

# The Challenge Of Secularism in Mexico

Jesús Rodríguez Zepeda\*



Antonio Nave/AE

One of the unexpected —albeit not illogical— effects of the victory of National Action Party (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox in this year's presidential elections has been the strengthening of right-wing fundamentalism, which until recently had existed in a relatively larval state.<sup>1</sup> Although the PAN accommodates a broad spectrum of right-wing positions ranging from Christian fundamentalism to liberal positions, the former

have been more belligerent since they saw in the elections what they deem a victory for the society they want. This new political situation brings to the fore the discussion about the nature of the secular state in Mexico.

A secular state is not the opposite of a theocracy or a fundamentalist state, but rather its modern successor. The logical opposite of the fundamentalist state is the Jacobin state, the persecutor of all religion, in itself another form of totalitarianism. That is why when defining secularism in Mexican politics, we must leave to one side the anticlerical precedents

of the first decades of the twentieth century, but also the idea that it is merely the public organization of the average values of existing religions.

This definition of the state must be formulated not only in light of the exhaustion of the secular model prevalent in Mexico in recent decades, but also taking into consideration the fundamentalist outbreaks that have resulted from the PAN occupying the office of president.

These outbreaks were set off by the local Congress of the state of Guanajuato's passage in August of a new criminal code. The PAN caucus used

---

\* Professor and researcher at the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) Philosophy Department, Iztapalapa campus.

its majority in the local Congress to toughen up penalties for voluntarily stopping a pregnancy, making it a crime to have an abortion even when the pregnancy is the result of a rape.

This decision—with its fundamentalist tone—was not without significant precedents. In the last five years,

Church in Mexico is the gradual decrease in the intellectual and cultural level of its hierarchy, one of the most backward and ignorant in Latin America.

To the degree that the country's modernization was beginning to open up career expectations for educated,

between the different churches and the state had been conducted in a way that attempted to hide the impossibility of applying the antiquated legislation on the matter. If the 1992 Salinas reforms had any merit in the field of state relations to religious institutions, it was in conceding legal recognition to the different churches' social and political presence, a presence that could not be covered up by a discourse of secularism that no longer corresponded to reality.

The problem of these reforms is that they did not promote an alternative model of secularism capable of ensuring that the public recognition of religious pluralism in Mexico not give rise in some places to conditions for the advance of fundamentalism. The PRI's traditional pragmatism led it to normalize the recognition of the existence of churches without promoting at the same time their counterpart, a secular state model capable of basing itself on its own values and institutions such as critical education or the defense of civil rights.

This task, unfulfilled during the PRI's hegemony, must be undertaken now, but with the risk that the country's troubling socioeconomic fragmentation may deepen because of religious clashes. In that context, it is imperative that we define the model of secularism appropriate for Mexico and its recently normalized democracy.

The discussion about secularism is not restricted to Mexico, but rather is one of the great themes of the contemporary moral and political debate. An author of the stature of John Rawls considers this theme a central problem of political justice.<sup>2</sup> In effect, secularism cannot be reduced to the non-denominational character of the state,

A secular state is not  
the opposite of a theocracy  
or a fundamentalist state, but rather its  
modern successor. The logical opposite of the  
fundamentalist state is the Jacobin state, the persecutor  
of all religion, in itself another form of totalitarianism.

a long list of PAN-directed local government decisions confuse religious principles with public norms, concluding with the scandalous case of Paulina, a 13-year-old girl forced by the PAN government of Baja California to have a baby conceived when she was raped. Despite their gravity and their violation of both state law and relevant federal legislation, the PAN actions went unpunished. The qualitative change in the case of Guajuato was that fundamentalist behavior may acquire validity through the imposition of certain religious principles through legislation.

Clearly, these fundamentalist groups would be quite weak if they did not enjoy the support of the dominant sector of Mexico's Catholic hierarchy, which achieved legal status with President Salinas' 1992 reforms. With that status, it began to play a more active role. A sociological phenomenon that has accompanied this increase in the political influence of the Catholic

mainly middle-class, layers of society, a career in the church stopped attracting the better educated candidates and made way for those with a weaker background in education and culture. The most visible result has been that the Mexican Catholic hierarchy has begun to be homogenous in its increasingly schematic moral positions and antiliberal political stances. This trend, however, is not only local, but is part of a process of increasing conservatism in Catholicism worldwide.

Among the points pending in the reform of the Mexican state now being discussed in light of parties alternating in the presidency, secularism is central. One of the first tasks in this context is to clear up the fallacy that the PRI regimen had been an active defender of the secular state.

Although during the seven decades of PRI domination in Mexico there were different stages in the state's relation to religious creeds, the fact is that during the 1970s, the relation

but rather must be broadened out to include political coexistence with a rigorous pluralism of groups who hold and defend different religious, moral and philosophical beliefs. In other words, secularism is at the same time both the recognition of basic civil liberties and an essential resource for democratic governability and social stability.

In the Mexican case, the reconstruction of a secular state may be attempted by different roads. One might be based on the false supposition that the values of secularism are already present in the churches' doctrine and social behavior and that it would suffice to integrate them into a political consensus for them to adjust to living together in a constitutional framework. This option was fed during the PAN's presidential campaign and is the most attractive one for its more liberal groups because it would allow them to resolve their differences with the party's fundamentalist sector without a break. We will call this option the "Rawlsian solution" for its correlation to one of the most important discourses of contemporary political philosophy. With this perspective, the principles and values of secularism appear to be the average of the values and practices of the religions themselves.

