

## "The Challenge of Secularism in the Middle East"

Address of His Holiness Karekin II to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council,  
19 January 1994, Los Angeles.

(Transcription provided by the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias-Lebanon)

I render thanks to God for having made it possible for me to be among you, for the second time, in this atmosphere, in this gathering of people, whose concerns are not limited or confined to a narrow sphere of interest. As members of the World Affairs Council, it is my understanding that you have close to your hearts the problems of this great country and as well as the world at large.

I thank Curtis Mack and the committee for having invited me and given me this opportunity to share some thoughts and experiences with you. However, I cannot go on speaking about the theme that has been proposed to me, "The Challenge of Secularism in the Middle East", without expressing, once more, my deep sympathy and my spiritual and moral solidarity with all the people who fell victim to this terrible catastrophe, the earthquake in this city. Only two days ago, being here in Los Angeles, I personally shared that traumatic experience with you on early Monday morning. So may I ask you to stand for one minute in silence, in honor of the memory of those who lost their lives.

1. During my recent years of service to my church in Lebanon, in other parts of the Middle East and in the world at large, I have come across a burning issue, which is bothering [?] us very much, not only in the Middle East, but everywhere in our world today.

I face it almost on a daily basis. When people in Europe or in America, or for that matter anywhere in the world, speak about the Middle East, they usually think in terms and images provided to them by the secular press: Oil, Sheikdoms, Arab-Israeli, Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Gulf War, the integrism [?] of Khomeyni in Iran, and other political, economic, ideological issues. But beneath all these political paradigms I see something which is deeper in its impact than the political negotiations, economic transactions, investment endeavors and other similar relationships. This is the challenge we are facing in the Middle East today vis-a-vis the phenomenon of secularism which is growing in such a rampant pace.

The word secularism surely has many connotations and can be differently understood and interpreted by each one of us. I would like, therefore, from the very start of this talk to define its meaning as I use it in the context of this presentation.

It comes from the Latin word *saecularis*, which means *wordly* or *temporal*; it refers to a human attitude towards life in which everything in human existence is conceived as pertaining to this world of time and space.

Secularization, before it became an ideological stand, was, and is, an existential situation, a sociological reality, which has become a widely dominant phenomenon in modern times and society.

It is the sum of attitudes or aspects of human behavior, a kind of widespread mentality, which is greatly influenced, shaped, I would say even conditioned, by the immeasurable advance of science and particularly of technological achievements of modern times.

Secularism or secularization is not new, that is to say, it is not the product of the last few decades. It goes back to the times when in the so called "age of reason", science became emancipated from the dominance of religion, when the political world proclaimed its autonomy, or its complete independence, from the church and church authorities. It started as a movement of intellectual and political emancipation, opposed to religion, that is, the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the worldly.

It gradually developed in such a way that it was translated as a way of life, as a norm of living in which religious faith, a sense of the sacred, and relation with God were replaced by applied sciences, technology, industrialization and material welfare. Religious practices were considered superfluous; traditional forms of life became discredited and reckoned as outdated; archaic religious authority and interference in public life were rejected. Instead, new styles of life and purely secular values were given high priority. Consumerism became the driving force for various kinds of behavior and relationships. Moral concepts and standards were challenged so radically that the whole principle of accepting any code of moral behavior was put under question.

Man, having reached such a stage of great power, having achieved such great scientific discoveries and having invented such ways and means of communication that could never be imagined before, yielded to the temptation of absolutizing his power and authority of decision and impact. A new trend of self-sufficiency became the dominant source of motivation and course of action.

The basic result of all these changes can only be understood when they are envisaged and interpreted in the context of a separation between the sacred and the secular, between church and state, between the realm of God and from whatever is considered as being of God. This dichotomy, therefore, is to be seen as the main postulate or predicament to understand the emergence and the development of the movement of secularization. But I will come to that later, towards the end of my talk.

