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978-0-521-74134-7 - Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey

Ahmet T. Kuru

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## Introduction

In the aftermath of the cold war, religion is playing an increasing role in politics across the globe. This trend has been a serious challenge to political scientists, who have generally left studies on religion and politics to legal scholars, philosophers, and historians.<sup>1</sup> Especially in the United States, this issue is often confined to the “true meaning” of the First Amendment or the correlation between religious affiliations and voting preferences. Recently, a group of political scientists have conducted comparative analyses of state-religion relations, although their number is still limited.<sup>2</sup> In addition to religion’s rising importance in world politics, the decline of two old impediments has been influential in this change.

The first impediment that distracted many political scientists from taking religion seriously was secularization theory. According to this theory, religion is a “traditional” phenomenon, which will eventually be marginalized by the modernization process, including industrialization, urbanization, and mass education.<sup>3</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Wald and Clyde Wilcox analyzed the flagship journal of political science, *American Political Science Review (APSR)*. From 1906 to 2006, the *APSR* published only twenty-one articles “with a religious term in the title” and “strongly concerned with religion.” Public law and political philosophy were the subfields that supplied about 80% of these articles. Wald and Wilcox 2006, 523–5.

<sup>2</sup> Rare examples of comparative political analysis include Gill 1998; Monsma and Soper 1997; Fetzner and Soper 2005; Jacobsohn 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce 2002.

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Inglehart argue that economic growth, socioeconomic equality, and human development result in long-term changes in existential security, leading to the erosion of religious values, beliefs, and practices. In short, religion is doomed to wither away in developed societies.<sup>4</sup> The number of secularization theory's critics, however, is increasing. A competing theory is the religious market approach of Rodney Stark, Laurence Iannaccone, and Anthony Gill. They stress that individuals' religious demands do not decline in response to the so-called secularization process. Instead, religious participation changes by the quality of the supply of "churches."<sup>5</sup> Other critics give credit to the valid parts of secularization theory. Jose Casanova stresses that the theory has failed in its predictions of (1) the decline of religion in terms of loss of faith and a decrease in religious participation and (2) the individualization of religion, with its waning public importance. The only valid part is its emphasis on the declining dominance of religion over other spheres, such as the political, economic, and scientific.<sup>6</sup> According to Peter Berger, secularization theory has only two valid explanations. One concerns the secularization of European societies regarding their declining religious beliefs and participation. The other details the emergence of a global secular elite, who share a worldwide secular way of life, removed from local traditions.<sup>7</sup> In sum, social scientists have become less bound by the secularization theory and more aware of religion's significant public role.

The second source of distraction was the normative argument that religion should not play a substantial public role in a modern democratic polity. Philosophers such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas initially required that a public discourse be secular.<sup>8</sup> They argued that people should participate in democratic deliberation by putting aside their religious doctrines, which impeded consensus due to their

<sup>4</sup> Norris and Inglehart 2004. See Kuru 2005b.

<sup>5</sup> According to this approach, state regulation of religion makes religious markets inefficient and decreases religious participation (e.g., in Western Europe), whereas deregulation promotes pluralistic and competitive religious markets that efficiently satisfy diverse religious tastes and increase religious participation (e.g., in the United States). Stark and Finke 2000; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Gill 1999; Young 1996. For a significant critique, see Norris and Inglehart 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Casanova 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Berger 1999, 10–12.

<sup>8</sup> Rawls 1971; Habermas 1999; Habermas 1998.

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dogmatic aspects. Some of these philosophers later rethought the role of religion in the public sphere. Rawls stressed that political liberalism should not be a comprehensive doctrine that challenged secular or religious worldviews.<sup>9</sup> He developed the concept of “overlapping consensus,” which may open spaces to religious views in public debates.<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor went beyond Rawls by reinterpreting “overlapping consensus” as a way of coexistence for secular and religious discourses.<sup>11</sup>

