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Secularism between Historical Genesis and Contemporary Challenges: A Critical Comparative Analysis of Western Experience and the Islamic World

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Abstract

Secularism has long constituted a central axis of political and philosophical debate, particularly in societies experiencing profound tensions between religious authority, political legitimacy, and social pluralism. In the contemporary Arab and Islamic world, this debate has acquired renewed urgency amid ongoing political instability, ideological polarization, and the challenges of state-building in the post–Arab Spring context. This article undertakes a critical and comparative examination of secularism by tracing its historical roots in the Western experience and analyzing the structural, cultural, and epistemological challenges that complicate its reception and implementation in Islamic societies. Drawing on a historical–analytical and comparative methodology, the study situates secularism within the specific socio-political conditions that shaped its emergence in Europe, notably the conflict between ecclesiastical power and political authority, the wars of religion, and the gradual differentiation between religious and temporal spheres. Rather than interpreting secularism as an inherently anti-religious ideology, the article conceptualizes it as a historically contingent response to concrete problems of governance, authority, and social coexistence. This framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of secularism as a dynamic process rather than a fixed doctrinal model. The article further examines the conceptual and practical obstacles that hinder the establishment of a modern secular state in the Arab and Islamic world. These obstacles include the persistence of dogmatic political ideologies, the instrumentalization of religion in public life, the fragility of civic institutions, and unresolved questions surrounding religious pluralism and minority rights. By engaging with both Western theorists of secularization and contemporary Islamic intellectual critiques, the study highlights the limits of direct transplantation of Western secular models and underscores the necessity of contextual adaptation. Ultimately, the article argues that any meaningful engagement with secularism in Islamic societies must move beyond binary oppositions between religion and modernity. Instead, it calls for a critical rethinking of secularism as a flexible political and philosophical framework capable of accommodating religious diversity, safeguarding individual rights, and fostering social cohesion. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing debates on governance, modernity, and intellectual renewal in the Arab and Islamic world.

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Introduction

In the contemporary global context, marked by profound political instability, cultural fragmentation, and ideological polarization, the question of secularism has re-emerged as one of the most contested and consequential issues in political and philosophical discourse. This debate is particularly acute in the Arab and Islamic world, where tensions between political authority and society are often articulated through competing visions of governance—most notably the opposition between religiously grounded political models and secular state frameworks. These tensions are not merely theoretical; they have translated into prolonged conflicts, institutional fragility, and deep social divisions, especially in the aftermath of the events commonly referred to as the Arab Spring.

The persistence of authoritarian governance, the weakness of civic institutions, and the instrumentalization of religion in political life have significantly constrained scientific development, social innovation, and human flourishing across many Arab and Islamic societies. Rather than functioning as vehicles for ethical cohesion or social justice, political and religious discourses have frequently contributed to exclusion, sectarianism, and ideological rigidity. The resulting crises—visible in armed conflicts, forced migration, and the erosion of social trust—have prompted renewed intellectual reflection on alternative models of political organization capable of reconciling pluralism, stability, and development.

Within this context, secularism is often presented either as a foreign ideological imposition or as a panacea for all political and social problems. Both positions, however, obscure the historical complexity and conceptual diversity of secularism as a phenomenon. To approach secularism merely as a doctrine opposed to religion is to misunderstand both its historical origins and its philosophical foundations. In the Western experience, secularism emerged not as an anti-religious project per se, but as a response to specific historical conditions—most notably the dominance of ecclesiastical authority, religious wars, and the entanglement of theology with political sovereignty. Through a gradual and conflict-ridden process, secularism contributed to redefining the relationship between religion, state, and society, thereby facilitating the emergence of modern political institutions, scientific rationality, and individual rights.

The relative success of secular governance in Western societies—manifested in political stability, scientific progress, and social pluralism—has led many thinkers in the Arab and Islamic world to reconsider its relevance beyond its original cultural context. However, the transplantation of secularism cannot be achieved through simple imitation. Any serious engagement with secularism must begin with a historical and conceptual analysis of its Western genesis, followed by a critical examination of the structural, cultural, and epistemological conditions that shape its reception in non-Western societies.

