

# EDUCATION, POLITICS AND RELIGION

RECONCILING THE CIVIL AND  
THE SACRED IN EDUCATION



JAMES ARTHUR,  
LIAM GEARON  
AND ALAN SEARS



# Education, Politics and Religion

In recent years, a number of popular books have savaged religion, arguing it is a dangerous delusion that poisons human societies and relationships. This is but the most recent manifestation of a secularizing agenda that has been sweeping contemporary democratic societies since the Enlightenment. This book pushes back against that agenda, examining its key assumptions and arguing that the exclusion of religious people and ideas from education and the public square is both undemocratic and unwise.

For the most part, this book draws arguments and examples from Christianity, the religious tradition of the authors, but it recognizes that many religions share the concerns and possibilities examined. The book examines contemporary expressions of the secularizing agenda in Western democracies, with particular focus on how it is played out in education. It demonstrates how republican theory understood within a faith perspective provides a shared understanding and substantive basis for education within a Western democracy. It explores the historical connections and disconnections between religion and civic life in the West, from ancient to contemporary times, and examines religiously based civic action and pedagogical approaches, contending both have the potential to contribute greatly to democracy.

This book will be of value to those interested in exploring how democracies can include the voices of all their citizens: the religious and the secular.

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Reconciling the civil and the sacred  
in education

**James Arthur, Liam Gearon  
and Alan Sears**

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# Introduction

## An argument for enchantment

In a lecture given at Munich University in 1918, Max Weber (1989: 29) argued ‘the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”’. He was describing the phenomenon some have characterized as the ‘Secularization Thesis, the idea that the rise of modernity necessitates the decline of religion’ (Bottum 2010: 63). Bottum argues that this thesis ‘remained a fundamental postulate of European intellectual life and, in truth, of its American imitation from early in the nineteenth century through the entire twentieth century’. We concur, and in this book examine the working out of the Secularization Thesis in contemporary educational discourses related to religion and its role in shaping meanings of civic duty and citizenship. We argue that following on from the Enlightenment, these discourses have been aggressively secularized and this ‘disenchantment’ has not served education generally, or civic education in particular, well. It is our contention that substantial attention to religion and religious forms in civic education has the potential to make the field both more democratic and effective in its mission of shaping thoughtful and engaged citizens.

Early exponents of the Secularization Thesis, such as Edward Gibbon, through thoroughly secular rationalists, often acknowledge the immense contribution of Christianity to Western culture. More recently, however, there has been an expunging of religion and religious thinkers from the record ‘as the “canon” of Western political thought got “normalized”’ (Elshtain 2008: xv). A significant example is the fact that the politicians that worked on the European Constitution refused to reflect explicitly the fact that Europe has been overwhelmingly Christian for the last two millennia. The traditions of a particular European culture are often linked with the Christian faith that has shaped that culture in an enduring fashion. It builds on the premise that the predominant religious beliefs, values and practices in any society are rooted in long-standing cultural traditions and histories. The theory suggests that religious traditions shape the values and practices of people whether or not they express or practise Christian beliefs.

Another example is that religious symbols in public schools have become problematic in modern Europe, particularly Islamic symbols, and have, as a consequence, given rise to widespread public debate on the scope of religious freedom. Questions have been raised about the relationship of constitutional courts when



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they consider human rights to the specific historical cultures within which they are embedded, and whose values they may be properly said to represent and are supposed to protect. There appears to be a relationship between religion, even if secularized, and constitutional identity. Religion as a belief emphasizes doctrine, while religion as identity emphasizes affiliation with a group. Thus, religion as identity is less likely to emphasize shared theological beliefs and is more likely to emphasize shared histories, culture and traditions.

One result of this secularization is that little attention is given in modern educational discourses to religion and its role in shaping meanings of civic duty and citizenship. This is due, in part, to the fact that many of the organizations that seek to promote a discourse between politics and religion are secular bodies that present issues of religious identity and faith in the language of community, equality, diversity and values. This language does not fully recognize the significance of faith and belief for the intersection of religious beliefs and political action. Such organizations also fail to take seriously the re-emergence of religion as a potent force in politics; modern notions of citizenship, whether liberal, communitarian or civic republican, are almost wholly founded on secular constructs. There is an assumption that the rise of secular citizenship requires the erosion of the authority of institutional religion. These observations minimize the importance of religion in the political context, denying religion a legitimate role.

