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# Canadian American Research Series

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# PUBLIC OPINION AND SUPPORT FOR THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE IN THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE

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## ABSTRACT

It is now fashionable to criticize the secularization thesis by pointing to the resurgence of religion and religious conflict in the contemporary world. Most critics accept that the thesis is accurate for Europe, but then go on to claim that there is now a European "exceptionalism" and so deny its validity for the rest of the world. They often cite the supposed resurgence in the power and influence of religion over society and politics in the United States since the 1970s to make their case. This argument forms the basis for the myth of a growing "Transatlantic divide" between "secular Europe" and "religious America". Though the rhetoric of American politics and public life indeed has changed and there is more "God talk", the actual situation in law and on the ground in society among public opinion has not mirrored this change.

Recent polling data is presented that refutes the 'myth' of a divide between the U.S. and Europe on the principle of the secular state. In fact, there is evidence of a trend towards convergence and political consensus in western public opinion. Although some variations in national cultures resulting from the different religious and political histories persist, a common ('secular') trend towards public acceptance of political secularism and a marked preference for the concept of the "separation of church and state" can be observed. The Enlightenment belief that religion should be distrusted and divorced as much as possible from government activity has now spread well beyond the U.S. and France and is currently the overwhelming consensus among public opinion in the U.K, Germany, Spain and Italy too. This "anti-clerical" consensus now extends to Catholic public opinion across all these countries.

The idea of separating the institutions of the state, government and public life from the direct involvement and influence of organized religion arose during the Enlightenment. It became a feasible proposition as a result of the two great revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In fact the American and French revolutions produced two intellectual and constitutional traditions of secularism and the secular state – a "soft secularism" and a "hard secularism". Canadians, of course, rejected both these revolutions and so historically they are heirs to the Lockean tradition of religious toleration rather than of secularism *per se*.

The secularism model, associated with the French Jacobin tradition, was suspicious of and antagonistic to religion and its influence on the state and society. This situation arose from the historical reality of the *ancien régime* and the revolutionary experience in France, which involved a joint struggle against despotism and religion – the monarchy, and the Roman Catholic Church. It produced a political construction that continues under the regime of *laïcité* bound up with *La Loi de 1905*.

This hostile attitude towards religion has only a marginal place in American public life. The reason, of course, is that the United States was heir to the Protestant heritage of the Reformation, whereby religious individualism and autonomy predated any concept of political autonomy. The result was that the Americans adopted a more moderate approach, characterized by indifference towards religion or encouragement of religious pluralism as promoted by the Deists and Liberal Protestants of the early republic. In addition and paradoxically, because of the deeply religious nature of a significant proportion of the American public, pure pragmatism suggests that they require a secularist state and public life. Firmly held but divergent religious beliefs and ties need a neutral

playing field. Today, as much as in 1790, if there is to be an American nation and republic, there cannot be a national church or religion.

However, there is a paradox to this situation. The "hard" secular tradition of France, later adopted by Turkey, which advocates the privatization of religion, is actually much more involved with organizing and supervising religion than is the United States. This regulatory tendency was even truer of the anti-religious and totalitarian Communist states. By contrast, the United States is neutral regarding religion, but this remains a unique position. In fact, a recent international analysis of the separation of religion and state (SRAS) found that "using strict interpretation... – no state support for religion and no state restrictions on religion – no state has full SRAS except the United States" (Fox, 2006).

It is theoretically possible for a state to be religious and its population to be secularized and conversely for the state to be secular and the population largely religious (Demareth, 2001). However, over the long haul in a democracy, there is a logical tendency for the superstructure and the substructure to align. Thus, in the complex world of modern western democracies, we can observe the process of secularization in nations on at least two major levels (Kosmin, 2007). One is the secularization of national institutions and structures, such as the organs of the state and government. The other level is the secularization of society – the secularization of human consciousness that leads to increased levels of secularity in belief, behavior and belonging among the populace. In a polity where popular sovereignty is acknowledged, change (or reform) at the institutional level happens as a result of political forces emanating from developments in society that are reflected in public opinion and attitudes.

It is now fashionable to criticize the secularization thesis by pointing to the resurgence of religion and religious conflict in the contemporary world. Most critics accept that the thesis is accurate for Europe, but then go on to claim that there is now a European "exceptionalism", and so deny its validity for the rest of the world. They often cite the supposed resurgence in power and influence of religion over society and politics in the United States since the 1970s to make their case (Westerlund, 1996). This forms the basis for the myth of a growing "Transatlantic divide" between "secular Europe" and "religious America". Though the rhetoric of American politics and public life indeed has changed and there is more "God talk", the actual situation in law and on the ground in society has not mirrored this change. Key indicators such as identification with religion,

membership of congregations and attendance at worship services have all declined during the past two decades (Kosmin and Keysar, 2006). The Sunday blue laws restricting economic activities as well as prohibitions against gambling have been abolished in most states. Abortion, contraception and pornography are available. Prayer in public school remains banned. Homosexuality is no longer a crime and is largely accommodated in law and society.