This study adopts such an approach by situating secularism within its historical trajectory while interrogating the challenges that arise when it encounters Islamic intellectual, legal, and cultural frameworks. Rather than framing the debate as a binary opposition between "Islamic" and "secular" governance, the article seeks to understand the deeper philosophical assumptions that underpin both positions. In doing so, it explores how secularism has been variously interpreted, resisted, adapted, or reconfigured within Arab and Islamic contexts.

Central to this inquiry is the recognition that contemporary crises in the Arab and Islamic world are not solely the result of religious factors, nor can they be resolved through purely theological solutions. Sectarian divisions—whether religious, ethnic, or ideological—have been exacerbated by weak political institutions, the absence of inclusive citizenship, and the lack of a coherent framework for managing diversity. Questions concerning the rights of religious minorities, freedom of belief, and the role of religion in public life remain unresolved, particularly in societies where political legitimacy is frequently derived from dogmatic or exclusivist interpretations of identity.

In light of these challenges, the article argues that secularism should be examined not as an abstract ideology, but as a historically situated political and philosophical response to specific problems of governance, authority, and social coexistence. By revisiting key Western intellectual contributions—such as those of Charles Taylor, Marcel Gauchet, and other theorists of secularization—alongside critical perspectives from Islamic and postcolonial scholarship, the study seeks to illuminate both the possibilities and the limitations of secularism as a model for contemporary Arab societies.

Accordingly, the research is guided by the following central questions:

1. How is secularism conceptualized in Western and Arab-Islamic intellectual traditions, and what assumptions underlie these conceptualizations?
2. What historical, political, and social factors contributed to the emergence of secularism in the Western world, and what were its principal consequences?
3. What structural, cultural, and epistemological obstacles hinder the establishment of a modern secular state in Arab and Islamic societies, particularly when measured against Western models?

Methodologically, the study adopts a historical-analytical and comparative approach, combining conceptual analysis with critical interpretation of key philosophical and political texts. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of secularism as both a historical process and a contested normative framework. By grounding the discussion in its original context while remaining attentive to contemporary realities, the article aims to contribute to an informed and balanced debate on secularism—one that moves beyond ideological polarization toward a deeper comprehension of the conditions necessary for political coexistence, social justice, and intellectual renewal in the Arab and Islamic world.

The Conceptual and Historical Foundations of Secularism

From a linguistic and conceptual perspective, the English term *secularism* derives from the Latin word *saeculum*, which denotes "this world" or "this age" and is traditionally used in contrast to ecclesiastical authority and the religious sphere (Al-Alam, 2016, p. 69). The semantic significance of *saeculum* lies in its temporal dimension: it refers not merely to the

world as a spatial entity, but to the world as a historical process unfolding within time. This temporal connotation distinguishes *saeculum* from another Latin term for "world," *mundus*, which signifies the cosmos or the ordered totality of existence. While *mundus* implies a stable, almost immutable structure, *saeculum* emphasizes historical change, transformation, and contingency.

As Mourad Wahba aptly observes, the world understood through *saeculum* is a world that "has a history" (Wahba, 1999, p. 23). In this sense, reality is not fixed or eternal, but subject to human interpretation, revision, and development. The concept of *saeculum* was itself translated from the Greek *aiōn* (*αἰών*), meaning an age or historical period, reinforcing the idea that secularism is inseparable from temporality and historical consciousness. Accordingly, secularism may be understood as the historical condition in which meaning, value, and knowledge are increasingly derived from within the world itself, rather than from transcendent or theological sources.

Within this framework, secularism signifies a shift in the ultimate sources of authority: reason, human experience, and empirical inquiry gradually replace ecclesiastical doctrine, sacred texts, and metaphysical absolutes. This transformation does not necessarily entail the negation of religion, but rather a reconfiguration of its role within society. The dominance of religious authority over political, scientific, and social life diminishes as humanity increasingly relies on its intellectual capacities to organize collective existence. This process is often interpreted as a form of liberation from theological constraints that had previously regulated social and political affairs.

This understanding is echoed in major reference works on religion and ideology. For example, the *Encyclopedia of Religions* defines secularism as a worldview associated with non-religion or worldliness, advocating the organization of life on the basis of reason and positive science, while distancing social and political interests from religious authority. In its political dimension, secularism denotes governance grounded in non-religious principles, independent of theological justification (Al-Juhani, 1420, p. 679). Under such a model, religion is largely confined to the private sphere, encompassing individual belief, worship, and personal rituals such as prayer, marriage, and burial, without exerting normative authority over public institutions.