2. This secular trend of thought and life was, and is, not confined to the Western countries where it originated. The facilities, rapidity and efficacy of modern media communication reflected and transported all that secularism to other parts of the world including the Middle East. Indeed, I can no longer accept the distinction we used to make between East and West. The barriers of separation and the walls of distinction are getting thinner and thinner and more widely and clearly transparent. By East, I do not mean the political connotation which usually refers to the former Soviet Union and what was called Eastern Europe.

The collapse and disintegration of the former has put an end to the previous order of duality on the level of Great Powers. An era of what is called New World Order is dawning upon the world whose value and impact are still to be tested in the coming years. By East and West, I refer to the cultural distinction with its manifold aspects of ethnic, religious, political, moral and social character.

Imagine how the Middle East is being influenced. I remember some 25 or 30 years ago, having read an issue of Life magazine which had on its cover page a picture of a Jordanian Bedouin shepherd. Before him were the sheep spread in the desert. In his hand was a transistor radio made in Japan. And he was listening to the Voice of America! That picture revealed more than articles or analytical studies of political, sociological or economic nature. I could guess then, that the Iron Curtain was not going to be iron anymore. Years later, after Gorbachev came to power, I read an article in Le Monde, the French newspaper in Paris, the title of which was so profoundly and eloquently suggestive: *Rideau de fer, ou rideau en verre?* (An iron curtain or a glass curtain?). Now it obviously has become transparent. World communication,

the cross-section of cultures, economic development, technological advances, scientific achievements, all these affect, and continue ever increasingly to affect, the life of all nations in all parts of the world. The Middle East is not an exception. It falls right in the middle of the crossroads of such communication.

Yes, that influence is there; but what kind of influence? What is being conveyed through it in most cases is not what I and you know to be truly and genuinely the Western American culture. Usually it is one aspect, or some aspects, and the most superficial ones are being transmitted to the outside world. Today most of the people in the Middle East, particularly the young people, are attracted to the American culture which they see not through their intellect, but through their physical senses and superficial approach motivated by pleasure, leisure, consumerism and, in the best cases, by technological factors of the most pragmatic nature and value (such as computers, electronics, management, business administration, etc.) In their attitude towards the American culture they do not apply and attempt a discernment or criteria or judgment. They just swallow and follow.

In the moral sphere of life, this young generation of the Middle East is mostly exposed to such aspects that are depicted in such attractive manners in various forms of mass media of communication, namely, films, TV movies, videos, magazines and newspapers in which violence, abused forms of sex, various other forms of behavior and relationships are extensively and wide-openly displayed.

Secularism [has become] a way of life. New life-styles are being identified with so called higher degrees and higher standards, advanced levels of civilization. Thus, the whole Western civilization is being associated with these decadent and so often degrading forms of what is called modern culture or simply modernism.

As I read the signs of the times in our present day predicament, I see that a new era of colonialism is being opened. The old colonialism of political character that began in the 19th century is dwindling in this second part of the 20th century; but a new colonialism is entering into the world scene in general, and into the Middle East in particular. I am inclined to call it cultural colonialism with all its economic, social, technological, moral and behavioral aspects taken together. We, in the Middle East, and for that matter in any other part of the world, are gradually losing the distinctness or the specificity of our own agenda and are adopting such agenda of life which are being impressed, and sometimes even imposed upon us, by the criteria, priorities and means of the mass media.

3. Indeed, what I see as immediate consequences of these developments have twofold dimension of serious importance:

a) These extreme forms of secularistic culture are distorting the image of the Western or, more particularly, the American culture taken in its integrity. You and I are cognizant that such an image of American culture does not do justice to the ethos, the spirit and the content of the American national heritage. There are so many great achievements in this Western culture that are a source of immeasurable contribution to the progress of the world, not only in the scientific or technological areas, but also in the realm of human development aimed at deeper layers and greater quality of happiness for humankind. Therefore, these superficial aspects of extreme secularist culture should not be taken and carried on to such an extent by which the true culture, with all its intellectual, scientific and artistic values, is eclipsed or overshadowed or discarded.

b) Secondly, on the other side, Middle Eastern societies are being alienated to their own indigenous cultures of such a long historical heritage and of spiritual, intellectual and moral richness. What we feel and see in our part of the world is that a large number of young people

fall victims to the temptation of imitating those superficial aspects of the American culture and not a healthy one for the development of the intrinsic values of the cultures of their own peoples. It also hampers the course of true communication which is a matter of mutual relationship and can surely become a source of mutual enrichment.

