DİNLER TARİHİ ARAŞTIRMALARI - VI

SEKÜLERLEŞME VE DİNİ CANLANMA

SEMPOZYUM
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Secularism and its variants are terms much discussed today, paradoxically as a consequence of religion seeming to have become more pervasive and influential in public life and society worldwide. This situation poses a number of questions. First, a definitional one: What are the spheres of secularity and secularism? According to our understanding Secularity refers to individuals and their social and psychological characteristics and behavior while Secularism refers to the realm of social institutions.

Secularism is an attitude or outlook towards society and the contemporary world. It makes no metaphysical claims. It is not a distinct or complete belief system and is not directly concerned about ultimate truth, matters of faith or spirituality. Thus Secularism is not a personal attribute. Rather it involves collective behavior, organizations and legal constructs that reflect the institutional expressions of the secular or mundane, particularly in the political realm and the public life of a nation.

Forms of secularism can be expected to vary across societies in reaction to the local culture or religious environment in which they developed. This variation arises from the "historical baggage" that reflects the symbolic and cultural encoding of religious legacies in national public institutions and mentalities. Nevertheless, in ideological terms we can assert that secularism essentially involves the rejection of the primacy of religious authority in the affairs of this world. This process which is usually referred to as secularization is most evident in the West in the governmental or political realm where the outcome has meant the "desacralization of the state" (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994).

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 Age of Enlightenment. It became a feasible proposition as a result of the two great revolutions of the 18th 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". That 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 ancient regime 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 *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 in combination with its sectarianism and religious diversity, pure pragmatism suggests that Americans 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, results in the state actually being much more involved with organizing and supervising religion than is the “soft secularism” of the United States. This tendency is even truer of the anti-religious and totalitarian Communist states. The *reduction ad absurdum* of this policy is a recent law introduced by the State Administration for Religious Affairs of the People’s Republic of China “to institutionalize the management of reincarnation” of Buddhist monks in Tibet (*Newsweek*, Aug. 20, 2007 issue). By contrast the United States is neutral as regards religion but this remains a unique position. In fact a recent international analysis of 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 so exhibit low levels of secularity, or conversely for the state to be secular and the population largely religious (Demarest, 2002). 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, behaviour 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 the 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. This situation reflects the logjam created by a divided "50-50, red blue nation" where the intellectual elite, and much of the business elite, do not subscribe to the agenda of the religious right. In fact in the course of the "culture war" the reversals suffered by traditional religion and its claims have been manifold. There has been a measurable decline in religiosity and in religion's impact in the economic and social sphere. 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 and restrictions on 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. For example, civil unions of same sex couples are now recognized in several states.

In the arena of jurisprudence it could be claimed that numerous court decisions since 1990 have reversed the locomotive of secularization of the public square, or at least complicated its course. The use of public monies to provide tuition vouchers at private, predominantly religious schools; the failure of legal challenges to arrest the progress of faith-based initiatives—federal funding for religious social service providers; or the symbolic retention of the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and the public display of the Ten Commandments under certain circumstances, all illustrate the willingness of the present "soft secular" order to allow some measure of institutional intimacy with the sacred order. Popular sovereignty and the decisions of the Supreme Court reflect the conservatism and recently enhanced piety of some sections of the American people and so the limits of American secularism. However, using a balanced comparative and historical perspective it is only from the "hard secular" point of view that these legal decisions can be regarded as real setbacks. The trend appears towards a "procedural secularism," whereby religions and the irreligious converse in public discussions over sensitive issues of value and the state authority takes on the job of legal mediator or broker to balance and manage real differences.

One reason for the popular misconceptions of current reality in America is poor judgement arising from weak analysis. This outcome largely reflects the decline of reason in the public sphere (Gore, 2007) and particularly the influence of sensationalist new media which has little patience for nuance or complexity. The trend for journalists to become entertainers and instant commentators has led them to become fixated on the unique and unusual occurrences as well as the colorful rhetoric of extremists. This has led to the exaggeration, if not outright encouragement, of divisions and conflict in society.