The Conventional and Historical Meaning of Secularism

Historically, the concept of secularism acquired its first institutional meaning in early modern Europe, particularly in the aftermath of prolonged religious conflicts that devastated entire societies. The term "secular" entered political and legal discourse through the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which sought to end the violent religious wars that had engulfed Europe. In this context, secularization referred specifically to the transfer of church property and authority to non-religious, civil institutions—namely, the emerging modern state (Al-Missiri, 2002, p. 54).

This initial meaning of secularization emphasized processes of transfer, separation, and dispossession. Church lands and assets were removed from ecclesiastical control and placed under state authority, thereby limiting the political and economic power of religious institutions. From the perspective of the Church, these measures were perceived as illegitimate confiscations and an assault on divinely sanctioned rights. Conversely, many Enlightenment-era thinkers regarded secularization as a necessary political reform, arguing that excessive ecclesiastical wealth enabled religious authorities to challenge sovereign power and perpetuate social instability. From this viewpoint, the secularization of church property was justified as a means of consolidating political order and preventing further violence (Al-Missiri, 2002, p. 54).

Over time, the semantic scope of secularism expanded beyond its original legal and economic meaning. One of the earliest thinkers to articulate secularism in a broader philosophical sense was George Holyoake (1817–1906), who defined it as the belief in the possibility of improving the human condition through material and human-centered means, without engaging in affirming or denying religious faith. According to this view, secularism does not necessarily oppose religion, but rather suspends it as a decisive factor in social reform, emphasizing human agency, rationality, and material conditions as the primary drivers of progress (Al-Allam, p. 65).

This expanded understanding reflects a growing confidence in human reason and autonomy. Humanity is no longer conceived as dependent on transcendent intervention to resolve social and political problems, but as capable of self-governance and self-transformation. In this sense, secularism can be interpreted as an ideology that places human beings at the center of history, granting them exclusive authority to legislate, govern, and shape collective life. For many, it functioned as a substitute for religious worldviews that had deferred justice, salvation, or fulfillment to an afterlife, offering instead tangible solutions within historical time.

Secularism and Worldliness: A Conceptual Distinction

Despite frequent conflation, secularism should not be equated uncritically with worldliness. Olivier Roy offers an important conceptual distinction between the two. He argues that worldliness (*mondanité*) is primarily a social phenomenon, characterized by the gradual detachment of society from the sacred without necessarily rejecting religion. Secularism, by contrast, is a political and legal framework in which the state actively defines and restricts the public role of religion (Roy, 2016, p. 29).

According to Roy, worldliness allows religion to persist within society, albeit without dominating social norms or political authority. This model can be observed in contexts such as the United Kingdom, where the state maintains formal religious institutions while allowing a high degree of social pluralism. Secularism as a political choice, however, often involves legal mechanisms that confine religion strictly to the private sphere and prevent its participation in public

governance. In some contexts, this may take the form of legal coercion designed to enforce ideological neutrality within the public domain.

Roy further emphasizes that secularism manifests differently across societies depending on their historical trajectories, identity formations, and experiences with religious conflict. In countries where national identity and religious homogeneity were central concerns, secularism often emerged as a strategy for managing internal diversity and preventing fragmentation. Consequently, there is no single, universal model of secularism; rather, multiple forms exist, shaped by specific cultural, social, and political conditions.

Secularism in Arab and Islamic Thought

In the Arab and Islamic intellectual context, secularism has been the subject of intense debate and divergent interpretations. Some thinkers have sought to reconcile secular principles with Islamic concepts, emphasizing Islam's historical capacity for rationality, consultation (*shura*), and legal pluralism. Others have argued that secularism, as developed in the Western context, presupposes philosophical and institutional conditions absent from Islamic tradition.

Among Arab thinkers, Mourad Wahba offers a distinctive epistemological interpretation of secularism. He defines it not primarily as a political doctrine, but as a theory of knowledge grounded in the recognition of relativity rather than absoluteness (Wahba, 1999, p. 29). From this perspective, secularism entails thinking about phenomena as historically contingent and open to revision, rather than as fixed truths sanctioned by sacred authority. Such an approach enables intellectual freedom, critical inquiry, and scientific advancement.

