SECULARISM FOR DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Secular governance is argued to be essential to stable development. From this it is contended that a secular approach to education is also central to development. This paper explores how religion can be complicit in conflict and fragility, and can be part of extremism or repressive nationalism. It outlines the amplification spiral of religion in conflict and violence, in order to propose a dynamic secularism to break this cycle. Eight myths of secularism are outlined and dismissed. The implications for education are fivefold: avoiding segregation by religion; not stereotyping or dehumanising 'others'; using a rights-based approach to values that cuts across all religions; preparing learners for a secular democratic citizenship; and insisting on critical thinking for teachers and learners. While in dynamic secularism all religions are accepted, they must not be elevated above other forms of ideology or grouping, and must be subject to the same critiques.

Keywords: secularism; conflict; development; religion; rights; education

INTRODUCTION: RELIGION AND CONFLICT

In this article I make the case that secular governance is essential to stable development. From this seemingly stark statement, I then argue that the features of a secular governance must be mapped onto schools so that the religion/education nexus does not fragment development. These arguments are based on my recent book *Unsafe Gods: Security, secularism and schooling* (Davies 2014a).

The linkages between secularism and development relate to the uneasy role of religion in conflict and fragility. Conflict and civil war are indisputably hindrances to the development of a country; while not all conflict has religious roots, religion

and religious division are often causal in conflict or can be manipulated during times of tension. There is growing evidence that conflict is worse and less tractable if underpinned by religious divides (Svensson 2007; Svensson & Rangdrol 2009). Conflict is not necessarily worse when between two faith groups, but if religion is held as the *cause* of the conflict, then it is harder to solve. In religious disputes, there is a much greater difficulty of bargaining and negotiation. Because religions are indivisible, features cannot be exchanged in the way that land or resources can be bargained over and compromises made. The thought of parcelling out Jerusalem is incomprehensible to both (all) sides.

Battle lines can also be drawn up between religion and secularism, with religious nationalism contesting the secularization of the state. It is obviously difficult to pinpoint what exactly a religious conflict is – and often this is not about theology itself but about religious identities and power blocs. Religion, nationalism and violence become bound together. Historical analyses such as by Jared Diamond (1998) show how the link between totalitarian rulers and the church becomes solidified, how kleptocrats co-opt priests and develop an ideology to justify their power. Then any critique of the church becomes a critique of the ruler, and becomes unpatriotic, even punishable. Religion is used for nation building in many current contexts – whether Islam in Bangladesh, Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka or Christianity in USA. Even after the 2011 revolution, Egypt's penal code still contains prohibitions on insulting the president and major monotheistic religions, and this is being used to try to prosecute the popular Egyptian satirist Bassem Youssef, who regularly lampoons Egypt's leading Islamists and liberals alike on his Friday night television show. We see this also in Russian President Putin's imprisonment of the female punk musicians Pussy Riot on charges of 'hooliganism'. The band's song had mocked not only Putin but also Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, so Putin was able to indict them on denigrating the feelings and beliefs of Orthodox worshippers. Yet as the *Times* leader column rightly pointed out:

> A society with due process cannot insulate from political criticism someone who ventures political opinions, even a Church leader. Nor can a civilised society legislate and impose criminal sanction for the protection of people's feelings. If it does, there is no limit in principle to the violation of liberty that is permissible to soothe the anguish of those who suffer offence (*The Times* 21 July 2012).

I return later to the problem of how religion, its leaders and its texts come to be seen as exempt from challenge.

AMPLIFICATION OF CONFLICT

One reason why religion can be particularly dangerous with regard to security and to development is because of the amplification spiral deriving from the exclusivity of a religion. Religion is focused on the absolute and unconditional and, as a result,

can adopt totalitarian characteristics. Each religion has its own system of symbols, rituals, ceremonies and sacred texts. As Paul Froese (2008: 65) points out, 'The exclusivity of a belief system and not its supernatural elements is what leads believers to go to great lengths to defend and fight for a cause.' Lester R. Kurtz (1995: 238) in his work *Gods in the Global Village* labels these 'exclusive accounts of the nature of reality', that is, followers only accept religious beliefs that they regard as *true* beliefs. Examples include the 'religions of the book' – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – because each faith claims authority that emanates principally from sacred texts. As Haynes (2009: 54) argues, 'Such exclusivist truth claims can be a serious challenge to religious toleration and diversity, essential to our co-existence in a globalized world, and make conflict more likely.'

     What I want to show is how such exclusivity can lead to a spiral or amplification towards negative conflict, as follows:

Exclusivity
↓
Superiority
↓
Intolerance
↓
God is on our side
↓
Expansionism for God
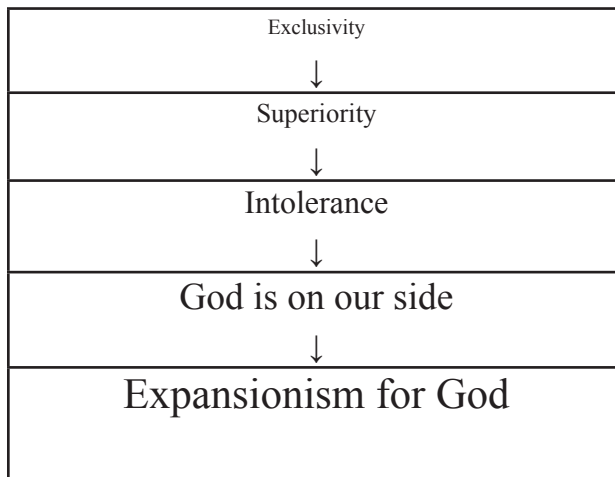
From exclusivity of a doctrine, the next amplifying step is to superiority: the conviction that one's belief is not just true but *better* than other accounts. Unless one is forced into displaying a religion, or is disbarred from joining one, support for a particular religion is a choice. And, like any choice, it is based on preferences and the assumption that this religion outscores others. This notion of the superiority of a set of beliefs almost inexorably, if one is not careful, leads to the conviction of the superiority of its adherents – that they are superior *as people*. In my book, *Educating against extremism* (2008), I draw attention to the hypocrisy of those in faith schools claiming that they respected all faiths as of equal value. This is logically impossible. The very reason for a faith school is because educating a child in that faith culture is seen as a better bet than another faith or than a secular environment. I have requested

