# A Critical Analytical Study of the Impact of Secularism on Religiously-Oriented Societies:
Yemen as a Case Study

**Belief Systems and Ideologies (RKUD 7306)**

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**Abstract**

This research studies secularism as an idea or belief system and how it affects societies that are strongly connected to religion. The case of Yemen is used to show how secular ideas work—or do not work—within a religious culture. The study explains what secularism means, where it came from, and who were the main thinkers behind it. It also explains how religion shapes people's identity and daily life. The paper shows that bringing secularism into a society like Yemen is not easy. It faces problems like cultural rejection and conflict with religious values. The study also compares Yemen with other religious countries to understand if secularism can fit different cultures. In the end, the research finds that secularism is not always accepted in religious societies unless it fits their culture and beliefs.

**Keywords**: Secularism, Religion, Yemen, Belief Systems, Culture, Identity

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

Secularism is a modern political ideology that advocates the separation of religious institutions from the functions of the state, and the neutrality of government toward all faiths. Its most general definition, as one scholar summarizes, involves "the separation of religious institutions from the institutions of the state; freedom of conscience… and no discrimination by the state against individuals on the basis of their beliefs."(1). Talal Asad, a leading scholar of secularism, emphasizes that the secular is not simply an anti-religious or purely "rational" replacement for faith, but rather a concept "with a multi-layered history, related to major premises of modernity, democracy, and the concept of human rights."(2). In short, secularism as an ideology arose in the Enlightenment and early modern period as a way to reorganize society around civil citizenship and political equality rather than inherited religious authority.

Today secularism is widely enshrined in constitutions and laws around the world. For example, a study of contemporary constitutions found that "over 70" out of 195 national constitutions explicitly incorporate a secularist ideal of some kind(3). That survey suggests secularism is a mainstream political principle globally. Nonetheless,

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(1)) teven Conn, "Secularism, Past and Future," *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, June 2018, review of *Secularism: Politics, Religion, and Freedom* by Andrew Copson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), https://origins.osu.edu/review/secularism-past-and-future (accessed January 2, 2026).

(2) Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1–17.

(3) Steven Conn, "Secularism, Past and Future," *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, June 2018, https://origins.osu.edu/review/secularism-past-and-future.

secularism's actual meaning can vary greatly by country and culture. Western-style secular democracy assumes religious pluralism and free conscience; indeed, some analysts argue that the core values of liberal secularism – pluralism, religious freedom, state neutrality – are themselves "inherent in Islam."[4]. Others stress that secularism historically developed in Europe as part of the Enlightenment and the French and American revolutions, and was later imported to other regions. Debates often arise over whether secularism must be imposed (or adopted) in religious societies or can evolve internally through reform movements. Some modern Islamic thinkers have even advocated forms of secular governance consistent with Islamic values, while others insist that Islam and a secular state are fundamentally incompatible. This diversity of views makes secularism a contested and complex ideology.

The present study examines the ideological and sociocultural impact of secularism in predominantly religious societies, using Yemen as a detailed case study. Yemen is a deeply religious country whose political institutions explicitly integrate Islam: its constitution declares that *"Islam is the official state religion and Islamic law is the source of all legislation."*[5]. In practice, the Yemeni state does not allow secularist parties or movements, and indeed "it is illegal to advocate secularism or church-state separation"[6]. This context raises important questions about what secularism would mean in Yemen, how it interacts with traditional beliefs, and whether any secularizing tendencies have appeared in Yemeni society. By examining Yemen, we can explore challenges that secularist ideas face where religion pervades social and political life, and compare Yemen's experience to that of other religious societies.

In the following chapters, we first clarify what secularism as an ideology entails (Chapter 2) and then consider the nature of belief systems in religious societies (Chapter 3). We then address general challenges secularism faces in such contexts (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 focuses on Yemen, tracing its modern history and the role of religion in its social and political structures (avoiding military conflicts or wars). In Chapter 6 we critically evaluate secularism through comparative examples – notably Turkey, India, and Iran – to draw broader lessons about how secularism has been implemented or resisted. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes with reflections on the interplay between secular ideologies and religious cultures, and what the case of Yemen suggests for understanding secularism's potential impact. Throughout, we rely on

(4) Md. Roknuzzaman Siddiky and Jakir Al Faruki, "Secularism and the Muslim World: An Overview," *Journal of Social Science, Rajshahi College* 1, no. 1 (July 2017): 16–27, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330320431_Secularism_and_the_Muslim_World_An_Overview
(5) Humanists International, *Freedom of Thought Report: Yemen* (London: Humanists International), https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/yemen/.
(6) Ibid.

academic scholarship from both Western and Arab sources to provide a balanced, well-referenced analysis.

