

Rethinking the Role of Secularism in the Discipline of IR and the Chinese Experience

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ABSTRACT

Secularism is credited with establishing the modern European state system, and this has aided in the formation of the discipline of International Relations. This resulted in the discipline overlooking the fact that not only religion continues to play a big role in Christian-majority countries, but also secularism exists in various forms in the rest. While numerous researchers in the International Relations discipline have started to examine the relationship between religion and secularism. However, China as a case in point has always been omitted from this file of research. Thus, this paper will analyze the foundations of secularism in the Chinese state and society through historical institutionalism. Confucianism and diverse ethnic dynasties have had a significant influence on China's social ideology and political sphere today. As a result, the Chinese experience with secularism and religion contributes significantly to the study of political 'values' disputes and thus global conflicts.

Keywords: *China, Secularism, Confucianism, Political value*

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion has never existed in isolation. It is inextricably linked to political, economic, ideological, and ethnic concerns, and has a significant influence on social development and stability. Yet, religion has been marginalised from the academic field for years due to the dominant secularization theories. Secularism is credited with establishing the modern European state system, and this has aided in the formation of the discipline of International Relations. Indeed, secularism sounds ideal in the Enlightenment ears that provide individual significance in contemporary life.

Nonetheless, the Western perspective of secular-state interactions is insufficient to provide a comprehensive picture of the global political landscape. Both mainstream theorists in the discipline, such as liberalism and realism, have been constrained by this restrictive view. Comment narrative view toward the origin of the discipline dated back to 1919 following the treaty of Versailles which brought an end to the First World War. Liberalism then entered academic studies as a theoretical response to this terrifying historical period. This theory tried to identify the cause of war in order to set up a liberalisation international order which could prevent the recurrence. Realism birth was during the late 1930s and 1940s with the breakdown of peace and the onset of WW2 as a

theoretical response to liberalism. They were pragmatists concerned with how the world actually is which supported by the evidence of the rise of ideological movements such as fascism and communism which overthrow the liberal state.

Nevertheless, both realism and liberalism belief in the benefits of rationality. And this rationality stands on the opposite of religious superstitious. Religion has eventually been marginalized from both the academic discipline of political science as well as global politics and been viewed as an existential threat to rational public order. This resulted in the secularization theory being widely accepted as the way to modernisation and democracy within the discipline. As a result, the discipline overlooks the fact that not only religion continues to play a big role in Christian-majority countries, but also secularism exists in various forms in the rest. What is the nature of secularization in non-western civilizations? How will non-Judeo-Christian religious institutions affect a society? If 'rationality' is a byproduct of the western secular process, how will other regions' social norms evolve? This paper will use China's experience to demonstrate that the distinctive cultural secularization experience resulted in a substantial impact on social values and political behaviors in its modern society. China has experienced less church-state disputes throughout its history and is now officially known as a

secular state. Yet, both Confucianism and diverse ethnic dynasties have had a significant influence on China's social ideology. Besides, the moral principles inherited from traditionalism are still ingrained in the country's political leaders and citizens.

2. THE ROLE OF SECULARISM IN IR

Secularism is the theory that denotes “a system which sought to order and interpret life on principles taken solely from this world, without recourse to belief in God and future life. It is now used in a more general sense of the tendency to ignore, if not to deny, the principles of supernatural religion” [1]. The concept dates all the way back to the medieval European religion conflicts when the notion of the *saeculum* arose in reference to a binary opposition within Christianity [2]. Later, ‘the word “secular” was flung into motion and used to describe a world thought to be in motion. In this second moment, to “secularise” meant to make someone or something secular — converting from ecclesiastical to civil use or possession’ [3]. During the time of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1658, secularism referred to ‘the laicization of church lands’, and the process of secularization is the ‘passage, transfer, or relocation of persons, things, function, meanings, and so forth, from their traditional location in the religious sphere to the secular spheres’ [4]. Meanwhile, the Treaties of Westphalia, which terminated the Thirty Years War in 1648, figured prominently in state-system studies. This Westphalian state-system distinguishes the ‘modern’ state system from prior models and ushered in a new era in the study of sovereignty [5]. The sovereignty principle questioned the church's temporal authority and diminished religion's public position [6].