greater honesty about this. The only way equal value would work is if a believer attempted some sort of pick-and-mix, that this bit of their own religion was better than another's, even if there were some aspects that were not as attractive. But this is not what is said.

The chain from exclusivity to superiority and then to intolerance is a heavy-duty one. There emerges among believers a suspicion and fear of lesser religions or of people with no faith at all. As Colin Howson (2011) documents, we do have an increasing renewal of religious intolerance, sometimes very violent and always drawing inspiration from holy scriptures. The Quran 'seethes with hatred of unbelievers, expressing God's loathing in language of graphic violence' (Howson 2011: 10). But Islam is not the only culprit. Every day, American TV stations spew out bilious condemnation of evolutionary theory, homosexuality, abortion, same-sex marriage and liberalism. There are murders of doctors who performed abortions, in the name of God and his judgement. Many Americans believe that the United States demands respect not because it is technologically advanced or militarily superior to all other nations but because God has blessed it, making it the best country in the world – as most Presidential addresses affirm. The American flag attains its sacredness because it represents 'one nation *under God'*. As Froese (2008) points out, the sacredness of national identity in the US fully depends on a shared religious sensibility. But this then means a dehumanisation of others less sacred.

The next link in the sequence from exclusivity to superiority to intolerance is elimination, the actual attack on others. This derives from the notion that members of 'our' faith are not just believing, but 'doing God's work'. From the Crusades onwards and, no doubt, before, believers go into battle in the conviction that 'God is on our side'. The classic example is the Jewish nation as 'the chosen people', with the God-given right to land and hence the duty to defend this. The Boers in South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century also saw themselves as the chosen people, with a divine mission to rid the land of Zulus. In the amplifying process, followers are taught not just to look down on the other, but to hate them, and then, by extension, to destroy them. The shift is from forgiveness of violence to positively rewarding it, with calls for God to destroy one's enemies. Religion can increase aggressiveness and the willingness to use violence. A survey of Palestinian students found 81 per cent believing that Islam allows the actions of the suicide bomber, including nearly 100 per cent of supporters of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Atran 2010:342).

The final, most lethal amplification arises when conflict in the name of religion goes global – not just as a conflict between two groups or nations, but as an international vendetta or international duty. Christianity was, of course, expansionist in its missionary work across vast parts of the globe, with the duty to evangelise and bring light to heathens – and to convert Muslims. Amy Stambach (2010) revealed this graphically in her important study of missionaries in east Africa. But there, the expansionist work was mostly confined to the missionaries themselves. The

other form of expansionism relates to the duties of *all* members of a religion. Atran (2010:104) quotes from the 1998 fatwa from Bin Laden and Zawahiri:

> The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty *for every Muslim who can do it in any country* in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the Al Aqsa Mosque [Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip… (my italics).

The reasoning is that, as there is no pure Islamic state anywhere, the whole world must be a House of War. Nor can one leave the faith and its duties. Hadith 260 of Sahih Bukhari is invoked: 'The Prophet said "if somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, then kill him"' (http://muflihun.com/bukhari/52/260). While the right of freedom of religion is an Article (23) of Iran's constitution, Sharia law says that the rejection of Islam is punishable by death.

However, it has to be remembered that atheism could be punished by death even in eighteenth century England and Scotland. So is it a matter of time before such extremes dissipate? Can this amplification spiral be reversed? When we look at progressions during conflict, and the spread of religious extremism, this seems initially doubtful. In the interests of this journal, I turn then to studies of the spread of radical Islam from the Middle East to some African countries, as it cannot be denied that this is a key concern for security.

EXTREMISM IN AFRICA

While Islamic fundamentalism does have global reach, the situation is complex and very country specific. Jeffrey Haynes (2007) looked at the relative political significance of domestic and transnational Islamic militancy in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Each of these countries is characterised by widespread political repression, economic crises, rapid social change, uneven industrialisation and swift urbanisation. Many people, including minority Muslim populations, are at the bottom of the economic and political hierarchy, and some harbour deep feelings of disappointment and disillusionment in relation to economic and political outcomes. Some Islamic NGOs in east Africa have been used as a vehicle for spreading political Islam, combining faith and material rewards. They have been funding vocational training centres as well as refuges and orphanages. They build on a shared sense of transnational Islamic identity that stems from long-established historical, cultural, linguistic and trade ties to the Arab world. There is also the educational influence of countries such as Saudi Arabia, giving scholarships, such as with Ugandan students studying at Medina and experiencing a puritanical form of Islam.