Wahba argues that many transformative moments in human history—such as the Copernican revolution supported by Galileo, the emergence of religious tolerance articulated by John Locke, and the methodological rationalism of Descartes—were not causes of secularism, but outcomes of a deeper process of rationalization. Secularization, in this sense, functions both as a precondition for enlightenment and as its result. It allows knowledge, institutions, and beliefs to be subjected to critique, correction, and historical reassessment.

Accordingly, secularism may be understood as a long-term civilizational process through which human consciousness evolves from myth and absolutism toward reason, freedom, and cultural pluralism. Like the "cunning of reason" described by Hegel, secularization advances through contradictions and historical tensions, gradually reshaping social structures and intellectual horizons. From this standpoint, secularism is neither a simple ideological project nor a linear historical trajectory, but a complex and contested process integral to the development of modern civilization.

Mohamed Arkoun's Perspective on Secularism

The Algerian philosopher and historian of Islamic thought **Mohamed Arkoun** approached the concept of secularism from a distinctly critical and epistemological standpoint, seeking to liberate the discussion from ideological reductionism and semantic confusion. One of Arkoun's most provocative positions is his insistence that secularism is fundamentally a product of Western historical experience and should not be treated as a universally translatable concept detached from its civilizational origins. In this sense, Arkoun situates secularism within the specific historical conditions of Western modernity, particularly the prolonged conflict between emerging bourgeois classes and entrenched religious and feudal authorities.

According to Arkoun, secularism emerged in Western civilization as a consequence of deep structural transformations brought about by economic change, urbanization, and intellectual exchange—most notably through contact with Islamic civilization during the medieval period. These interactions contributed to the formation of new social classes whose interests increasingly conflicted with those of the clergy and feudal elites, who struggled to adapt to evolving political and economic realities. Secularism, in this context, was not merely a political doctrine but a historical outcome of broader social struggles and epistemic shifts.

Arkoun was highly critical of how the concept of secularism has been received and debated within Arab and Islamic intellectual discourse. He famously argued that the term itself "does not refer to a concrete reality and does not constitute a conceptual, historical, or philosophical problem in the Arabic language; it is a word suspended in the air" (Arkoun, 2004). By this, he meant that secularism is often invoked without a precise understanding of its semantic, historical, and epistemological dimensions. For Arkoun, this conceptual ambiguity reflects a deeper crisis within Arab–Islamic thought—namely, an inability to rigorously define and critically appropriate modern concepts.

Rather than viewing secularism as a simple struggle for political power or institutional dominance, Arkoun interpreted it as a profound intellectual and ethical challenge confronting the human mind. He rejected reductive interpretations that frame secularism solely as a sociopolitical confrontation between religion and the state. Instead, he understood it as an ongoing struggle to approach truth through critical inquiry, intellectual freedom, and the deconstruction of dogmatic certainty. As he stated:

"For me, secularism is an attitude of the spirit; it is a struggle to possess the truth or to arrive at the truth" (Arkoun, 1996, p. 10).

This definition reflects Arkoun's broader intellectual project, which aimed to dismantle rigid doctrinal frameworks that, in his view, had historically constrained Islamic societies and prevented them from participating fully in modern civilization. His own life trajectory—marked by intellectual resistance to institutionalized orthodoxy and eventual academic exile—illustrates the personal and political dimensions of this struggle. In Arkoun's vision, secularism opens a space for critical reason, enabling societies to rethink inherited categories, renew intellectual life, and engage creatively with global modernity.

Causes and Factors Behind the Rise of Secularism in the West and Its Consequences

Many contemporary thinkers, including Mourad Wahba, have emphasized that secularism was not an arbitrary ideological invention but an inevitable outcome of the broader process of rationalization that underpins modernity. Rationalization, in this sense, refers to the gradual displacement of mythological and theological explanations by reason, empirical inquiry, and systematic thought. Wahba correctly identifies this process as a necessary condition for the emergence of secular culture.

Initially confined to marginal social groups—such as affluent families, philosophers, scientists, and a limited number of political actors—secular culture gradually expanded into the wider social fabric. As these groups gained influence, they challenged the dominance of religious authority and introduced new modes of thinking grounded in reason and scientific inquiry. This expansion contributed to what Max Weber famously described as the "disenchantment of the world," a process whereby reality is no longer interpreted through sacred cosmologies but through rational and empirical frameworks (Taylor, 2019, p. 46).