Other thinkers have emphasized that religious discourses are not different from ideological arguments and, therefore, welcome the public sphere. Alfred Stepan emphasizes that all religions are “multivocal”; they may have both democratic and authoritarian interpretations. For Stepan, the *sine qua non* for democracy is not secularism but “twin tolerations” between the state and religions, as indicated by the presence of established churches in several Western European democracies.<sup>12</sup> Casanova points out how religions have positively contributed to the public life by defending traditional values, questioning states and markets, and protecting the common good against individualist theories.<sup>13</sup> The exclusion of religion from public debates is particularly problematic for political theorists, such as Nancy Fraser, who criticize the idea of a monolithic public sphere, which would become exclusionary at the expense of various religious, ethnic, and social groups. For Fraser, a truly democratic society should have room for multiple, alternative, and competing public spheres, which allow for cultural diversity.<sup>14</sup> In sum, these scholars emphasize that it is normal for religion and politics to interact. Therefore, the proper question for the political scientists is “*how* religion and politics interact, not *whether* they should.”<sup>15</sup>

Even if certain political scientists are not influenced by secularization theory or by a normative view against public religion, they may still avoid making a comparative analysis of state-religion relations for two reasons. First, such an analysis is more difficult than, for example, a comparative economic study because of the lack of consistent

<sup>9</sup> Rawls 1996. See also Habermas 2006; Habermas 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Dombrowski 2001; March 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Stepan 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Casanova 1994, 228–9.

<sup>14</sup> Fraser 1997, 69–98.

<sup>15</sup> Cochran 1998, xiv (emphasis in original).

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terminology. Among the three cases that I picked, the United States, France, and Turkey, only France is unanimously defined as a secular state. A major reason for the disagreement over the United States is its constitution, which does not literally include the concepts of “secular state” or “separation [of church and state].” Turkey’s problem of definition is the state’s control over Islam, which sounds odd for a secular state. I explain these puzzles throughout the book.

The second hurdle is the idea that each country has its unique conditions of state-religion relations, which makes a comparative analysis difficult.<sup>16</sup> This problem is particularly valid for my cases because the United States, France, and Turkey are largely viewed as exceptional countries. America is perceived as “exceptional” because it is the only “Western” society with constantly vibrant church participation. It would be redundant to say that France is seen as exceptional. One could even say that “French” is synonymous with “exceptional.”<sup>17</sup> France is the only Western European country that explicitly uses the term *secular republic* in its constitution. Finally, Turkey is regarded as an exception by being both Muslim and Western – a “torn country” à la Huntington.<sup>18</sup> Despite these so-called exceptions, there are important similarities among the three cases to warrant comparison.<sup>19</sup> The term *secularism* as defined in this book captures these similarities, while still highlighting the differences among them. Such a comparison has significant, generalizable consequences for the study of religion and politics. With its comparative politics perspective, the book differs from sociological works on societal and individual religiosity,<sup>20</sup> philosophical works on secularism as a worldview,<sup>21</sup> critical works on the deconstruction of secularism as a discourse and as power relations,<sup>22</sup> and anthropological works on secularism as an everyday practice.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Mardin 1995.

<sup>17</sup> “L’exception française: mythe ou réalité?” *Sciences humaines*, no. 46, September–November 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Huntington 1993, 42–3.

<sup>19</sup> The French Council of State issued a report on secularism in 2004. The only two non-EU countries analyzed in the report are the United States and Turkey. Conseil d’Etat 2004, 377–82.

<sup>20</sup> Casanova 1994; Norris and Inglehart 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Asad 2003; Scott 2007; Hurd 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Navaro-Yashin 2002; Özyürek 2006.

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The following theoretical chapter summarizes main puzzles and arguments, discusses case selection, explores the theoretical framework and its alternatives, explains the methodological tools and data sources, and defines relevant terminology. Then, two chapters focus on each of the three cases. One chapter is devoted to (1) current state policies toward religion, particularly in education, and (2) how ideological struggles shape the policy-making process. The second chapter in each set examines the historical origin and trajectory of current ideological conflicts. I counterintuitively chose to put the contemporary chapters before the historical ones because they explain both the dependent variables (policy trends toward religion) and explanatory variables (ideological dominance and struggles). The historical chapters then trace the genealogy of ideological dominance using an historical variable (*ancien régime* based on the marriage between monarchy and hegemonic religion). The conclusion includes a comparative review of the empirical chapters and their generalizable results.

