The South African Policy on Religion and Education (2003): A Contradiction in a Secular State and Age?

Paul Prinsloo

Abstract

Traditional definitions and prescriptions of 'secular' are increasingly being questioned as religion re-emerges as an important element of the public sphere in different nation-states. Secular nation-states with official policies of freedom of religion are increasingly challenged to redefine assumptions about the public role of religion. South Africa is not an exception as regards the definition and redefinition of the role of religion in the public sphere. In the pre-1994 dispensation there was freedom of religion, but South Africa claimed to be a specifically *Christian* state, in which a specific version of Protestant Christianity informed apartheid policies and legislation. Christian National Education (CNE) furthermore deliberately endorsed and promoted this version of Protestant Christianity and excluded other Christian denominations, other religions and African traditional religion from curricula, access to learners and representation in curricula. The new South African Constitution (1996) guarantees not only religious freedom, practice and expression but also freedom from coercion. The question that arises is how to address religion in the context of school curricula.

The National Policy on Religion and Education (2003) actively promotes the role of religion in education and teaching about religion, but also embraces teaching about secular worldviews. Despite being biased towards religion, different groups have contested and still contest the Policy. These groups use concepts like 'secular' and 'secularisation' interchangeably to mean 'anti-religion' and even atheism.

Paul Prinsloo

This article interrogates the location of the Policy within the context of the so-called secularity of the South African state. It concludes that the notion of South Africa as *secular state* does not find any support in the Constitution or the Policy. The notion of South Africa as *secular* state is therefore without official grounds. Both the Constitution and the Policy *purposefully* celebrate religion and the role religion can play in a constitutional state. Evidence from the Constitution and Policy suggest, rather, that the state is biased *towards* religion.

Keywords: Postsecular, religion education, religion, secular, secularisation, secularism.

Introduction

Modernity has (at least in the North Atlantic discourses) been associated with disenchantment with a world that has, as proposed by Max Weber (e.g. 1976), become increasingly secular, that is *less religious*. The secularisation thesis argues that,

> society is on the road to irreversible or reversible secularisation and that, because of this, religion is in decline at the level of social process, or individual consciousness or both (Hanson 1997:159).

A number of authors (e.g. Boeve 2004; Byrnes & Katzenstein 2006; Habermas 2006; Keddie 2003; Kyrlezhev 2008) have explored the secularisation thesis and have contested its range and definitions and examined the *re*-emergence of religion in some contexts (the notion of postsecularism).

As populations become increasingly diverse due to global migrations, the diversity of religions is challenge accepted traditional assumptions about religious freedom, democracy and the secular state. Late in 2009 Switzerland (a secular state with religious freedom) voted against the construction of minarets. Though the Muslim population represents between only 4% and 5% of the population, the referendum reflects changing notions of religious freedom in secular states.

In the South African context, the post-1994 democratic dispensation introduced a major departure from the previous period in which, although

religious freedom was allowed, a particular *Gestalt* of Christianity informed apartheid policies, legislation and curricula in schools. In 2003 the *National Policy on Religion and Education* (Republic of South Africa 2003)[1] was accepted. As an educational policy document, the Policy differed from the pre-1994 dispensation in which Christian National Education (CNE) informed school curricula to the *exclusion* of other religions. The only religion taught and endorsed during school hours was a specific version of Protestant, reformed Christianity. The new Policy (2003) introduced curricula in which learners are introduced to a variety of world religions (including African traditional religion). Paragraph 5 (2003:9) of the Policy states:

> Under the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion, the state, neither advancing nor inhibiting religion, must assume a position of fairness, informed by a parity of esteem for all religions, and worldviews. This positive impartiality carries a profound appreciation of spirituality and religion in its many manifestations, as reflected by the deference to God in the preamble to our Constitution, but does not impose these.