In Kenya, the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) introduced the question of Sharia law for the country's Muslim population, many of whom felt discriminated against by the wholesale application of perceived 'Christian' (that is European derived) law. US counter-terror strategies were seen as anti-Muslim. Haynes argues that Tanzania

is somewhat different because of the unique social consensus forged under Nyerere. Religion has not served as primary fault-line for sustained political violence and conflict. However, a significant catalyst for the emergence of political Islamic groups in Tanzania was a government announcement in early 1992 that, in order to reduce public spending, it would henceforward transfer the country's health and education system to the control of the country's powerful Catholic Church. This fuelled an outburst of resentment, inflammatory sermons and protests. While this was not a terrorist security threat, it was interpreted as such by US.

But while Islamists are pushing for Sharia, Haynes (2009) thinks the prospects of any of the three countries degenerating into bastions of radical Islam are a relatively remote possibility. Firstly, the influence of radical elements is quite marginal, and is not likely to be a major recruiting pool for Al Qaeda (AQ). Secondly, he claims, many east African Muslims are relatively apolitical, and are moderate and tolerant in orientation. Even the groups that do seek a more Islamic agenda pursue their objectives through discussion and negotiation. Third, there is no evidence that Muslims are taking up arms against the infidel West.

Somalia is more often cited than other east African countries as being the current springboard and safe haven for AQ, because of its fragility in governance. Terdman's (2008) analysis is that the fate of Somalia throughout history has been determined by external actors. Somalia is clan based, and the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) did not transcend Somali tribal politics and clan lines and unify all Somalis under the banner of radical Islam and Sharia. But the political dynamics of Somalia are similar to Afghanistan and Iraq: a regime or ascending movement displaced by external military intervention, followed by a foreign occupation propping up a weak central government that has not been able to control its territory and quell armed opposition to it.

Yet, in looking at the prospects for Islamic radicalism in Somalia, Le Sage (2007) points out that Islamic faith is one of the horizontal identities that cut across clan lines. But he also argues that we should not conflate all politically organised Islamist groups as 'fundamentalist' or 'terrorist'. *Al Islan* (reconciliation/mediation) seeks to infuse Somali politics with a liberal reading of Islamic values by entirely non-violent means. The movement, drawn from educated elite activities in Mogadishu, includes basic literacy training in Koranic schools, vocational training and higher education at Mogadishu University. Some humanitarian organisations are connected to this project, too. *Al Itihad,* on the other hand, is very different. This group works within the clan system, with strong ties to Sharia courts, and with links to banks. It makes alliances with militia factions and offers welfare services to Somalia's poorest urban populations.

What emerges from such analyses is that violent radical Islam is not necessarily instantly imposable on people, even those who are poor or marginalised. Different versions of religion map onto clan lines and clan traditions, and do not immediately

subvert liberal values. As Stambach (2010) revealed with regard to the east African response to Christian missionaries, people will happily accept the rewards offered to them of schooling or welfare, but not necessarily the indoctrinatory messages that go with such incentives. The same applies to Islamic infiltrations that offer welfare nets. The optimistic note is that people are often more astute than they are given credit for. But education can help them be even more astute – particularly, as I will argue below, a secular education.

But the situation shifts. In October 2013, the Islamic movement Al-Shabaab mounted a campaign in Barawe, Somalia, to scare residents into not using smart phones, telling them that they were tools 'to spy on Muslim people'. Then they tried to ban residents from watching television, trying to convince them that sending children to school could harm their Islamic faith (*Sabahi* 20 November 2013). However, this was not accepted by any means. John Price (2013) thinks that education is the best way to defeat Al-Shabaab. However, only 25% children go to school and dozens of children are recruited into Al-Shabaab every day. An entire generation has grown up knowing only fighting.

'If the US wants to minimise the influence of radical imams that are indoctrinating young boys to become terrorists, more emphasis will need to be placed on helping to provide secular education in Somalia' (Price 2013: 1).

To date, such an initiative has taken a back seat to surgically killing Al-Shabaab leaders. For Price, this is a short-sighted and expensive undertaking. He describes alternative incentives for getting children to school, for example cooking oil for girls, or a safe dormitory.

Yet a particular risk emerges with the new communications technologies. This is a war of networks, not a clash of civilisations. Militant Islamic movements are encouraged by the ease of communications provided by and via the internet. Lindsay Pearlman (2012) describes how Al-Shabaab launched its Twitter account on December 7th 2011 under the name HSM Press Office (Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen). (Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the Westgate Mall attack in Kenya, saying it was retributive justice). The Press Office employs Twitter for three uses – intra-movement coordination, information creation or verification, and ideological engagement. There is a daily update on engagements and actions; and there is the release of stories, discounting opposition media sources as manipulative and subjective, promoting themselves as the whistle blowers.

A crucial point is that nearly every tweet is written in English, increasing global interconnectivity. Most followers live outside Somalia. Although Al-Shabaab's primary objective is to establish Sharia rule in Somalia, it also aims to motivate and shape worldwide debate on jihadism and Islam. Technology's evolution has made 'winning hearts and minds' a priority for social movements around the globe, the Islamic world included. Islam is portrayed as endangered and Muslins are enjoined to defend their religion against perceived extinction; jihad is thus obligatory.

It legitimates martyrdom, controversial in the Islamic community. It is a sign of the times that dead militants receive prayers in tweets that Allah will accept their sacrifice and have mercy on their souls.

Another crucial point is that Al-Shabaab is framed as more successful than the government or military in protecting the population, offering better security from violence. Education is also emphasised as its chosen social service. Al-Shabaab claims that it has established three universities, 550 madrassas and 250 primary and secondary schools.

