

SECULARISM IN THE CAMEROONIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

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Abstract: Cameroon's educational system is characterized by a complex interplay of state and religious influences. This paper examines the concept of secularism in Cameroon's educational system, exploring its historical roots, current challenges, and implications for national unity. The paper argues that secularism is essential for promoting inclusivity, tolerance, and academic freedom in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like Cameroon.

The paper discusses the constitutional provisions and laws governing secularism in education, highlighting the state's efforts to promote neutrality and inclusivity. However, it also examines the challenges posed by the growing influence of religious groups and the need for effective regulation. The paper concludes that a robust secular framework is necessary to ensure equal access to quality education for all Cameroonians, regardless of their religious affiliations.

The paper recommends strengthening the regulatory framework, promoting interfaith dialogue, and enhancing teacher training on secularism to address the challenges. It also calls for increased efforts to promote critical thinking and media literacy to counter extremist ideologies. By upholding secularism, Cameroon's educational system can foster a culture of tolerance, mutual respect, and national cohesion.

Keywords: secularism, Cameroon, education, neutrality, inclusivity, religion, national unity.

Introduction

The relationship between education and religion has long occupied a central place in philosophical reflections on schooling, especially in societies that are marked by religious diversity and characterized by historical frictions between faith and state institutions. Scholars like John Dewey regard education to be more than the mere technical process of knowledge transmission. He is of the opinion that to a large extent, education is a normative enterprise through which values and moral dispositions are cultivated (Dewey, 1916). It is within this framework that the discourse on secularism and its capacity to regulate and define the appropriate role of religion within public educational institutions while safeguarding the freedom among citizens emerges.

Philosophically, secularism is commonly understood as the principle of state neutrality in matters of religion, intended to prevent the privileging of any particular faith within public life (Audi, 2011). In educational settings, this principle is usually defined and understood in relation to the policies put in place by states to restrict confessional or religious instruction in public schools and promote civic education grounded in non-sectarian values (Nussbaum, 2012). As a reaction to the above conceptualization, scholars within the field of education such as Strike (1994) and Biesta (2015) have come to question whether education can ever be entirely neutral with respect to values, given that schooling inevitably transmits moral and cultural principles. These debates bring to light a key concern with vital implications. It raises attention towards the fact that secularism in education is

not merely a legal arrangement but a deeply philosophical problem as it touches on one of the fundamental problems of philosophical ethics; namely, what constitutes the sources of moral authority in education?

Cameroon provides a particularly interesting context for examining the impact secularism has on the educational system. This is explained by the fact that Cameroon is constitutionally defined as a secular state, yet its educational system is historically and structurally intertwined with religion. Formal education in Cameroon developed largely through Christian missionary activity during the colonial period, with mission schools serving as the primary providers of education well into the twentieth century (Nkwi & Warnier). Despite post-independence efforts to centralize and regulate education, faith-based institutions, especially those of Christian and Islamic background continue to play a significant role in the national educational landscape (Fonkeng, 2007). At the same time, both indigenous and foreign religious worldviews continue to shape moral life and social identity of the people, especially at the community level.

This historical and cultural backdrop generates a persistent tension between constitutional secularism, religious plurality, and educational practice in Cameroon. This dichotomy is made even more apparent by the fact that despite state policy affirming secularism and religious neutrality, religious symbols, moral teachings advanced by religious institutions still influence and remain visible within both public and private schools, often without clear philosophical justification or consistent regulatory frameworks (Fonkeng, 2006).

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The central problem addressed in this study, therefore, concerns the conceptual and practical ambiguity surrounding secularism in the Cameroonian educational system. Specifically, in relation to how secularism is understood within official educational discourse in Cameroon, how it is enacted in practice, and whether existing arrangements adequately reconcile state neutrality with the moral and cultural realities of Cameroonian society. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions: How is secularism conceptually framed within Cameroonian educational policy and constitutional discourse? To what extent is secularism consistently implemented within educational practice? What philosophical tensions arise between secular neutrality and the religious and cultural identities of learners and educators? The primary objective of the study is to offer a critical philosophical analysis of secularism in the Cameroonian educational system, and examine its normative implications.