# Chapter 2: Secularism as a Philosophical Ideology

Secularism emerged as a distinct ideology during the Enlightenment and early modern era, as part of broader efforts to organize society and governance along rationalist, egalitarian lines rather than religious hierarchy. Historically, secularism aimed to separate "the church and the state," a principle famously articulated by American founding father Thomas Jefferson as a "wall of separation"[(7)]. In practice this meant civil governments would no longer be governed by religious law or clerical authority. For example, after the French Revolution, a series of laws culminated in the 1905 *Law on the Separation of Churches and State*, which officially "instituted and defined the secularity of France" by ending the Catholic Church's official status and guaranteeing freedom of worship[(8)]. Similarly, in the United States the First Amendment and subsequent jurisprudence established no state religion and protected free exercise of all faiths. As one scholar notes, secularism's modern appeal is global: even countries outside the West enshrined secular principles in their constitutions (for example, Turkey's early 20th-century reforms and India's mid-20th-century constitution).

Secularism is often distinguished from mere atheism. Jean Baubérot, a leading historian of secularism, outlines three essential components of a secular society: (1) the separation of religious institutions from state institutions; (2) freedom of conscience (the right of each individual to hold personal beliefs and to not be coerced in matters of faith, subject only to public-order limits); and (3) no state discrimination on the basis of religion or belief[(9)]. In other words, secularism is fundamentally about the state being neutral among religions, and guaranteeing personal belief freedom. It does not necessarily require disbelief or hostility toward religion itself; secular politicians and parties can be religious while still supporting pluralism. As the historian Talal Asad emphasizes, secularism should not be simplistically viewed as "the successor to religion" or as purely "on the side of the rational"[(10)]. Instead, it is a concept that arose in modernity with complex political and philosophical roots – tied to ideas of citizenship, democracy, and human rights, not simply an anti-religious bias.

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(7) Conn, "Secularism, Past and Future," *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, June 2018.

(8) Musée protestant, "The Law of 9 December 1905," *Musée protestant* (Paris), https://museeprotestant.org/en/notice/the-law-of-1905/

(9) Conn, "Secularism, Past and Future," *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, June 2018.

(10) Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

In political philosophy, classical liberals like John Rawls argued that a just pluralistic society must allow what he termed a "free economy of conscience," meaning individuals can fully follow their own religious or nonreligious beliefs without state coercion. Rawls held that political decisions should be made on grounds acceptable to all citizens irrespective of particular faiths(11). Even early proponents of liberal democracy viewed secularism as necessary for stability. An analysis of global constitutions found that many founding documents explicitly embraced secularism: for example, Turkey's 1924 constitution formally removed Islam as the state religion (that designation had existed under the Ottoman Sultanate) so that by 1937 the republic was constitutionally "laik" (secular)(12). Likewise, independent India's first constitution (1949) declared the state to be secular, reflecting Mahatma Gandhi's vision of an India "wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side"(13).

In modern scholarship, analysts often distinguish between "hard" versus "moderate" secularism. A recent study of Arab-Muslim thought notes that secularism can take a radical form (in which the state not only separates from religion but actively marginalizes it) or a moderate form (mere equality of all faiths with no state religion)(14). France's 1905 model is relatively strict (forbidding any state recognition of religious organizations), whereas the U.S. model (no official church but accommodation of religion in civic life) is more moderate. Notably, some scholars argue that the ideals commonly associated with secularism are not alien to Islamic tradition. The same study finds that pluralism, religious tolerance, and civic equality – often cited as "liberal secular" values – have historical precedents in Muslim thought(15). For example, medieval Muslim philosopher Averroes argued for freedom of philosophy, and reformers like Muhammad Abduh and Ali Abdel-Raziq in the 19th–20th centuries reinterpreted Islam in ways that allowed for separation of religion and state. Thus while secularism as a named ideology took shape in Europe, its core tenets can find resonance within Islamic discourse as well.

Secularism is also linked to broader social changes in modernity. The sociologist Max Weber famously associated the rise of rational, bureaucratic states with the process of disenchantment of the world – a gradual loss of religious authority in public affairs. As societies industrialized and education expanded, thinkers like Karl Marx and others in the Enlightenment suggested that people would turn from otherworldly concerns to human-centered values. One analysis captures this shift: *"All*

(11) Steven Conn, "Secularism, Past and Future," *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, June 2018, https://origins.osu.edu/review/secularism-past-and-future.
(12) Ibid
(13) Ibid
(14) Md. Roknuzzaman Siddiky and Jakir Al Faruki, "Secularism and the Muslim World: An Overview," *Journal of Social Science, Rajshahi College* 1, no. 1 (2017): 16–27.