It is a cunning and heady mix of violence and security, conservatism and modernity. Can young people be protected from this type of messaging? The argument of this article is that education can break the stranglehold of religion on conflict and help prevent the amplification spiral of violence from escalating. But this needs an acceptance of a secular approach. The first problem in this is a misunderstanding of the relationship between religion and secularism, which I address in identifying eight myths below.

EIGHT MYTHS OF SECULARISM

Secularism at its simplest is the separation of faith and state. The principle is that the institutions and machinery of governance (parliament, civil service, law, police, military) are separate from religious institutions, their beliefs and their dignitaries. Decision-making is not determined by the supernatural. There are many versions of secularism, with hard versions as found in the old Soviet Union trying to ban religion (actually this was State atheism rather than secularism), and semi-hard versions, as in France or Turkey, attempting to ban public displays or symbols of religious expression. Hard interpretations have led to misconceptions about secularism that need to be challenged:

a. *That secularism is oppositional to religion.* The goal of a secular state in trying to avoid negative conflict is actually to allow religions to exist comfortably alongside one another. Secularism merely wants to ensure that religions do not harm one another. Secularism in its softer versions is actually a friend to religion. It does not privilege religion in decision-making, but accepts that religion occupies a place in society. Secularism and religion are not antagonistic.

b. *That one cannot be religious and support secularism.* In fact, many religious people and organisations are only too aware that secularism is the best protection for their faith. There are secular Jews, secular Christians and secular Hindus. There is a thriving organisation, British Muslims for a Secular Democracy (BMSD), which I discuss more below. Religious supporters of secularism are very aware of how undue religious influence in foreign and domestic policy can curtail freedoms for themselves and others.

c. *That secularism is a belief system and therefore a rival to religion*. Secularism is not a metaphysical philosophy grounded in a set of beliefs about the origin of the world. It is a political order, designed as a practice, and equivalent to other political orders of law or jurisprudence. There are no sacred texts of secularism, no leaders to worship, no daily or weekly rituals to observe. Sadly, perhaps, secularism cannot offer comfort or salvation or someone to talk to who is always there. But that is not its purpose.

d. *That secularism is the same as atheism*. This is one of the biggest confusions of all. Atheism simply means not believing in the divine, the supernatural, in deities who control the world. Atheism could indeed be a rival to religion. Atheists would probably support a secular approach to government and education, but that does not mean that atheism and secularism are coterminous. One relates to belief, one to governance. If, as some Islamists do, one thinks belief and governance are the same thing, then it is understandable that secularists and atheists are all seen as heretics. Yet secularism is not there to reject notions of divinity, but rather to contain them as an umbrella protection. One issue is that there is no Arabic word for secularism, sometimes translated as *dahriyya* (materialist/atheist) *kufr* (a wilful and conscious decision to reject God's message), *al-Ilhād* (belief in no God) or *ilmaniyya (*whatever deals with worldly matters). It is not surprising if there has been resistance to secularism, if it only means worldly or worse, non-Godly. There is much educational or even linguistic work to do to convince religious adherents of the benefits of a non-partisan stance on governance.

e. *That secularism has no morality*. Secularism is sometimes portrayed as a moral vacuum, lacking the values that characterise a faith. Yet secular authority has at root the ideals of peace and of social justice. Secular law will have a basis in the moral framework of human rights. While the conventions on rights may well stem from a selection of religious commandments, the difference is that rights now have a transversal, international mandate and a contemporary application, not gaining legitimacy from divine, sacred jurisdiction from previous centuries. Ideals of secularism would relate to liberty (to believe or not to believe) and to equality (between people of different faiths and none). This is a deeply moral position.

f. *That secularism has no spirituality*. This stems from the mistaken idea that spirituality is confined to religion. Yet spirituality can be unifying: we can all enjoy and experience the spiritual in music, art or the beauty of nature. In fact, it can be hard versions of some religions that forbid music or dance. Qualities such as love, compassion, patience, forgiveness and responsibility are humanistic qualities, not confined to religion. Spiritual practices such as mindfulness or meditation can be experienced as beneficial without any supernatural interpretations. Evidence of beauty in the world is not evidence of God, but of

our human interpretation of what we see around us, which is changeable and culture-specific.

g. *That Islam is incompatible with secularism*. As mentioned above, there is a language issue in Arabic of how secularism is translated, but that does not mean a rejection. Islam is not the enemy of secularism, or of democracy or any other political system. Islamic fundamentalists might claim that in 'true' Islam there is no distinction between religious belief and political action, and that the creation of a pure and global *Ummah* is their absolute duty, but in fact there is little in the Quran about the politics of building an Islamic state. The Quran does not specifically discuss power, nor its possible connotations, and Muhammad died without indicating a successor and without leaving instructions on the nature of the government of the *Ummah (*De Poli 2010*)*. Brown (2000) reveals how Muslims who seek democracy argue that Muhammad was in fact the first democrat. While Sharia provides a basic political theory for governance of an Islamic community, it does not outline the specifics of how to legislate and govern rapidly expanding and plural states. This is why many Muslims living in plural societies acknowledge a secular approach to such governance.