One reason for popular misconceptions of current reality in America is the trend for the media to become fixated on the exotic and unusual occurrences as well as the colorful rhetoric of extremists of all types. As an antidote to "current myths", data will be presented to demonstrate that the often claimed politico-cultural divide between Americans and Europeans is not as wide or as deep as it is often believed.

In order to fully appreciate or measure the level of secularization of the state, it is necessary to distinguish not only the work of the three traditional functions of government – the legislature, executive and judiciary – but also three levels in public life and political action. The first level is the state and its permanent structures and constitutional arrangements including its historic legacies and fictions such as its symbols. It needs to be considered separately from the apparatus of government and the daily administration of public services by temporary office-holders. In turn, government needs to be differentiated from the realm of political parties, campaigns and episodic elections. Of course, there are overlaps and confluences of personnel and activities. In a functioning democracy however, the various levels of public life are not a single playing field. This realization is crucial for a proper understanding and appreciation of the social survey data presented here.

The key question we will examine is: "do you think that religious leaders should or should not try to influence government decisions?" This question could be interpreted or understood in a number of ways. However, it clearly relates to the governmental decision making process and so to public policy issues. Of course,

there is a link between legislation and government actions. However, the question is not about the relationship of religion to the state *per se*, as for example whether thirteen bishops of the Church of England should maintain their place in the House of Lords, the upper chamber of the UK Parliament. Nor is it a direct question about the legitimacy of religiously based parties such as the Christian Democrats of Germany. Of course, in reality there are linkages, so the supporters of both the aforementioned positions are very likely to respond positively to this question.

It is now fashionable to criticize the secularization thesis by pointing to the resurgence of religion and religious conflict in the contemporary world. Most critics accept that the thesis is accurate for Europe, but then go on to claim that there is now a European "exceptionalism", and so deny its validity for the rest of the world.

**Table 1: Political secularization**

Do you think that religious leaders should or should not try to influence government decisions?

	US	France	Spain	Italy	UK	Germany
Should Not	61	63	76	75	77	85
Should	37	30	17	20	20	12
Unsure	2	7	7	5	3	3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

The AP/IPSOS survey was conducted in May 2005. In each country, approximately 1000 people were surveyed and there was a margin of error of  $\pm 3\%$ .

The data are drawn from an AP/IPSOS international poll in 2005. They cover representative national samples of five major western European nations – Spain, France, Italy, UK and Germany along with the United States. France, Spain and Italy have strong cultural ties in the form of Romance languages and a common Catholic legacy and tradition. In former times the other states would have been described as “northern and Protestant” in culture.

At first glance, the results in Table 1 seem to validate the thesis that religion has lost much of its social significance as well as its authority (Wilson, 1966). The overall pattern of response shows that a majority in every country clearly rejects the interference of religious leaders in the decisions of democratically elected governments and so adopts what can be considered to be a “hard” secular position. The U.S. and France are clearly the two polarities in terms of this “political secularization index”. The legacy of their different revolutionary traditions between “soft” and “hard” secularism which was referred to earlier seems to have endured. Three times as many American as French provide positive pro-religious responses towards religious intrusion or involvement in government policies. In contrast, the level of antagonism to clerical intrusion into public life and so towards the power and authority of organized religion is significantly higher in France.

However, the Europeans are by no means a homogeneous group. The Italians are much closer to the Americans than they are to the other Europeans. It is the British, Spanish and Germans who are most closely aligned on this issue, though closer examination shows that their actual scores are nearer to the French than to the Americans and Italians. The findings suggest that public opinion in the major states of EU is not yet homogeneous with regards to the process of secularization at the level of government.

There is another possible explanation of these results. Rather than reflecting difference in secular-religious outlook, the data could well reflect variations in political culture. In the U.S., “lobbying” the administration and especially legislatures is a legitimate part of the political system. This system is much less formalized and acceptable in Europe and especially France with its *dirigiste* approach. In fact, it could be argued that the negative response to this question is essentially an anti-democratic one. Why should religious leaders be denied the right of advocacy on questions of the day and be more restricted than leaders of other civic or voluntary institutions from participating in politics? Separation of formal ties between religion and the state and constraints on religious hegemony need not be extended to legitimate democratic interventions. The fact is that historical experience is important here. Religion is

associated with clerical power and authority. It is more feared and distrusted because of its past dominance over the state. The general verdict on political intervention by clerical power and authority is negative. Moreover, the historical memory of religious authoritarianism is much stronger and more recent in Europe than the United States. In Spain, it only disappeared with the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975.