Consequently, accounts of politics in educational studies generally omit references to religion. Many of the works of key intellectual shapers of civic education in Britain, such as Dawn Oliver, Derek Heater and Bernard Crick, make no reference to the Judaeo-Christian tradition in what they believe to be the foundations of Western citizenship. Crick made his position explicit when he declared at a British Humanist Association conference at the University of London in October 2006 that 'Citizenship is secular, on historical and philosophical grounds'. Even when explicit reference is made to religion it is generally negative. There is also an absence of historical as well as theological perspective in debates about pluralism, diversity and community cohesion.

The virtual elimination of religion and religious ideas from the discourses of civic life in the West is not simply a matter of benign neglect. Secularity, or a commitment to a non-sectarian public square, has often given way to secularism, an ideology that fiercely sets out to eliminate religion from public, and in some cases even private, life. Increasingly, educationalists are defining the public space to mean 'in the open' where all can see, such as a public school, and defining religion as in the home or within one's mind where no one can see. This comes to mean the 'visible' and the 'hidden'. Religion is relegated to the private sphere and must therefore be hidden. For example, the phenomenon Noddings (2008: 369) describes as 'the new outspoken atheism' often uses polemic laced with ridicule and scorn in an attempt to extinguish religion or push it to the margins. Guinness (2008: 13) calls this 'secular fundamentalism' and argues that it 'matches the rise of religious fundamentalism and creates one of the two poles of today's extremism in religion and public life'.

In the face of this aggressive intolerance, religious people and institutions have reacted in a number of ways, including retreat and retaliation. Retreat takes one of two forms, the first being compromise with the secular world so religion loses any distinctive presence. In 1976, concern about this kind of capitulation to the secular *Zeitgeist* moved a group of American Christian thinkers from a range of traditions to issue the Hartford Appeal. The appeal was a call to American Christians to affirm their traditions, emphasize transcendence and challenge the assumptions of modernity (Berger and Neuhaus 1976).

The second manifestation of religious retreat is the restricting of religion to a private affair concerned with the edification and salvation of individuals and religious communities but with nothing to contribute to the wider society and civic discourse. This is the view of religion often propagated by secularists (and the overt policy of the state in some places, including France) but is also adopted by some faith groups. As we show later in the book, this is not consistent with Judaeo-Christian tradition which has a history from ancient times of engagement with civic life, even in hostile or ambivalent contexts. The prophet Jeremiah exhorted the Hebrew exiles in Babylon to ‘seek the peace and prosperity of the city’ where they found themselves. That sentiment is further worked out in the Christian theology of Augustine, Aquinas and many who followed them.

Religious groups who choose not to retreat in the face of secularism often resort to retaliation. They respond in kind to the invective sometimes used against them, resulting in what some have described, particularly in the American context, as the culture wars. In these wars ‘name-calling, insult, ridicule, guilt by association, caricature, innuendo, accusation, denunciation, negative ads, and deceptive and manipulative videos have replaced deliberation and debate’ (Guinness 2008: 84). More serious still, in terms of retaliation, is religiously inspired intimidation and violence as a response to secularism.

This book is a response to the dominance of secularism in the field of educational discourses around citizenship and civic education that eschews both retreat and retaliation. We intend to push back firmly against those who would exclude religious ideas and people of faith from civic life, setting the record straight where we believe it has been distorted. With Neuhaus (1976: 138), we are ‘calling a halt to retreat’ in both senses used above. In our response we are also committed to civility, which means much more than simply being nice or polite. It includes a commitment to deliberation, even through very tough issues, and to persuasion. As Guinness (2008: 151) points out, ‘genuine civility is more than decorous public manners, or squeamishness about differences, or a form of freshman sensitivity training. It is substantive before it is formal ... It is a style of public discourse shaped by respect for the humanity and dignity of individuals, as well as for truth and the common good’.