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## I

## Analyzing Secularism

*History, Ideology, and Policy*

On December 11, 2003, the Stasi Commission, including twenty French academics and social activists, submitted a report on secularism to President Jacques Chirac. The French executive and legislators embraced the commission's recommendation of a law to prohibit students' religious symbols in public schools. Although the primary target of the law was Muslim headscarves, it also included "large" Christian crosses, Jewish kippa, and Sikh turbans. A week after the Stasi Report, the U.S. Department of State released its "2003 Report on International Religious Freedom." At the accompanying press conference, Ambassador John Hanford answered the following questions:

**Question:** What was your reaction to President Chirac's headscarf ban...?

**Ambassador:** [A] fundamental principle of religious freedom that we work for in many countries of the world, including on this very issue of headscarves, is that all persons should be able to practice their religion and their beliefs peacefully without government interference.... President Chirac is concerned to maintain France's principle of secularism and he wants that, as I think he said, not to be negotiable. Well, of course, our hope is religious freedom will be a non-negotiable as well. One Muslim leader said this is a secularism that excludes too much.... [A] number of countries ... restrict headscarves ... where people are wearing these with no provocation, simply as a manifestation of their own heartfelt beliefs, that we don't see where this causes division among peoples.

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**Question:** You're referring to Turkey, yes?**Ambassador:** Turkey would be another country, yes.<sup>1</sup>

As the ambassador stresses, there is a sharp policy distinction among the United States, which allows students to display religious symbols; France, which bans such symbols in public schools; and Turkey, which prohibits them in all educational institutions, both public and private, schools and universities. What is puzzling about these three states is that although each has a different policy on student displays of religious symbols, they all are “secular states” regarding two main characteristics: (1) their legislative and judicial processes are secular in the sense of being out of institutional religious control, and (2) they constitutionally declare neutrality toward religions; they establish neither an official religion nor atheism.<sup>2</sup> Other states have established religious laws and courts as the basis of their legislative and judicial systems (“religious states”), recognized an official religion (“states with an established religion”), or shown an official hostility toward religions generally by establishing atheism (“antireligious states”).<sup>3</sup> Table 1 differentiates among these four sorts of states in terms of their relationships to religion.<sup>4</sup>

Although they are secular states, the United States, France, and Turkey have been deeply concerned with religion and have engaged it on many fronts. The rules of these three states regarding the wearing of headscarves reflect a broad array of policy differences among them.<sup>5</sup> Historical and contemporary debates on secularism in all these three

<sup>1</sup> “Release of the 2003 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom,” December 18, 2003, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/27404pf.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> While defining a secular state, some scholars emphasize (1) separation of church/mosque and state, and (2) religious freedom. See Smith 1999, esp. 178–83. A complete separation is neither constitutionally declared nor a practical issue in many secular states. Religious freedom is both constitutionally declared and practical; yet, it is not necessary or sufficient to be secular for a state to provide religious freedom.

<sup>3</sup> By religion, I imply a set of beliefs and practices that refer to a supernatural being, generally God. In this definition, neither atheism nor ideologies like Marxism are a religion.

<sup>4</sup> For similar typologies, see Wood 1998, 81–8; Madeley 2003a; Durham 1996, 36.

<sup>5</sup> Several terms are used to define particular Muslim-woman dress. The following are English words and their French and Turkish equivalents, respectively. *Headscarf* (*foulard*; *başörtüsü* or *türban*) implies a cloth worn around the head, while *veil* (*voile*; *peçe*) covers the face. *Veil* may also be used interchangeably with *hijab* (*hijab*; *tesettür*) to mean dressing modestly in general. *Chador* (*tchador*; *çarşaf*) is a black robe that covers the entire body from head to toe. See also Liederman 2000, 373–5, 380n16.

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[More information](#)8 *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion*TABLE 1. *Types of State-Religion Regimes*

	Religious State	State with an Established Religion	Secular State	Antireligious State
Legislature and Judiciary	Religion-based	Secular	Secular	Secular
The State toward Religions	Officially Favors One	Officially Favors One	Officially Favors None	Officially Hostile to All or Many
<i>Examples</i>	<i>Iran</i> <i>Saudi Arabia</i> <i>Vatican</i>	<i>Greece</i> <i>Denmark</i> <i>England</i>	<i>United States</i> <i>France</i> <i>Turkey</i>	<i>North Korea</i> <i>China</i> <i>Cuba</i>
Number in the World	12	60	120	5

*Source:* Appendix A.

cases have pointed to education as the main battlefield. State policies toward religion in schools are controversial because struggling groups try to shape the young generation's worldview and lifestyle. This study, therefore, focuses on six of the most publicly debated state policies on (1) student religious dress and symbols in public schools, (2) pledges recited in public schools, (3) private religious education, (4) religious instruction in public schools, (5) public funding of private religious schools, and (6) organized prayer in public schools.