h. *That secularism has meant a decline in religion*. This is one of the biggest fears. Modernisation is held to be the culprit, the causal engine 'dragging the Gods into retirement' (Svensson and Randrol 2009). Yet the separation of church and state does not logically lead to non-belief. Bhargava (2009) argues that it is secularism that is 'under siege', with an increasing number of theocracies or states with theocratic or Islamist tendencies. There are ever stronger Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Hindu nationalists in India, religious ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel and Sikh nationalists claiming that Sikhism does not recognize a separation of religion and state. Christian movements are emerging more strongly in countries as far apart as Kenya, Guatemala and the Philippines. Christian fundamentalism is an increasingly visible force in American politics. A major problem is that what are held to be secular states are pseudo-secular, in terms of a less than transparent participation of religion in governance. Nepal declared itself a secular nation, but the official religion is Hinduism. Burma is now supposedly secular, but the Buddhist government is persecuting the Muslim minority. While in the UK there is a long-term trend towards secularisation in terms of church attendance, there are still 26 seats reserved for Church of England bishops in the Upper House of the legislature, the House of Lords. In Germany, it has been shown that the banning of the headscarf is less a sign of secularisation or of the maintenance of neutrality and has more to do with the reassertion of a national German identity, of Germanness. The *Leitkultur* (guiding culture) into which immigrants should assimilate has deep Christian roots (Sandford-Gaebel 2013).

DYNAMIC SECULARISM

My argument is that secularism in governance is the best protection against religious conflict or extremism, but, in contrast to hard secularism or pseudo-secularism, it should be a dynamic, flexible, transparent secularism with the following features:

- A diversity of religious and other beliefs and life style choices is seen as productive for social progress and evolution.

- Religious belief, religious membership and religious identity are not elevated or privileged above any other ethical system, cultural grouping, political movement or personal identity. Religious organisations and members are subject to the same laws as everyone else.

- There is freedom to hold a belief and to leave it, and to reject all religions.

- There is freedom of religious expression (as long as this does not harm others).

- There is freedom to challenge religion: critiquing or satirising a religion is seen as the same as critiquing or satirising a political, economic, social issue, or any other way of seeing the world, and is subject to the same, *but not more* constraints on doing harm or offending.

- There is no discrimination on the grounds of religion in citizenship rights, duties and activism.

- Religious schooling is permitted, but is not funded by the state. There are no tax exemptions for religious organisations as such.

- Religious associations are accepted, can lobby and can be consulted, but there is no official recognition or representation in the machinery of governance. Religions compete in the marketplace for influence with other vested interests

- Accommodation to religious belief can occur if it does no harm to others, makes no difference, or is within the framework of existing legislation. Tolerance to religious practice has to be within the framework of human rights.

The link between secularism and development is bound up with the link to democracy: that development requires the means for peaceful change and progress, with freedom of discussion and government accountability to the people. This allows for brakes on corruption and excesses of power. In his discussion of the contemporary politics of secularism, Sayyid (2009) groups the proposed benefits into three: firstly, the nature of knowledge needed for a modern scientific state, and who controls it; secondly, secularism being necessary for peace and social harmony, with religious differences becoming a matter of individual taste, not large-scale social organisation, with a level playing field and the prevention of contending groups making appeals to supernatural forces; and thirdly, that secularism represents the preconditions for the exercise of democracy.

This follows Lefort's (1986) useful understanding of 'keeping the space of power empty'. Democracy is government based on the sovereignty of the people, which would preclude a sovereign God or a sovereign priesthood. In a multi-party democracy, political parties should not receive funding, as parties, from the state. Similarly, religious groupings should not be privileged as automatically part of governance. Democratic secularism does not exclude religion, nor does it necessarily privatise it, but merely puts it on a par with any other ideological organisation.

As argued earlier, secularism is not antithetical to religion, and many religious groups support it – not least because of its support for democracy. The organisation, British Muslims for a Secular Democracy, has as its first objective to:

> Raise awareness within British Muslims and the wider public, of democracy particularly secular democracy helping to contribute to a shared vision of citizenship (the separation of faith and state, so faiths exert no undue influence on policies and there is a shared public space) (http://bmsd.org.uk/index.php/about-us/).

Development requires this shared vision of citizenship and a shared public space. I turn, then, to the educational implications of a dynamic secularism for development and democracy.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

If we return to the amplification spiral described above, the duty of schools is to interrupt this before exclusivity becomes superiority, then intolerance, then animosity and then violence in the name of one's God. It is, however, firstly not possible to tackle the exclusivity of religion. The parallel is with gender – that it is not (normally) possible to be simultaneously male and female and it is not possible to be simultaneously Christian and Muslim, Hindu or Jew. Hybrids are not really possible, in spite of ecumenical movements. The idea of an Espero faith, like Esperanto, will never catch on. The task is to make the boundaries less important – not to deny identity, but not to allow difference to become inequality or oppression. We all have hybrid identities, and faith may be only one component. In education, then, the first step relates tackling religious segregation. The existence of faith-based schools does not automatically lead to religious intolerance, but they are risky. It is incontrovertible that systems that separate children by religion/ethnicity as in Northern Ireland, Bosnia & Herzegovina or Sri Lanka do not help mutual understanding and can be manipulated by those in power. A secular education system tries to avoid segregation into different faith schools, where a feeling of superiority to others of different backgrounds can germinate. I alluded earlier to the hypocrisy of some faith schools in claiming they promote all religious equally. Secular education genuinely treats all religions as of equal worth, giving no immunity to some in the name of cultural respect.

Yet it must be acknowledged that arguing against faith schools in a plural society, where religion may be a flashpoint for conflict, is different from arguing against faith schools in a mono-religious society or one where religion is not the key issue in inequality. In Afghanistan, the task is in fact to make state schools appear *more* religious, perhaps calling them madrassas and the teachers imams in order to appease local religious leaders or the Taliban – particularly for girls' schools. As I have argued in an earlier paper (Davies 2014b), it is not possible to generalise about faith schools.