The public emergence of secularism was not without conflict. Its rise was accompanied, in certain historical moments, by violence and intense resistance, particularly from institutions that perceived secularization as a direct threat to their authority. Among the principal factors contributing to the rise of secularism were the Church's monopoly over truth, its use of coercive power, and its hostility toward emerging scientific knowledge.

The Violence of the Church and Institutional Tyranny

During the European Middle Ages, ecclesiastical authority exercised extensive control over social, political, and intellectual life. The Church claimed exclusive interpretive authority over sacred texts and legitimized its dominance through doctrines of infallibility. Dissenting voices—whether social, political, or intellectual—were often suppressed through excommunication, censorship, and violence. Religious discourse became a powerful instrument for enforcing obedience and maintaining hierarchical social structures.

The Church's institutional power extended beyond spiritual matters, enabling it to intervene in political affairs, depose rulers, and control property. As Tuchard (2010, p. 205) notes, the Church possessed the authority to forgive and condemn, to legitimize and delegitimize, thereby exerting profound influence over both rulers and subjects. This fusion of religious authority and political coercion created conditions in which resistance was framed as heresy and opposition as rebellion against divine will.

Despite this dominance, critical voices emerged from within the margins of ecclesiastical power. Reformers, many of whom were themselves members of the clergy, challenged the Church's monopoly over interpretation and called for the free examination of religious texts. The Protestant Reformation, spearheaded by figures such as Martin Luther, represented a decisive rupture with institutional dogmatism. Luther's insistence on individual interpretation of scripture undermined the Church's claim to infallibility and opened new pathways for intellectual autonomy (Wahba, 1999, pp. 24–25).

The Conflict Between the Church and Science

One of the most consequential outcomes of ecclesiastical dogmatism was the systematic suppression of scientific inquiry. Any knowledge produced outside the Church's theological framework was often dismissed as illusion or heresy. This antagonism toward science manifested in persecution, censorship, and institutionalized violence. Early examples include the brutal killing of the philosopher and mathematician Hypatia of Alexandria, whose intellectual achievements were perceived as threatening to religious orthodoxy (Al-Mohammadawi, 2016, p. 78).

Over time, repression became formalized through institutions such as the Inquisition, which targeted scientists, philosophers, and religious minorities. The execution of Giordano Bruno in 1600 exemplifies the extent to which intellectual dissent was criminalized (Al-Mohammadawi, 2016, p. 120). Such practices fostered a climate of fear, forcing many thinkers to work in secrecy and delaying scientific progress.

The gradual introduction of Arab–Islamic scientific and philosophical heritage into Europe through translation movements played a crucial role in challenging ecclesiastical dominance. The dissemination of works in astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy revitalized European intellectual life and weakened the Church's epistemic monopoly. The publication of Copernicus's *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* marked a decisive shift from geocentric to heliocentric cosmology, fundamentally undermining theological interpretations of the universe (Mabrouk, 2011, p. 52).

This transformation was further advanced by Galileo Galilei, whose empirical observations and mathematical reasoning exposed the inadequacy of traditional cosmological models. Although forced to recant under pressure from the Inquisition, Galileo's work laid the foundations for modern scientific rationality and demonstrated the capacity of the human mind to uncover natural laws independently of religious authority (Oweida, 1994, pp. 7–8).

Section Three: The French Revolution and the Institutionalization of Secular Politics

By the early modern period, ecclesiastical authority in Europe was increasingly challenged on two interrelated fronts: the socio-economic rise of new urban classes, and the intellectual emergence of political philosophies that redefined sovereignty, legitimacy, and the foundations of political order. The first transformation was visible in the consolidation of bourgeois power in expanding cities; the second was reflected in philosophical writings that began to theorize society, authority, and law in ways that no longer depended on theological legitimation.

Within this trajectory, early modern political thought played a significant role in shifting the locus of authority toward human agency and institutional design. Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* has often been read as a key moment in the development of political realism, where governance is treated as a distinct domain guided by pragmatic principles rather than ecclesiastical norms. In this line of interpretation, Machiavelli implied that political authority must be understood within a human framework, and that religious institutions—however influential—should not monopolize governance (Mabrouk, 2011, pp. 28–29).