This solution necessarily means the need to distinguish between what Rawls denominates reasonable comprehensive doctrines and unreasonable comprehensive doctrines. A doctrine is comprehensive when it integrates in a more or less articulated and systematic way a series of moral, religious or philosophical values and principles. It is reasonable when it accepts that other doctrines or persons may have different conceptions

without relinquishing their right to enjoy a society's principles of justice. According to Brian Barry, a person holds a reasonable doctrine when he/she considers that another person may defend a different doctrine without necessarily being wrong or a complete imbecile.<sup>3</sup>

in the different reasonable comprehensive doctrines being capable of sharing a nucleus of powerful principles of political justice, such as the idea of equal citizenship, economic reciprocity or respect for the constitutional order. In this view, a secular state is effective and morally justified when

In the last five years, a long list of PAN-directed local government decisions confuse religious principles with public norms, concluding with the scandalous case of Paulina, a 13-year-old girl forced by the PAN government of Baja California to have a baby conceived when she was raped.

An unreasonable doctrine holds that its moral, religious or philosophical truth is so indisputable that it merits being backed by the force of the state for its expansion or defense. All forms of religious fundamentalism come under this definition, but so do the ideologies of white supremacy, neo-Naziism, racism or discrimination against minorities.

The cultural distance between reasonable and unreasonable doctrines is marked by a principle that can be defined as a relativist component born in the Enlightenment. A comprehensive doctrine is reasonable when, despite believing firmly in the truth of its own religious, moral or philosophical principles, it accepts the legitimate existence of other doctrines that embrace different principles. That is, its reasonableness consists in maintaining the benefit of the doubt when faced with absolute truths, even when they are one's own.

According to the Rawls solution, the possibility of a plural society resides

its basic principles of justice reflect what existing reasonable religions already accept as norms of morality.

The Rawls solution maintains that it is founded on the historical experience of the United States, where even constitutional order is conceived as the consensual result of a plurality of doctrines with strong religious components. Despite its solid logical structure, this solution's starting point is the idea that a society's pact of moral and religious pluralism can be reached without conflict. What is more, it supposes that comprehensive doctrines play an active role in the construction of the social framework that ensures living together pluralistically. The resulting idea of secularism is the average of religious views.

This point of view is questionable even for the case of the U.S. society for which it was proposed. There is no sociological evidence that the different religious faiths accept or have ever accepted democratic principles (which

in terms of the notion of “truth” are highly relativist) out of a positive conviction and not out of necessity. In other words, what is historically verifiable is that churches maintain a *modus vivendi* (a kind of “non-aggression pact”) with lay principles that were originally alien to them. It would

first erected have, over time, ended up taking that tradition’s principles on board.

Even from the logic of the argument, the reconstruction of secularism in Mexico must start from the idea that religions would impose theocracies if they could. In other words, although

norms based on the freedom of conscience, are at the opposite end of the spectrum from religious pretensions of having the only truth about the meaning of life and happiness.

If the obsession for achieving a consensus with the fundamentalist forces in Mexico prevails, we can begin to forge the possibilities of building a secular state and a genuine constitutional democracy.

The recent internal clashes in the PAN itself are an example of what the most logical course may be for overcoming this conflict: the isolation of the fundamentalists by all the democratic forces with a modicum of liberal components as part of their political identity.

A functional model of secularism in Mexico, capable of offering a framework of reasonable political coexistence for our society’s different religious and moral faiths, can only be established if the imaginary line dividing the democratic right and left stops being central to this debate and the symbolic line separating modern democrats from fundamentalists takes its place. ■■■

The PRI’s traditional pragmatism led it to normalize the recognition of the existence of churches without promoting at the same time their counterpart, a secular state model capable of basing itself on its own values and institutions such as critical education or the defense of civil rights.

be absurd to think about churches as promoters of or activists for these principles.

If the model for the reconstruction of Mexican secularism follows the Rawlsian solution, the result will only be the elimination of the values and characteristics of the secular state that historically have been built “against” religious intentions of domination.

The Rawlsian solution contradicts its own suppositions. According to Rawls, the public reason that rules in a plural society, in which moral and religious doctrines are the basis for political consensus, would be characterized by values such as free, informed, reasonable research subject to the criteria of scientific knowledge as long as they were not highly controversial.<sup>4</sup> Rawls’ contradiction—and therefore, the invariability of his position—consists of the supposition that the religious institutions counter to which the Enlightenment’s rationalist tradition was

fortunately large sectors of religious institutions have managed to live effectively with representative political institutions, if they were free to do so they would move toward fundamentalism.

Therefore, secularism must be built in Mexico not as the result of a pre-established consensus that from the outset has the approval of the different religious faiths, but as the articulation of legal principles and institutional practices that can only result from a highly intense political struggle that will establish the line of separation between defenders of modern secularism and the promoters of fundamentalism. This would be, of course, a democratic and peaceful struggle like the one now being waged in the European Union against neo-Naziism or the terrorism of Spain’s ETA.

The positive values of secularism, like public, critical education that closely follows advances in science, and its

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Although it could seem exaggerated to speak of fundamentalism in Mexico, I use the term in the following sense: the decision of the governing group to impose religious principles on all of society through the use of political power.

<sup>2</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Brian Barry, “John Rawls and the Search for Stability,” *Ethics* 105, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Rawls, *op. cit.*, p. 139.