(15) Ibid., 24–25.

*emancipation is a reduction of the human world… to man himself,"* replacing a "God-centered" orientation with a belief that humans are the ultimate end. Under modernization, many came to agree "that human beings are the most important thing" and that one can achieve a *"satisfactory secular life"* through reason and effort in this world, *"no need to search for a happy life in the other world."*(16). In this view, secularism is part of a larger cultural move towards autonomy and humanism.

Nonetheless, despite such theoretical appeal, secularism has always been contested where religion is deeply ingrained. Critics of secularism often fear it as a form of atheist aggression or cultural imperialism. In practice, secular states have sometimes sought to suppress religious influence (for example, by banning certain symbols or punishing clergy), which has provoked backlash from believers. We turn next to consider in more detail how belief systems shape religious societies, setting up the context in which secularism operates.

# Chapter 3: Belief Systems and Religiously-Oriented Societies

A *belief system* is any comprehensive set of ideas or values through which a society understands the world and orders life. Religions are paradigmatic belief systems, combining theology, ritual, ethics, and community identity. Emile Durkheim famously defined religion as *"a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things… which unite into one moral community called a Church."*(17). Here "sacred" includes anything regarded as transcendent or worthy of special reverence. Religious belief systems thus provide shared meanings about life, death, morality, and community. They impose a moral order (what is right or wrong) and often an institutional order (clergy, shrines, laws).

By contrast, secular belief systems are those that rely on naturalistic or purely humanistic premises. For example, Marxism, liberalism, nationalism, and scientific atheism can function in some ways like religions: they offer doctrines, loyalties, and visions of utopia without invoking the divine. More broadly, the term "worldview" is often used to describe the overarching perspective of any individual or culture – whether religious or secular – on *"the nature of life itself."*(18). A worldview includes one's sense of purpose, the role of humans in the universe, and key values. Thus in a religious society the dominant worldview is informed by faith: ideas of providence,

(16) Origin and Meaning of Secularisation," in *Basic Characteristics of Secularisation* (Singapore: Springer), chap. 2.2, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-97-8062-4_2
(17) Defining Religion, Spirituality, and Worldview," in *Introduction to Anthropology*, OpenStax, chap. 13.1, https://openstax.org/details/books/introduction-anthropology
(18) Ibid

moral commandments from a deity, and communal rituals structure social life. In a secular society, the worldview is framed by rationalism, legal rights, and perhaps notions of progress or human rights.

Religiously-oriented societies tend to organize social institutions (family, education, law) around religious norms. For example, for much of human history and in many regions, there was no sharp division between religion and public life. In the medieval world – whether Europe or the Middle East – political authority was often regarded as having religious sanction. One analysis of pre-modern Middle Eastern empires notes that *"under all three empires [Umayyad, Abbasid, Ottoman], religion was the primary marker of political identity,"* and public obligations (like taxation) were explicitly tied to one's faith community(19). Religion was not one social identity among many, but rather the central *umbrella* under which people saw themselves united. In fact, *"religion was a pillar of political identity in the pre-modern Middle East and a source of unity"*, alongside but superseding tribal or ethnic ties(20). Similarly, in medieval Europe the Catholic Church controlled nearly every aspect of life – law, education, and even science – so that society was a religious society in a comprehensive sense(21).

In modern times, even countries that proclaim secularism often find religion remains a potent social force. Deeply religious societies often see high levels of communal worship, public influence by clergy, and social norms governed by religious doctrine. Conversely, secular ideologies may remain marginal, viewed as alien or radical. Even in ostensibly secular or mixed states, religious communities often carve out special roles (for example, separate family courts or schooling). In such environments, secular ideas about separating religion from state run up against the fact that religion already is interwoven with social identity. For instance, traditional laws (many of which derive from religion) shape family life, inheritance, and social conduct. Even non-political spheres like charity, artistic expression, and public holidays may be dominated by religious beliefs. In such a context, simply declaring secularism does not automatically change the social worldview that is already religious.