It is crucial to note that the Policy describes the relationship as 'neither advancing nor inhibiting religion' and assuming a 'position of fairness, informed by a parity of esteem for all religions, and worldviews'. The Policy (2003:9, paragraph 5) describes the state's position on religion as 'positive impartiality [carrying] a profound appreciation of spirituality and religion in its many manifestations, as reflected by the deference to God in the preamble to our Constitution' but also indicates that it 'does not impose these'. Although the Policy is positively impartial with regard to religion, it states clearly that teaching about religions has an *educational* purpose in stark contrast to the *confessional* nature of the way in which Christianity was taught prior to 1994[2].

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[1] Hereafter referred to as the Policy.

[2] For a comprehensive and critical overview of the Policy, see Prinsloo (2008).

The formulation of the Policy was deeply controversial and various stakeholders from various faith communities contested the different drafts (Prinsloo 2008). Though the final Policy was supported by all major religions, the Policy is still, more than five years since its implementation, controversial and contested. While different religious groups contested the Policy *during* its formulation, recently the debate has been re-opened with individuals outside the traditional religions complaining that Christianity is still enshrined and privileged in some public schools in South Africa despite the Policy (Hawkey 2009).

The latest debates have raised the question of whether the Policy allows for a situation in which some religions may indeed be privileged above others. The earlier and recent debates illustrate the confusion about the scope of South Africa as a secular society with different stakeholders claiming either that secularism means being *anti*-religion and promoting atheism or that the Policy actually *promotes* religion against secular worldviews. Both the proponents of the Policy and its opponents base their claims in specific understandings of South Africa as a 'secular state'. It is therefore crucial to explore the scope of South Africa as secular state and determine whether the Policy is possibly a contradiction.

In this article I will first clarify my use of the terms secular, secularism, postsecularism and secularist. I will then explore the Policy within the context of the broader discourses on/in (post)secularism, internationally and in the South African context. Following this exploration of the Policy, I will go on to provide a brief overview of the public and media debates surrounding the formulation of the Policy as representing glimpses of the confusion about the 'secular' nature of South African society. I will conclude by analysing the Policy's approach to the paradoxes of the secular state and to the role of religion *and* other worldviews.

Methodology

In the literature review which follows, I will focus primarily on discourses in and surrounding the notion of secularism and postsecularism. The Policy is located in the interstices of education, religion and politics, and therefore the notion of the 'secular' forms the background to all three of these contexts. With the acceptance of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act

No. 108 of 1996)[3], South Africa opted for a *secular* education curriculum—not advancing any religion but also positively impartial towards religion. In the public discourses surrounding the formulation of the Policy up to the present day, secularism has been and is still differently interpreted. Many stakeholders claimed the term meant state-endorsed atheism and an anti-religion curriculum while the present debate (Hawkey 2009) implies that Christianity is still privileged.

The Constitution, various documents, and speeches by state officials all provide insight into the notion of South Africa as a 'secular' state. I will analyse the Constitution, a selection of documents and speeches by state officials, and the Policy to gather and present a conclusion on secularism as it functions in these documents. I will then briefly analyse the notion of secularism as it has functioned in the public debates surrounding the formulation of the Policy and finally analyse the Policy's position on secularism. These analyses will provide a foundation for some concluding remarks.

Terminology Clarification

Given that the crux of this article is whether the Policy is a contradiction in South Africa as a 'secular' state, it is necessary to clarify my own understanding of 'secular', 'secularism' and 'secularist' as some authors (eg Prozesky 2009) differentiate between these terms. Table 1 gives the individual definitions of 'secular', secularism', 'secularist' and 'secularisation' as provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2009).

Secular	Secularism	Secularist	Secularisation
Belonging to the world and its affairs as distinguished from the church and religion; civil, lay, temporal. Chiefly used as a negative term, with the meaning non-ecclesiastical, non-	The doctrine that morality should be based solely on regard to the well-being of mankind in the present	An adherent of secularism.	The conversion of an ecclesiastical or religious institution or its property to secular possession and use; the conversion

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[3] Hereafter referred to as the Constitution.

religious, or non-sacred. Of literature, history, art (esp. music), hence of writers or artists: Not concerned with or devoted to the service of religion; not sacred; profane. Also of buildings, etc., not dedicated to religious uses. Of education, instruction; Relating to non-religious subjects. (In modern use often implying the exclusion of religious teaching from education, or from the education provided at the public expense.) Of a school: That gives secular education. Of or belonging to the present or visible world as distinguished from the eternal or spiritual world; temporal, worldly.	life, to the exclusion of all considerations drawn from belief in God or in a future state.		of an ecclesiastical state or sovereignty to a lay one; an instance of this.

