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Secularisation in the 21st century as a factor of political polarisation of society

Abstract. The polarisation of society in the 21st century has become a significant threat to both state governments and the functioning of national communities themselves. Issues of religion and religiosity, placed within the framework of secular institutions, have become one of the areas of increased confrontation, which necessitates a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. The aim of this article was to study the problem of the formation of political confrontation around religious practices and secularisation in modern society. The leading research method was the formal-legal analysis method, with the help of which the current legal status of atheism as a worldview of a significant part of the population was investigated in national and international legal acts; the content of civil law on freedom of religion was investigated. Using the comparison method, the scale and practices of discrimination against representatives of the atheistic worldview in different countries of the world were compared. As a result of the study, the legal nature of the establishment of the right to freedom of religion, as well as the significance of the criminalisation of atheism in Muslim countries, were revealed. It is worth noting that this study has shown that in many countries atheists face discrimination and persecution because of their beliefs. The results obtained during the study demonstrate that the church continues to play a significant role in shaping public opinion and political decisions in many countries, which exacerbates the divide between believers and non-believers. Progressive secularisation and the reaction to it contribute to the polarisation of society through the confrontation of religious and atheistic views in various spheres of life, which is especially acutely felt in political confrontations. The results of this research, as well as the conclusions drawn on their basis, are of practical value for a further, more comprehensive study of the stated problem, creating a foundation for the legal regulation of the status of atheism

Keywords: atheism; religious conflicts; religion policy; freedom of religion; stigmatisation

Introduction

In the 21st century, secularisation has emerged as a defining social trend, profoundly impacting political processes and societal transformations across the globe. The growing number of individuals who do not identify with any religion or self-identify as atheists poses new challenges for governments and societies that have traditionally been based on religious values and norms. The polarisation of society based on worldview differences between believers and non-believers is becoming increasingly evident, particularly in matters concerning morality, education, family values, and the role of religion in the public sphere. Secularisation as a factor of political polarisation of society is an extremely relevant topic for research, as it directly touches on fundamental human rights, such as freedom of conscience and religion, and also impacts social cohesion, intergroup tolerance, and the stability of political

systems. Understanding the causes, manifestations, and consequences of this phenomenon is critically important for preventing potential conflicts based on worldview differences and ensuring the harmonious coexistence of different groups within society.

Fundamental human rights are an important principle of every democratic state, defining the individual as the highest social value. According to B. Somody & F. Gárdos-Orosz (2023), the doctrine of fundamental personal rights exerts immense influence on international law and national institutions, giving rise to a key norm of any modern legal system – legal equality before the law. This principle is reflected in every international pact and treaty, emphasising the equal protection and opportunities afforded to every individual, regardless of race, age, sex, material status, or religious beliefs. This idea, forming part

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of the concept of “rule of law”, serves as the foundation of many existing constitutions and is widely regarded as a fundamental principle of a just and lawful legal system (Acemoglu & Wolitzky, 2021).

H. Bielefeldt *et al.* (2022) demonstrated that the right to freedom of religion holds a central stance among the leading personal human rights, encompassing a range of significant civil rights: the right to freedom of worldview, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and the right to be protected from discrimination and hostile remarks. The right to freedom of religion is multifaceted and aims to protect any religion and its adherents. The content of the subjective personal non-property right to freedom of thought and religion lies in the fact that its holder can use it at their discretion without the application of any additional legal acts. The holder also has the right to demand that others cease actions aimed at limiting their personal non-property rights, the right to freedom of behaviour and actions, and the right to appeal to competent state authorities for the protection of their violated personal rights (Brynchak, 2018).

Despite the above, it cannot be fully asserted that it protects the right not to adhere to any religion as a form of freedom. K.Y. Kuznetsova (2020) describes the rapid growth of supporters of atheistic worldviews, indicating that non-religiosity (atheism) is spreading each year and gaining recognition not only in Europe or America, as suggested by many controversial religious leaders, but also in the Middle East and Africa – countries have become more secular between 1990 and 2021 (The Growing Influence..., 2021). These findings underscore that discrimination against the non-religious community is not a localised issue but affects millions globally. It is important to acknowledge the counterargument presented by R. McLaughlin (2019), who asserts that the world is not becoming less religious but rather more so.