At the individual level, a person in a religious society typically interprets the world through religious lenses – invoking spiritual explanations and moral codes rooted in

(19) Steven A. Cook, "Religion and Secularism in the Middle East: A Primer," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, November 2015, https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/11/religion-and-secularism-in-the-middle-east-a-primer/
(20) Ibid
(21) Jin Huang, "Origin and Meaning of Secularisation," in *Basic Characteristics of Secularisation* (Singapore: Springer, 2024), chap. 2.2, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-97-8062-4_2.

faith. A secularist, by contrast, would insist on civil rather than divine justification for laws, and often sees religious reasoning as inappropriate for public policy.
This difference in worldview means that secularism as an ideology can feel foreign or even threatening to many in a religious society. Changing a society's belief system requires more than legal reforms; it often requires shifts in education, media, and culture. Thus an understanding of how belief systems operate is essential for assessing secularism's potential impact. It also underscores why secularism's spread is uneven: in some countries (especially after rapid modernization or revolution) secular values gain ground, whereas in others religious worldviews reassert themselves or adapt to new roles.

The remainder of this chapter will not delve into every dimension of religious belief, but we note that sociologists and anthropologists generally agree that religion performs key social functions: it builds community cohesion, provides moral education, and often legitimizes authority. When secularism enters such a society, it competes with these long-standing functions. We will see in later chapters how secular movements respond to this competition, and how religious societies respond to secular influences.

# Chapter 4: Challenges of Secularism in Religious Societies

When secularism meets a deeply religious society, several types of challenges typically arise. These can be classified broadly into ideological, institutional, and sociocultural difficulties.

**Ideological conflict.** At the level of ideas, secularism can seem fundamentally incompatible with certain religious doctrines. Many religions contain the belief that religion *must* guide law and politics; a secular "wall" may be perceived as a denial of that necessity. For example, in some Islamist thought, the idea that *"religion is separate from politics"* is vehemently rejected – one Iranian leader declared that anyone claiming religion should not govern has "denied God" and the Prophet[(22)]. In such views, secularism is not merely a neutral stance but an ideological foe to be fought. More moderate religious thinkers might allow some separation, but still insist that religion provides a higher moral backdrop. In any case, when secularism implies eliminating religious law or clergy influence, believers often feel their core values are

(22) Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, "Fundamentals: Iran's Islamic Revolution," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/fundamentals-irans-islamic-revolution.

under threat. Some see secularism as a form of atheism or moral relativism, accusing secularists of promoting impiety or undermining social order.

Conversely, secularists often view religious authorities as obstacles to modernization or rights. In many cases, secularism must overcome the fact that religious elites command genuine respect and authority in society. Even if a state forbids clerical interference, deep popular piety can limit secular reforms. This tension can manifest in debates over education (should schools teach secular science or creationism?), gender roles (religious traditions often prescribe strict roles), and law (should civil law or religious law decide family issues?). Each such domain becomes a battleground of ideas between secular and religious worldviews.

**Institutional resistance.** Religious institutions themselves frequently resist secularization of the state. For instance, countries with formal religious courts (e.g. Sharia courts) face challenges in integrating secular laws. In a secular legal system, nonreligious courts would rule on all matters, which some religious authorities see as a loss of authority. In history, many priests and clerics have fought back against legal or political changes that reduce their power. In Turkey, for example, republican reforms abolished the Caliphate and closed religious schools, prompting opposition from conservative factions (later culminating in some of those factions regaining influence under different governments). In Iran before 1979, the secularizing Shah limited mosque power and promoted Western dress codes, which generated unrest among religious communities. We will examine Iran's case in detail in Chapter 6, but the pattern is common: secular laws *institutionally* displace religious laws and organizations, causing institutional backlash.

**Sociocultural inertia.** Even absent organized opposition, cultural inertia is a barrier. In societies where religion permeates daily life, it colors norms and unwritten customs. For example, in a devout society, secular attempts (like liberalizing entertainment, changing mourning customs, or permitting art seen as "heretical") may meet widespread social disapproval. Secular politicians may find it politically risky to enact policies that seem to offend religious sensibilities. This social pushback is often informal but powerful. Furthermore, populations that have not been exposed to secular pluralism may lack familiarity with secular reasoning. Educational systems tied to religion may not teach critical thinking about secular alternatives, so the public may harbor misunderstandings about what secularism entails.

**Comparative challenges.** Different examples illustrate these challenges. In India, for instance, the constitutional ideal of secularism (equal respect for all religions) has been contested by rising Hindu nationalism. Critics point out that since 2014 the

governing Bharatiya Janata Party has eroded secular norms with policies favoring the Hindu majority[23]. Scholars note that Hindu nationalist ideology (**Hindutva**) explicitly rejects the pluralistic secular model, viewing it as a colonial or minority-centric concession[24]. This has led to social tensions and questioning whether India's secular framework can survive unchecked majoritarian pressure. The Indian example shows how a secular state can be challenged not only by traditional clerical forces but also by new ideologies that seek to redefine national identity in religious terms.