This Westphalian framework produced a contemporary understanding of societal structure, positing that ‘individual subjects’ formed a society under the authority of a ‘single sovereign’ [5]. By opposing kings’ excessive powers in the service of the public good, the new form of government undercut the legitimacy of pre-existing hierarchical governing institutions. Furthermore, it reinforced the separation of secular and sacred structures. Following that, it became feasible to “secularize” a person or organization by refocusing attention away from spirituality purposes and toward temporal and worldly goals. These gradual shifts in the development of European nations following the Enlightenment finally culminated in the development of a secularist ideology. And, beginning in the nineteenth century, secularism developed the meaning it presently has in the mainstream. According to Elizabeth Shakman Hurd [2], secularism separates religion from the areas of the state, economy, and science. And ‘this separation facilitates a consensus which is sustained by a powerful yet historically contingent set of beliefs, including secularism as the realization of God’s will, secularism as

the natural evolution toward universal morality and secularism as a normal consequence of economic modernization’. Thus, the focus was laid on separating ethical issues from theological belief and developing a moral framework that was concerned solely with the public benefit of people in ‘this life’. At the very least throughout the last five centuries, the Judeo-Christian West has steadily embraced this secularization process, which aspires to isolate religion to the private sphere and to establish ‘a theory of life and conduct [2]’ devoid of divine reference. The United States constitution exemplifies this aspiration, as it specifically distinguishes between State and Church on a wide number of issues.

Thus, secularism and secularization theory in political science have a normative agenda that could be followed directly to the evolutionary process stated above. (1) Secularization is associated with liberalization, democratization, and modernization. (2) It contained strong presumptions about what constitutes a good or bad religion, with a particular emphasis on the threat posed by certain religions. (3) Religious superstition versus rationality. While this may seem commendable during the Enlightenment ears in the European context, it's far more complicated than it appears to be. The idea that ‘an individual, institution, or political collectivity [2]’ is capable of unambiguously distinguishing between ‘transcendent and temporal [2]’ is contentious in many quarters. How might a civilization appear if it made no clear claim to ‘transcend religious’ and faithful framework (as the Chinese do)? After World War I, interest in International Relations grew rapidly in North America and Western Europe. Due to its distinct religious development history, modern forms of secularism contribute to “the formation of a particular conception and practice of state sovereignty that purports to be universal by delineating the boundaries of state-centered politics with ‘religion’ on the outside” [2]. European and American varieties of secularism continue this assertion about modern politics’ limitations, working below the threshold of public discourse but remaining deeply entangled in the politics of sovereign authority [2]. As a result, there is a widespread conviction in the West that modernization demands a focus on the challenges of this life (secular value), not the next (sacred value). Hence, this relatively nascent field has inexorably established itself as a topic of secular-western domination. For years, religion has been marginalized in the academic world. It was not until the 1990s that researchers such as Peter Berger and Jose Casanova began to critique the traditional version of secularization thesis as being inaccurate. This resulted in the discipline has failed to recognize that not only does religion continue to play a significant role in Christian-majority countries, but secularism persists in diverse forms in the rest of the world. Additionally, secularism in the IR study also has its limitation due to European colonial history. Shakman Hurd has examined this constraint through the lens of

secularism politics in North Africa and the Middle East. Hurd made the point that Tunisia's President Habib Bourguiba and Iran's Shah both used the concept of secularization to consolidate their domestic control while keeping the support of major Western allies [12]. As a result, the process failed to consider the local cultural background but impose a "Western" secularist settlement. Islamists have perceived Islam's marginalization as authoritarian state authority and action in favour of European and American hegemony. Eventually, secularization initiatives have resulted in tragic violence and insurrection in both cases. Michael Barnett's work demonstrates that humanitarianism ideology is inextricably linked to religious beliefs [13]. He underlined that in recent years [13], the activity of suffering emancipation has been focused on terrorism and ethnic conflict. As a result, humanitarianism is founded on Christian ideas and the ideal of a universal human society. Thus, secularism theories have failed to identify not only those non-Christian civilizations have a variety of paths toward 'modernization,' but also that a variety of secular forms exist in the global community. The follow content will take China as example to examine the Chinese secularization process to bolster the argument that secularism takes diverse forms in different countries, resulting in a distinctive impact on their political values and ideologies.