Discussing the legal status of atheists in the most developed countries, J. Holleis (2021) notes that their situation in Muslim states often remains overlooked by the public, as strict sanctions and the government’s absolute dependence on the church have solidified the assertion of an inevitable connection between the individual and religion. While this is not entirely accurate, in Lebanon, for instance, it is practically impossible to remain officially unaffiliated with a religion due to the civil status registry that records each citizen’s religious identity. J.D. Eller (2022) established that Muslim countries where atheism is officially criminalised and equated with blasphemy implement some of the most repressive policies toward atheists. Idealistic beliefs, on which most normative acts are based, assume faith as an inherent aspect of human nature. Y.N. Gez *et al.* (2022) highlight that repression and legally sanctioned crimes against the non-religious community have been part of the state policy of religious countries. Across Africa, atheists have faced serious or systemic violations of their right to freedom of conscience, as well as other significant violations in several countries: Egypt, Libya, and Morocco, as well as in the Christian countries of Zimbabwe and Eritrea. Considering the aforementioned, the aim of the research was to comprehensively study the phenomenon of secularisation and

its impact on the formation of political divisions and confrontations in modern societies driven by religious factors. To this end, several tasks were formulated in the study: to identify key trends in secularisation in the 21st century and their influence on the transformation of social relations; to analyse the role of the religious factor in the formation of political divisions and conflicts in various regions of the world; and to examine the legal status of atheism and the degree of protection for the rights of non-believers in national legislations and international law.

Materials and Methods

In the course of the research, formal-legal and comparative methods were employed. The first one allowed for the analysis of current socio-political sentiments regarding “religion opponents” and helped identify the main aspects of the religious issue and discriminatory policies. The comparative method was used to compare the rights of atheists in different countries and the means of their protection. The method of normative documentation facilitated the analysis of international and regional human rights acts to better assess the legal status of atheists. This article aims to reveal the current state of religious influence that restricts the rights of supporters of atheistic views. The research work was conducted on a previously prepared theoretical foundation, which served as a basis for further studies on the topic.

The normative basis of the research consisted of normative legal acts, namely: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950). Additionally, supplementary analytical materials from the Pew Research Center (2019), the International Commission of Jurists (2021), and the court case “McCreary County v. ACLU of Kentucky” (2005) were used.

The first stage of the research was characterised by the search for literary sources and normative legal acts that formed the theoretical and normative basis. An analysis of international legal documents in the field of human rights protection was conducted, highlighting the current legal status of supporters of atheism, the rights granted to them, and the various manifestations of stigmatisation and discrimination against representatives of this worldview. During the first stage of the research, the attitudes of citizens from different countries toward atheistic beliefs and the actual content of the fundamental human right to freedom of thought and religion were clarified.

The second stage of the research focused on the influence of the church on the consciousness of citizens and state policy. The significance and reasons for the criminalisation of atheism in Muslim countries were analysed. In the final stage of the research work, conclusive findings regarding the examined topic were formulated, identifying the main causes of societal polarisation on religious grounds and the political dimensions of this confrontation, as well as outlining ways to overcome discriminatory policies. Arguments were presented in favour of defining the legal status of atheism in international law acts and the possibilities for regulating issues of faith within the legal framework.

Results

The right to freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed in several key international human rights instruments and within customary international law (International Commission of Jurists, 2021). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), proclaimed after World War II, served as the foundation for all subsequent legal instruments and affirmed freedom of religion. However, it did not in any way address the status of non-religious individuals, whose beliefs fell outside the scope of normative regulation. Subsequent history has shown that the issue surrounding such a worldview cannot be fully addressed within the concept of natural law as “freedom of conscience”. Neither the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) nor the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950) addressed the status of atheists, as they used nearly identical wording. While the UN Human Rights Committee acknowledged this oversight and, in 1993, published General Comment No. 22, which clarifies the scope of religious freedom in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), including “the right to replace one’s current religion or belief with another or to adopt atheistic views” (Atheist Rights, 2022). However, even despite this, the so-called “right to atheism” remains almost unregulated. Thus, it can be concluded that the rights of proponents of atheistic views have not been defined, in contrast to those with religious beliefs. This creates a disparity in legal protections for the right to freedom of conscience, particularly concerning the right to demand that others cease

actions aimed at restricting one’s personal non-property rights. Laws and policies that restrict religious freedom and government favouritism toward religious groups (for example, through funding for religious education) have consistently been the most common forms of restrictions on freedom of conscience (Pew Research Center, 2019). However, there is a significant difference between the restrictions faced by believers and those faced by atheists. The government policies of each country favour the development of religious culture, which includes religious education, religious organisations, and state religious holidays, while atheistic symbolism is often prohibited, and the legislation in some countries imposes criminal liability for atheistic views.