Table 1: *The distinction between secular, secularism, secularist and secularisation*

These definitions concur with other definitions (e.g. the *Merriam Webster dictionary* 1992) and form the general basis for literature on religion in the public and national spheres. Although there is general agreement on these terms, the relationship between secularism and religion in different national contexts does fluctuate according to country (e.g. Spohn 2003). For example, secularism and religion as they intersect in the context of India (e.g. Ganguly 2003; Pantham 1997; Upadhyaya 1992) differ radically from the

gestalt this relationship has in the context of France (e.g. Freedman 2004; Gökariksel & Mitchell 2005), Turkey (Gökariksel & Mitchell 2005), the rest of Europe (e.g. Byrnes & Katzenstein 2006) and the Americas (Juergensmeyer 1993; Philpott 2002).

Although none of the definitions of secularism and secular give any hint of *opposition* to religion or 'anti-religion', authors (such as Prozesky 2009) and popular opinion tend to see 'secular' as being in opposition to religion (see e.g. Henrard 2001: 54). Given the recent ban on the building of minarets in Switzerland, it is quite possible that secular could, in future, increasingly come to mean 'anti-religion', or at least anti any other religion than Christianity. In view of the reality of the variety of gestalts of secular in the international domain, and for the purposes of this article, I propose that the term 'secular' means, in line with dictionary definitions, a position that is neither *against* nor *pro* religion.

Having clarified my use of the term 'secular', I will now explore the notion of the secular and postsecular in the context of North Atlantic discourses before briefly looking at the discourses in the South African context. These discourses provide a crucial background in determining whether the Policy is a contradiction in the context of South Africa as secular state. These discourses also provide useful background for understanding the present-day discourses on the role of religion in South African public schools.

Secularism, Postsecularism and the (Re)Turn of Religion

There seems to be agreement amongst a number of authors (e.g. Kyrlezhev 2008; McLennan 2007; Taylor 2007; Ward 2004) that the modernist claim or expectation that religion would disappear as humanity progressed has been proved wrong. Ward (2004:3) states:

> What characterises this 'postsecular' condition is not simply the refusal of religion to go away but, more significantly, the new public visibility of religion. And it is at this point, the point where religion has a public voice, that religion becomes political again.

Boeve (2004:15) writes that '[m]odernisation in Europe has caused a *transformation* of religion, not its disappearance' (2004:15; italics in the

original). Boeve (2004:20) also suggests that understanding secularisation as a linear progression

> is far too simplistic a reflection of the current state, even if one would substitute the 'post-Christian', or 'pluralistic securalist' position, for the atheist stance.

He (Boeve 2004:20-21) goes on to say that

> Christianity has not been replaced by a secular culture, but a plurality of life views and religions have moved in to occupy the vacant space it left behind as result of its diminishing impact.

Without exploring the historical development of the term 'secular' in detail, it suffices to say that from the nineteenth century onwards the concept was used to describe the 'belief that religious institutions and values should play no role in the temporal affairs of the nation-state' (Keddie 2003:14-15). Keddie (2003:16) indicates that present-day use of the term 'secularisation' refers to:

- an increase in the number of people with secular beliefs and practices;
- a lessening of religious control or influence over major spheres of life;
- a growth in state separation from religion and in secular regulation of formerly religious institutions and customs.

Taylor (2007) indicates that the term 'secularisation' in general refers to the move from a situation in which 'the political organisation of all pre-modern societies was in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality' to a situation in which 'the modern Western state is free from this connection' (Taylor 2007:1). He (2007:2) also explores a second meaning of secularisation, namely that of the general 'falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church'. A third possibility for understanding current secularisation is as follows:

[t]he shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace (Taylor 2007:3).