3. ANALYSIS OF SECULARISM IN CHINESE STATE AND SOCIETY

According to scholar Guangwu Wang [8], China was unique in its own nature since 'unlike the West which had to deal a powerful Church for centuries, the Chinese had begun with a secular outlook that ensured that no Church could be established to challenge political authority'. Religious convictions or church authority have never had the same influence on Chinese political authorities as they did throughout Europe's history. Or, as Wang puts it [8], In Europe, secularism emerged from a religious core or, as some may say, secularism deviated from a religious norm, but in China, what was worldly was the norm. It might indicate that the Chinese did not feel the need to stress the phrases necessary to explain the notion of 'secularism'. As a consequence, secularism has been established as a difficult concept to translate into Chinese owing to their lack of attention on secular development and church-state ties. Shisu, the Chinese version of secular, primarily refers to the 'common customs that in an age' [9]. And its use dates all the way back to the third century BC, when it already reflected the ordinary people's entrenched beliefs, those habits and traditions passed down for centuries. Although China did not have the same church-state connection as Europe, it did have a thriving religious realm. This research will then examine the secularism of Chinese society from four aspects: the field of superstition in ancient China, Han and

Confucianism, Confucianism and Religion in China, and the orthodoxy Confucianism.

3.1 Superstition in ancient China

Throughout the ancient Shang dynasty (15th-11th century BC), religious rituals honouring the ruling family were prioritized, and intricate divination systems were developed to govern social actions. In modern China, this behaviour is commonly referred to as 'mixin', which translates as superstition. These spiritual practices demonstrate the civilization's distinctiveness from other Axial Age civilizations in terms of authority paradigm. Furthermore, there is a new religious trend in its imperial heritage, which Prasenjit Duara characterizes as 'vertical rather than lateral' in nature, with conflicts arising 'between the state and elites and popular religiosities' [10]. The ruler was the greatest shaman, and that he and his priests aspired to monopolize access to Heaven's sacred authority [10]. Thus, the ruler and his ritualists asserted monopolistic connection with divinity not only over rival spiritual groups and also over the general public. By the Zhou dynasty, the heir rulers had shifted their focus to the practical applications of the Royal Rites of Heaven-worship in the interest of dynastic maintenance and rejuvenation, a trend that has been fostered during the periods of division that lasted around four centuries until 3rd century BC. China's imperial secularism, as demonstrated, is strikingly distinct from the other AA civilizations. The division between 'transcendence and the mundane' is fundamental to Axial Age civilizations [10]. Almost every civilization desired to be ensconced in the realm of sacred transcendence. Because neither individuals nor society can fully realize their aspirations in this world, everyone was exhorted to work toward realization. Thus, divinity served as the cornerstone for these societies' moral frameworks. Nonetheless, distinctions amongst these AA civilizations emerge regarding their attitude toward transcendence. On the one hand, there was a fundamental schism in the majority of Abrahamic faiths between the transcendent and human endeavor to obtain it. Chinese religion, on the other hand, was 'not transcendent but immanent' [11]. In the basic theology of Chinese religions, Tian (Heaven) symbolized a transcendent power and spirit. Yet, 'this power, moral authority, and ideals' were not primarily sought or obtained through 'faith and messianic prophesy' [10]. Rather than that, the critical issue was 'who could access it, how to cultivate it, and with what (this-worldly) implications' [10]. The impersonal construction of 'Tian' as a framework for public moral guidance facilitated the acceptance of secular traditionalism philosophy in the future. Hundreds of minor regimes waged war against one another during the Warring States era, and when only seven large powers remained, secularization of public affairs became a new benchmark. The proliferation of activist educators and intellectuals who proposed solutions to the large opposing ruling family resulted in