The legal equality of human rights is primarily determined by their enshrinement in international law. As previously mentioned, nearly every declaration or treaty protects the freedom to profess, adopt, and change one’s religion according to one’s choice, thereby creating a powerful mechanism for protecting the rights of believers both on the international stage and at regional levels. At the same time, the issue of protecting the rights of adherents of atheistic views remains open, as legal acts do not explicitly grant the freedom not to adhere to any religion. Based on the analytical studies conducted, it can be concluded that the popularity of the atheistic worldview (including agnosticism) is growing every year, and currently there are approximately 12-17% of the world’s population (Mathers, 2020), with China being the leader in the number of atheists (Table 1).

Table 1. Atheistic worldview in modern countries

Ranking of the most atheistic countries in 2020	% of atheists among the population	Ranking of the most atheistic countries in 2022	% of atheists among the population	Ranking of the most atheistic countries in 2023	% of atheists among the population
China	79%	China	91%	China	91%
Czech Republic	70%	Japan	86%	Japan	86%
Sweden	68%	Sweden	78%	Sweden	78%
Estonia	64%	Czech Republic	75%	Czech Republic	75%
Netherlands	60%	Estonia	72%	United Kingdom	72%
Norway	55%	Belgium	72%	Belgium	72%
Hong Kong	53%	United Kingdom	72%	Estonia	72%
United Kingdom	53%	Norway	70%	Australia	70%
South Korea	52%	Australia	70%	Norway	70%
France	51%	Denmark	68%	Denmark	68%

Sources: compiled by the author based on research by C. Mathers (2020), World Population Review (2024), F. Brown (2024)

China, despite its diverse religious culture (Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, etc.), is officially an atheistic state, where the government is wary of any religion. Secondly, atheistic views are directly promoted in schools, universities, and colleges, and anti-religious publications are included in the list of educational materials. Thus, it can be argued that the Chinese government, while enshrining the right to freedom of beliefs and religion, openly imposes a certain worldview on its society, while restricting the rights of religious communities.

“There’s absolutely more atheists around today than ever before, both in sheer numbers and as a percentage of humanity”, says P. Zuckerman (2020), a professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College in Claremont

(USA). While the percentage of the atheistic population is indeed increasing each year, the religious influence on nation-building processes is also relentlessly expanding, and the issue of imposing beliefs is more pressing than ever (Serebro, 2021). Despite the declaration of secularism in many modern states, its implementation varies. This concerns the influence of the church on the political life of the country and state favouritism towards certain religious organizations. De jure, the content of the right to freedom of thought and religion, which is stated in almost every constitution, includes the possibility of not adhering to any religion; however, de facto, this right has no practical realisation. According to the survey “Reality Check: Being Nonreligious in America”, atheists who permanently

reside in “very religious” communities are particularly prone to discrimination in education, employment, and government services, such as jury duty (Manson, 2021).

Existing research has identified a range of practices and tendencies that contribute to the stigmatisation of atheists in religious communities. Generally, adherents of religion believe that to be a moral person, one must believe in God. The prejudice regarding the absence of moral values in atheists leads to a suspicious attitude towards them from society. A study by T. Stahl (2021) found that “distrust of atheists is comparable to distrust of rapists”. In other words, atheists are equated with criminals, and their beliefs are likened to criminal offences. Over 50% of atheists are married, and more than 40% have children (Married adults who..., 2024). Some studies assert, for example, that the stigmatization of atheists occurs because they remind believers of inevitable death (Krems & Moon, 2019).

Research by Humanists International (2023) reveals that the overwhelming majority of countries do not respect the rights of atheists and freethinkers, despite signing UN agreements guaranteeing equal treatment for all citizens. The atheistic worldview faces not only prejudice but also criminal persecution. This is particularly prevalent in theocratic and clerical states characterised by a strong influence of the church and religion on all spheres of public life. Due to their personal beliefs and rejection of faith, atheists face persecution and harsh government control in some Muslim countries, such as Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and others. The laws of some African countries, such as Nigeria, even provide for the death penalty for apostasy or blasphemy. The criminalisation of atheism, impunity for discrimination, and isolation mean that atheists experience repression and even lose their lives (Humanists International, 2023).