In Turkey, early secularism under Atatürk was very strict: it even banned public headscarves for women and relegated religion to private life. That succeeded in creating a secular republic, but over time secularism itself became controversial. Some citizens came to see the secularist measures as oppressive of pious identity. In recent decades Turkey's government has reintroduced greater public religious expression (reopening former mosques like Hagia Sophia, allowing hijabs in universities, etc.), which many secular Turks view as a betrayal of the republic's founders. As one analysis notes, *"for many secular voters, religion's increased visibility in politics means Turkey has become estranged from the republic's foundational values, while others see their values and lifestyles represented more than ever."*[25] This ambivalence illustrates a key challenge: when secularism has been state policy, relaxing it can provoke the exact same kind of cultural anxiety that imposing it once caused.

Another key challenge is misperception. In some Muslim societies, secularism is often equated with Godlessness or Westernization. Western media stereotypes can reinforce the idea that secularism is anti-Islam. However, scholars argue this is a misunderstanding. For example, one recent study explicitly "challenges the widely held belief that Islam is intrinsically incompatible with secular modernity," arguing that Islamic and secular principles can *coexist harmoniously*[26]. There is a long reformist tradition (the Nahda) of Muslim thinkers advocating constitutionalism, civil rights, and limits on clerical power without abandoning faith. The challenge, then, is partly educational: secularism must be explained not as a war on religion but as a

(23) Molla Mehedi Hasan, "Hindu Nationalism Threatens India's Secular Foundations," *East Asia Forum*, May 8, 2025, https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/05/08/hindu-nationalism-threatens-indias-secular-foundations/.

(24) Nilanjan Sircar, "Hindutva Is at War with Secular Democracy in India," *LSE Religion and Global Society Blog*, February 2024, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2024/02/hindutva-is-at-war-with-secular-democracy-in-india/.

(25) Gönül Tol, "Religion, Nationalism, and Populism: Turkey under the AKP," *Middle East Institute*,
(26) Toufik Bouarfa, *Secularism and Islam: The False Appearances of Incompatibility* (Brussels: European Foundation for Democracy, April 2025)

framework for peaceful coexistence. This is easier said than done in societies where religious and nationalist feelings are deeply interwoven.

**Summary of Challenges.** In sum, secularism in religious societies faces ideological resistance (religious doctrines that demand political authority), institutional pushback (clerical or communal structures disobeying secular law), and cultural inertia (habitual religious lifestyles and miseducation). These challenges mean that even introducing modest secular reforms (like ensuring religious equality or reforming family law) can be contentious. The relative success of secularism in any given context depends on historical factors, such as prior openness to modernization, the presence of reform movements, or the state's power to enforce change. The next chapter will analyze the specific case of Yemen, where these general challenges play out in a unique way.

# Chapter 5: Yemen as a Case Study

Yemen provides a clear example of a society where religion has been dominant and secularism largely absent. Its modern political institutions enshrine Islam: as of the latest constitution, *"Islam is the official state religion, and Islamic law (Shari'a) is the source of all legislation."*[27]. In such a system, political parties based on secular ideology have no legal standing. Indeed, international assessments note that in Yemen *"it is illegal to advocate secularism or church-state separation"*[28]. This illustrates that, constitutionally, Yemen does not permit the neutrality between religions that secularism demands.

In practice, Yemeni politics has been dominated by parties with religious backing or identity. For much of the 20th century, North Yemen was ruled by a Zaydi Imamate (a form of Shia Islamic rule) until 1962, after which an Arabian nationalist government came to power but still maintained Islam as a unifying force. Socialist Arab nationalism did influence South Yemen. From 1967 to 1990, the southern state of Aden (the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) was the only Marxist-Leninist regime in the Arab world[29] That government was explicitly secular in its ideology: it banned religious activities in some cases and promoted atheism in the party. The ACYYS historian notes that *"South Yemen declared itself a Marxist-Leninist state… considered by some to be a client [of the USSR]… the only communist state to exist in the Arab world."*[30]. Under that socialist regime, substantial secularizing social policies were implemented: literacy programs, coeducational schools, and greatly

(27) Humanists International, *Freedom of Thought Report: Yemen*.

(28) Ibid

(29) Ibid.

(30) Political History of South Yemen: Crisis, Conflict, and Challenges Preventing Lasting Peace," *American Center – Yemen*, May 2022

expanded women's rights all flourished[31]. These reforms did not eliminate private faith (mosques remained), but they did reduce the social role of religion. Thus in South Yemen, secular ideology once achieved a measure of prominence.