Secularism has often been understood as a backlash against religious abuses and practices, especially in Europe, while the *return* of religion is described as a reaction against secularism. This reaction is understood as postsecularism (as described for example by Habermas 2006; Harrington 2007; Lafont 2007). In a flux reminiscent of Boeve's (2004) fluid model for understanding current changes in the religioscape, there are signs of a response to postsecularism in the form of a militant (or even fundamentalist) turn to atheism and publications 'celebrating' the possibilities atheism or anti-theism holds (Gray 2008, online). While Keenan (2002:280) celebrates the end of the 'stranglehold of the secularisation thesis upon sociological imagination', Gray (2008, online) writes,

[a]n atmosphere of moral panic surrounds religion. Viewed not so long ago as a relic of superstition whose role in society was steadily declining, it is now demonized as the cause of many of the world's worst evils.

The reason for this 'moral panic', according to Gray (2008, online), is the 'sudden explosion in the literature proselytizing atheism'. Gray is referring mainly to the publication of the works of Dawkins (2006), Hitchens (2007) and others. Gray also acknowledges the publication of counter arguments— for example the works by Alister McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion* (2007), and Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (2007)—stating

[t]he urgency with which they produce their anti-religious polemics suggests that a change has occurred as significant as the rise of terrorism: the tide of secularisation has turned.

Although the above contestations provide a background to exploring the notion of 'secular' in the processes leading to the formulation of the

Policy (2003) and its contents, most of this discourse is alien to Africa and South Africa, as indicated in a letter by De Gruchy (2009) to the *Mail & Guardian* (23-29 January 2009). De Gruchy (2009:19) laments the *Mail & Guardian's* 'fascination with an Anglocentric debate when there are so much fascinating questions about religion going on here in South Africa'. Kumar (2006:274) suggests that in the South African context religious pluralism and secularism are 'two sides of the same coin'. Kumar (2006:275-276) questions the supposedly 'neutrality' of South Africa's Constitution in awarding equal status and representation to all religions, for example the growing Pagan community and the Church of Scientology, and alludes to the clear 'Christian overtones' of the Preamble to the Constitution and the National Anthem. Referring to the Preamble of the Constitution, Prozesky (2000:44) laments the 'lapse' of the theistic invocation in the Constitution.

Secularism in the Constitution, Speeches, the Public Discourse and the Policy

In this section I will first explore the notion of secularism as it appears in the Constitution and various speeches by state officials, documents and processes *preceding* the Policy. I will then explore the notion of the 'secular' and secularism within the Policy itself.

Secularism in the Constitution

Starting with the Preamble to the Constitution, it is obvious that the notion of South Africa as 'secular' state is not as clear as one may presume. The Preamble (Republic of South Africa 1996:1243), after situating the Constitution against the historical development of democracy, commits itself to:

- Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
- Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
- Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and

- Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

The Preamble closes with 'May God protect our people' in seven languages. This immediately raises the question of why a secular state would evoke God's blessing (also questioned by Kumar 2006 and Prozesky 2000). In addition, the word 'secular' does *not* appear in the Constitution. So where does the notion of South Africa as a 'secular' state come from? Before exploring this, it should be noted that the Constitution is clear that it provides space for religious practices, but also protects citizens from hate speech and coercion. In Section 9.3 the Constitution guarantees protection against unfair discrimination on the grounds of a number of characteristics, including religion. Although Section 15 guarantees freedom of religion, Section 16 prevents the advocacy of hatred on the grounds of, inter alia, religion. Section 31 guarantees that the Constitution protects communities' right to enjoy 'their culture, practise their religion and use their language' and to form communities based on these.

With no evidence for South Africa as a *secular* state in the Constitution as its founding document, it appears that the notion of a secular state has a broader and more complex history.