This book is divided into three parts, each addressing particular aspects of the issue of the role of religion in discourses about citizenship and citizenship education, but there are some overriding themes that permeate the book. These include:

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- 1 A firm belief that the Secularization Thesis has proven to be false. For better or worse (and it has been both) religion is, has been, and will be an important factor not only in the lives of individuals but in the common life of societies, nations and the world. Despite challenges raised by modernity and postmodernity, religion remains a core element of the identity of many people around the world – including in the most ‘advanced’ societies – and if we expect students to come to understand the world in a deep sense, they will have to wrestle with understanding their own and others’ identities. A number of scholars around the world are calling for citizenship education that fosters a sense of cosmopolitanism, including an understanding of the animating role that faith plays in the civic engagement of individuals and communities (Hébert 2010; Osler 2010). Osler and Starkey (2003) demonstrate that young people have both multiple identities and can come to understand the identities of others in quite sophisticated ways. We believe it is a mistake not to acknowledge the power of religion in people’s lives as part of civic education.
- 2 There has been an essentializing of religion and religious practice as un- or anti-democratic, while secularity is characterized as politically and socially neutral and absolutely compatible with democracy. Dawkins’ (2006) book *The God Delusion* is one of the most egregious examples of the former. Religion is described as anti-rational, oppressive and violent, and responsible for almost every ill facing the world; in the words of Hitchens (2007), ‘religion poisons everything’. Secularity, on the other hand, is portrayed as neutral and the natural context for democracy. We contend that both these positions are simplistic and inaccurate. In some cases, religion has been, and is, all of the things Dawkins, Hitchens and others claim it to be, but that is neither necessarily nor always true. As we show throughout this book, democracy has often flourished in religious contexts (including in Ancient Athens, widely acknowledged as the birthplace of Western democracy) and, in some cases, it has burgeoned because of religious influences. The flip side of this is that secular societies are often not democratic at all. The great totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century are the most obvious examples, but just as dangerous is a liberal autocracy that fosters a totalizing discourse of secularism and abides no dissent from that position.
- 3 The public square in democracies around the world includes both religious issues and religious people. In 2009, a referendum in Switzerland approved a constitutional amendment banning the construction of minarets on mosques in that country, the European Court of Human Rights ordered the removal of crucifixes from Italian schools, and senior French politicians proposed banning the wearing of the burqa in public. These are just a few of the religiously based issues circulating in the public discourse of Western democracies and they illustrate the often complex and contentious nature of forging a sense of the common good in contemporary, pluralist democracies. Studies in Canada (Peck and Sears 2005; Peck *et al.* 2008) indicate that young people in that country are so ignorant

of religious motivation in the lives of adherents that they would be ill-equipped to engage in substantial dialogue around any of these issues or ones like them. We know that most democracies either ignore religious education or treat it very superficially (Sweet 1997; Gates 2007; Noddings 2008) and so it is reasonable to assume that ignorance of religion and religious issues and poor preparation for deliberating on them extend well beyond Canada. As Guinness (2008: 5) points out, ‘living with our deepest differences has become one of the world’s greatest issues’, and citizens have to be well prepared to engage in figuring out how to do this.

- 4 Religious people and communities, as well as religious ideas and forms, have much to offer democratic societies. Engagement is critical to democratic societies and evidence of declining levels of engagement underlies a deep and pervasive sense of crisis across the democratic world. This sense of crisis is driving reform initiatives in citizenship education in many jurisdictions. We demonstrate that religion has often been a motivator for very positive and democratic forms of engagement. From arguments about limits on the absolute power of monarchs made by Augustine and Aquinas through the movement to end the slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to public advocacy to forgive the international debt of the world’s poorest countries at the turn of the millennium, religious people and groups have often helped to build democracy and extend human rights. A central argument through this work is that a Judaeo-Christian world view was critical in laying the foundation for Western democracies. It strikes us as ironic that some would seek to exclude religious people from civic life at the very time there is growing concern about widespread civic disengagement. It is not only unjust, but also unwise to exclude religious voices from public deliberation.
- 5 Religious world views offer an important counterpoint and check to the dominant secular ideology. While we contend that religious systems and religion can operate in harmony with democracy, they are not the same thing, and sometimes they are in conflict. We argue that the conflict itself is important and valuable for democracy. The framers for the Hartford Appeal characterized their stand as being ‘against the world, for the world’ (Berger and Neuhaus 1976). In other words, they saw their questioning of aspects of modernity, such as its lack of concern for transcendence and its overweening focus on material gain and scientific advancement, as a potentially important corrective to public life. We and others (Samons 2004) argue that current manifestations of democracy have often attained iconic status that does not allow for questioning of its forms or the proposition of substantial alternatives. These expressions of totalitarian democracy or autocratic liberalism would benefit from critique, and religious ideas can be an important source for that.