an increased attention on pragmatic concerns such as financial surpluses, effective militaries, and strong administration as a prerequisite for good governance. Numerous works of outstanding literature emerged during this period, which serves as the core of Chinese philosophy and ideology. They all believed that the truly significant problem was to live a prosperous life, whatever defined, in this life rather than 'after life.' And this was not only valid for rulers but common people alike. Legalists' ideas propelled the Qin dynasty to quickly unite China as a powerful state, promoting logical and practical reasoning in political concerns and rejecting any divine and afterlife values. By this time, Confucius, the dynasty's most famous thinker, had also arisen, and his thinking was adopted as a guide by the latter Han rulers to maintain the dynasty's stability and continuous influence in modern Asian countries. One could argue that by the third century, China had 'finished' the process of secularization and transitioned from a superstitious stage to a more practical and material era. Thus, divinity served as a tool for rulers to govern in ancient China, placing a lesser emphasis on the ordinary populace. Additionally, there is a distinct spiritual root that is immanent in its 'Heaven' ideology, which acts as the ultimate transcendent authority that guides moral frameworks. This paved the way for subsequent philosophical works to pursue a materially superior 'this life' for both rulers and the public.

3.2 Han and Confucianism

The Han rulers engaged diverse intellectuals to assist them in developing more benevolent governing policies. Even yet, the Legalist-style governmental framework remained substantially intact, assisting the ruler in establishing a practical administrative structure. Nevertheless, it was during these stable eras that the Confucians arose as a group capable of providing the most comprehensive set of principles integrating practical administration and moral theory, most notably ideals demonstrating their commitment to the ruling 'Tian Zi' (Son of Heaven). Han Wudi summoned these Confucians to serve as intimate counselors and instructors to his successors, as well as to assist them in recruiting the best individuals to govern the realm. Thus, for the length of its history, China has generally avoided disputes between faith-based social religiosities hallmark of Abrahamic faiths. Confucius emphasized that individual need to focus on this life rather than the afterlife. As such, general moral principle is guided through the secular philosophy instead of divinity. While practices honoring ancestors remained significant to both the rulers and the public, they primarily delivered to emphasize the value of practical development, especially material prosperity. Personal rituals were essential yet did not signify salvation, as well as the royal family lead by the TianZi's official rituals does not send any spiritual notion to his populace. Yet this preponderance of that

materialistic principles ultimately resulted in a tedious environment that focused on ethical exhortations and brought no spiritual consolation to the empire, whether royal or ordinary. I concur with Wang's statement [8], that the absence of a spiritual alternative paved the way for Buddhism's significant influence in the Han capital of Changan during the first and second century AD, when it was introduced by Indian monks. The secular nature of the Han emperors' monopoly on the social sphere contributed to the spiritual vacuum that the Buddhist belief instantly filled once it was introduced to China. Nonetheless, this Han's encounters with Confucianism serve as a model for the later empire and continue to exert a strong impact on modern China.

3.3 Confucianism and Religion in China

Between the fourth and sixth century, China has been segmented into northern and southern dynasties. Whether among the Chinese or among the different tribal confederations that invaded northern China, Buddhism evolved rapidly as a well-organized religion. That was the first and only occasion in Chinese history that an alien religion received such a warm response. The popularity of Buddhism prompted native local organizations which had previously found fulfillment in Taoism to duplicate Buddhist structures and construct their own assertions to be organized religions. Rarely does religious or religion-based systems affect the secular national discourse to such an extent that it has infiltrated social problems. When Confucianism's dominance on public life came to an end, the majority of the populace was divided between two rival organized religions. Prasenjit's work [10], for instance, reveals how Buddhism integrated concepts such as salvation and faith into Chinese society, particularly during the three-century interregnum between major centralized kingdoms ruled by Confucian literati. These supernatural concepts are ostensibly answers to the metaphysical conundrum of death. What remains intriguing, however, is why the metaphysical problem of death and the hereafter was not coupled with the transcendent concept of Heaven in the same way that Abrahamic faiths were. Prasenjit identifies a potential answer to this difficulty in the religion of ancestor worship – and subsequently a lineage ideology – which was one of the oldest expressions of the divine in China [10]. Yet, these beliefs were unable to eradicate the pervasive secularism that influenced the public sphere. Another point to make here is that Confucianism possesses the capacity for secular unification. Despite the fact that several empires' rulers were profoundly Buddhist and recruited priests and followers to assist them in governing throughout the split in north and south China, state functions largely followed the Han's traditions. These characteristics of secular Confucianism appear to have developed throughout time and established themselves as effective tools of imperial authority, which is vital for any ruler interested in

