Why So Secular?: An Analysis of Secularism in Practice

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Why So Secular?

I would like to start tonight by quoting the Pledge of Allegiance: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America; and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” That second phrase, “under God,” has caused an amazing amount of controversy in a nation that enshrines separation of church and state in the first amendment to the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment, in contrast, reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…” These two statements, the Pledge of Allegiance which mentions God and is spoken in every public school classroom, and the First Amendment which separates religion from the state, set up a tension in American political and civil life that I would like to untangle tonight.

However, before I begin discussing religion in America I want to jump briefly to South Asia. In 2007, the deputy prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, denied that his country was secularizing as a result of recent reforms. I mention this because I find his definition of secularism worth interrogating. In his words, secularism “by the Western definition means separation of the Islamic principles in the way we govern a country” (Hashemi, 2009, p. 146). In essence, he is claiming that secularism means denying all religious morals or guidelines when operating a state. Is this really the Western definition of secularism though—that religious values must be kept out of state governing? I will argue this is not the case and there are rather two distinct understandings of secularism in the West with very different implications.

I think I can assume that most people in this room grew up with the idea of separation of church and state as a fundamental foundation of American society, just as many of us grew up saying the Pledge of Allegiance every day in school. But separation of church and state comes in many different manifestations. What I will call the French model of secularism envisions the state’s duty as keeping the practice of religion out of public life altogether, unlike the American model, which seeks merely to prevent organized religion from influencing politics. In a nutshell, this difference emerged from each country’s unique history. France’s revolution was partly precipitated on “freedom from belief”—freedom the influence and abuse of the church—whereas early Americans fled to the New World for the “freedom to believe” (Berger, Davis, & Fokas, 2008, p. 28). Freedom from belief and freedom to believe: two very different ideas of separation, even though both the French and the American governments today are rightly considered secular.

So why is this distinction between the American and the French models of secularism so important? As a comparative example, the role of religion in politics is increasingly divisive in much of the Middle East, especially in post-Arab Spring states that are holding free elections for the first time in recent memory. Some Islamist groups, such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia’s al-Nahda Party, control their parliaments for the first time. Many American media and political outlets seem to suggest this trend is inherently bad, yet I believe Islam’s sudden prominence in politics is creating a healthy debate there about the role of religion in the state.

Given the political upheavals in the Middle East, I would like to create a debate about which form of secularism is healthier for society—American society, I should probably add. As with many philosophical debates, I believe there is no “correct” answer, although I expect most of us here will defend America’s existing model, which is what I will be doing. However, this debate could unlock important ways in which we comprehend the interweaving of religion and
politics, especially in this age of fear of Islamic fundamentalism, which in some cases has led to fear of Islam itself. I believe that Americans misunderstand how secularism actually works, which accounts for some of the unfortunate attacks against Islam that we have seen in the last couple of years, most notably Oklahoma’s banning of sharia law. And occasionally, we Americans are confused as to whether we have a secular state at all.

For anyone watching the news, it can be hard to keep track of where the United States stands in relation to secularism. This may be hard to believe at a relatively nonreligious place like Franklin & Marshall College, but Americans are very religious. Very. CNN’s Belief Blog (Greene & Marrapodi, 2010) claims the United States “is more devout than Iran (at least in terms of worship service attendance).” About 40% of Americans describe themselves as regularly attending church, a statistic that is much higher than in Western Europe (Berger, Davie, & Fokas, 2008, p. 42). Clearly, religious practice and community is integral to many Americans’ daily lives.

On the one hand, Americans strongly oppose the influence of any religion that is not our own, mostly Christianity. Let us not forget the hysteria over sharia law’s so-called invasion a few years ago, culminating in Oklahoma’s attempt to ban sharia law via referendum in 2010. America’s aversion to Islamic law, while mostly based on bigotry and ignorance, is coached in terms of separation of church and state. Associate professor of law Asifa Quraishi-Landes at the University of Wisconsin (2011) argues that some Americans are convinced that any Muslims elected to public office would be “part of a stealth or civilizational jihad arm of the sharia conspiracy to take over the country” (p. 20).

And unfortunately, it’s easy to guess why some people might think this. On the front page of Fox News’s website section devoted to the topic of sharia law, I found a video segment in which the news anchor quotes a 10-year old survey where 8% of American Muslims want to establish sharia law in the United States; she conveniently ignores the 65% of American Muslims in the survey who disagree and the 13% who responded “I don’t know” (Sharia Law, 2011). On the other hand, evangelical Protestants, which make up about a quarter of Americans, regularly declare America a “Christian nation” and fight to introduce religious references into the public space; some of the most fundamentalist Christians, who grew politically influential in the 1980s and 1990s with Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority and in the 1994 Republican takeover of Congress, “argue that U.S. laws should reflect biblical teachings” (Wilcox & Potolicchio, 2010, p. 390). So before we blame Muslims for their excessive religiosity, we should start examining trends within American Christianity first.

Americans routinely ask for legal accommodations for their own religions. When courts consider religious law in their rulings, most of those cases involve issues of dress, marriage, and inheritance—and even so religious challenges are not always upheld. Judges balance rights against each other, and as Quraishi-Landes (2011) notes there is no “automatic trumping of religious practice by secular law or vice versa” (p. 22). After all, this is the American version of secularism—separation of church and state with a healthy appreciation for religion.
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Comparative Secularism

A comparative look at other countries could help clarify secularism (or non-secularism) in practice. France’s 2004 secularity law is a good case study of how France’s secularism works. France, just to note, has one of the least religious populations in Europe—around 4% regularly attend church (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 9). However, France is about 8% Muslim, and the issue of Islamic headscarves is increasingly controversial. As I mentioned earlier, France’s brand of secularism denies religious expression—and really multiculturalism of any type—in the public sphere in favor of a unifying “Frenchness.” In 2004, a law was passed banning the wearing of religious symbols in public schools, including Judeo-Christian symbols. This law, which many opponents accused of targeting Muslims, nevertheless could not have passed in the United States; it would be seen here as an infringement on benign religious expression. In France, however, secularism is seen as being undermined if any amount of religion intrudes on the public space (Adelman, 2008, 45-6).

