

Secularism in India and the United States - A Comparison

Secularism has a meaning whose range is very wide, however, the most commonly used definition of the term is the separation of religion from the civic affairs or the state. The other terms it may connote are atheism, naturalism and banishment of religious symbols from the public sphere. In this article, you can learn about the differences between secularism practiced or understood in India and the United States of America, for the [UPSC exam](#).

Secularism Meaning

The meaning of secularism differs in India and the West. In India, it basically connotes tolerance towards all religions while in the West, it emphasizes a strict separation of religion and the State.

- It may seem that secularism is a relatively modern concept but references to it can be found in ancient texts of various civilizations including the Charvaka system of philosophy in India, which held direct perception, empiricism, and conditional inference as proper sources of knowledge, and sought to reject the prevailing religious practices of that time.
- In the West, [secularism](#) was mentioned in the works of various Greek scholars but it re-emerged and gained momentum through the reformation and Renaissance movements.

Secularism in India

In India, secularism means that the State in a neutral manner supports and participates in the religious affairs of all groups. It also means that religion is kept separate from the political, social, economic and cultural spheres of life. In the Constitution of India, the word “secular” finds a place in the Preamble itself. In addition, the concept of secularism is reflected in Articles 25-28 of the [Fundamental Rights](#) Chapter. Article 25 gives individuals the following rights:

- Right to practice any religion.
- Right to profess any religion.
- Right to propagate any religion.
- Freedom of Conscience.

These religious freedoms are available to citizens as well as non-citizens, however, these freedoms are not absolute and reasonable restrictions can be imposed and as such the Central or the State governments can interfere with religious affairs at the time of need.

The secular character of India is a basic feature of the Indian Constitution and the same was held by the Supreme Court in the [S.R.Bommai case](#). This in essence means that the secular feature of the Constitution cannot be taken away even by the Parliament and if it does enact a law to this effect it will be unconstitutional. The Indian Constitution reflects what is known as positive secularism i.e. it envisages equal respect for all religions. Moreover, if a state government propagates anti-secular policies it will face action according to Article 356.

Also read: [Differences between Western Secularism and Indian Secularism](#)

Secularism in the United States

Secularism in the United States refers to the separation of church and state irrespective of one's own religion or lack thereof.

- The modern concept of secularism owes a lot to the movement of Separation of Church and State in the United States.
- The United States is also credited with being the first explicitly secular nation, not only in the West but in the entire world.
- In the United States, the Establishment Clause in the first amendment is the basis for many cases involving the sponsorship of religion in the public sphere.
- In the United States, the stance of being secular is more of passive neutrality rather than an active effort to rid religion for the public indefinitely.

However, despite it being neutral, there have been court cases that have clearly been pro-secular, blurred the lines between the separation of church and state, and encouraged the resurgence of religious influence in the government arena.

- The Establishment Clause is not a perfect defence, but it is one of the most prominent walls blocking an established religion in the United States.
- However, contradictions have occurred between the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause.
- The Founding Fathers of the United States did, indeed, create a secular state.
- The historical forces that led them to inscribe absolute liberty of conscience in matters of religion in the Constitution, and to cast a wary eye on religion, also supported the process of disestablishing state churches.
- The intent, as Madison (one of the founding fathers and the fourth President of the US) explained, was "the idea of religious freedom as protected by the separation of church and state."

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that even though both countries practice secularism as a policy but the cultural and social realities make these approaches distinct from each other.