Due to constant manifestations of discrimination, there are numerous examples of legal disputes and court decisions that only contribute to the polarisation of society. It is worth noting the 2005 Supreme Court of the United States ruling accompanying the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which states that the government cannot favour “religion over non-religion” (Decision of Supreme Court of the United States No. 545 U.S. 844, 2005). The Court indeed emphasised the unacceptability of favouritism toward religious communities and consequently prohibited the government from penalising individuals for the absence of religious beliefs. The absence of an extensive international legal framework regarding the status of atheism creates ambiguity in the formulation of national acts. In turn, regional recognition of the right to freedom of beliefs and religion tends to limit its actual content rather than reveal its potential.

The political consequences of secularisation manifest in various forms across different countries. In some cases, it leads to the intensification of conflicts between religious and secular forces, while in others, it results in more peaceful coexistence. A striking example of ideological confrontation in contemporary America is the conflict between conservative Christian groups and proponents of secularism over a range of ethical and moral issues (Perry, 2022). Conservatives oppose abortion, same-sex marriage, and the teaching of evolution in schools, upholding traditional Christian values. In contrast, secular groups

advocate for a secular state, freedom of choice, and equal rights for all citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs. This confrontation reflects a deep divide in American society on issues related to the relationship between state and religion, individual liberties, and ethical norms.

During elections, religious people tend to support conservative parties that oppose the liberalisation of society, while non-religious people vote for more secular forces. In France, the ban on wearing religious symbols in public institutions, including hijabs, has sparked protests from the Muslim community and accusations of discrimination from secularism supporters (Mégret, 2022). Secularism advocates, on the other hand, view this ban as a necessary step to protect the secular character of the state. In India, the ruling Hindu nationalist Indian People’s Party pursues a policy of “Hindutva” aimed at strengthening Hindu identity, which leads to the restriction of the rights of religious minorities, including Muslims (Varshney *et al.*, 2021). This policy has caused a number of conflicts and acts of religious violence in different parts of the country. This provokes resistance from secular forces that advocate for the equality of all religions and freedom of religion.

In Poland, the ruling conservative party “Law and Justice”, which relies on the support of the Catholic Church, significantly tightened anti-abortion legislation, allowing termination of pregnancy only in cases of rape, incest, or threat to the mother’s life (Kulczycki, 2023). This decision triggered massive protests among supporters of secular values and women’s rights across the country in 2020. The conflict reflected a deep division in Polish society between conservative religious circles and secular progressive forces on issues of reproductive rights and the role of the church in the legislative process.

Under the leadership of President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party, Turkey has witnessed a gradual departure from the principles of secular Kemalist ideology and an increase in Islamic influences in state policy and the public sphere (Chen, 2020). This includes an increased role for religion in education, restrictions on women’s lifestyles and clothing, and the promotion of conservative Islamic values in legislation. Oppositional secular forces view these actions as an attempt to Islamise the secular state and a violation of the principle of separation of religion and state, leading to heated debates in Turkish society.

In Israel, there are deep divisions between the secular majority and ultra-Orthodox religious parties regarding issues related to the relationship between the state and religion (Wharton, 2022). In particular, ultra-Orthodox communities oppose mandatory military service for their members and non-recognition of civil marriages, citing religious precepts. This position has drawn the ire of secular Israelis, who view it as a violation of the principle of equality before the law and an excessive influence of religion on state policy.

On the international stage, issues of secularism and the relationship between state and religion continue to be subjects of lively debate and contention within organisations such as the EU, UN, and others. For instance, countries with predominantly Muslim populations have repeatedly criticised European states for banning the wearing of religious symbols, viewing this as a violation of freedom of religion (Orgad, 2021). At the same time,

secular Western states have faced pressure from conservative religious groups over attempts to protect the rights of LGBTQ+ communities and other minorities (Palecek & Tazlar, 2021). These controversies vividly illustrate the complexity of reaching compromises between diverse worldviews in a globalised world.