Secularism in the Processes Leading up to the Formulation of the Policy

In 1992, Omar *et al.* (1992) published *Religion in public education: policy options for a new South Africa*. In the same year, in preparation for the democratic transition, the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI) explored alternatives to the system of religious education endorsed by the apartheid regime. NEPI (1992) agreed that the previous dispensation had to change and three options were considered:

- *Option 1: Eliminating religion entirely from the school curriculum.* 'NEPI concluded that neglecting such a principal feature of South African life would not do justice to the importance of religious diversity in the nation's history and society' (Chidester 2006:66).
- *Option 2: Establishing parallel programs in religious instruction,*

developed by the different groups themselves. This option was also not considered to be viable as it would entrench a kind of 'religious apartheid' and students would be required 'to study a single-tradition religious education program devoted to particular religious interests' (Chidester 2006:66).

- *Option 3: Introducing a program of multi-religion education* that would teach students *about* religion 'rather than engaging in the teaching, confession, propagation, or promotion *of* religion' (Chidester 2006:66).

In 1993, Judge Albie Sachs (1993:171) indicated that a strict separation between religious and public life would have resulted in severe discomfort, because religion 'bound us together and gave us a sense of strength and comfort'. In choosing between the different options of a theocratic state where religion and state overlap, or a strictly secular state where these two domains are separated, Sachs (1993:171) opted for a third possibility where state and religion are recognised as separate spheres, but with 'a considerable degree of cooperation and interaction between the two'. Interestingly, Sachs's motivation for choosing the third cooperative model provides insight into the later formulation of the rationale for the Policy. Sachs (1993:171) states that the majority of South Africans belong to one or other faith:

It is not something that one wants to deny or lament. It is an important part of our reality. If an appropriate relationship can be established, it can be a source of tremendous upliftment for the whole of society, and a means of helping us to establish the maximum input for tackling and resolving the considerable problems facing our country.

In 1997 Krüger proposed different models of religious education. In the proposal, he refers to the formation of the *Independent Forum for Religion in Public Education* in October 1993. The group consisted of

about thirty representatives from various churches and various departments of Religious Studies and Biblical Studies at universities and teachers training colleges in various provinces (Krüger 1997:1).

The purpose of the group was to discuss 'the future of religious education in South African schools' and 'to promote the formation and implementation of a new Policy' (Krüger 1997:1). Krüger (1997:1-3) describes points of departure which acknowledge religion as a 'given' in South African society; the power of religion 'to motivate and inspire people, and to provide vision and hope'; religion as part of the identity and security of individuals and groups of people; and the multi-religious nature of South Africa. While parents are responsible for religious nurturing, it would be unfair to expect them to provide information on religions different from their own.

In 1996 both the National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996) and the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) were published. In 1997 Curriculum 2005 (Grades 1-9) was published for comment and outcomes-based education (OBE) launched. In August 1998, the Minister of Education, Sibusiso Bengu, appointed a Ministerial Committee to look into the diverse ideas and approaches of religious communities and their outcry against developments. In January 1999, the *Report of the Ministerial Committee on Religious Education* (1999) was published which states that the confusion and controversies surrounding the issue can be attributed to two ways of understanding religious education, namely,

- educating learners to *be* religious; and
- educating learners *about* religion and religions (1999:10).

A new Minister of Education, Prof Kader Asmal, was appointed in 2000[4]. On 6 May 2000 a Ministerial Workshop on Religion in Public Education was held in Pretoria. As a result, a *Working Document* (2000) was formulated which proposed a model of religious education as 'education about religion, refraining from a specific religious purpose, but led by general educational interests' (2000:2). It further proposed that religious observances should be treated 'as not being part of public school's activities' (2000:2). The *Working Document* (2000) also aimed at resolving the tension between the different options for religious education.

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[4] For a critical discussion on the legacy of Minister Bengu see Jansen (1999). The appointment of Minister Asmal was a significant turning point in the processes resulting in the Policy under discussion.