Historical Foundations of Education and Religion in Cameroon

In order for any meaningful analysis of secularism in the Cameroonian educational system to be made, one must first of all provide a solid historical grounding surrounding the two constructs, so that an understanding of the relationship between education and religion in Cameroon can be established. Prior to colonial contact, education in Cameroonian societies was predominantly informal and integrally linked to spirituality and moral formation. Indigenous education functioned as a lifelong process through which individuals were initiated into the values, norms, skills, and cosmological beliefs of their communities (Mbiti, 2015). Learning was very experiential and was characterized by everyday life realities. Instruction was mainly accomplished through the instrumentality of oral traditions, storytelling and apprenticeship (Fafunwa, 1974).

In many Cameroonian societies, including those of the Grass fields, spiritual formation was central to education. Knowledge of ancestors, rituals, taboos, and cosmological order formed an essential part of socialization, as these elements were believed to sustain harmony between the living, the dead, and the unborn (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982). Education thus served not only epistemic purposes but also metaphysical and ethical ones, reinforcing the idea that moral order and spiritual awareness were prerequisites for meaningful social existence.

The advent of colonialism marked a decisive shift in the educational landscape of Cameroon. Formal Western-style education was introduced primarily through Christian missionary activity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with education serving as a tool for evangelization, cultural transformation, and colonial administration (Fonkeng, 2006). Mission schools, established by Catholic, Protestant, and later Islamic organizations, became the dominant providers of formal learning, especially in the southern regions of the country.

Missionary education explicitly transformed schooling by integrating religious instruction into the curriculum and framing education as a means of moral and spiritual conversion. As a matter of fact, literacy in schools was often taught through biblical texts, and moral discipline was almost entirely grounded in Christian doctrine (Fonkeng, 2007). As a result, schooling became closely associated with religious identity. This legacy continues to shape perceptions of schooling as a morally and religiously charged institution rather than a neutral civic space.

Cameroon's dual colonial experience under French and British administration further complicated the relationship between education and religion. In French Cameroon, educational policy was influenced by the French republican ideal of "laïcité", which emphasized state control over education and the marginalization of overt religious influence in public institutions (Baubérot, 2014). In British-administered Cameroon, education followed the Anglo-Saxon model, which was generally more accommodating of religious participation in schooling. Missionary bodies retained significant autonomy, and religious instruction was openly incorporated into school life (Njimoluh, 2006). These contrasting colonial legacies produced divergent assumptions about secularism, neutrality, and the role of religion in education. Following independence, the Cameroonian state adopted secularism as a constitutional principle. The state positioned itself as neutral in matters of religion, and affirmed freedom of worship (Republic of Cameroon, 1996). In this light, educational reforms aimed effectively to centralize control and standardize the curricula on its own terms.

Legal and Policy Framework of Secularism in Cameroon

The principle of secularism in Cameroon is constitutionally grounded in the Preamble of the 1996 Constitution, which affirms the state's commitment to freedom of religion, equality before the law, and neutrality in matters of belief. Although the Constitution does not explicitly employ the term "laïcité", it establishes Cameroon as a secular state by guaranteeing freedom of worship and prohibiting the establishment of a state religion (Republic of Cameroon, 1996). This formulation reflects a model of secularism that is more oriented toward state neutrality rather than the complete exclusion of religion from the public sphere.

Scholars have noted that constitutional secularism in postcolonial African states, including Cameroon, often reflects a pragmatic accommodation of religious diversity rather than a rigid separationist doctrine (Kymlicka, 2007). In this sense, one might say that Cameroonian constitutional secularism is elaborated to mainly serve as a framework for the coexistence of Cameroonians. It is crafted with the intention of managing religious diversity and preserving national unity. However, the absence of explicit operational guidelines within the Constitution has left room for divergent interpretations, particularly in the education sector where religious actors have historically played a central role.

The legal articulation of secularism within the education sector is further elaborated in national education laws and policy documents. Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998 explicitly lays down guidelines for education in Cameroon, affirming education as a public service under the authority of the state (Republic of Cameroon, 1998). It also recognizes the contribution of private actors in educational provision. The law emphasizes national integration in line with a state-led vision of education that transcends the demands of particular religious doctrines.