Certain countries employ religious factors as instruments of foreign policy and exert pressure on other nations. For instance, Muslim countries have repeatedly criticized Western states for allegedly discriminating against Muslims and restricting their religious rights under the guise of secularism (Orgad, 2021). Protests have erupted over bans on hijab-wearing in public institutions in some European countries. Secular Western states, in turn, criticise Islamic regimes for violating freedom of conscience and persecuting atheists and apostates (those who have renounced Islam) (Riexinger, 2024).

Particularly in 2022, a number of Western countries strongly condemned the public execution in Iran of a man sentenced to death for apostasy from Islam under Shia law. They insisted that this was a gross violation of the right to freedom of religion and free worldview self-determination, enshrined in international human rights conventions. Thus, secularisation processes have a direct or indirect impact on political discourse, creating potential lines of division in society. The extent to which states can ensure equal rights for all groups of citizens regardless of their worldview beliefs will determine the degree of polarisation of society on religious grounds.

Discussion

Disputes about atheism concern the differences between those who believe in the existence of deities and those who do not, specifically regarding how these differing beliefs should be treated in the public sphere. As a result, this debate closely touches on issues of religious freedom, the separation of church and state, and freedom of expression (Tomar, 2024). Various discriminatory criteria or restrictions are based on stereotypes, affecting the rights of women, people of colour, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Of course, each side of the contentious debate seeks to frame the issue in its favour, emphasising the constant suppression of their civil rights. For instance, American essayist and populariser of the atheistic worldview, N. Me-goran & R. Foster (2019), considers religion to be the most common source of violence in our history. On the other hand, there are those who view atheists as Satanists, partly due to the belief that those who do not worship God must, by implication, bow to the devil (Diab, 2021). It is worth noting that neither of these proposed versions has a well-reasoned basis, although they somewhat confirm the presence of stigmatisation and prejudice against both groups. However, it is still worth emphasising that the discriminatory policy towards atheists has more noticeable results and manifests itself regardless of their location or legal status. Even people who are white, male and educated may fear stigmatisation when called non-believers.

Recently, researchers have focused on exploring the root causes of discriminatory policies against atheists and the significance of religious pressure on social and political life. With the growing number of cases of persecution and punishment, as well as discriminatory campaigns

against atheists in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East and North Africa, another question arises: does Islam establish discriminatory boundaries for atheism, or are there other factors that play a decisive role (Khatib, 2018). Indeed, as the results of this research have shown, the influence of the church, and consequently of religion, on the state system is extremely significant, which is confirmed by various privileges and special legal status. However, other factors significantly impact the discredited position of supporters of atheistic worldviews.

As mentioned, the rapid growth of the atheist population raises the issue of defining their legal status, which directly concerns their legal protection, determining the permissible limits of their activities, and responsibility for insulting personal interests. In their research on the reasons for discrimination against non-religious individuals in the USA, Ryan T. Cragun, Barry Kosmin, Ariela Kaysar, Joseph H. Hammer, and Michael Nielsen came to the unequivocal conclusion that those who declare their religious self-identification as “atheists” or “agnostics” are more likely to be discriminated against, as they are no more religious than individuals who simply report their religious identity as “none”.

In this context, states, especially those built around the church and religion, reserve the right to defend their normative worldview, which results in the daily stigmatisation of supporters of atheism or agnosticism. These findings confirm the results of this study on the fact that the source of prejudice and limitations, in addition to the vague formulation of the normative and legal framework, is hidden religious propaganda spread by the largest media – the state. “Extensive discrimination by governments against atheists, humanists and the non-religious occurs worldwide” said the organisation, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), which has about 120 organisations in 45 countries (The Growing Influence..., 2021).

A significant number of researchers believe that state favouritism towards religious policies is the primary cause of the discriminatory treatment of atheists. Of course, this statement has an opposing view, according to which secular states are propaganda machines, the main goal of which is: “...intimidate Christians and influence the government to limit religious freedom (especially concerning Christianity)” (McLaughlin, 2019). However, considering both positions, it is impossible to disagree that the influence of the church on the state (both clerical and secular) is extremely great. In general, both from the position of researchers and personal analysis, it can be noted that the imposition of the religious issue concerns a variety of components, such as religious holidays that are officially recognised by states, religious education in schools or the spread of religious attributes.

