המכון הישראלי לדמוקרטיה
THE ISRAEL DEMOCRACY INSTITUTE
The Guttman Center

Trinity College

On August 7, Guttman Center at the Israel Democracy Institute, together with the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC) at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, hosted a conference on secularism. A large number of researchers and intellectuals from various fields participated in the conference, and were asked to write essays on the subject. Prof. Asher Arian, scientific director of Guttman Center, chaired the meeting.

The first speaker, Prof. Barry Kosmin, director of the ISSSC of Trinity College, emphasized the importance of understanding secularism in contemporary society. Prof. Kosmin claimed that the field of secularism lacks analytical research due to a lack of suitable indices, and stressed the importance of constructing a universal system that would enable a comparative study of secularism across different societies.

The second speaker was Dr. Arye Carmon, president of the Israel Democracy Institute. Dr. Carmon pointed out the instability that characterizes Israeli politics, a result of an uncertain social identity. According to Carmon, the current political echelon lacks responsibility that is based on skepticism and rationalism, traits that have always been identified with secularism. According to Carmon, this type of responsibility is the greatest challenge that modern societies have faced since the period of the Enlightenment. In addition, Carmon claimed that indecisiveness and uncertainty are also fundamental to secularism, and therefore that secular life is destined to a never-ending struggle of self-inquiry.

The first session dealt with secularism in a universal context, while the second one focused on Israeli secularism. Participating in the first session were: Prof. Yaakov Malkin, Prof. Jonathan Fox, Dahlia Scheindlin, Giora Kaplan, Prof. Ariela Keysar, Prof. Emanuel Gutmann and Prof. Nissim Calderon.

Prof Malkin claimed that secularism stands at the heart of a cultural struggle between religion, which calls upon man to adhere to a higher law, and democracy, which sees man as free and self-governing. He claimed that 'way of life' is the main indicator of secularism, not self-definition, and that most people's way of life indicates secularism and not religion, regardless of how they define themselves

Prof. Fox presented the various indices, which have been used to measure levels of state secularism. The first group of indices referred to secularism as the negation of

religion, whereas the second group of indices referred mainly to self-definition. These indicators, Fox claimed, have not yet been consolidated into a universal definition of secularism. One possible universal indicator might be the level of hostility towards religion, but this kind of measurement also has its disadvantages. Another suggestion was to gather a group of individuals that define themselves as secular, and to identify their common secular characteristics.

Dahlia Scheindlin compared secularism in the United States, France and Turkey, where religion plays a major role in public life but is not manifested in legislation. Scheindlin stressed the need to identify indicators of secularism that apply in the area between legislation and 'way of life', especially in countries that clearly separate between church and state.

Giora Kaplan presented the perspective of the health research field, which measures secularism levels according to self-definition. The categories currently used in the field of health research do not offer a clear distinction between respondents. Kaplan suggested the construction of indices that combine different aspects of secularism and religiousness (for example: combining attitudes toward religion with actual behavior).

Prof. Ariela Keysar presented the projects conducted by ISSSC of Trinity College, including the American Religious Identification Survey 2001 (ARIS) that was conducted among more than 50 thousand respondents and is now being replicated. The respondents were asked: "what is your religion if any?", to which 13% replied: "none". The number of respondents that define themselves as not belonging to any religion grew by 8% between 1990 and 2008. The ISSSC measures three aspects of secularism/religiosity in its studies: behavior, belonging to a religion, and believing in the existence of God. One of the aims of the 2008 survey is to show how individuals who define themselves as secular associate or relate to various social groups and causes.

Prof. Emanuel Gutmann commented that the concept of secularism holds different meanings in different cultures, and furthermore, it should be noted that non-Western societies understand this concept differently from Western ones.

Prof. Nissim Calderon addressed the issue from two perspectives: political and literary. According to Calderon, the most important issues in politics are: 1. war and peace; 2. democracy; 3. wealth distribution; and 4. secularism and religiousness. These were also the priorities of the Zionist movement and up until 1967 religious and secular Zionists were willing to compromise on the fourth issue in order to maintain the first three. But after '67, the first priority became the occupied territories and the cooperation on all other counts was discontinued, due to disagreements between secular and religious groups over the fate of the territories. From a literary point of view, the secular discourse continues the legacies of Brenner, Berdichevski and Bialik.