## Overview of the book

This book is organized into three parts: Educational, political and theological theory; Challenges of historical and philosophical interpretation; Religious approaches to civic engagement and education for citizenship. Each author brings his own expertise and perspective to a particular section of the book – Arthur in Part I, Gearon in Part II and Sears in Part III.

Part I considers a number of theoretical positions arising from educational, political and theological discourses. Chapter 1 focuses on Christianity, citizenship and identity, and relates this to education in state schools, recognizing that identity is a controversial and contested theme, but it has been a neglected theme in relation to religion. We believe that the role of religion in the formation of a person's identity can have significant educational and political implications. Chapter 1 considers how 'secular' and 'secularism' are conceived and applied, and argues that religious believers who are motivated by religious faith can legitimately seek change in society for the common good of all.

Chapter 2 examines republican theory and religion together with the implications for education. It looks at the central commitments of the republican idea within the context of religious faith by exploring: first, that citizens possess and should recognize certain civic obligations; second, that citizens must develop an awareness of the common good, which exists over and above their private self-interests; third, that citizens must possess and act in accordance with civic virtue; and fourth, that civic engagement in democracy should incorporate a deliberative aspect. The chapter will show how republican theory, understood within a faith perspective, provides a shared understanding and substantive basis for education within a Western democracy.

Ambitious in scope, Part II of the book critically engages with some of the challenges of historical and philosophical interpretation on the interface of religion, politics and education. It aims to provoke discussion amongst theorists and practitioners of citizenship and religious education, but also debate amongst educators in general on the foundations of education in liberal democratic contexts today. Taking a long historical view, Chapter 3 begins with the Enlightenment narration of a golden classical past, Gibbon's (2004) *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Gibbon's vast historical perspective opens a review of interweaving classical sources from Greek, Roman and Christian antiquity. Articulating the complexities of the relationship between the civil and the sacred, Chapter 3 shows how many of the intellectual currents in the ancient world have been subsequently replayed, from the early centuries of Christian persecution to Renaissance and Reformation through to the Enlightenment, and beyond. From antiquity to Enlightenment it is thus shown that Christianity held a significant and defining role in the forming of Western identity. Chapter 3 argues, however, that Christian tradition continues to be neglected by those citizenship educators who draw from a narrow, confining and ultimately distorting range of secular sources in order to define their subject.

Chapter 4 takes up the historical narrative, critically engaging with the many religious, political and educational repercussions of Enlightenment. Framing the discussion with close textual reading of Dewey's (1916) *Democracy and Education*, Chapter 4 highlights four critical contexts in the interaction of religion, politics and education since the Enlightenment: religion and politics; religion and the United Nations; religion in citizenship education; and citizenship in religious education. On the basis of an empirically self-evident growth of religion in the public sphere, Chapter 4 presents a contentious thesis.

Part III explores applied examples of religious engagement in democratic life and the possibilities for transformative learning offered by religiously inspired pedagogies. Chapter 5 examines the intersection of faith and the public square, examining debates about the place of religion in civic life. American writer Gary Wills (2007) argues that while the genius of the American constitution is the disestablishment of religion, various manifestations of Christianity have played key, and often positive, roles in American civic life. Drawing on this and other work on democratic systems around the world, Chapter 5 argues that people of faith have every right to participate in public life as Christians, Muslims, Jews, and so forth, and that religious systems and ontologies have particular insights that can be beneficial to the development of democracy.

Chapter 5 also explores examples of religiously motivated civic activism, in particular Christian, and its contribution to both the historic and contemporary development of democracy. Examples include William Wilberforce and the fight to end the slave trade, Gandhi and the struggle for independence and democracy in India, Martin Luther King and the fight for civil rights in the USA, Desmond Tutu and truth and reconciliation in South Africa, and East European churches as incubators of democracy during the communist era. These individuals and groups not only fostered significant changes in public policy, but provide examples of forceful yet positive religious engagement with civic matters.