In July 2000 the *Draft Religion in Education Policy* was circulated and made available for public comment. From early 2001 the public discourses surrounding education in South Africa and more specifically the role and person of Minister Asmal took centre stage. Examples of headlines at the time include 'Asmal Braak Gal oor Christene', (Politieke Redaksie, *Beeld* 22 Maart 2001), 'Christelike Toorn Ontvlam teen Asmal' (Politieke Redaksie, *Beeld* 23 Maart 2001) and 'Groot Grief oor Asmal en die Christene' (Gunning *Rapport* 25 Maart 2001). Although these three articles do not have anything to do with the draft Policy, they indicate how many Christians (and Afrikaners) felt about Asmal. The public press presented a tainted view of Asmal[5] as Minister of Education and driver of the processes to formulate the position of religion in education. The public fall-out over Asmal's remarks was soon used to raise a general question about his proposals for religion in education. On Saturday 24 March, *Beeld* published an article written by Prof Pieter de Villiers entitled 'Asmal uit pas met die wêreld' (De Villiers 2001:9). The article's main thrust is to cast doubt about Asmal's 'true' intentions. Among a number of allegations, De Villiers (2001:9) stated that Asmal wanted to force an 'inter-faith' approach on schools which would be value-neutral. De Villiers also cast doubt on the *intentions* of several scholars of religion who were co-opted by Asmal and on their academic and research standing. De Villiers's second argument was that international developments indicated that the ethos of specific groups should be allowed to dictate the curriculum and how schools are run.

Minister Asmal responded to these allegations in a letter to *Beeld* (24 March 2001, no page number available) in which he encouraged and invited debate and refuted the allegations made by De Villiers (2001). In this letter Asmal states that the draft Policy is not 'value-free' but embodies the specific values,

> of being factually informed about others in an unprejudiced manner,
> real understanding of them as human beings, tolerance, acceptance

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[5] It is difficult to ascertain to what extent Prof Asmal's specific role directly influenced the Policy and the processes and debates surrounding it. From these and other newspaper articles, it is clear that in his role as Minister of Education, he was considered controversial.

and a spirit of co-operation between all the groups of our society (Asmal 2001, no page number available).

Asmal went on to reiterate that the government and religious bodies operate and should operate in two different spheres. With regard to De Villiers's allegation that Asmal was proposing an 'inter-faith' approach, Asmal acknowledged that dialogue between faiths should be encouraged '*but that such an initiative falls outside the responsibility and mandate of the state*' (Asmal 2001, no page number available). De Villiers also alleged that the draft Policy (and Asmal) were out of pace with developments in the rest of the world. Asmal countered with a number of international examples that point to the contrary.

Between 15 August and 11 December 2001, Minister Asmal held nine extensive consultations with leaders from various religious organisations, as reported on in an *Analytical resumé of discussions between Minister Asmal and religious leaders on the matter of religion in education* (dated 13 December 2001). The *Analytical Resumé* (2001:3) indicates that

> virtually all religious leaders expressed an understanding and appreciation of the Minister's intent that all future citizens should be educated about the various religions constituting the pluralistic national religious mosaic.

It (*Analytical Resumé* 2001:4-6) also notes some misunderstandings and clarifies the Policy's intention regarding these. The misunderstandings included concerns that 'the policy may be driven by a "secularist" animosity towards religion', that 'the policy will result in renewed caricaturing of some religions' and that the new policy was aimed at, or would result in, a syncretistic 'New Age' mixing of religions, and that 'inter-faith' religious views would be foisted on pupils (*Analytical Resumé* 2001:6-8).

The articles and public debates were full of evidence that there was considerable confusion in the use of terminology and concepts. Contributors used terms like 'syncretism', 'secularism', 'neutrality', 'democracy', 'multi-religious' and many others with a range of different meanings. In some cases the 'incorrect' use of a term could be excused, but in many cases terms were misused by informed people.

Secularism in Speeches by Government Officials

We now turn to some public statements made by government officials about the notion of a 'secular' state. In a keynote address in Durban on 21 October 2000, Mr JS Ndebele (MEC for Transport in the province of KwaZulu-Natal) stated that whereas the apartheid regime was a 'white Christian nationalist state', the new South Africa represented a 'secular state'. He defined a 'secular state' as a 'state in which the right to practice religion as personal choice will be respected and valued, without prescribing one specific religion' (Ndebele 2000, online). The MEC of Agricultural and Environmental Affairs, Mr. Narend Singh, stated on 21 April 2001 that: 'No single religious orthodoxy is likely to prevail, which is almost certainly one of the reasons why the constitution-makers opted in 1993 for a *secular state'* (Singh 2001 online, emphasis added).