reunifying the realm. Thus, despite royal support, religious principles of administration failed to endure, and whenever rulers encountered grave challenges to imperial authority, they sought assistance from practical Confucians committed to the social sector. Then, near the Tang's ending, a remarkable resurgence of secular-Confucian notions emerged. Notable intellectuals of the Song dynasty include Han Yu and Li Ao, who published works critical of both Buddhist and Taoist religious ideas. Song-ming lixue (Neo-Confucianism) was prevalent throughout the Song dynasty under Zhuxi's formulations. For him, this meant eradicating the superstitious and mystical components of Taoism and Buddhism from their impact on Confucianism, which was prevalent in China during and after the Han Dynasty. In his most renowned work *Family Rituals*, he uses it to uphold and reinforce his Confucian ideals about public harmony and good personal behaviour. Wang Yangming is another major scholar of neo-Confucianism worth mentioning. His interpretation of Confucianism rejected Zhu's orthodox philosophy's rationalist dualism and formed the heart-mind school (Xinxue). While Confucianism's organizational autonomy was never sufficiently developed in China due to the state's monopoly, Neo-Confucianism highlights its critical role in acquiring access to transcendent authority. They sought to create a morality that embraced both the royal family and all individuals seeking entry to 'Heaven.' The ultimate aspirations of the devout Confucian were personal sagehood (junzi) and cultivation of the heavenly endowed nature (tianming zhixing) [10]. While neo-Confucianism is essentially a repudiation of Buddhist and Taoist ideals, it has adopted ideas and notions from both. Nevertheless, rather than seeing metaphysics as a spiritual path, neo-Confucianists viewed it as a tool for constructing a logical philosophy. While the history of Buddhism, Taoism, and other religious groups in China is lengthy and fascinating, the point here is that Confucians exhibited the capacity to weather spiritual upheavals and create secular shelter for the majority of royal dynasties in order for them to maintain governance and accomplish unification.

3.4 New invaders and the orthodoxy Confucianism

Even yet, during the Song dynasty, Neo-Confucianism suffered further impediments and challenges. Despite possessing the most educated administration in Chinese history, the dynasty was militarily weak, and these intellectuals lacked the military might required to repel a string of invasions. In 1279, the Mongols seized the entire country. As a result of Khubilai Khan's integration of steppe-land practices into China's administrative system, Confucian notions became less relevant. The majority of educated literati competent for civil administration were unemployed, since the Yuan preferred religious advisors such as Buddhist and Taoist

