conscience-forming practice. Here again conscientious objection is a noteworthy example: objecting Christians historically grounded their objection not on conscience alone but on the teachings and trainings they received from their respective faith communities (e.g. Mennonite, Dukhobor, Quaker). For

me this hybrid definition is the most satisfying because it holds together both the private and public dimensions of religion in a robust fashion. If religion is reduced to one or the other it becomes one-dimensional and incomplete.

On to secularism. The preamble to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms reads: "Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the Supremacy of God and the Rule of Law." That an increasing number of Canadians find the content of this declaration problematic supports Charles Taylor's well-known thesis that we are living in a "Secular Age." For, according to Taylor, ours is an age marked by the "contestability" of any and all claims to exclusive authority, especially religious authority. It is an age in which the "cross-pressures" of various interest groups, religious or otherwise, have produced a hotly contested public arena. When speaking of the "Supremacy of God and the Rule of Law," then, it will naturally be asked, "Whose God, Which Law?" In Taylor's account, secularism, as an official government policy, emerged as a means of addressing that question. I am inclined to agree.

As I see it, secular government is broadly characterized in one of two ways in popular discourse. The first posits secularism as aggressively anti-religious. Secular government, on this model, is seen as an alpha competitor in the public arena that will brook no rivals. Competition for public influence is seen as a zero-sum game in which secular civil authority and religious authority are fundamentally at odds. This brand of secularism is usually associated with the French policy of *laïcité* and many would see the 2013 Quebec Charter of Values as representative. The second characterization posits secularism as a benign facilitator, accommodating the presence of religion in the public arena so long as it doesn't aspire toward monopolization. Secular government is thus seen as serving to maintain a fair and equitable balance between competing religious (and non-religious) authorities. On this model, public concord is not achieved by banishing religion from the public sphere but by policing against disproportionate manifestations of religious power. This model of secularism is associated more with North America than Europe. The idea of Canada as a "cultural mosaic" is exemplary of its logic.

Having now run through several workable definitions of religion and secularism, we are in a better position to answer the initial question: "Can religious diversity and secularism co- exist?" If we take conscience to be the essence of religion, then the answer is ostensibly "yes" for both varieties of secularism: aggressive and facilitating. For such a definition effectively privatizes religion, thereby satisfying the strictures of even aggressive secular government. That being said, a purely private religion would, I believe, prove so attenuated as to be hardly recognizable to its adherents. It would thus be unacceptable to the vast majority of religiously observant Canadians. Given that private religion is the only kind provided for by aggressive, *laïcité* secularism I submit that this secularism cannot co-exist with any but the most mitigated of religions. Be that as it may, the facilitating variety of secularism, which has, in any case, most often prevailed in Canada, appears to satisfy all three of the above definitions of religion — private conscience, public practice and public/private conscience-forming practice. This should not come as a surprise. For, indeed, if Charles Taylor is to be believed, provision for the co- existence of competing religious authorities is its very *raison d'être*.