

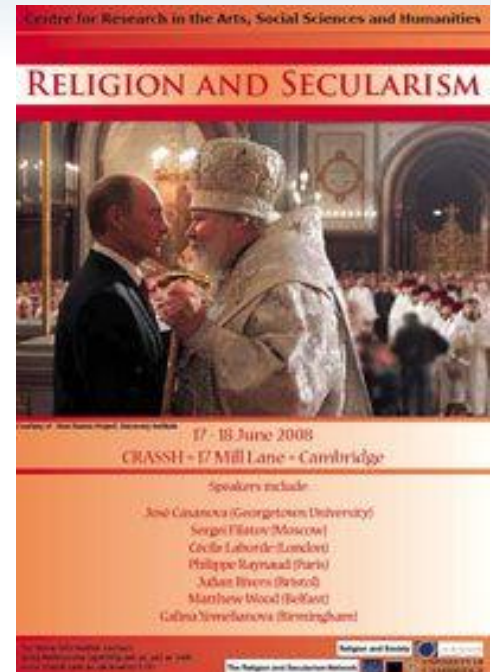
## Secularism means very different things in different times and places

People in Europe often speak of ‘secularism’ as if it has a single and straightforward meaning. By giving a platform and meeting ground to scholars of secularism from around this world, this research network showed that there are as many meanings of secularism as there are political arrangements. Overall, the network has successfully detached the concept of the secular from its European roots and reconstructed it in a way suitable for a comparative understanding of religion and politics.

The network, organised by David Lehmann and Humeira Iqtidar, ran between 2007 and 2009 from Cambridge University, and involved a series of seminars and three major workshops. It involved scholars from the fields of political theory, political science, religious studies and the sociology of religion presenting research on France, Argentina, Singapore, Indonesia, Israel, India, the USA, the UK, Pakistan and Russia. Speakers included David Martin, Tariq Modood in debate with Polly Toynbee, Bryan Turner, Galina Yemelianova and Maleka Malik. The leader of a religious NGO working with the British government’s ‘Preventing Violent Extremism’ programme also provided an illuminating presentation of secularism in action.

The network did not set out to say that one form of secularism is better than others. It did, however, recognise that the braiding of secularism with democracy and rights-based citizenship is a product of the European context. The modern European view that ‘religion’ is a separate and containable sphere which can be separated from politics and even from public life is based upon a very specific history of church-state relations. It does not do justice to the sheer variety of ways religion is understood, lived or managed across the world. (In many ways it is also a simplification of what actually happens in Europe and America.) To take some examples discussed in the meetings, in Russia, a European concept of secularism has barely survived twenty years after Gorbachev initiated his reforms. In India the conception of secularism as a state equidistant from all religions is an important ideal, but many citizens are left unprotected from majoritarian domination. In Indonesia, members of ‘syncretic and local traditions’ must convert to Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism or Confucianism if they are to get an identity card or marry. Religious affiliation draws boundaries in multifarious ways which defy the notion that religion is merely a personal option or lifestyle. Although there may be fewer state-religion disputes in Africa, Latin America and the USA than in Europe, there are nonetheless major legal, media and social pressures on the regulation of religion in daily and civic life.

The network proved so successful that extra funding was obtained from the British Academy and Smuts Fund for Commonwealth Studies at Cambridge University to complement it.



## Find out more...

- Read the co-organiser's chapter arising out of the network: Iqtidar, H. 2010 'Islamism and Colonial Secularism: A Relationship of Creativity?' in *Religion and the Political Imagination* ed. by G. Stedman-Jones and I. Katznelson. Cambridge University Press.
- Keep a look at for the special issue of the journal *Modern Asian Studies* based upon the network's October 2008 workshop focused on Pakistan, which will be published shortly.
- There will also be a special issue of *Citizenship Studies* in 2012 arising from the October 2009 workshop which placed secularism in comparative perspective.

## You might also be interested in...

- Reading the report or listening to podcasts from the one day event on Faith and Policy the Religion and Society Programme co-organised at the British Library July 2010:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/featured\\_findings/faith\\_and\\_policy](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/faith_and_policy)
- Reading an interim report on another Religion and Society funded research network looking at young people's belief which also highlights what a constructed category this is:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010\\_09/1283770625\\_Lynch\\_Phase\\_2\\_Network\\_Young\\_people\\_and\\_the\\_cultural\\_performance\\_of\\_belief\\_\(Oxford\\_workshop\\_report\)\\_July\\_2010.pdf](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_09/1283770625_Lynch_Phase_2_Network_Young_people_and_the_cultural_performance_of_belief_(Oxford_workshop_report)_July_2010.pdf)
- Looking at Mark Pike's Religion and Society project report on 'Religious Reading in a Secular Society' about Christian ethos schools in England:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010\\_09/1283770625\\_Lynch\\_Phase\\_2\\_Network\\_Young\\_people\\_and\\_the\\_cultural\\_performance\\_of\\_belief\\_\(Oxford\\_workshop\\_report\)\\_July\\_2010.pdf](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2010_09/1283770625_Lynch_Phase_2_Network_Young_people_and_the_cultural_performance_of_belief_(Oxford_workshop_report)_July_2010.pdf)
- Basia Spalek's Religion and Society funded work about police-Muslim engagement for the purposes of counter-terrorism in the UK:  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2009\\_11/1258555474\\_Spalek\\_Summary\\_Report\\_2008.pdf](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2009_11/1258555474_Spalek_Summary_Report_2008.pdf)

## Project Details

### Award Title

**Secularism: a reappraisal of institutional arrangements for religious regulation**

### Team

**Principal Investigator:** Dr David Lehmann (Cambridge)

**Co-organiser:** Humeira Iqtidar (Cambridge)



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



## University

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Cambridge University

## Research Partners

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John Barber (Politics, King's College Cambridge), Emile Perreau-Saussine (Politics; Pembroke College Cambridge), plus seminar and workshop participants

## Award Type

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Phase 1 Network

## Key terms

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secularism, the state, human rights, citizenship, democracy, law, secularization