In his address to the Student Christian Organisation in Bloemfontein on 8 July 2001, the Deputy Minister of Education, Mr. M. Mangena, stated that,

> [t]he principles that the new Constitution embodies, establishes *this country as a secular state*, but one which is not at variance or in conflict with religion—the state which allows religion to flourish and to grow (Mangena 2001, online, e.a.).

He does not mention the word 'secular' again and in the rest of the address explores the need for education in South Africa to take on the responsibility to teach children 'about religions'. He emphasises the differences between religious education, religious instruction and religion nurture (Mangena 2001, online).

Although the Constitution does not refer to the state as 'secular', these quotations from government officials point to another interpretation. In stark contrast to these statements, Minister Asmal posits the notion that South Africa is 'not a *secular nation*' (Asmal 2003, online, e.a). Asmal further posits that the new democratic dispensation has opted for a co-operative model which allows for church and state to exist in harmony in different spheres but to collaborate in areas of shared interest, like education. In stark contrast to accusations that the Policy was the vehicle for banishing religion from schools or enforcing secular values, Asmal states clearly that

the Policy encourages 'the revitalisation of religion in our schools' (Asmal 2003, online).

Secularism in the Policy

I will now analyse the Policy itself and look at the definitions formulated by the Policy which provide a way 'into' understanding the Policy's view on the relationship between the secular state, religion in the South African public sphere and the national education curriculum.

The Policy (2003:30) defines 'religion' as follows:

> Religion is used to describe the comprehensive and fundamental orientation in the world, mostly with regard to ideas of divinity, spiritual and non-secular beliefs and requiring ultimate commitment, including (but not restricted to) organised forms of religion and certain worldviews, as well as being used collectively to refer to those organisations which are established in order to protect and promote these beliefs.

This definition of 'religion' contains the following elements:

- It is an orientation which is both comprehensive and fundamental.
- This orientation mostly refers to ideas of divinity, spiritual and non-secular beliefs.
- This orientation requires ultimate commitment; it includes (but is not restricted to) organised forms of religion and certain worldviews.
- This definition also encompasses those organisations whose sole reason for existence is to protect and promote these beliefs.

The definition is fairly clear on what it includes. It is wide enough to encompass all the world religions. From the definition it is also clear that the major defining factor seems to be the dichotomy of secular and *non*-secular. Non-secular beliefs and worldviews are included in the definition of 'religion'. It is not clear whether non-secular encompasses worldviews or whether non-secular refers only to beliefs.

    In the 'Foreword' to the Policy (2003:2; e.a.) the Minister makes it clear that South Africa is *not* a secular state. He states: 'We do not have a

state religion. But our country is *not a secular state* where there is a very strict separation between religion and the state'. The Policy (paragraph 3; 2003:8) itself goes on to describe its view of a secular state and the implications of such a state for the relationship with religion:

> A modern secular state, which is neither religious nor anti-religious, in principle adopts a position of impartiality towards all religions and other worldviews. A separationist model for the secular state represents an attempt to completely divorce the religious and secular spheres of a society, such as in France or the United States. Drawing strict separation between religion and the secular state is extremely difficult to implement in practice, since there is considerable inter-change between religion and public life. Furthermore, a strict separa-tion between the two spheres of religion and state is not desirable, since without the commitment and engagement of religious bodies it is difficult to see us improving the quality of life of all our people.

The Policy contends that a secular state is 'extremely difficult to implement in practice, since there is considerable interchange between religion and public life'. Such a strict separation is also not necessarily desirable, since it is difficult 'to see us improving the quality of life of all our people' without the 'commitment and engagement of religious bodies'. The Policy does however acknowledge that secular worldviews are a reality in the present South African context and that tolerance between religions also extends to the relationship between religions and secular worldviews. Paragraph 14 states: 'Religion in education must contribute to the advancement of interreligious toleration and interpersonal respect among adherents of different religious or secular worldviews in a shared civil society'.