A similar transformation appears in Thomas Hobbes's political philosophy, especially in *Leviathan*, where the state is theorized through the problem of order and security rather than through the religious origins of association. Hobbes' account, grounded in the logic of civil peace, positions temporal sovereignty as the decisive guarantor of social cohesion, thereby limiting clerical claims to political supremacy. The same philosophical context extends through John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*—notably his emphasis on consent, rights, and legitimate rule—and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's analyses of inequality and political legitimacy in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *The Social Contract* (Al-Allam, 2016, pp. 262–303).

These intellectual shifts did not remain confined to elite circles; rather, they gradually contributed to broader political mobilization against systems justified through divine-right doctrines and inherited hierarchies. This culminated in the French Revolution of 1789, a historically decisive rupture that accelerated the institutional differentiation between ecclesiastical authority and the modern state. Revolutionary policies included the nationalization of church property, the reorganization or dissolution of religious corporations, and the transformation of religion's public role through legal and administrative measures. While revolutionary rhetoric could be extreme, its broader political meaning lay in redefining sovereignty as rooted in the nation and its citizens rather than in sacralized authority (Weishy, 2001, p. 237).

From an institutional perspective, the Revolution opened a new phase in which political membership was increasingly framed through the vocabulary of citizenship, rights, and national belonging. The primary bond uniting individuals was no longer theological fraternity in the ecclesiastical sense, but civic fraternity within the nation. In this framework, religious practice was increasingly redefined as a matter of personal conscience and individual freedom under a constitutional state. As some accounts emphasize, the emerging model advanced governance "in the name of the people" rather than "in the name of God," with constitutional norms replacing ecclesiastical decrees as the authoritative foundation of public order (Al-Hawali, n.d., p. 169). Although European secularization took multiple forms across different contexts, the French case became a major reference point for the political institutionalization of secular governance.

Chapter Three: Why Western Models of Secularism Are Difficult to Transplant into Islamic Contexts

A substantial body of Arab and Islamic scholarship argues that secularism is historically rooted in the Western experience and is therefore not easily transferable as a ready-made institutional model. This position is often based on the claim that European secularism emerged from specific historical conflicts—particularly between ecclesiastical institutions and changing social classes—and from theological configurations distinctive to Christianity. For example, some interpretations emphasize biblical distinctions between temporal and spiritual domains, such as the principle "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Bishara, 2015, p. 25). This formulation has frequently been read as enabling a conceptual separation between political authority and spiritual obligation within Western religious history. Some writers further argue that secularism is more closely associated with the Christian institutional experience than with other religious traditions, since the historical role of the Church as a centralized authority differs from Jewish and Islamic configurations of law, community, and public life (Al-Jundi, n.d., p. 18). However, contemporary scholarship increasingly suggests that the relationship between religion and politics is more complex than any single "religion-based explanation" can capture. Secularism in the West was not produced by theology alone, but by the interaction of economic change, political centralization, intellectual transformation, and institutional conflict—including, but not limited to, religious dynamics.

In Islamic contexts, the challenge of transplantation is often framed through the historically integrated role of religion in public life—especially in early Islamic political formation. Classical narratives frequently cite early constitutional arrangements such as the Charter of Medina as evidence that political community and normative order were structured through religious-ethical principles. In addition, Islamic legal and moral frameworks have historically provided key references for governance, social organization, and public legitimacy. For this reason, some thinkers argue that a strict Western-style separation between religion and state may be conceptually contested and socially difficult to institutionalize.

Yet, from an academic perspective, it is methodologically more cautious to speak not of "impossibility," but of structural divergence: Western and Islamic societies were shaped by distinct historical trajectories of state formation, legal tradition, and institutional authority. Accordingly, calls for secularism can be interpreted in multiple ways across Islamic societies, ranging from proposals for administrative neutrality and equal citizenship to more radical programs of restricting religion to the private sphere. Critics often argue that the latter approach risks reducing religion to ritual practice alone, which is perceived as inconsistent with Islamic understandings of religion as encompassing ethical, social, and legal dimensions (Hanafi, 2005, p. 244).