Participating in the second session were Dr. Guy Ben-Porat, Yair Sheleg, Dr. Ilana Ziegler, Prof. Tamar Hermann, Yair Tzaban and Rabbi Sivan Maas.

Dr. Ben-Porat presented his essay "Ideology and Everyday life: Measuring Secularism in Israel", and claimed that there are two types of secularism: the first is a

specific set of fundamental beliefs, such as the aspiration to separate church and state or to oppose the Orthodox monopoly in Israel; the second type of secularism refers to a day-to-day life, to customs and to consumerism. In his research, Ben-Porat wishes to ascertain whether consumerism on the Sabbath is related to a wider set of beliefs, and he views consumerism on the Sabbath as a secular practice. But in his study he was unable to identify a definite correlation between consumerism on the Sabbath and any other set of beliefs, including liberal ones.

Yair Sheleg claimed that there is longer an essential clash between secularism and religiousness. The collapse of ideology in the second half of the 20th century has diverted the attention to the individual - existentialism in the philosophical sense and liberalism in the political one. Now that the axis of identity is no longer binary, but individual, one doesn't necessarily have to choose between religion and secularism. Today, it is possible now to be an individual with a secular-religious identity, as expressed in the phrase "Datiloni" (Dati-Hiloni; religious – secular). There are many examples of this phenomenon, such as secular people that study in Batei-Midrash, Kabbala centers and other religious centers, or religious people who occupy key positions in the secular world. Furthermore, Sheleg claimed that in the Jewish case, especially the Jewish-Israeli one, the combination of secularism and religiousness is much more common, as a result of the central place of Jewish culture in national-Jewish identity. Finally, the ideological era has not ended completely - holding on to ideology is what brings the religious camp to fight against the values that individualism allegedly represents.

Dr. Ilana Ziegler presented her point of view, from the field of reproductive health. She aims at integrating traditional and modern values and makes a special effort at refraining to neglect the past, while still ensuring certain important modern provisions. The 21st century poses a challenge to modern societies in the West, which are still influenced by the dominance of religion over society. The challenge of reproductive health is the result of fear that the feeling of solidarity linked to communitarian values might be replaced with radical individualism. Children and terminal patients are not considered productive in modern societies, so it is important to preserve some traditional values in order to maintain some level of solidarity. New media, such as the internet, can assist in creating a communitarian basis for the promotion of these goals, as recent campaigns have shown. According to Ziegler, our task is to find a common ground between the communitarian traditions of the past and the individualistic traits of contemporary times.

Prof. Tamar Hermann presented her research on public opinion in the area of peace and security. She found that the axis of religiousness-secularism is the most important variable for predicting the public's stance on these issues. Since 1994, she has been conducting a study which has been measuring support of the Oslo Accords, and later on, of the "peace process", on a monthly basis. Over the years, respondents who defined themselves as secular have expressed a higher level of support towards the Oslo Accord, compared to those who defined themselves as religious, and the level of support correlates to the level of religiosity (i.e. the more religious the respondent – traditional, orthodox, or ultra-orthodox – the more likely he or she was to show a low level of support towards the peace process).

Yair Tzaban stressed that secularism constitutes only one component of identity and that the significance of this component can fluctuate. Nevertheless, these definitions are important because of each group's position towards democracy – support of the occupation, for instance, often has deep religious roots. According to public opinion, after 1996 the social cleavage between religious and secular groups became the most dangerous in Israeli society. This tendency has two explanations: one is the perception that the rise of the radical right, as seen in the acts of Baruch Goldstein and Yigal Amir, is deeply related to religion; the second explanation is the increasing overlap between the main cleavages in Israeli society: the class rift, the political rift and the religious one.

Rabbi Sivan Maas referred to different of types of secularism: one type turns to 'real Judaism', when it is needed – in matrimony and in other religious ceremonies; another type is "fashionable Judaism", which tries to find new meaning in traditional religious ceremonies; a third type of secularism is "positive Judaism", which tries to comprehend how to live in a Jewish "positive" way, according to a chosen set of values. Maas claims that our central task is to understand the motivations of each type.