Despite the dynamism of the policy formation process, states still follow distinct and relatively stable trajectories in their general policies toward religion. There is a sharp qualitative distinction between state policies toward religion in the United States and those in France and Turkey. In America, students are allowed to display religious symbols and recite the Pledge of Allegiance, which includes the statement "one nation, under God." In France and Turkey, however, the state pursues totally opposite policies on these two points. Even regarding other policy issues, there is a positive tone toward religion in the United States, in contrast to two other cases. Religious instruction in Turkish schools is directly related to the state's desire to control religion and the fact that private religious education is prohibited. Similarly, in France, the state funds religious private schools as long as these schools sign

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TABLE 2. *State Policies toward Religion in Schools*

	Ban on Religious Symbols in Public Schools	A Pledge Referring to God Recited in Public Schools	Ban on Private Religious Education	Religious Instruction in Public Schools	State Funding of Religious Private Schools	Ban on Organized Prayer in Public Schools
United States	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
France	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Turkey	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

a contract to accept certain state control over them. On the surface, the ban on the organized school prayer seems similar. Yet an in-depth analysis reveals a distinction. In France and Turkey, the main justification of the ban would be that the prayer contradicts the principle of secularism and the secular character of the public school. In the United States, however, an important rationale is that school prayer implies a “psychological coercion” over students with minority religious beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Table 2 compares my three cases regarding these six policies.

Beyond these specific policies in schools, the three cases also show two opposite attitudes toward religion in their public spheres. In the United States, there is clear, official, public visibility of religion, which is not the case in France or Turkey. “In God We Trust” appears on all American currency. Many official oaths, including the swearing-in of the president, customarily contain the statement “so help me God” and are often made by placing the left hand on a Bible. Sessions of the U.S. Congress begin with a prayer by a chaplain, and the sessions of the Supreme Court start with the invocation “God save the United States and this Honorable Court.” Such public religious discourses do not exist in Turkey or France.

These differences point to my central question: why are American state policies inclusionary toward public visibility of religion while policies in France and Turkey are largely exclusionary? Stated differently, the main dependent variable of this work is the variation of

<sup>6</sup> *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Santa Fe v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000).

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policies on religion, particularly the two opposite policy tendencies of three secular states.

STRUGGLING IDEOLOGIES: PASSIVE SECULARISM  
AND ASSERTIVE SECULARISM

I argue that state policies toward religion are the result of ideological struggles.<sup>7</sup> The main source of public policy making on religion in almost all antireligious states (such as North Korea, China, and Cuba) is diverse interpretations of the communist ideology, whereas in many religious states (such as Iran and Saudi Arabia) it is various understandings of Islamism.<sup>8</sup> Many states with established churches (such as Greece, Denmark, and England) lack the totalitarian ideologies like communism and Islamism. Yet they experience certain struggles between leftist and rightist groups to shape state policies on issues such as the elimination of religion from state identity cards, multiculturalism, and state neutrality toward all religions.<sup>9</sup>

Because the dominant ideology plays a crucial role in the formation of state policies, its change implies a substantial policy transformation. Two recent examples are post-Shah Iran and postcommunist Russia. Although the Iranian Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union had multiple causes,<sup>10</sup> ideological transformation marked their results, in terms of new patterns of policy orientations. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, Shia Islamism replaced the Shah's secularist ideology. This ideological rupture caused extensive policy repercussions on state-religion relations.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the elimination of the communist ideology in former Soviet republics led to major

<sup>7</sup> I deliberately use the term *ideology*, rather than the term *culture*. Culture is practical and habitual, which makes it more inconsistent and fuzzier than ideology. Ideology is a set of ideas related to consistent utopias, which makes it easier to recognize, categorize, and analyze. As Stephen Hanson emphasizes, ideologies are “formal, explicit, and relatively consistent” and “articulated by political elites,” whereas cultures are “informal, implicit, and relatively inconsistent” and “held by people within a given institutional setting.” Hanson 2003, 356. See also Scott 1999.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State 2007; Kindopp and Hamrin 2004; Hefner 2005; Al-Rasheed 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Liederman 2003, 296–7; Mouritsen 2006; Fetzer and Soper 2005, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Skocpol 1982; Solnick 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Arjomand 1988.