

Haileybury MUN

Research report

GA4: Special Political and Decolonisation

The question of separation of religion and state

By: Claudia Chan



Introduction and key terms

People often argue that separation of religion and state (also known as secularism) is essential to democracy. Separation of Church and state Religion is a philosophical and jurisprudential idea for defining the political distance between religious organisations and the nation state. It also refers to the idea of the creation of a secular state (state that doesn't include the Church).

With the increase of immigration comes the increase in different religious traditions and practices, making a country more diverse and adaptable to the needs of the general public. America is one of the few nations that established a state religion in 1791. This means that government is prohibited from supporting any religion or promoting one over the other. They are also not allowed to appoint religious leaders, encourage worship or prayer, define creedal statements of faith or official interpret sacred scriptures. Only religious institutions (e.g. Churches, Mosques, Synagogues etc.) have the jurisdiction to dictate or decide these- this plays an important role in religious freedom.

Examples of countries that have established separation between religion and state:

1. United States
2. Canada
3. Australia
4. France
5. Brazil
6. China
7. Russia
8. Japan
9. Nigeria
10. Italy

Benefits of separation of religion and state:

1. People should have the individual right to exercise their right to religious freedom and freedom of religious expression. This is highlighted in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18) and the US Constitution under the 1st amendment. To temper with religious liberty would go against these rights that have been granted to all. The government shouldn't be allowed to coerce someone to participate in a particular religion nor give up one's religious beliefs.
2. Additionally, the concept of separation of church and state reinforces the legal right for people to freely live their faith, both in public and in private. As religion is a personal topic and varies from person to person, everyone should be entitled to do whatever is most comfortable for them and shouldn't have to experience prejudice as they would be protected under the rule of law.
3. Separation of religion and state makes everyone equal before the law. No religion would have more advantages- it supports the idea of democracy and fairness.

Disadvantages of secularism

1. An anti-religious secularism creates conflict within society and between individuals. People are more susceptible to discrimination against religious minorities.
2. Religious institutions lose some power despite influence over majorities in some countries

Useful websites:

<http://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-29>

<http://time.com/5103677/church-state-separation-religious-freedom/>

https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/bc_papers/BCP-ChurchState.pdf

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-secular-life/201711/fighting-the-separation-church-and-state>