Moving southeastward, Turkey provides a good example of the tension between secularism and religion in the Muslim world. Turkey’s population is almost completely Muslim yet its state was founded and continues to be based on an extreme model of secularism—France’s model. After the Ottoman Empire crumbled in 1923, the new Turkish government embarked on a program of what Nader Hashemi (2009) calls a “militantly antireligious version of secularism” (p. 155). Displays of religion were banned from public life and the Arabic alphabet was even exchanged for the Latin alphabet. Although religious parties have formed in Turkey, they were either barred from politics or failed to win elections until 2002. Since then, the Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party, or the AKP, has controlled Turkey’s national assembly and this has challenged the strict secularism upon which Turkey’s system was founded.

Even so, the AKP has sought to rule within the limits of secularism. In other words, Turkey’s political arena is beginning to shift from a French secularism to an American secularism, and I believe this is a healthy development for Turkey. To quote the book Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme of Variations (Berger, Davie, & Fokas, 2008), the form of secularism that existed prior to the AKP’s victory was “running the risk of violating, rather than protecting, the place of the active Muslim constituency in the democratic process” (p. 136). Turkey is 99% Muslim, a majority of women wear headscarves, and the political elite are no longer as secular as they once were—so banning any religious expression in the government or public services, I believe, does an injustice to the daily lives of ordinary Turks.

In fact, regimes in Muslim-majority states need to have some semblance of religious legitimacy or else they will not survive (Claessen, 2010, p. 60). Many of the autocrats overthrown by the Arab Spring revolutions used Islamic rhetoric to legitimize their rule, even while implementing secularization policies. In Tunisia, both post-independence presidents proclaimed themselves the protectors and modernizers of Islam even as they dismantled traditional clerical infrastructure and denied Islamic parties a role in politics (Shahin, 1997, p. 37). In Egypt, Anwar Sadat used Islam to boost his legitimacy as an alternative to former President Nasser’s discredited Arab nationalism. Even Qaddafi in Libya used Islamic rhetoric in an attempt to legitimize his rule, although his political ideology was almost unrecognizable as Islam.
Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, tension between political Islam and secularism exists, especially in countries that have a history of state-imposed secularism with a population that is either partly or mostly religious in their private lives. Obviously the situation there is much more polarized than in America, but I think comparing the debate within the Middle East and within America is useful. In fact, I think the American situation is in some ways closer to that of secularized Middle Eastern countries than it is to Europe—in both the United States and North Africa you see similar debates over the role religion should play in the state.

**General Discussion**

So now that I’ve discussed the relationship between religion and state in a comparative context, I want to turn back to the issue of secularism in America. After examining other countries’ responses to religion, I have concluded that France’s model definitely does not fit the United States because, like in Turkey, it would unfairly limit religious expression of the large number of Americans who practice a religion. And of course making Christianity the official U.S. religion is out of the question.

Our constitution is secular—there is no mention of God or any Divine Creator in the text. This was very controversial from the moment the document was introduced to the public. Regardless of the Founders’ personal beliefs, they built a government in which established religion had no role in national politics.

However, religious belief is a choice many Americans have selected to follow, and for many it guides their fundamental decisions. Furthermore, church attendance has been found to correlate with high civic involvement. Before coming to college, the only people I’d known to go on humanitarian trips went with their Christian youth groups. Maybe that’s just where I grew up, but maybe not. Political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell (2010) report in their book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* that frequent churchgoers are more likely to do the following: give money to a charity; do volunteer work for a charity; give money to a homeless person; give excess change back to a shop clerk; donate blood; help someone outside their own household with housework; spend time with someone who is “a bit down;” allow a stranger to cut in front of them in line; offer a seat to a stranger; and help someone find a job (pp. 451-52). Putnam and Campbell allow that the study they cite does not prove causation, only correlation, between religiosity and generosity, but it nevertheless positions churches as an integral social force in society.

On the other hand, let us consider why religion might be bad for America. This occurs when it impinges on state territory. Religion and politics are an explosive mix on issues like evolution versus creationism, health care, homosexuality, and, even more than it used to be, abortion. The problem is that people do not consider these issues specifically religious, even if the debates are often coached in religious language; instead, they are considered moral issues.

At the same time, politics is increasingly polarized between the secular left and the religious right, and primary politics is reinforcing this trend. Presidents swear the oath of office
with their hand on the Bible, although this is not constitutionally required; the government sponsors chaplains for the military and gives aid to religious hospitals. We say the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools and at every baseball game we sing “God Bless America.” As someone who is not Christian, I am bothered by some of this, but at the same time I cannot imagine an America where religion does not rear its head in everyday life.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I want to leave you all with a final question—do we want religion completely out of the state? Should politicians excise all religious references from their speeches and lives? Does religion add any value to politics? Although I am not religious myself, I know many people for whom religion forms the fundamental basis of their moral decisions, and frankly it’s a bit hard for me to fathom American politics nowadays without the influence of Christianity. Our nation is so diverse that opinions on almost any issue will be influenced by one’s religious beliefs. Is this a bad thing? I’ve had my say—now I turn this debate over to you.

**References**