4. If this brief, indeed, sketchy, and purely descriptive presentation is true, even in its general outline, then I and you have the responsibility to ask the question: how to find the way out of this course of relationship which surely is detrimental to us and to you and, indeed, to the whole humankind?

I am not capable of offering any clear cut answer to this fundamental question. I only will attempt to advance some reflections of my own in our common search for remedy.

First of all, we have to redefine secularism. In other words, we have to clarify our understanding of what we mean when we use the term 'of the world'.

As I indicated earlier, secularism started by making a sharp distinction between the two realms of the sacred, the mystical, the religious, on the one hand, and the worldly, the temporal, the profane, on the other hand. Is this dichotomy a legitimate one according to our Christian understanding? I believe not.

The world according to the Holy Scriptures is God's creation. It remains God's world. All we have in it as given by God is good. Mankind is the most important part of the universe, the cosmos. That world is not only created by God but also sustained by and cared for by him.

We read in the Gospel: <God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life> (JOHN, 3:16). And yet, the same Evangelist makes a distinction between that world and the one that human beings make out of it. In a prayer to God the Father, Jesus asking for the protection of His disciples, says: <The world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them, from the evil one> (JOHN, 17:14-15).

It is obvious that the world is taken here in two senses:

a) as the handwork of God, and b) as the handwork of men. The question then is a question of attitude towards the world, *saecularis*. How do we relate to ourselves, with our own free will, to the world? If we identify ourselves entirely with the world or if we become even dependent from the physical world then we undergo the temptation of falling victim to our own physical senses. We lose our distinctness as human beings in spiritual and moral dimensions, stature. Here is the cause of distortion of our integrity as human beings.

Secularism taken in its extreme forms of today's situation may lead us to all forms of permissiveness wherein the norms of our human, moral and spiritual nature and vocation are trodden down. We are reduced to the purely material elements of our existence with all the pleasures attached to them. This cleavage within our human condition is the source of our human tragedy. We are in the world, we are part of the world, but let us never forget that we are there with a distinct human condition which transcends our physical elements of existence and, indeed, give specific value to life. That distinctness is, what we call in Biblical terms, <the image of God>, <the likeness of God> as we read it in the first chapter of the Bible.

I strongly believe that the Church or, for that matter, other religions in the world, should interpret this truth in the context of the modern age. Our task ought to be the recognition

of the freedom of human creativity in all the realms of science and technology, yet at the same time, reminding men and women of their existential obligation to be conscious of their spiritual and moral welfare, without which, science and technology cannot serve the purpose of human life in its integrity, that is, divorcing life from its Creator. I think it is in this sense that the great scientist Albert Einstein has said: "Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind".

When and if life in the world is divorced from spiritual and moral values, it becomes a course of pursuit of such values which identify the human being with what he or she creates and consumes in the material and temporal world.

Therefore, the sharp contrast, between sacred and the worldly, has to be overcome. For us, in the Middle East, religious faith and life in the world are not as disassociated as has so often been in the West. Religious faith is more existentially interwoven within the texture of our public life. Often this fundamental fact has been considered by the Western secular press as being the major cause of the political conflict and armed confrontation in the Middle East. No doubt that religious factors and aspects have bearings on such conflicts, but they are far from being the only or the dominant cause. For us religion is part of the style of our daily living; the separation between the sacred and the secular is not as sharp as in the West and here in America. The influence of extreme secularism may create, and has created, a certain reaction which is to be seen in the rise of fundamentalist attitudes in all our religious traditions, not only in the Middle East, but also in many quarters of American religious revival movements often described as radical evangelical movements.