However, the position of madrassas does raise questions. In countries such as Pakistan, they are often wrongly all held to be training camps for AQ, when the reality is very different. They may be authoritarian and use rote learning, but then most schools in Pakistan are the same. In an important paper on madrassas in South Africa, Yusef Waghid (2009) looks at the suspicion that madrassas are seedbeds for terrorism and locates the issue around whether they teach democratic citizenship. Democratic citizenship is not in fact at variance with a normative concept of Islamic education, which is actually linked to the achievement of justice and rights and the practice of diversity, pluralism and disagreement. However, he reveals that madrassas use at best a minimalist view of citizenship. They want to inculcate tenets of Islam such as cleanliness, prayer, fasting and pilgrimage; but educators in his study did not conceive madrassa schooling as having anything to do with what learners learn in public schools, for instance, biological, physical and technological, economic and management sciences. Such schooling is isolated from world affairs. Educators say they do not encourage learners to think critically or participate actively in the lessons due to time constraints and large classes. The purpose is not grounded in politics 'as if learning to be a good person is unrelated to being a good citizen in a democratic post-apartheid South Africa' (Waghid 2009: 122). The key question is discussed of whether the type of learning in madrassas condones violent action. Much depends on how 'respect' for others is operationalised, as this ought to mean exchange and contact with others, in order to learn their views. Rote learning could lead to political naivety, predisposing to being used as pawns; it could perpetuate doctrinaire thinking or alternatively promote a powerful and normative 'we-consciousness' that leads to awareness of difference from others, in extreme cases seeing them as less human or less morally aware humans:

'If madrassah learners are taught that Islam is the universal religion and that only Muslims can secure a passage to paradise, then it seems very unlikely that such views would be challenged' (Waghid 2009: 124).

But Waghid argues that madrassas ought to teach capacities of democratic citizenship – the capacity to deliberate as free and equal citizens in a democratic polity, with justice for all individuals. Their duties are not just to their group, but to the wider community. Students should be taught to see their neighbourhoods and the international community as arenas of civic action.

What, then, are madrassah-responses to state-led reform and arguments for change? A comparative study of South Asia and Nigeria found that, whereas in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh there has been some resistance to reform and to the introduction of secular subjects to boost graduates' employability, in Kano, support for Islamic schools responds to an agenda shared by the state government and religious leaders and is generally welcomed (RaD 2010). Factors shaping state-madrassa relationships include different visions of knowledge, whether for employment or personal growth; the political aspirations of the religious elite; and levels of trust between state and madrassa, and whether there is a fear of Western influence or of state control. The policy implications are to find common ground in an integrated vision of secular and religious education.

LEARNING ABOUT 'OTHERS'

The educational implications of protecting against religious conflict and combating religious extremism contain in themselves some paradoxes and contestations. On the one hand, it is important for young people to learn about religion in school; on the other hand, it is vital not to elevate religion and give it a special place. In peacebuilding initiatives in wider society, it has been argued that multi-faith dialogue is less important than is preventing conflict expanding into the religious realm in the first place (Toft 2007). Similarly, education should work on making the boundaries of religion (or ethnicity or tribe) less impermeable, rather than constantly foregrounding religious difference or religious identity and then having to find ways to talk across the apparent walls that have been erected.

There have been grave errors in teaching about both ethnicity and religion. Multicultural education in many countries has often focussed on learning about 'other' cultures or 'other' faiths. This acts both to cement difference and to harden stereotypes. In Sri Lanka, attempts to foster understandings between Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim groups focussed on each group learning about 'their' prayers, 'their' music and 'their' dances. This backfired, as, although children liked coming together for multicultural festivals, the attempt at parallelism meant superficial stereotyping – especially when trying to find a way to show 'Muslim dancing' to match displays of Sinhalese and Tamil dancing (Davies 2012). Currently there is more emphasis on bringing young people together for shared projects such as on the environment, or human-elephant conflict, so that they actually 'forget' their culture and religion for a while and work for a common cause.

Similarly, as soon as students in predominantly Christian or secular contexts have programmes to learn 'about' Muslims/ Sikhs/Hindus/ Buddhists, there is the implicit message that all members of one faith are the same. Such exposure can be engaged in only superficially. This is particularly problematic in terms of Islam, because of the greater likelihood of Islamophobia after 9/11. There would be no time

to learn about all the variations of Islam – Sunni, Shia, Salafi, Wahabi and so on; and teachers are wary of teaching about the various conflicts that exist within Islam. Most disturbingly, as soon as one does not portray the vast diversity among Muslims, then the assumption by children is that they are all Islamists. As we reported in our guidebook on *Islamophobia* (ODIHR 2011) in countries such as UK, Canada and US, non-Muslim children are bullying Muslim peers, calling them terrorists, or mates of bin Laden. It is vital that schools recognise real diversity, which can be greater within cultures than across them. As one imam said to me wryly at a counter-terror conference, 'It's well-kept secret, but not all Muslims go to the mosque'.