As mentioned earlier, the religious influence on the state system is reflected in a vast array of privileges, including state funding for religious organisations and church campaigns. This issue has been the subject of research by J. Holleis (2021), as government spending always arouses particular public interest. There are many models of church-state relations in the world, there are common and distinctive features, but finances and taxes are areas where churches and states often cooperate and interact,

various religious organisations receive financial support in millions of dollars, thus having the opportunity to exist in every sphere of public life.

Thus, state funding of various religious associations does not legally violate the right to freedom of religion, but in practice, such funding limits the opportunities of non-religious groups by distorting free competition of worldviews, opinions, and ideas. Some scholars, notably D. Gegenava (2019), highlight the positive aspects of state aid and argue that the government should align with religion and encourage its free exercise in the public sphere. Most researchers, such as H. Holleis (2021), insist that religious freedom is best protected by avoiding government support of religion and separating the two institutions. Of course, any given position is based on allegiance to a particular group (Schwartzman *et al.*, 2020).

One way or another, the level of state support is extremely important, as can be clearly seen in the case of Japan. In 2024, Japan ranks second among the most atheist countries (World Population Review..., 2024). At the same time, the Japanese government does not fund any religious associations or organisations, and churches and temples operate on donations from believers. Meanwhile, the number of atheists in Greece is 27%, and it is Cooperation between church organisations and the state demonstrates the level of support of the latter and clearly contributes to the popularisation of religion and its perception by society.

At the same time, the issue of religious influence on political processes and the apparent favouritism of both clerical and many secular countries toward the church remains equally important. T. Stahl (2019), after analysing the relationship between church and state in the 21st century, emphasised that when religion is used for political purposes, it deprives religion of its eternal significance, turning it into just another cynical method of gaining power. This assertion is hard to dispute, and it is worth adding that a modern democratic society demands that constitutional civil rights prevail over religious prescriptions. Therefore, from the author's perspective, the most appropriate course of action is to establish the neutral status of the state, without the obvious monopoly of any particular worldview. Despite the principle of secularisation aiming to preserve religious independence, people often interpret Thomas Jefferson's phrase "separation of church and state" to mean that religion should not influence anyone's political decisions or the views of those holding office (Nelson, 2021). The principle of secularisation is a guarantee of state neutrality and the foundation for building a secular democratic country. Therefore, to realise freedom of choice, speech, and religious beliefs, and to overcome constant disparagement and stigmatisation, it is necessary to implement this principle and provide everyone with the opportunity to freely choose their worldview.

Conclusions

The issue of discrimination is currently more pressing than ever, as the number of atheists continues to grow each year, increasing the need for their legal protection. Although the right to freedom of religion, conscience, and belief can be interpreted in various ways, it clearly requires more detailed regulation at the legislative level. No legal act enshrines the right to "non-religion", but every document provides for the right to be free from discrimination. It is evident that the right to freedom of religion focuses on the rights of the religious population, simultaneously creating an imbalance in legal protection opportunities between believers and atheists. The lack of regulatory clarity in this area will contribute to extrajudicial, informal conflicts, which will fuel societal polarisation, as can already be observed in various countries around the world. In some countries, this manifests as sharp political conflicts and confrontations between conservative religious circles and secular forces over issues of morality, minority rights, cultural identity, and so on. In others, polarisation takes on a milder form but still creates potential fault lines in society. On the international stage, there are also disputes between religious and secular states regarding freedom of conscience, migration, and human rights. These contradictions are exacerbated by the use of the religious factor as a tool of foreign policy by certain countries. The religious influence on public life is exceptionally strong, reflected in the stigmatised status of both the atheist community and certain religions within different states.

The criminalisation of atheism, the imposition of religious beliefs, and the privileged status of the church all contribute to prejudice and various forms of discrimination against non-believers. Overcoming political polarisation based on secularism requires ensuring equal rights for all groups of the population regardless of their worldview convictions, clearly separating church from state, and promoting mutual tolerance, and understanding between believers and non-believers. Achieving this will entail reducing government spending on religious education programs and tax breaks for religious organisations. This factor, coupled with the ban on the use of atheist symbols in the public sphere, creates systematic inequality between religious and "pro-atheist" groups in the competition of ideas. Thus, only ensuring truly equal conditions can put an end to the use of religiously motivated conflicts for political purposes. Further research into successful practices of coexistence among various ideological groups in multi-confessional societies can contribute to this goal.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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