5. It is high time that we look at the issue on a global level and in a holistic approach.

If the advance of modern secularism goes in the pace that it has been going in the last few decades, surely it will produce negative results for us whether here in the United States or there in the Middle East or anywhere in the world.

We are called to assess this present course of events and developments, communication and influence with self critical attitude. Where are we heading to? Will the abundance and affluence of the material goods help us reach happiness which basically is the common and supreme end of all our endeavors? I do not see that happening as I look at the world situation, even here in America. One of the profound observations that a great writer like Alexander Solzhenitsyn made after coming into living contact with the Western and American way of life, was the following: "All the glorified technological achievements of progress, including the conquest of outer space, do not redeem the 20th century's moral poverty".

We need to redefine our priorities and reorder their hierarchical setting. The simpler are our ways of life and more sober is our expenditure, the greater are the chances of happiness. Rapidity and spectacularism are not the only or the most important criteria for the quality and value of our culture. Today the inner quality of human life is at stake.

It cannot be saved by pure scientific discoveries and technological inventions, however overwhelmingly impressive and productive they may seem. It needs inner search for revalorization of spiritual and moral dimensions and values. This is what so often I tend to call "inner perestroika" which goes deeper than brick and mortar, electronics and computers!

6. I already see signs of spiritual renewal in the Western world. The spiritual aspirations are there; how to respond to them? Just one, and the most recent example from among so many others: I was very deeply impressed when I read in many journals in Europe that at the end of 1993, from 28<sup>th</sup> of December to the 1st of January, 1994, 80,000 young people from Western

and Eastern Europe were assembled in Munich, Germany. They were young people who had come for prayer, speculation, worship and adoration, through an intense spiritual retreat. The Taize Religious Community, under the inspiring leadership of the prior Brother Roger Schultz, had organized it. This was the 16th year that such young groups were coming together by sharing a tremendously profound experience of true religious revival and regeneration. They had no appropriate conditions of decent accommodation. Some of them were passing the nights in sleeping bags and in the courtyards of the churches at the very middle of the winter season. What an eloquent sign of spiritual recovery for our modern times!

There in the Middle East we are called to a heart searching inner scrutiny of our own predicaments. Today, where we are heading to in our deeply shaken situation caused by political upheavals?

We cannot avoid communication with the Western and American culture. Yet, we cannot equally afford being just imitators or copyists, in short, victims of an uncontrolled attitude of being subjected to, without our own input in it. There is absolute and urgent need of re-evaluating our own traditions and giving them new interpretation, new relevance, and thus liberating them from becoming stereotype traditionalism which rejects every effort that tries to bring new and fresh air into human life.

7. The task is a common task. We, both in the West and in the Middle East, have to develop a new methodology of fellowship, partnership and collaboration. Manipulation of one sort or another is contrary to our human dignity, integrity and true mutual solidarity. Moreover, and in the final analysis, manipulation is detrimental to both the manipulator and the manipulated. Neither exploitation nor subjugation can, and should, be the main driving force. The human life and destiny are at stake. The only way to overcome the dilemma and the threat of confrontation is real dialogue in life, mutual exchange of experiences for the benefit of mutual enrichment and common goals for peace, justice, integrity and the well being of humankind, whether in the United States or in the Middle East.

We have to enter into this dialogue not in terms of pure exchange of ideas, in a kind of process of purely intellectual nature, but by sharing each others experience and ways of life, under the imperative of one God and for the sake of one humankind.

Centuries ago a great thinker and a profound theologian St. Augustine said: “Without God we cannot, without us, God will not”. Very humbly, I would like to add, “Without us working together hand in hand, neither God nor we will be able to make this world become a haven of happiness, the 'Garden of Eden', the original handicraft of God Almighty and All Merciful”.

Karekin II  
Catholicos of Cilicia

See also: “Armenian Pope Visits L.A.” Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, June 1994, p. 68. <https://www.wrmea.org/1994-june/alifornia-chronicle-memorial-dedicated-to-slain-activist-alex-odeh.html> (accessed 12 June 2023).