



Archevêque de Montréal

September 14, 2013

The Secular Government and Religion Duality

In response to the proposed Charter of Values.

Discussions about secular government and religion are important because they concern democracy and human dignity. There are two pitfalls that must always be avoided in society: theocracy and state religion.

Our society itself is not secular, but pluralist (see the Assembly of Quebec Catholic Bishops document: *Catholiques dans un Québec pluraliste*). The government, however, is secular. The question is whether it consists of an open secularism or a closed one.

What is the difference between a theocracy and a state religion? In a theocracy, a religion takes over the political role. A state religion is a religion or a system of values that is exploited by politics.

Our democracy is designed to be pluralist. Our society is composed of various religious and philosophical communities, and is home to a wide range of schools of thought. A society that is not ruled by a religion or in which there is no dominating state religion, and where religious freedom, the freedom to believe or to not believe, is respected, is likely to progress.

Religious freedom includes the freedom to not believe in God, for atheism is itself a form of faith—in that which is material, or in humankind—which is expressed through various trends. Every human being wants to find the meaning of life, and doing so requires freedom of conscience, whether it be religious, agnostic, or atheist. Religious freedom applies to all sets of beliefs and values, and an absence of religious freedom could be interpreted as a form of atheism that is imposed by the state religion, not only to the detriment of religious people, but also to people of other beliefs.

Secularism that is closed to religion gives rise to a state religion, for once its policy is enforced; it becomes permanently positioned in opposition to religion's public dimension. Closed secularism attempts to inculcate in people the belief that this life is the only life and that human beings should not hope for anything other than present life, no matter how great their thirst for the absolute may be. An individual could hold this belief, and an association could try to propagate it, but if the state embraces such a belief, we find ourselves back at the beginning.

We wanted a society where no religion was imposed on us, and we ended up with a government that imposes its philosophy, its system of values, and its discourse on religions. In doing so, the government claims to represent all aspects of life and contributes to the loss of a sense of God and to the destruction of the transcendent, reducing religion to a theoretical cultural phenomenon.

Not only is religious freedom at risk here, but so is humanity, which is stripped of its true greatness of having been created in God's image, and which is left powerless before a state that assumes it has the power to decide what is good and bad without referring to a set of moral values that transcend it. Secularism that is closed to religion can exist as a concept, but if it takes over politics, or if politics makes use of it, it becomes a state religion whose beliefs are imposed.

Secularism that is open to religion, and respects the religions as it respects the different forms of atheism and agnosticism, gives back to the people their own freedom, responsibility, and conscience, and sets the stage for them to continue their search.

Religious and non-religious acts, public or private, cannot be imposed on people, nor forbidden from them. Everyone has a right to religious freedom, whether it is practiced individually or jointly with others.

The secular government here is a government that is open to religious freedom, and this religious freedom is manifested with a respect for a free connection with God and all its implications.

Here, the government and religion duality becomes a strength; it keeps humanity at the heart of things, in all its dignity, allowing people to refer to their conscience in determining their involvement in family, work, and society, while remaining open to God and to the transcendence of moral values.

Secular does not have to mean without God or against God. It refers to a commitment to a world that is autonomous and that is free to be inspired by God and propelled by the fundamental universal values outlined in God's commandments, which reflect humanity's vocation. Atheists and agnostics also benefit from such a freedom because a life constantly evolves. In a pluralist democracy, we can only gain from secularism, for in keeping paired an open secular government and religious freedom, we protect ourselves from being imprisoned by absolutisms and from having a closed future.

The Archbishop,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christian Lépine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small cross symbol at the beginning.

† Christian Lépine