Several Arab thinkers have therefore emphasized that social acceptance is a key condition for any political model. Where secular reform appears as a top-down project associated with colonial administration or coercive modernization, it may generate resistance and deepen legitimacy crises. Authors such as Ismat Seif El-Dawla are cited in this regard to argue that adopting a system without broad societal consensus can produce alienation and political instability (as cited in Al-Bahnsawi, 1992, p. 12). Historically, the entry of certain secular legal and educational reforms into parts of the Islamic world has indeed been shaped by colonial influence or state-led modernization programs, which complicates the cultural reception of secularism and affects public trust in reform agendas.

A further dimension concerns citizenship and pluralism. Modern secular frameworks are often associated with the equal legal status of minorities and the transformation of communal categories into the principle of citizenship. In Arab intellectual history, a number of prominent advocates of constitutionalism, civil rights, and modern political reforms emerged from diverse religious backgrounds. However, interpreting such advocacy through a "conspiracy" frame is analytically weak and generally rejected by academic standards because it replaces institutional explanation with identity attribution. A more robust approach is to analyze reform debates through **political sociology**, **legal history**, and **institutional theory**, focusing on how different social actors—majorities and minorities alike—negotiate rights, identity, and state legitimacy in changing modern conditions.

Conclusion

This study has emphasized that secularism is not a single, universally uniform doctrine but a historically situated phenomenon whose meanings vary across societies. In the Western experience, secularism developed through a long trajectory of institutional differentiation, intellectual transformation, and political conflict—culminating in modern constitutional frameworks in which sovereignty was increasingly grounded in the people, and religious authority was limited in public governance. The French Revolution illustrates a decisive moment in which these transformations were consolidated through law, citizenship, and the redefinition of religion's public role.

At the same time, the comparative discussion suggests that Islamic societies have distinct historical and normative configurations that shape their engagement with secularism. The relationship between religion and governance in many Islamic contexts has historically been integrated through ethical, legal, and communal frameworks, which complicates the direct transplantation of strict Western models of separation. Consequently, debates over secularism in the Arab and Islamic world often reflect deeper tensions concerning legitimacy, modernity, pluralism, and institutional reform rather than a simple binary conflict between "religion" and "non-religion."

From a scholarly standpoint, the most defensible conclusion is not that secularism is inherently "impossible" in Islamic societies, but that **the form secularism can take is context-dependent**. Outcomes depend on variables such as constitutional design, legal culture, educational reform, public trust, religious pluralism, and the capacity of institutions to manage diversity without coercion. In this sense, the central challenge for contemporary Arab and Islamic societies is not merely to adopt or reject secularism, but to develop political frameworks capable of ensuring:

1. equal citizenship and legal protection,
2. freedom of belief and conscience,
3. institutional legitimacy grounded in social consent, and
4. an ethical public sphere where religion and reason can coexist without domination.

Accordingly, a future research agenda would benefit from shifting the debate from ideological slogans toward empirical and institutional analysis: How do states manage religious diversity? What legal arrangements protect rights? Under what conditions does the public sphere become inclusive rather than polarized? Addressing these questions may allow the discussion of secularism to move beyond inherited binaries toward a more constructive engagement with governance and human development in plural societies.

Concluding Insight

The historical conflict between religious authority and scientific reason in Europe reveals that secularism did not arise as an abstract philosophical doctrine, but as a practical response to institutional violence, epistemic closure, and social stagnation. In this sense, secularism functioned as a pathway toward intellectual freedom, scientific advancement, and political reorganization. Understanding these historical dynamics is essential for any contemporary discussion of secularism, particularly when assessing its relevance and limitations within non-Western contexts such as the Arab and Islamic world.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on qualitative, historical, and theoretical analysis of published sources and intellectual traditions. It does not involve human participants, personal data, interviews, surveys, or experiments. Consequently, no ethical approval from an institutional review board was required. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with internationally recognized academic and ethical standards, including principles of intellectual integrity, accurate citation, and respect for diverse religious, cultural, and philosophical perspectives.

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Author Contributions

Ziani Youcef contributed to the conceptualization of the study, the development of the theoretical framework, the historical analysis of secularism in the Western context, and the drafting of the introduction and conceptual sections. Boubaya Karim contributed to the comparative analysis of secularism in the Islamic world, the critical discussion of political and cultural challenges, the synthesis of philosophical arguments, and the revision and editing of the manuscript. Both authors jointly contributed to the overall structure of the article, the interpretation of findings, and the final approval of the submitted version.

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