The Cameroonian state exercises regulatory authority over religious influence in schools through the accreditation standards it sets to be fulfilled by institutions of learning in the country. Public schools are expected to adhere to principles of neutrality, particularly in matters of religious instruction, which is either excluded or offered in non-optional manner. This approach aligns with broader philosophical arguments that view public education as a civic institution tasked with promoting shared values rather than "sectarian" identities (Gutmann, 1999).

Faith-Based Schools and Their Relationship with the State

Faith-based schools constitute a significant proportion of Cameroon's educational system. Faith-based providers account for approximately 12% of all primary school students nationally (Boulenger & Criel, 2012). The role of faith-based schools is even more prominent in the medical and health sciences domain. In 2017, faith-based faculties trained 6,052 students in medicine and health sciences, compared to 11,361 in public facilities (Herzig van Wees et al, 2019). These institutions, largely operated by Christian denominations and Islamic organizations, are legally recognized and regulated by the state but retain the right to provide religious instruction and cultivate faith-based moral identities (Fonkeng, 2007). The relationship between faith-based schools and the state is therefore characterized by partnership rather than separation. The state sets national curricular standards and oversees certification, but faith-based schools are given the leeway to integrate religious education as a core component of their pedagogical mission. Scholars argue that this arrangement reflects a model of accommodative or plural secularism, in which the state acknowledges the social role of religion while maintaining regulatory authority (Taylor, 2007). Nonetheless, tensions arise when religious norms appear to conflict with national policies on aspects such as inclusion, gender equality, or civic education etc.

It is worth mentioning that teachers occupy a critical position in mediating secularism within educational practice. As agents of the state in public schools, they are expected to uphold principles of neutrality and professionalism. (Kymlicka, 2007). At the same time, they are moral subjects whose identities are shaped by personal religious convictions. This dual role often generates ethical and professional dilemmas, regarding the expression of religious beliefs in the classroom. Philosophical debates on professional ethics suggest that while teachers should refrain from imposing their religious worldviews on their students, complete moral neutrality is neither possible nor desirable (Strike, 2010). The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing freedom of conscience with the obligation to respect pluralism and equality within public education.

Comparative and African Philosophical Perspectives

Across Africa, secularism in education has taken different forms. These are shaped in most part by colonial legacies and the religious demography of the citizens. In Senegal, for instance, the state formally upholds "laïcité", but at the same time, accommodates strong Islamic influence in public life. Also, it allows Qur'anic education to coexist alongside state schooling without any much friction (Villalón, 2015). Nigeria presents a contrasting case. Nigeria's constitutional secularism coexists with profound religious pluralism. This has resulted in persistent tensions over religious instruction and the introduction of Sharia law in some northern states (Suberu, 2009).

In South Africa, secularism is articulated through a constitutional commitment to freedom of religion and equality. These cases illustrate that African secularism is rarely separationist in the strict Western sense. Instead, it generally functions as a negotiated framework aimed at managing diversity. Comparative evidence suggests that attempts to impose rigid secular models often generate conflict (Kymlicka, 2007).

African philosophy offers a rich normative framework for rethinking secularism in education in Africa. One of the most renowned African philosophies in this regard is the Philosophy of "Ubuntu". "Ubuntu" is commonly expressed as *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which translates to "a person through other persons". Ubuntu emphasizes relational personhood and communal flourishing rather than individual autonomy as the foundation of ethical life (Mbiti, 1969; Metz, 2011). In educational contexts, this implies that moral education is inseparable from communal values and shared ethical principles (Frankline & Shalanyuy, 2026). From an Ubuntu perspective, the strict exclusion of religion from public education appears conceptually incoherent. This is because in this worldview, spirituality, morality, and community life are all intertwined. As such, moral education cannot be reduced merely to abstract civic norms detached from lived traditions. Many scholars argue that Ubuntu-based education prioritizes character formation which resonates strongly with religiously informed moral discourses without necessarily endorsing doctrinal instruction (Letseka, 2012).

