New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12490

Comment: *Varieties of Secularism*

Judging by the decline in church attendance, people in Britain are becoming less and less religious, more and more secularist in outlook. Statistics from the mainstream churches all tell the same story. Fewer and fewer of us mark the great rites of passage in life, such as marriage, birth and death, by any traditional religious ceremony. With whatever plausibility, sociologists predict that by mid century, the number of self-identifying Christians, including Catholics, will have become a tiny minority. Universities report a substantial drop in applications by students who want to take degree courses in theology and religion. In general, people will not be qualified to understand how much religion matters in many other countries in the world, especially outside Europe. (Some commentators, such as the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, have long maintained that a 'little remnant' of committed believers would not be a bad thing.)

Not very far outside Europe. Think of Turkey. With a population of over 80 million, the second largest standing military force in NATO (estimated at 495.000 personnel), a healthy economy, and much else to recommend the country, as well as sunny Mediterranean beaches that attract UK holidaymakers, Turkey seems to be leaving behind decades of secularism.

The Ottoman Empire, dating from the last years of the 13th century, collapsed as a result of the First World War. In 1923, when the new republic was created, the principle of secularism was established: there would be official religious neutrality and no state religion. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the soldier who led the defeat of the Allies at Gallipoli, founder of the new Turkish republic, waged a relentless campaign to free his fellow Turks from, as he put it, 'irrational, useless and harmful beliefs'. He could not have been a more eloquent spokesman for Enlightenment hopes for the triumph of reason over religion. Arabic script, the sacred letters of the Quran, was replaced with the Latin alphabet. Sharia courts were banned. The famous 'hat law' prohibited men from wearing the fez and made European-style brimmed hats compulsory in public: 'It was necessary to abolish the fez, which sat on our heads as a sign of ignorance, fanaticism and hatred of progress and civilization', as Atatürk declared. (The fez enabled a man to touch his forehead to the ground during prayer.) Women, at any rate those employed by the state, as schoolteachers and health workers, were forbidden to wear the veil. In 1938, the year before his death, Turkey was declared a 'laicist' state.

© 2019 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12490 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The population of the new state was effectively Muslim. There were long-standing Christian minorities. Tarsus, birthplace of St Paul, Ephesus, Nicaea, Chalcedon, the Cappadocian fathers, and much else, bear witness to key events and sites in early Christianity. In 1924 the exchange of Greeks in Turkey for Turks in the Balkans greatly reduced the Christian minority in Turkey. (It was the Ottoman Empire, in 1915, which massacred the Armenians, thus almost wiping out one of the most ancient Christian churches.)

The secularism promoted by Atatürk was very much a top-down programme. Large numbers of the Sunni Muslim majority, especially in the countryside, never really accepted these very radical reforms. In the mid 1990s, at last, Necmettin Erbakan was elected the first openly Islamist prime minister, two years after his young disciple Recep Tayyip Erdogan became mayor of Istanbul. They were soon forced out by the army, self-proclaimed guardians of the republic's secularism. Erdogan was imprisoned briefly for reciting a provocatively Islamist poem: 'Turkey's mosques will be our barracks, the minarets our bayonets, the domes our helmets, and the faithful our soldiers'. It would be hard even for diligent students of religion in British universities to fathom the passion motivating what seems such doggerel. That the army intervened in defence of allegedly westernised secular practices and principles may seem less difficult to understand: key members of the officer corps were trained in the West. In 2003 Erdogan returned to power, taking over as prime minister. Since then he has worked hard and very successfully to undermine Turkey's secularism—helped by the unsuccessful coup launched by the officer corps, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of hundreds of military officers as well as university lecturers, school teachers, journalists and anyone else suspected of sympathy with non-Islamist secular ideas.

It seems unlikely that the spread of secularist ideas among us in Britain will help us to understand the failure of—resentment against—secularism in countries like Turkey—or India.

Fergus Kerr OP

© 2019 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12490 Published online by Cambridge University Press