As an antidote to the perpetuation of such "current myths", data will be presented here which demonstrates that the often claimed politico-cultural divide between Americans and Europeans is largely a chimera. The data will also demonstrate that the supposedly homogenized nations of "Old Europe" still retain some cultural diversity even while their economies and elites are integrating.
In order to fully appreciate and understand the true political significance and social importance of this data it is necessary at the outset 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 conflations of personnel and activities but in a functioning democracy the various levels of public life are not a single playing field. This realization is crucial for a proper understanding and appreciation of the opinion poll and social survey data presented here.

The key question we will be analyzing 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 is clearly about the governmental decision making process and presumably it relates to everyday 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. In fact the question goes deep into the realm of political secularism, far beyond questions of constitutional forms and niceties or of religious establishment *per se*. It essentially measures anticlericalism – the public’s response to the call in “vernacular thinking”, “to keep religion out of politics”.

Table 1: **Political secularization**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should Not</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The API/IPSOS survey was conducted in May 2005. In each country approximately 1000 people were surveyed and there was a margin of error of ±3%.

The data are drawn from an API/IPSOS international poll in 2005. They cover representative national samples of five major western European nations – Spain, France, Italy, 

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UK and Germany along with the United States. Three countries France, Spain and Italy are Mediterranean states with 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 I 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 clear 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” secularist 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 regard to the process of political secularization.

There is another possible explanation of these results. Rather than reflecting differences in secular-religious outlooks 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 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 feared and distrusted more than most other elements in civil society because of the record of its past interventions. The common historical judgement on clerical power and authority when it had political dominance over the state 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’s 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christians</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused / Unsure</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that at the superficial level of nominal religious identification the various societies show the commonalities of a common 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 rather 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).

Table 3 which asks about the importance of religion in the life of the individual respondent can be considered a religious intensity or “salience of faith” scale. The question deals with a more personal aspect which may be seen as having a behavioural outcome or perhaps as being more meaningful to the respondent than “identification”. The responses are a much better predictor of the results in Table 1 than are the religious identification data in Table 2. Certainly the rank ordering and alignment of the countries is much closer. Again the U.S. and Italy are one polarity and France is the other. However, we can observe that the Americans tend to favor “very important” while Italians favor the less intense “somewhat important” response category. When the results are presented in a binary fashion contrasting the scores for “important” and “not important” by country then really sharp differences can easily be observed. There is much more of a division of opinion on this question in Germany, Spain and U.K. whereas in the U.S., Italy and France there are clear national majorities of opinion for or against religion’s importance.

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Table 3: **Personal Importance of religion**

How important would you say religion is in your own life?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not too important</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all important</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total important</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total not important</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is when direct theological questions about personal belief in a deity are asked, as in Table 4, that the much heralded “religious America - secular Europe” split appears, largely because of widening gaps between American and Italian response patterns. The question is essentially personal and offers a nuanced, sophisticated 6 point scale for response. The response categories by row identify different groups of non-believers and believers. The top row identifies the atheists and the second row the agnostics while row 3 identifies the deists. Rows 4 and 5 identify the “soft theists” while row 6 accommodates the true believers.

Following the diagonals across the table illustrates how far apart the French and Americans are in their belief systems. Americans are overwhelmingly traditional theists with very few atheists and agnostics. By contrast over a third of the French are atheists and agnostics. True believers comprise 70 percent of Americans, half the Italians, one-third of the Spanish but only one in five among the Germans, British and French. Italy appears almost exactly half way between the U.S and France.

Table 4 shows that the French are the most pluralistic in their patterns of belief and have the most balanced distribution across the response categories. In terms of national similarities it is the British and the French who are the most alike in the arena of theology with almost identical patterns of response. The Germans are the most unique of the Europeans with one-third adopting a Deist position (row 3).
Table 4: **Personal Beliefs**

I'm going to read you a list of statements (and I'm going to read the list twice). Please tell me which of the following statements comes closest to expressing what you believe about God.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don't believe in God</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is anyway to find out</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not as others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are now ready to examine how far Table 4 on personal belief, which has emerged as the most "divisive" question of the battery considered so far, correlates with the results in Table 1. The "undoubting" Theists of row 6 do not necessarily subscribe to a "theocratic political tendency" in row 1 of Table 1, which has much lower scores. For example, piety and religiosity does not automatically translate into a desire for theocracy. While 70 percent of Americans are true believers only 37 percent of Americans (so presumably only half of them) think religious leaders should try to lobby government. Only in Germany does there seem to be a high correlation between the scores of the two rows so that we can assume the same respondents comprise both response categories in the two tables.