Beyond Ubuntu, many African indigenous worldviews reject the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular that characterizes modern Western secularism. Spirituality occupies a central place within these traditions and permeates state institutions and educational practices. Mbiti (1969) famously observed that in African cosmologies, religion is not a compartmentalized sphere but "the strongest element in traditional life," shaping perceptions of knowledge, morality, and social order.

Toward a Context-Sensitive Model of Secular Education

The preceding analyses reveal that the challenge of secularism in the Cameroonian educational system does not only lie merely within the legal framework and policy inconsistencies in Cameroon. The rigid transplantation of secular models into an educational system that is situated within a socio-cultural context characterized by deep religious plurality and spirituality is the biggest challenge in this regard. As such, a context-sensitive model of secular education that moves beyond abstract neutrality and responds to Cameroon's lived educational realities is ideal. Such a model will be better placed to reconcile state impartiality with religious precepts and offer a viable framework for educational reform.

Classical liberal interpretations of secularism by figures such as Rawls (1993) often emphasize strict neutrality, understood within the context of a complete exclusion of religion from public institutions, including schools. It is true to an extent that this model has historical justification in contexts that have been marked by church-state antagonism. However, its application in African societies such as Cameroon has proven problematic. Scholars such as Asad (2003) and Modood, (2013) have increasingly argued that "neutrality" in deeply religious societies frequently results not in impartiality, but in the implicit privileging of secular worldviews over religious ones.

Another claim that is advanced by classical liberal secularists is that the central aim of secular education is the formation of citizens who are morally responsible and civically engaged. Notwithstanding, moral education in Cameroon cannot be effectively grounded in abstract civic values detached from the ethical sources that give them meaning. African communitarian philosophies offer a reliable pathway. Philosophies such as "Ubuntu" and related concepts such as *wir dze wir bi' wir*,

emphasize relational responsibility communal well-being as foundational ethical principles (Tangwa, 2004). These values are not inherently religious, yet they are deeply compatible with religious moral teachings and indigenous spiritual dictates. A context-sensitive secular education model would therefore integrate civic virtues such as tolerance, justice, and solidarity through culturally resonant ethical frameworks rather than through value-neutral abstractions. This approach avoids the extremes of moral relativism and allows students to encounter shared civic norms.

Translating this philosophical model into practice requires deliberate policy interventions. First, national education policy should explicitly articulate a conception of secularism only on the basis of state neutrality. Neutrality in the sense that the state sees to the protection of diversity rather than suppression of religious expression, as has regrettably been the case in many other countries such as North Korea, China, Iran, Eritrea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Russia (USCIRF, 2024). Secondly, teacher education programs should include training in religious literacy and intercultural pedagogy so that educators are equipped with the competence to navigate religious diversity at a personal and professional level.

Third, curriculum development should incorporate indigenous religion and ethics. Also, civic education should be taught in line with the socio-cultural worldview of the people. Such curricular reforms align with UNESCO's (2017) recommendations on global citizenship education, which emphasize respect for cultural and religious diversity as a foundation for social cohesion. Finally, mechanisms for dialogue between the state and faith-based educational providers should be institutionalized to ensure equity and mutual respect within the broader educational system.

Conclusion

This article has examined secularism in the Cameroonian educational system as an ideology with political, philosophical, and normative implications. The article situates secularism within broader debates on state neutrality and the purposes of education. The study demonstrates that secularism in education cannot be understood as a value-free technical principle. The analysis has also shown that post-independence efforts to assert state neutrality have not resulted in a coherent or consistently implemented model of secular education, but rather in an ambiguous arrangement characterized by inconsistencies. The study lays out evidence contrary to the assumption that moral education can be grounded in abstract civic values detached or cut away from cultural and spiritual sources. Especially in the African context, where socio-cultural values and spirituality are perennial. As the discussion of Ubuntu and related indigenous philosophies illustrates, African conceptions of personhood reject the sharp divide between the sacred and the secular that characterizes Western secular thought. All in all, the article argues for a context-sensitive model of secular education. A model that preserves state impartiality and protects freedom of conscience while acknowledging the ethical and cultural foundations through which moral education is meaningfully transmitted at the same time.

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