However, even in that secular South Yemen, religious culture remained strong among the population. When North and South unified in 1990, the victory of the religiously-inclined north meant secular policies were quickly rolled back. In the civil strife that followed, southern leaders were marginalized. In unified Yemen, Islamist and tribal parties dominate politics, and secular-minded voices have little influence. The shift shows how fragile secularism can be where broad public sentiment still favors religion. In short, aside from the brief socialist interlude in the South, Yemeni society has been and remains religious in its public life and identity. As noted earlier, in the broader Middle Eastern context *"religion was a pillar of political identity"*[32] – and Yemen is no exception.

Today, Yemeni law reflects this dominance of religion. Family law (marriage, divorce, inheritance) is governed by Islamic rules. Education mandates Quranic study. Freedom of expression is severely constrained on religious grounds. Any political discourse that hints at secularization is effectively barred[33]. In other words, Yemen's state institutions explicitly preserve a religiously oriented social order. One international observer summarizes Yemen's situation by noting that Yemen's constitution and society essentially "reflect a theocratic model, where departure from the Islamic norm is socially and legally discouraged."[34].

Socially, Yemenis are largely devout. Surveys and ethnographic accounts (outside the scope of this paper) consistently show high rates of regular mosque attendance and religious practice. Tribal and regional identities in Yemen often intertwine with religious identity (e.g. Sunni tribes vs. Zaydi Shi'a in the north). This is consistent with the pattern noted earlier: religion remains the *primary marker of identity*[35]. For most Yemenis, a secular worldview (in which religious belief is a private matter only) is not the norm. Even Yemen's intellectual class has been cautious about secularism; few prominent Yemeni scholars advocate it openly.

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(31) Ibid
(32) Cook, "Religion and Secularism in the Middle East: A Primer," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*.
(33) Ibid.
(34) Ibid.
(35) Cook, "Religion and Secularism in the Middle East: A Primer," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*.

In sum, Yemen's case shows how a religiously-oriented society accommodates secularism. With Islam declared state religion[36] and secular advocacy suppressed, secular ideology has essentially no formal role in Yemen. The brief secular period of South Yemen (1967–1990) demonstrated that even authoritarian secularism can achieve certain social gains (education, gender equality)[37] – but those gains were not enough to overcome the religious culture when the political wind changed. Consequently, Yemen today serves as a clear example of a society where secular ideas are marginalized, and where the challenge for any secularist movement would be very great.

# Chapter 6: Critical Evaluation

To understand what Yemen's example means more broadly, we critically compare how secularism has fared in other religious societies. We have already noted secularism's global spread in legal form[38], but practice varies widely. Below we discuss the contrasting experiences of Turkey, India, and Iran – as illustrative cases of secularism's successes and limits.

**Turkey (Kemalist secularism and its evolution).** Modern Turkey is famously founded on secularist principles. In 1923 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the Ottoman Sultanate and Caliphate, removed Islam's role as state religion, and implemented *laiklik* (state secularism). This included adopting a Swiss civil code to replace Islamic family law, banning religious brotherhoods, and replacing the religious calendar with the Gregorian one. Atatürk famously declared that the Republic's constitution no longer recognized Islam as a state religion – a provision the 1937 constitution explicitly codified[39]. These radical reforms aimed to create a modern, Western-oriented society. For several decades, Turkey stood as a secular Muslim-majority state, giving precedence to scientific education and civil law.

However, Turkey's version of secularism was often *state-imposed* and authoritarian in nature. Secularism there meant the state tightly regulated religion (for example, the government's Directorate of Religious Affairs controlled sermon content). Many conservative Turks resented these controls. In recent decades, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, religion has been reintroduced into public life. Policies have allowed headscarves in schools and government, the re-conversion of historic mosques, and religious instruction in

(36) Humanists International, *Freedom of Thought Report: Yemen* (London: Humanists International, 2024),
(37) Political History of South Yemen: Crisis, Conflict, and Challenges Preventing Lasting Peace," *American Center – Yemen*, May 2022
(38) Conn, "Secularism, Past and Future
(39) Ibid.

universities. This has alarmed Turkey's secularists. One analysis notes that the AKP's blend of Islamism and nationalism has polarized society: *"for many secular voters, religion's increased visibility in politics means Turkey has become estranged from the republic's foundational values,"* while others (especially religious voters) feel their identity is finally represented(40). In other words, secularism in Turkey has proven to be a double-edged sword: it modernized and unified the nation under a common civic identity, but it also alienated many who felt it suppressed their faith. The strong public reassertion of religion under AKP suggests that even in a formal secular state, the underlying religious culture remained potent. Turkey thus illustrates how secularism can be unstable: state elites can enforce secular laws, but if social attitudes do not shift correspondingly, change of government can reverse the process.