Besides requiring that learners be taught tolerance towards religions *and* secular worldviews, the Policy (2003:12, paragraph 14) also prescribes that any overt or covert 'denigration of any religion or secular world-view' will not be tolerated. The Policy therefore not only acknowledges the reality of secularism, but also guarantees that secularism, as a worldview, will not be denigrated. The Policy (2003:16, paragraph 29; italics added) also goes one step further in stating that children will be exposed not only to different religions but also to secular worldviews:

> We believe we will do much better as a country if our pupils are exposed to a variety of religious *and secular belief* systems, in a well-informed manner, which gives rise to a genuine respect for the adherents and practices of all of these, without diminishing in any way the preferred choice of the pupil.

Paragraph 62 ensures that students who hold 'secular or humanist beliefs' will not be forced to participate in any activities where they may feel denigrated or compromised:

> The separation of learners according to religion, where the observance takes place outside of the context of a school assembly, and with equitably supported opportunities for observance by all faiths, and appropriate use of the time for those holding secular or humanist beliefs (2003:26).

Paragraph 64 further guarantees parity in the allocation of resources 'with respect to religion, religious *or secular beliefs*' (2003:27; emphasis added). Though secular worldviews may 'naturally' be part of the rest of the school curriculum, the Policy specifically describes its inclusion of secular worldviews as a feature of how the Policy views Religion Education. Paragraph 29 (2003:16) refers to the fact that pupils will be exposed to 'a variety of religious and secular belief systems'. It furthermore undertakes to teach *about* 'secular values' in paragraph 30:

> By teaching about religious and secular values in an open educational environment, schools must ensure that all pupils, irrespective of race, creed, sexual orientation, disability, language, gender, or class, feel welcome, emotionally secure, and appreciated (2003:17).

It would seem from the Policy that learning *about* secularism can be seen as being part of the scope of the Policy's understanding of the range of the curricular content. *The Policy is however clear that it is biased towards religion*. Paragraph 2 states 'we therefore promote the role of religion in education' (2003:7) and 'genuinely advance the interests of religion' (2003:7).

Concluding Remarks

This article started by interrogating the notions of the secular and postsecular as inappropriate descriptors for the South African context. Although there is ample evidence for secular influences in contexts like Asia, Africa and South America, these societies do not fit neatly into categories of secular and/or postsecular. Religion in these contexts has always been and continues to be an integral part of broader society. With regard to Taylor's (2007:1) definition of secularism, the article has found that though it may be true in Western contexts that the connection between religion and state has ended, the co-operative model the Constitution adopted suggests that in the South African context, the notion of secularism is *different* from that in the rest of the Western world.

In addition, South African *society* does not qualify as secular (Henrard 2001), but deeply religious. The only sense in which secularism as suggested by Taylor (2007:3) may have some significance is his third option, namely that secularism may mean

> [t]he shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.

The recent issues raised about the privileging of religion in schools (Hawkey 2009) points to this notion of secularism as proposed by Taylor (2007).

The notion of South Africa as secular *state* also does not find any support in the Constitution, the Policy or the opinion of then Minister Asmal who was seminal in the Policy's formulation and processes. The statements made by various government officials do however indicate confusion about the use of the term 'secular'. Based on the evidence, the notion of South Africa as *secular* state is without official grounds. Both the Constitution and the Policy purposefully celebrate religion and the role religion can play in a constitutional state. Evidence from the Constitution and Policy (2003:2, 7) suggest rather that the state is biased *towards* religion.

Based on the evidence provided, I propose that South Africa is neither a secular state nor (post)secular in its philosophical and societal self-definition and roots. The Policy is therefore not a contradiction in terms.

As the notions of secularism and postsecularism evolve in the international domain in different nation-states, it is clear that the role of religion in the public sphere may increasingly contest traditional definitions and assumptions about freedom of religion, democracy and secularism.

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Directorate: Curriculum and Learning Development
Unisa
prinsp@unisa.ac.za