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**Brief Notes on Secularity and Religion, in a Jewish Perspective**

## **Brief Notes on Secularity and Religion, in a Jewish Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

These brief notes aim to give a description of the concept of *laïcité*/secularity as a religious value, inspired by some Jewish sources. They emphasize a positive attitude towards the world as a divine creation but not God in itself. Among the virtues that characterize a *laïc*/secular person we may find irony, empathy and compassion, respect for diversity and pluralism, humility and a disposition to continuously study of world, in order to better appreciate it and live with justice and goodness. The opposite of the secularist is the fanatic/fundamentalist who lacks all these virtues.

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1. *Laïcité*/Secularity – a term and concept that has a long history precisely within religious contexts – is not, however, the opposite of religiosity. Rather, it is a mental attitude connected to a vision of the world that assigns the proper religious value to people and things, without absolutizing them but also without annihilating them by depriving them of their intrinsic, though relative, dignity. Indeed, since God, for believers, is the Absolute and the sole Creator, it follows that everything that is not God—that is, the entire world as “creation”—has a relative value. Every creature has value precisely because, in the symphony of existing things, it was created as distinct and special, with its own purpose. At the same time, this value is always relative, meaning that it must integrate and harmonize with other values; it must relate to them and not claim an absoluteness (*ab-solutum*), so that it may achieve the purpose for which it exists. A *laïc*/secular person is someone who recognizes him/her-selves in this attitude that simultaneously values and relativizes everything that exists in the world, perceiving its beauty and purpose in itself while placing it within the broader perspective of the whole. The opposite of such a person is the fundamentalist—that is, anyone who absolutizes something or someone within the order of the world and who does not place things in perspective (whether historical or cultural). Instead, by identifying their own worldview with the divine one, they declare everything else null. In a sense, the fundamentalist is a nihilist, unable to see the relative value of the world itself, which they would gladly sacrifice at the feet of whatever they have absolutized and thus transformed into an idol. *Laïcité*/secularity is an anti-idolatrous stance, typical of those who know that God is God and the world is not God (nothing within the worldly order is).
2. True *laïcité*/secularity, as just described, is appreciated and taught by the Jewish tradition as a form of care for the world inspired by a divine command called the Torah. The Torah as a whole – the books of the Bible, for simplicity – consists of a set of instructions, mostly practical, for the proper use of the world. Here, “proper” means just, balanced, and loving: a shared use of the resources that creation offers to all creatures. Judaism cultivates a mundane gaze upon the world when it lives in the spirit and according to the teachings of the Torah. It asks that the heart be oriented toward knowledge of and service to God, but that in daily life one strive to live according to justice and love, as all the great teachers of Israel tirelessly remind us. Since the world operates according to its own natural laws, in Judaism secularity takes shape in a realistic outlook that seeks the good of the human being here and now, within given geopolitical conditions, rather than in a vague afterlife, without excessive spiritualization but also without renouncing the potentials (both material and spiritual) with which humanity is naturally endowed. From a Jewish perspective, a secular person is one who appreciates and recognizes these potentials, values them as divine gifts, and uses them for their own good and for the good of the rest of humanity. Nature itself is not ethical; it is therefore up to the human being to elevate it to further levels of meaning – spiritual ones – while respecting its rhythms and laws, without idolizing it and without demonizing it. The Torah provides the tools for this elevation of nature, avoiding both the excess of its divinization and the excess of its devaluation. The Torah teaches how to place things in their proper place.
3. Jewish monotheism can be interpreted, more than as a philosophical abstraction or a theological dogma, as the principle according to which the world is from God, but is not God. As such, *laïcité*/secularity is intrinsic to the monotheism of the rabbinic tradition, which invites believers to take the world seriously rather than despise it. Only in the world do we find “traces” of the divine presence, according to a teaching found in Jewish mysticism and in the biblical book of Proverbs: «It is the glory of God to conceal things [that is, their deeper meaning], and the glory of kings [that is, human beings as children of God] to investigate them» (25:2). A secular person, by virtue of their faith in the absoluteness of the Divine, commits themselves to investigating the complexity of the world in order to uncover its secrets, reveal its beauty, and optimize its laws (and, if necessary, correct them to improve

the world). A secular person is anyone who, astonished and captivated by such complexity and beauty, recognizes that God can only be honored by those who investigate without prejudice and without arrogance the infinite dimensions of the world God created. Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer once said that it is possible that «not even God, in the highest heavens, has yet solved all the mysteries of the divine creation, and for this reason continues to hide His/Her face.” A truly *laïc*/secular person and at the same time a true believer is one who never tires of seeking the truth and who knows how to recognize it wherever and from whomever it is spoken.

4. But how does one recognize that such a person is also a believer in God? One might venture that a *laïc*/secular person possesses three characteristics or qualities. First, they have a profound sense of irony, because irony is the ability to see and measure things as they are, placing them in perspective and never exaggerating their weight. It is important, however, to ensure that irony does not degenerate into sarcasm or cynicism. The sarcastic person mocks the world instead of appreciating it; the cynical person sees only its utilitarian aspects and denies value to every other dimension. Second quality: a *laïc*/secular believer relates to the world with empathy and compassion, which are the opposite of indifference and superficiality. A *laïc*/secular person is someone who can recognize another’s suffering regardless of whether the one who suffers belongs to their clan, class, or religion. Such a person does not wear blinders; they feel in others a shared belonging to the world of life and bend toward those who struggle to live. Third quality: the person who grounds their *laïcité*/secularity in the divine Absolute does not disdain recognizing that difference and plurality are the register through which God has willed this world. Loving God therefore means never suffocating the structural diversity of the things that exist (including human beings). Not only tolerating diversity, but celebrating it, understanding it, and making space for it are the traits of the true *laïc*/secular person, who abhors monochrome, monotony, and uniformity, the opposite of the nature of things and of human beings.
5. Perhaps I would add a fourth quality or virtue that distinguishes a religious and secular person from a religious person who is not secular. If the metaphor – brilliantly evoked by Israeli writer Amos Oz – is true, according to which «every fanatic is a walking exclamation mark,» then the truly *laïc*/secular person is the one who, abandoning exclamation marks, prefers to walk with question marks, willing to question themselves, if it means knowing more and living better with themselves and with others. One sad note remains: those who are accustomed to using only exclamation marks often crush those who use question marks. This increases fanaticism and fundamentalism, especially among religious people, against which true *laïcité*/secularity can defend itself only with the weapon of irony. Indeed, *laïcité*/secularity, understood in this way and as it emerges from both ancient and modern Jewish sources, cannot be improvised. Rather, it is the result of an education in humility and a disposition toward continuous study, which together immunize people against the presumption of having the truth in their pocket and of being its sole representatives on earth.

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