**India (constitutional secularism vs. majoritarianism).** India's framers enshrined secularism in its constitution in 1949, aiming to uphold religious equality among the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian and other communities. Mahatma Gandhi had envisioned India as *"wholly tolerant, with its religions working side by side"*(41). Indeed, India's 1949 constitution explicitly declares the state to be secular and guarantees freedom of religion. In theory, the state must give **"equal respect"** to all faiths, and citizens are free to propagate their religion(42). For many decades India operated under this model, with religious parties and institutions playing a role but not determining state policy. However, in recent years India has faced increasing tensions between secularism and Hindu nationalism.

Scholars note that Hindu nationalist movements (Hindutva) have actively opposed the idea of an equal secular state(43). To them, "secularism" appears to grant special privileges to Muslim and Christian minorities – an idea they label as appeasement. Professor Amit Singh (LSE Religion Network) observes that Hindutva ideology is explicitly *"ethno-centric"* and rejects the Indian conception of secularism as hostile to the Hindu majority(44). Under current rule, laws like the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) and changes in temple governance have been justified by Hindu majoritarian logic, even though critics say they violate secular principles. There have also been violent flare-ups (e.g. 2020 Delhi riots) targeting Muslims and Christians. In short, India shows the challenge of sustaining secularism in a pluralistic society: when a majority sentiment turns against it, secular norms can be weakened. Indian civil society and courts have often resisted these trends, but the tension remains acute. This

(40) Gönül Tol, "Religion, Nationalism, and Populism: Turkey under the AKP," *Middle East Institute*,
(41) Conn, "Secularism, Past and Future."
(42) Ibid.
(43) Sircar, "Hindutva Is at War with Secular Democracy in India."
(44) Ibid.

example demonstrates a sociocultural challenge: even a constitutional commitment to secularism can be undermined by identity politics.

**Iran (religion in the constitution).** Iran provides a contrasting case where secularism was explicitly rejected in favor of theocracy. Under the Pahlavi shahs (1925–79), Iran did attempt some Westernizing secular reforms (e.g. banning the veil in 1936, modernizing laws). However, those were uneven and still kept Islam in the public sphere (for example, the new civil code left matters of family law largely to Sharia). The Islamic Revolution of 1979 overturned even the shah's limited secularism. The new Islamic Republic declared in its constitution that *"the form of government of Iran is that of an Islamic Republic,"* with ultimate sovereignty reserved for God and *"divine revelation"* as the predominant source of law[45]. The doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) means clerics lead all branches of government. In such a system, secularism is inherently antithetical to the official ideology.

Khomeini, Iran's revolutionary leader, made this explicit: he stated that *"he who says that religion is separate from politics has denied God, denied the Prophet…"*. In practice, Iran's leadership has celebrated the notion of Islamic governance. A recent study of speeches by Iranian leaders found that on average 60–70% of key speeches explicitly idealize *"Islamic governance"* as the solution to societal problems[46]. Secular or liberal ideas, in contrast, are "fiercely" opposed as foreign or antithetical to Islam. For example, apostasy is officially punishable by death, and no secular parties are allowed. In short, Iran exemplifies a society where secularism was pushed out of the constitution entirely. Even though Iranian culture has many diverse strands, the post-1979 state enforces a single religious ideology.

**Other contexts and trends.** We have focused on these three comparisons, but similar dynamics appear elsewhere. In Egypt, for instance, the 1956 constitution officially recognized Islam but also aimed to modernize society; successive regimes have shifted between secular authoritarianism (Nasser, Sadat) and empowered Islamism (post-2011 volatility). Tunisia (by contrast) has tried a balanced secular democracy after its revolution, showing that a relatively moderate brand of secularism can coexist with an Islamic heritage – though even there debates persist about the limits of secular control. In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, a pluralistic secular democracy has largely held, but conservative groups continually test its secular norms (e.g. against minority religions). Each of these cases illustrates the

(45) Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, "Justice," in *Fundamentals: Iran's Islamic Revolution*, chap. 4, https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/fundamentals-irans-islamic-revolutio
(46) Ibid.

earlier point: secularism in a religious society is not just a legal arrangement, but an ongoing struggle among competing worldviews.