In a thought-provoking article on Islamophobia in South Africa, Ebrahim Rasool (2010) discusses among other things two contentious debates: the type of relationship South Africa should have with religion, and avoiding Muslim exceptionalism. Muslims had discounted the two extremes – the theocratic and atheistic models of relationships – and discussed the two versions of secularism, namely the Chinese Wall or the Porous Wall approaches. They preferred the Porous Wall to the absolute separation of church and state, for a number of reasons: as a tribute to the active role of religious communities in the struggle for freedom, the need to keep infusing social and political life with a religious dimension of ethics and values, and the desire to utilise the full infrastructure of religion in the reconstruction and development of the South African society. But it is significant that Rasool talks of the negotiating process between the apartheid government and the liberation movement: 'Muslims could recall from the Qu'ranic and Prophetic precedents at Sulh al-Hudaibiya, that negotiation, compromises and not winning all that you desire was sanctioned, if it was at the hand of higher purposes and more sustainable outcomes' (Rasool 2010: 150).

This is significant: I would argue that learning skills and dispositions for negotiation is a key educational task. Rasool also talks of the problem of avoiding Muslim exceptionalism, which my co-authors and I struggled with in the *Guidelines*. There should be caution in elevating one form of hatred above another. He explains how South African Muslims had they been hooked onto the idea that they were suffering only because they were Muslims, that their situation of oppression was unique, would have been unable to recognise the suffering in others, make common cause with them, enter with them into life and death struggles for survival, and adopt a set of common objectives towards freedom from oppression and a state of equality. A critical insight from Rasool is that South African Muslims, throughout the periods of suppression and repression, and more importantly, despite these experiences, did not adopt 'the mantle of victimhood'. This gives you 'the licence for self-pity and passivity, alternatively for what you may consider justified extremism' (Rasool 2010: 153). Rasool asserts that South African Muslims, on the contrary, assumed agency, to insert themselves into the broader struggle.

> The clarity of such agency is that you recognise that what is done to you and your faith community is a variation on a theme of brutality done to all those considered the other and who purvey difference and opposition. This insight, that we are all victims of one source of brutality, but through methodologies specific to our varied conditions, allows, not victimhood, but agency in responding to the challenge confronting us (Rasool 2010: 153).

Conferring a state of uniqueness on Muslim suffering lessens the possibility of collaboration with the millions of others who struggle.

The educational implications would relate to the questions of shared citizenship and democratic citizenship mentioned above. This would be an agentic citizenship, with collaboration in the general struggle against injustice. A shared school culture would seem necessary for such work, but this then raises the question of how religious education fits into this. This is discussed next.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Just as a dynamic secular governance does not repress religions, a secular education does not deny learning about religion. On the contrary, it is crucial for the understanding of the development of a society that the role of religion is understood and critically analysed.

How religion and religious education should be introduced in school reveals a site of immense variation. An interesting comparative article by Mawdsley *et al.* (2008) compared attempts at a shared culture in USA, Australia and South Africa. The authors maintain that creating a shared culture can be difficult where rules are simply propagated without underlying religious beliefs. But the challenge has been when or how to permit the infusion of religious values into public education. Australia is more accommodationist, permitting support of religious and religious incursions into public schools that would not be allowed under the US constitution. South Africa is evolving its own approach from a neutrality and impartiality perspective, but one that has as its core the political agenda of nation-building. The legal issues are fascinating: there were claims in South Africa that cannabis represented a fundamental religious practice for Rastafarians – yet the nation's compelling interest is fighting drug abuse. Excluding Rastafarians from drug laws would be financially and administratively impossible. While a state should avoid putting believers to painful choices, a society can cohere only if all participants accept that certain basic norms and standards are binding. Similarly, the law prohibiting corporal punishment in all public and private schools in South Africa rejected claims of 196 independent schools that the blanket prohibition of its use in its schools invaded their individual, parental and community rights freely to practise their (Christian) religion. The ruling was that 'the State's interest in protecting pupils from degradation and indignity … [implicates] the core value of human dignity in our Bill of Rights' (quoted in Mawdsley *et al.* 2008:98). But there remain tensions in USA and Australia between

separationists and accommodationists over such issues as the distribution of religious literature, schools' recognition of student religious clubs and access by community religious groups to hold their meetings on public school premises.

Another interesting comparative paper comes from Yonah Matemba (2013), who compares the micro-politics of religious education reform in Scotland and Malawi. In Scotland, surveys have found that over 27% of Scots have no religion and that Christianity is no longer the basis of people's moral and spiritual life. Secularisation now characterises contemporary Scottish thought and practice. In Malawi, in contrast, nearly 83% of people are Christian, with 13% Muslim. What happens in both countries, however, is a highly politicised arena for religious education (RE). Malawi had replaced Bible Knowledge (BK) with a multi-faith subject called Religious and Moral Education (RME), which had an Islamic component. The old approach to RE in Scotland was thoroughly confessional, but the new one became neo-confessional in both denominational and non-denominational schools: pupils were to have a knowledge of Christianity. There is therefore continued privileging of Christianity in Scotland, the outcome of successful 'hand twisting' by the powerful Christian fraternity, even if it employs 'heritage' as its primary justification. In Malawi too, orthodox Christians were successful at 'manning the gates' in RE, because in spite of the parallel syllabus arrangement, it is BK and not RME that dominates. Churches in Malawi see religious pluralism as more of a challenge than an opportunity. Significantly, no evidence was found in this research supporting the Christian respondents' view that teaching other religions in RE would work against Christianity. In contrast, it was found that in some church-controlled schools, overzealous BK teachers had begun to say unkind things about Islam. It was seen as anathema for church schools to teach Islam or *Gule Wankuk* (occultist performances associated with African religions). Overall, the study found the influence of faith communities remains strong against any modernist or secularist agenda from the state, and in Malawi in particular, Christian dominance perpetuates historical inequalities for Muslims and educational privilege for Christians. While the state attempted to address the general question of citizenship and the recognition of minority rights within RE from an essentially liberal-democratic perspective, this has been less than successful.