These results should alert us to the subtle differences between metrics of theological belief and attitudes towards organized religion. Such contrasting results between theological and political attitudes demonstrate the fact that the secularization process is not coherent and develops at varying rates in different aspects of life. The intervening or confounding variable could well be national political culture which is wrapped up with the historical legacy referred to earlier.

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. So that what we are really observing is the socio-political outcome of theological beliefs. To refute this argument and to prove the salience of national culture 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 Roman Catholic Church is a hierarchical body of believers with a strong tradition of centralized leadership and direction by an “infallible” Pope. Though the Pope lost temporal power in 1870 with the demise of the theocracy of the Papal States, through Concordats with national governments or via support for Christian Democrat political parties with a clear Catholic social agenda, the Church has a continuing involvement in national politics in Europe. This makes an assessment of Catholic public opinion very salient to the issue of mass popular support for political secularism.

The self-identifying Catholic proportion of the national samples varies greatly as Table 5A demonstrates. Nevertheless the responses to the question in row 1 of Table 5B 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 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 5 is less than 2 percentage points. The data suggest that French Catholics subscribe to the national political culture and laicite as much as other Frenchmen.

Support for theocracy, along with ideas such as “the divine right of kings”, has long ago evaporated in the West. The vast majority of the Catholic public in the West has come to the same conclusion as U.S. “founding father” and fourth President James Madison writing in 1832. “In the papal system, Government & Religion are in a manner consolidated; & that is found to be the worst of Governments.” Madison argued that this was because history had proven that such a system had neither been favorable “to Religion or to government”. (Padover, 1988)

Table 5: Catholic Opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

221
B. Do you think that religious leaders should or should not try to influence government decisions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>France</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should Not</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusions**

The analysis of these survey results demonstrates the complexities involved in theorizing about the sociology of religion and political sociology especially with regard to international comparisons of secularity and secularism. What we can observe across all six nations is indeed secularization in both realms, the social and the institutional, but the pace varies. Secularization at the macro-level of national structures is more advanced in some societies and more unidirectional than is the micro-level of personal belief. This outcome is possible because there is a general public acceptance in western democratic states of the need for pluralism and of the privatization or perhaps a "Protestantization" of religion. Nevertheless this privatization of religion can take different forms both at the macro and micro-levels as is most clearly illustrated by the cases of the U.S. and France. In addition, it is necessary to recognize that support for political secularism particularly of the softer varieties, is not an indicator of anti-religious sentiment in other areas of life. Nor does it necessarily correlate with disbelief in the transcendent on the personal level.

It is possible to argue 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 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 largely treated as a single system so its various levels are often conflated in the minds of the public and in the commentary offered by the media on social surveys and polling 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 "secular state" can be observed. The Enlightenment belief that religion should be divorced as much as possible from government activity has now spread beyond the U.S. and France and is now the overwhelming consensus among public opinion in the U.K., Germany, Spain and Italy too. That this consensus now extends to self-identifying Catholic public opinion is also remarkable.

From the perspective of a search for divisions and cleavages, this analysis has shattered the thesis of both a north-south divide among Europeans as much as it has a deep transatlantic divide. In terms of political secularism, Spain is now more similar to France than is Italy but so the U.K., and on some variables also Germany. From a historical perspective such evidence of a trend towards convergence in western public opinion, as shown in Table 1, 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 harder and softer forms. These attributes probably help to enhance its public appeal and acceptability today in the West. The result is a majority western consensus for “popular sovereignty” and a distrust of political interference by the clergy of any religion. This “anticlericalism” suggests the tendency is to favor the French rather than American tradition and form of political secularism. It aims to constrain organized religion and remove it from the public square. It tolerates religion only as a matter of private conscience and divorced from the day to day affairs of the polity.

References