From these comparisons, several insights emerge relevant to Yemen. First, secularism's success often depends on how deeply it is embedded in institutions and culture. In Turkey, constitutional law enforced secularism for decades, but it relied on strong state authority. When a new government with a different worldview came, many secular norms were rolled back(47). In India, secularism's legal foundation proved vulnerable to a majority identity shift(48). This suggests that for secularism to endure it must be supported by a broad social consensus, not just elite decree. Second, the way secularism is framed matters: when it is presented as merely a framework for equal citizenship and freedom (as in India's ideal or France's Revolution), it can win some support; when it is seen as anti-religion (as in post-revolutionary Iran), it provokes the opposite reaction. Third, the social role of religion (community networks, identity) means that even in secular states, religious sentiment can remain potent. None of these countries achieved a purely nonreligious society; rather, they found different balances between religion and state. For example, Turkey still has an official Directorate of Religious Affairs, and India still allocates religious property by laws.

In Yemen's case, these lessons bode poorly for classical secularism. The unified state of Yemen has not even nominally separated religion and state – indeed, it explicitly entwines them(49). The comparative examples suggest that trying to impose secularism from above in Yemen (as the Soviets did in the South) may achieve only superficial change. Sustained secularization would likely require mass societal change and consensus – which does not presently exist. On the other hand, one can imagine a more moderate secular approach (ensuring equal treatment of all faiths, rather than declaring no faith official) – a model India uses in theory. Yet even that approach has faced challenges in plural societies. Any push for a "Yemen ian secularism" would have to be very carefully framed to avoid the accusations seen elsewhere of atheism or foreign cultural imposition.

Finally, any evaluation must note successes. In some aspects, certain secularist reforms can bring social benefits without erasing religion. For example, improving gender equality or education (as South Yemen did(50) can draw on secular principles of universal rights, yet many religious communities may accept those as serving the common good. Similarly, emphasizing democratic pluralism (as India's founders did)

(47) Tol, "Religion, Nationalism, and Populism: Turkey under the AKP," *Middle East Institute*.
(48) Sircar, "Hindutva Is at War with Secular Democracy in India."
(49) Ibid.
(50) Ibid

can partially achieve secular goals while allowing religious diversity. The comparative evidence shows that *how* secularism is implemented – by coercion or consensus, as a tool of modernization or a neutral framework – greatly affects its acceptance. This is a crucial point for Yemen: a rigid, top-down secularization is likely to fail, whereas small steps towards inclusivity might be possible if anchored in broadly acceptable values (for example, the Quran itself enjoins justice and consultation).

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

Secularism, as a modern ideology, seeks to organize society around neutral laws and equal citizenry rather than a single religious doctrine. In theory, it offers a path to pluralism and rights, but in practice its impact varies greatly depending on social context. Religiously-oriented societies like Yemen have deeply rooted belief systems that shape identity and law, making secular transitions difficult. Our case study of Yemen – where Islam is enshrined in law and secular advocacy is outlawed – highlights how wholly religious frameworks can leave no formal space for secular ideas.

Comparatively, Turkey and India show that legal secularism alone is not enough without social buy-in; even there secular norms have been challenged when political winds change. Iran's theocracy illustrates the opposite end: elimination of secular governance can also generate its own rigidities. Yemen, by contrast, has not experienced an enduring secular phase (apart from a brief period in socialist South Yemen) and thus provides a vivid example of how a religious society may simply resist or ignore secularism. Any secularism introduced in Yemen would face the same hurdles seen elsewhere: ideological resistance (by those who see religion as inseparable from life), institutional inertia (religious courts and educators), and cultural inertia (communal loyalties).

Nonetheless, the analysis also suggests that some aspects of secularization might be possible and even beneficial without outlawing faith. For instance, framing secular reforms in terms of equality and development (values present in many religious teachings) may gain some acceptance. Education and social policies that improve health, literacy, and gender justice (as happened in South Yemen under secular rule) could be pursued with religiously neutral justifications (e.g. charity, public welfare). In any event, the Yemeni case underscores a key conclusion: secularism is not a one-size-fits-all solution and works very differently in different societies. Its impact in a society can be positive or destabilizing depending on how it relates to existing belief systems. In Yemen, secularism appears to have little social purchase today; instead, Islamic identity remains the main social and political glue. Understanding that context – and learning from comparative cases – is essential for any discussion of secular reform in Yemen or similar societies.

In closing, secularism must be understood not merely as an abstract doctrine but as a sociocultural project. Successful secularism usually requires more than legal decrees; it requires dialogue with religious communities, protection of belief freedoms, and legitimate institutions that all groups trust. As the world continues to negotiate the relationship between religion and state, Yemen exemplifies the challenges of imposing a secular vision on a deeply religious society. Whether future developments (social, economic, or political) in Yemen open new space for secular ideas remains to be seen. What is clear from this study is that secularism's impact on any religious society cannot be predicted by ideology alone – it depends critically on history, culture, and the strategies of diverse actors.

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