RIGHTS AND A COMMON VALUE BASE FOR CRITICAL THINKING

This brings us to the question of a rights-based approach. A secular governance will have its common framework in the rule of law and human rights for all, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, disability and other 'differences'. A key task of a secular education is for young people (and teachers) to learn the principles and morality of secularism, challenging some of the myths outlined above. This includes

education in human rights and children's rights, to provide the common framework for all belief and value systems. These rights can be discussed and dissected in ways that become more difficult when analysing sacred texts. Rights learning includes acknowledgement of which rights are inalienable (freedom from torture, the right to a fair trial) and which are conditional on other rights being upheld (the right to freedom of speech, the right to privacy in the home when someone is being abused). In terms of religion, a secular education would stress the right to freedom of religious belief (or non-belief) and of religious expression in school (as along as others are not harmed).

The scientist Gregory S. Paul produced a detailed study in 2005 to find out if rates of murder and rape went up as levels of religion went down. He found the exact opposite. In detailed international comparisons, the more religious a country is, the more likely you are to be stabbed or raped there (quoted by Hari in *The Independent* 8 May 2009). As Hari (*The Independent* 8 May 2009) points out, this is not a causal relationship, but it certainly challenges the idea that we should have compulsory worship in schools. It supports the idea of critical thinking skills, looking for evidence, enabling young people to make up their own minds, when they wish, beyond the school gates.

While one cannot generalise across countries about the provision of schools nor the relationship of religion to nation-building, there is one over-riding feature that seems to emerge and re-emerge in the challenge to extremism, idolatry and religious domination, and that is critical thinking. Like secularism, there is confusion about what this means. It is not just problem-solving in maths, nor the relativist acceptance of any old idea in philosophy. It includes a search for evidence, a sense of historical sources as well as a facility to analyse the basis of one's own and others' judgements. Critical thinking cannot operate in a vacuum, and needs some sort of value base – which, as discussed above, is best approached through rights that cut across all religions. There are arguments about whether rights derive from long standing religious precepts, but the point is that once enshrined as 'man-made' laws, they can be critiqued and updated in ways more difficult for critiques of religions and their sacred texts.

Critical thinking with regard to secularism has the feature of being able to stand outside religion, to achieve a distance, as in the broader distance between church and state. But standing outside religion and examining its impact is not without risks and controversy. I argue, however, that it is crucial if we are to challenge the extremism and fundamentalism that spirals into violence and negative conflict. The right to freedom of expression, which would include the right to criticise a religion – one's own or someone else's – is a key plank in an education that aims to foster not just critical thinking but how to express critical thoughts. The role of a dynamic secular state is to be watchful about how freedom of religion is interpreted – and whether it genuinely includes both freedom of speech and freedom to leave a religion. A secular

state does not ignore religions, or treads softly round them, but, as with any social organisation, it acts to provide the legal and educational framework for citizens to know and pursue their rights. Religions are not exempt, even if they claim a majority of citizens as believers. One important aspect of this is a critique of the patriarchy and gender subordination, which is to be found in virtually all religions (Gross, Davies and Diab 2013).

Mamoun Fandy, talking of the Arab world, says that even in its most 'secular' states, the broad environment in which a student lives is currently saturated by religious discourse. He argues not for the banishment of religious teaching but a different way or teaching it, making students more 'tolerant' of other faiths, but also arming these students 'with the knowledge necessary for alternative conceptions of Islam' (2007: 94). This is a key point, the awareness of alternatives. Fandy continues:

> It was not religion in schoolbooks that created the present situation, but rather a lack of free debate and serious engagement with those responsible for creating modern educational systems founded on ideals of intellectual excellence, administrative accountability and critical thinking (Fandy 2007: 95).

The bedrock for this is teacher education. Fandy quotes an Egyptian scholar, stating that teachers themselves are seen as a vital element of the fundamentalist threat. People trained in teaching colleges are not sufficiently able to think critically themselves, much less teach their students to do so. The curricula of the teachers' colleges in countries such as Egypt are comprised of locally produced workbooks, put together in haste by professors and containing little more than 40–50 pages of questions and answers that students must simply memorise for the final exams. Rote learning to be a teacher might apply to many teacher education systems in Africa as elsewhere – and it is dangerous. 'This process that stifles the critical faculty is at the very centre of the issue of extremism' (Fandy, 2007: 83). It also does not instil the notion of citizenship, developing a teacher who recognises his or her obligations to the state and has the skills to participate.

One key aspect in teacher education, which I would add, is skill of critical discussion of various sorts of social messaging, going back to the question of the persuasive Islamic Twitter accounts mentioned above. Teachers of a different generation may be less conditioned to see Twitter as the prime means for communication among the young, but need to grapple with this in the classroom as part of a critical media education.

In conclusion, I have argued that a dynamic secular democratic governance is best able to minimise the risk of religious conflict, and hence to aid development. Education can assist in interrupting the processes of amplification of religious conflict in five key ways: by avoiding religious segregation, by not stereotyping or dehumanising 'others', by using a rights-based approach to values, which cuts across all religions, by preparing learners for a secular democratic citizenship and by

insisting on critical thinking for teachers and learners. This is a critical thinking that does not shy away from critiquing religious practice and religious texts if they are harmful. Religion in education is a highly politicised arena, but powerful religious leaders should not be allowed to undermine the foundations for shared active citizenship, which are vital for development.

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