

Secularism

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Secularism is, in its simplest form, a belief that religion should be kept separate from the State and vice versa. It is an idea which has been around since thinkers such as Epicurus graced the streets of ancient Greece but has developed in various forms in different parts of the world.

France and the United States in the late 18th Century, found much common ground in the idealisms which gave birth to revolution and their respective republics. A central tenet written into their constitution was the idea that any one religion did not have a position of favour within the walls of government. Much as this common ground existed; their secularism differs greatly in practice. Secularism has also featured in some political regimes in the Middle East.

In the United States, freedom of faith is held to be of high importance. All faiths are held to be equal under the constitution. In the early days of Independence there were a lot of ideas circulating regarding separation of state and religion. The third President Thomas Jefferson even cut and pasted the Gospel into a new book omitting all the “supernatural” elements and thus created a “secular gospel”. In recent times however, faith plays a large part of public life amongst US politicians and the public. Indeed it is unusual and perhaps unheard of for a presidential candidate not to pin their flag of faith to the mast.

The US is in notable contrast to France where, since 1958 and the Fifth Republic, public displays of faith are not favoured. This includes public figures but has also manifested in the banning of wearing religious garments such as the Muslim burqa in public. Some of this has also been adopted in the UK where healthcare workers are asked in many health trusts not to wear religious jewellery.

The philosophy behind secularism is often misunderstood as being generated from an “anti-religious” mind-set. Actually this couldn’t be further than the truth. In practice the priorities that manifest out of secularism are deeper than the aspiration to keep religion in the most appropriate sphere of society.

Perhaps a more important philosophy behind secularism is that each person can live expressing themselves fully according to their individual beliefs. Each person should not be favoured for belonging to a particular faith. No person should be discriminated against because of their faith or lack of faith.

One might consider that a Service person who holds a secular view might experience a sense of inner conflict related to the fact that the monarchy whom they protect is also the head of the Church of England or “protector of the faith”. On a practical level this is no different to personnel who are members of protestant free churches; a tradition which was arguably born from a secularist mind set.

Within the Armed Forces, Humanists share the same aspiration as Command and all community networks. That aspiration is to create an environment where every person can experience and contribute to service life without being discriminated against because of race, colour, faith, gender or sexuality. Within the wider dialogue as to how to achieve this, sometimes a secular position being weighed against a non-secular position can contribute positively to decision making. Indeed the Defence Humanists actively seek to engage with Chaplaincy in all three services who maintain an interest in how best to support its non-religious as well as religious personnel.

On the ground, day to day, Humanists in the Armed Forces prefer to build bridges rather than burn them. We all share mess deck, recreational spaces and work places with people who have diverse beliefs and live in close proximity to each other. Whilst we all belong to a fighting force that seeks to promote freedom and free speech, we realise that these freedoms need to be exercised with responsibility both in the interests of security, the core values of the Armed Forces but also to exist happily, respectfully and meaningfully alongside our colleagues.

During the uprisings in Egypt a many pictures and stories came through the media which depicted both Muslims and Christians verbally and physically defending the rights of the other to live free from discrimination and violence. There is no more vivid a picture of one group protectively encircling members of another faith in order for them to pray without fear of violence. This picture whilst building bridges between faiths is also a great example of what secularists wish to achieve. Equality and freedom of faith or lack of faith.

Secularism, therefore, rather than being divisive in nature, can serve as a bridge between two different ends of a belief spectrum.