Over the last three decades, secular states, virtually everywhere, have come under severe strain. It is hardly surprising then that political secularism, the doctrine that defends them, has also been subjected to severe criticism. For example, it is argued that secularism is a western, Christian doctrine that cannot take root in non-western, Islamic or Hindu societies. It is also claimed that over time and in several societies, it is become aggressively anti-religious, belittling the deep significance of religion in the lives of ordinary people. Some scholars have concluded that this critique is ethically and morally so profound and justified that it is time to abandon political secularism. In this seminar, arguments are offered for rejecting this conclusion. The criticism of secularism looks indefeasible only because critics have focused on mainstream conceptions developed in largely religiously homogenous societies.

Our focus must be shifted away from doctrines underpinning some Western or Western-inspired secular states towards the normative practices of a wide variety of states, including the best practices of non-Western states such as India. What precisely this entails, and what specific steps must be undertaken will be explored in detail during the seminar.
**Friday May 29, Morning Session (9.30am – 12.30pm)**

**A Theological Articulation of Secularity**

Naser Ghobadzadeh, Institute for Social Justice, ACU

The resurgence of religion over the last few decades of the 20th century posed a formative challenge to the secularisation thesis. In direct conflict with the secularism, it led to the aspiration to establish an Islamic state in many parts of the Muslim world. However, in the light of the lived experiences of the Islamic state, one may argue that an Islamic state is detrimental to religion, necessitating an alternative conceptualisation of state-religion relations. In order to characterise an alternative politico-religious discourse, the seemingly oxymoronic term “religious secularity” is offered, by which I mean the Islamic quest for the emancipation of religion from state. Religious stimulation is the distinguishing feature of this discourse. Rather than being political theorists, advocates of this secularity are religious scholars. Their articulation is not only engendered by religious concerns: religious methods and sources are also employed to argue for secularity. In this conceptualisation, the religion-secularity relationship is not antithetical but proposes a theoretical shifting away from the religion-secularism dichotomy.

Respondents: Rajeev Bhargava, Centre for Study of Developing Societies and ISJ/ACU, Akeel Bilgrami, Columbia University and ISJ/ACU

---

**Thursday May 28, Afternoon Session (1.30pm - 4.30pm)**

**Secularism, Liberalism, and Identity**

Akeel Bilgrami, Columbia University and Institute for Social Justice, ACU

This seminar will seek to do two things. First to characterise the notion of identity as it affects politics (as in identity politics) and to explore exactly why liberalism finds it so hard to cope with the concept of identity and the mobilisations around it. The idea will be to steer past the familiar disputes between liberalism and communitarianism and find the deeper issues underlying them in the moral psychology of politics. And second, to genealogically clarify the meaning and significance of the concept of the secular and the doctrine of secularism and conclude with a few brief philosophical and historical remarks about their relation to multiculturalism.