Chapter 6 focuses on the contribution religion and religious models of pedagogy might make to citizenship education. Contemporary approaches to secular public education are often overly reductionist in their focus on rationality. Religion offers pedagogical forms with great potential to challenge this and enhance the quality of children's educational experiences. British writer Brian Gates (2007), for example, argues that religions use story, ritual and community as pedagogical forms that have great potential to enhance public education in general and, Chapter 6 argues, citizenship education in particular. Specific examples, such as the use of 'subversive stories' as vehicles for opening up and reconsidering world views and the potential of structured reflection for transformational learning, are also explored.

Our examples throughout the book are drawn primarily from Christianity because that is the tradition we know best, but we believe that many of the approaches outlined here are common to a number of religious traditions.

**Conclusion**

Enchantment can mean being bewitched or put under a spell or, in other words, to lose one's capacity for independent and critical thought. To the extent that religion has sought to propagate this kind of enchantment, to be, as Marx put it, 'the opiate of the masses', we are in sympathy with 'the disenchantment of the world' described by Weber in his 1918 lecture. Our contention is, however, that religion is not always or necessarily a force for closing the mind. It has been, is and can be just the opposite, a force that opens up new possibilities. Enchantment can also mean consideration of and engagement with something new, extraordinary and exciting. We believe religion has the possibility to be enchanting for democratic societies in this more positive sense.

In his reflection on the Hartford Appeal, American sociologist Peter Berger (1976: 10) argues that 'both social institutions and individual lives are increasingly explained as well as justified in terms devoid of transcendent referents. Put differently: the reality of ordinary life is increasingly posited as the only reality. Or, if you will, the common sense world becomes a world without windows'. He contends that religion offers an important critique to that view allowing for the consideration of transcendence, that there is meaning beyond what we can touch and see. It is in that spirit of critique we offer this book, not as a polemic about the evils of secularity, but as a point of departure for an ongoing discussion about the civic life we share as religious and non-religious citizens.

## **Part I**

# **Educational, political and theological theory**





# 1 Christianity, citizenship and identity

We would none of us today be what we are if a handful of Jews nearly two thousand years ago had not believed that they had known a great teacher, seen him crucified, dead, and buried, and then rise again.

J. M. Roberts (1986: 37)

## Introduction

Identity and religion are controversial and contested themes in relation to an academic consideration of citizenship, but they are both unavoidable in any serious-minded account of the origins and operation of citizenship in the West. Indeed, religion and, in a certain sense of the term, identity can be interpreted as negative words in discussions of democratic citizenship as they are often associated in the media with intolerance, prejudice and even violence against those who are different. Identity is normally viewed as a set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognisable as a member of a group. Religion is a system of thoughts, feelings and actions that are shared by a group and provide the individual with a frame of reference for understanding the world and their place within it. Against this backdrop it is constitutionally acknowledged in most European states that legal citizenship is not dependent on adherence to any religious beliefs, and therefore religion is not, it would seem, a constitutive element of citizenship. A sense of identity can provide the very reasons for being citizens in a democracy, by linking us with others in such a way that life is given greater meaning and purpose. Moreover, identity can take the 'us' beyond ourselves by providing an individual with a life of commitment which helps fulfil the basic human need to become part of something greater than oneself. Those educationalists who are reluctant to entertain the idea of a single substantive identity, as opposed to only multiple identities, in discussions of citizenship often make the mistake of failing to acknowledge the power of religion in people's lives. People develop a sense of commitment and way of life when they share a religious faith, and like identity, faith often manifests itself in strong links to others, links that have implications for the exercise of citizenship and education. Identity is something that encompasses the totality

of social experience and is not always easy to determine or define given all the differences in the way individuals are socialized during the course of their lives. It has been widely considered from a variety of perspectives in the social sciences and history, but these have been chiefly political and cultural perspectives (Checkel and Kazenst 2009). Christian religious identification has been largely neglected in the social science literature; though more recently it has begun to be recognized as an important dimension of culture and civil society (Casanova 2004).