officials, as well as a few Muslim officials, to cement imperial influence on the Chinese public. Confucianism, on the other hand, established its amazing durability by adhering to secular values until another opportunity to affirm their relevance presented itself. When the Mongols were expelled in 1368, a similar drastic transformation occurred. A former Buddhist monk rose to power, most likely with the assistance of Manichaean religious rebels, and rapidly enlisted as many Confucians as possible to assist him in reestablishing Chinese secularism. This action was driven by both a desire to serve the royal family and the goal to nurture new intellectuals along similar lines through the examination system. Nonetheless, a schism emerged between Confucian intellectuals and many court cliques throughout the Ming dynasty. Ming rulers frequently prioritized the interests of the ruling family, and any Confucian thinkers who refused to comply were severely punished. However, the secular principles that had benefited the Confucians for centuries continued to exist in order to safeguard their position at court. Under the reign of northern invaders, the Manchus, shamanism and Buddhism were merged under the Qing dynasty. When the northern invaders (Manchus) founded the Qing dynasty, they blended shamanism and Buddhism while continuing to appreciate Confucianism. While the Ming literati fought valiantly against Manchu supremacy over several years, it was the Confucians who were keen to contribute their secular abilities to the new ruler. The Manchus, meanwhile, wooed them by restoring the examination system. The Manchu regime placed a premium on secularism and recruited Confucian academics to serve in civil administration ministries. Additionally, competent officials were encouraged to pursue additional education to lend intellectual backing to the dynasty's favored form of orthodox Confucianism. Due to the elevated social position, secular Confucianism retained its prominence in the country's development post 1949. These ancient philosophical values serve as benchmarks for the Chinese to be more receptive to post-colonial anti-consumerism ideals. Perter van der veer provides an intriguing investigation on secularism and postcolonial China's national development [14]. As such, he illustrates how Chinese nationalism embraces material development and scientific materialism on the one hand, while being enchanted and collectively enticed on the other by Maoist secular utopianism. Still, the most noticeable feature of nationalism is China's role as a victim throughout modern history, one that is today on the verge of liberty and renaissance. Economic pragmatism and materialism form the bedrock of the country's internal and foreign policy, which are widely accepted by its population. Meanwhile, even Marxism serves as an official ideology, but it is unique in that Marxism is combined with ancient traditionalism. According to scholars Yan Xuetong [15], these ideologies emphasize the necessity of political leadership, as well as the value of strategic credibility in laying the groundwork for the leadership's solidarity and

durability. In short, they suggest that the foreign policy of a superpower should promote strategic reputation. To accomplish this, the ancient notion of 'humane authority' (wang) encourages decision-making based on the ideals of benevolence (ren) and justice (yi) [15]. Additionally, historical experience has conditioned the Chinese social sense of morality to favor assimilation over invasion. After all, the Chinese secularization process have generated a special moral code to guide the country's current policy agenda, which include (1) Government serves as an instrument only for the people's benefit (2) Ensuring the country has a geopolitical space that is rightfully its own (3) Recognizes its return to global prominence as a result of recent tragic colonial history (4) Assuring the world that this is a process that will benefit everyone.

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how the Chinese experience with secularism and religion greatly contributes to the study of political 'values' disagreements and consequently worldwide conflicts. As stated at the outset of the paper, secularization theory as viewed through a European-centric lens has limitations in the context of the IR study. According to Hurd [2], 'International Relations is rooted in modern social theory, which has used the Western demarcation of 'religion' and its separation from 'politics' as the natural starting point for social science'.

Additionally, secularism in the IR research has limitations as a result of European colonial history, which has resulted in the uncritical support of secularization attempts that have frequently resulted in catastrophic violence and uprising. Following Barnett's assertion that 'Humanitarianism ideology is inextricably linked to religious beliefs' [13], the study uses China as an example to demonstrate how secularism theories have failed to identify not only that non-Christian civilizations have a range of paths toward 'modernization,' but also that a range of secular forms exist in the global community. China, as the world's oldest civilization that has lasted to the present day, has demonstrated its viability with one-fifth of humanity, and its tale merits recognition. While this is an oversimplified version of the Chinese secularization story, it does address the claim that China has a unique manner of displaying secularism ideology. As seen, while China claims to be officially secular, its social ideology and political domain are profoundly influenced by Confucianism and diverse ethnic dynasties. These traditional values serve as the bedrock of the country's present moral framework for both leaders and the public in general. Besides, it was precisely this divergence between China and the Christian-majority country during the secularization process that resulted in considerable ideological disputes.

Increasing cultural pluralism and global interdependence within societies necessitate a rethinking of the process by which social norms and values are generated in distinct cultural contexts, as well as their similarities and differences within the global community. Scholars should develop research questions that transcend cultural divides. This opens the door to innovative thinking on ideology, power, and policies in international and comparative politics.

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