One could look in another direction to explain the patterns in Table 1, towards national differences in current levels of religiosity and secularity. This argument assumes that national differences in the extent or pace of secularization in the public/civic realm merely reflect those at the personal/individual level across the populations of the various countries. The problem here is that measuring “religion” is not as simple as it might appear at first sight. The phenomenon has a variety of aspects to it – belonging, belief, behavior – on both the individual and societal levels. No single question fully covers this complexity of social reality and meaning. However, one obvious place to start to look for an explanation of the results in Chart 1 is the religious profile of these countries.

Table 2 provides the overall religious profile of each country using the AP/IPSOS survey data for 2005 with the exception of the U.S., where I have used the American Religious Identification Survey 2001 data and the UK, where I have used the 2001 national census results.

**Table 2: Religious composition**

	US	France	Spain	Italy	UK	Germany
Christians	77	93	81	64	72	74
Other Religions	4	1	1	5	5	7
No Religion	14	5	17	31	16	19
Refused / Unsure	5	1	1	–	7	–
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

The table shows that at the superficial level of nominal religious identification the various societies show the commonalities of a joint heritage of Christianity whose main challenger is No Religion rather than any other form of religion. The numbers do not suggest inter-continental polarization. In fact, there are remarkable similarities in the national scores on the proportions of self-identifying Christians and Nones (self-identifying as of no religion) between the results for the U.S., U.K. and France. Italy and Spain are the most Christian nations with Germany the least Christian. On the obverse indicator, the “secularization of loyalties and ties”, Italy seems to be the anomaly while Germany is where it is most developed, presumably largely as a result of the cultural legacy of the anti-religious policies of the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

One observation that could be made in the context of this discussion is that we are dealing here with large complex highly differentiated societies with tens of millions of inhabitants so that it is difficult to tease out attitudinal and cultural differences from structural differences. The religious composition data presented in Table 2 conflated the two main Christian traditions of the West, Catholicism and Protestantism. A major explanatory argument for the pattern

of American responses to the various questions examined here could well fix on the uniqueness not of the American constitutional system, but on its unique heritage of sectarian and denominational Protestantism. What we are really observing is the socio-political outcome of theological beliefs. To refute this argument and to prove the salience of national political cultures, we need some sort of control group. Fortunately, the survey data provides this. One way to test whether the pattern of responses in Table 1 reflects the legacy of religious difference independent of national political traditions, is to focus analysis just on the Catholic respondents across these nations.

The self-identifying Catholic proportion of the national samples varies greatly as Table 3A demonstrates. Nevertheless, the responses to the question in row 1 of Table 3B are almost a direct replica of row 1 in Table 1. American Catholics are 6 percent less likely than Americans as a whole to want religious intrusion into government decision making. This slight difference may relate to fears that such 'lobbying' would mean empowering Evangelical Protestantism. As regards to Catholic opinion versus national opinion overall, it is the small minority of British Catholics that differs most from the overall national consensus. They are 10 points "less secularized" than the U.K. as a whole but given the small size of the sub-sample, this is hardly statistically significant. Interestingly in Italy, Spain, Germany and France, the difference in scores between Tables 1 and 3 is less than 2 percentage points. The data suggest that French Catholics now subscribe to the "anti-clericalist", national political culture and *laïcité* as much as do other Frenchmen.

**Table 3: Catholic opinion**

A. Percentage of population that is Catholic

24	92	80	28	10	71
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B. Do you think that religious leaders should or should not try to influence government decisions?

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Should	31	32	19	22	30	13
Should Not	68	62	73	75	66	84
Unsure	1	6	8	3	4	3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

It is possible to argue in theory that neither separation of religion from the state nor the privatization and state supervision of religion necessarily lead to the undermining of the public acceptance or legitimacy of religious intrusions into politics. Nevertheless, the survey findings in Table 1 suggest that in the six countries analyzed here, the field of governance is treated as a single system so that its various levels are often conflated in the minds of the public and in the commentary offered by the media on social surveys and trends. However, despite these reservations, the data presented in the tables are robust enough to support some important conclusions. Although some variations in national cultures resulting from the different religious and political histories persist, a common ('secular') trend towards public acceptance of political secularism and a marked preference for the concept of the "separation of church and state" can be observed. The Enlightenment belief that religion should be

distrusted and divorced as much as possible from government activity has now spread well beyond the U.S. and France and is currently the overwhelming consensus among public opinion in the U.K, Germany, Spain and Italy too. That this "anti-clerical" consensus now extends to Catholic public opinion is also remarkable.

From a historical perspective, such evidence of a trend towards convergence and political consensus in western public opinion would have been considered truly amazing seventy years ago on the eve of World War II. Political secularism seems a user friendly political construction. It is adaptable and can come in both hard and soft forms. These attributes probably help to enhance its public appeal and acceptability today in the West.

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