Some of the urgent questions being raised in academia and by the public today concern European identity and the role of religion in that identity. Religious identity situates people within particular communities and these communities can have a public presence which entails a relationship between religious identity and citizenship. However, the recent incorporation of immigrants, principally Muslims, into Europe has raised the question of religion in the public sphere. There is also a growing feeling within Islamic religious communities that the value of their particular religious world view goes unrecognized in secular societies (Sweet 1997). There is simultaneously a mounting conviction among Christians that the secularizing of European culture and education is not inconsequential either for the health of society or for individuals. Many European states have for a long time developed explicit secular schools, secular customs and secular laws whose fundamental values appear to be in tension with religion. Despite Europe's long Christian heritage, the majority of Europeans live in secular societies and are governed by secular authorities – in fact they are predominantly all *ex posteriori* secular. Some would say Europeans are children of the Enlightenment and that religious faith is becoming increasingly irrelevant to the important choices they make about who they are in their public identity. This chapter argues that this is a largely negative process that limits our understanding of citizenship.

### **European identity and citizenship**

The role of religion in the formation of a person's identity can have significant educational and political implications. Religion, despite the distinctly secular orientation of European societies, remains a particularly strong source of identity and plays an important role in the communal lives of some young people. A person's identity as a citizen can coexist with their religious identity. Religion does not necessarily undermine democratic citizenship, but rather can support it. However, if the historic religion of a people is discarded, what values, ideals, beliefs will provide them with an identity and unify them as citizens of a country? This is the question increasingly being asked by some Americans about Europeans (Thornton 2007; Weigel 2008; Mickelthwait and Wooldridge 2009). Thornton (2007: 134) sums up what he sees as the basic issues that are raised, thus 'the lack of a unifying belief and set of values that can substitute for an abandoned Christianity, and a corrosive doubt about the greatness of the achievements of the West'. The claim being made by these

critics is that Europeans have largely abandoned the Judaeo-Christian religion, and secularized their civic institutions and democratic processes to such an extent that they must find a surrogate for religion in order to strengthen their sense of cultural and political identity. Europe, these American critics claim, requires a common set of values to ensure coherence and to guide its actions in order to be viable in the modern world and that the inheritance from Greco-Roman philosophy is not sufficient by itself. Their claim is premised on the belief that European societies are not only largely secularized, but that they are now pluralist and fragmented and have no common sense of shared values which leads them to assert that these societies are parasitic in that they are still living off their Christian past while being in denial about much of the source of their current modus operandi as citizens. These American critics would no doubt agree with Dawson (1998: 128) who concluded that the accumulated capital of Europe's Christian past is responsible for the moral and social idealism that inspired the humanitarian and liberal democratic movements of the past two centuries. Thornton's title for his book takes the argument to a new level – *Decline and Fall: Europe's Slow Motion Suicide*. These American critics are accusing European citizens of having little sense of a clear identity and of living day-to-day in pursuit of purely materialist goals which renders them unable to sacrifice themselves for a cause bigger than themselves. These critics are, in many respects, rather narrow and simplistic in their interpretation, but there is sufficient concern expressed in these criticisms for Europeans to seriously examine them.

It is true, for example, that while in the majority of the world there appears to be a major revitalization in religious belief and practice, Europe continues on the road of secularization with increasingly low levels of measured religious practice (Bruce 2003). It is also clear that in Western Europe, the influence of religious institutions in society has weakened and, to a greater or lesser degree, Europeans are largely secular citizens. This is true to such an extent that some believe that the secularization process is not only irreversible, but normal and progressive – something to be welcomed. The result has been the privileging of European secular identities and secularist self-understandings which has resulted in religion being viewed by European political elites as fundamentally irrelevant to political activity or to the identity of the European citizen. For example, during the debates in 2003 over acknowledging the Christian roots of Europe in the Preamble to the abandoned European Constitution, hostility emerged to Christianity's presence in the European public sphere. Many of the European politicians who constructed the proposed Constitution were Catholics, and yet they refused to reflect explicitly the fact that Europe has been overwhelmingly Christian for the last two millennia. In the same year, the European Court of Human Rights, in a landmark case, supported the Turkish government's decision to dissolve an Islamic party by affirming the view that 'the principle of secularism' was a necessary presupposition of democracy (ECHR 2003). The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly in Recommendation 1804 on the state, religion, secularity and human rights