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"Hard and soft secularists and hard and soft secularism: An intellectual and research challenge."

Barry A. Kosmin  
 Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture  
 Trinity College  
 300 Summit Street  
 Hartford, Connecticut 06106  
 Tel: (860) 297-2353  
[barry.kosmin@trincoll.edu](mailto:barry.kosmin@trincoll.edu)

The relationship between intellectual and social research issues relating to secularism is the primary focus of the agenda of the new Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College, Hartford. Paradoxically, secularism is a term much bandied around today as a consequence of religion seeming to have become more pervasive and influential in American public life and society.

The principal aim of ISSSC is to define secularism in ways that tease out its operational uses for social analysis, curriculum development, and public policy. Accordingly, our work at ISSSC poses for itself a number of questions, which I would like to pursue with you. First, a definitional one: What do secular or secularism mean today? Second, some sociological ones: Who is secular today? How much of the American or other national populations is secular? What do those people who are secular believe? How is a secular preference manifested on the personal level by individuals in their beliefs, ways of belonging and social behaviors?

To examine these questions further a typology will be introduced. For this purpose it is useful to draw two pairs of analytic distinctions: the first is between the individual and society. It involves on one side the range of behaviors with subjective dispositions regarding personal identification with secular ideas and traditions as a mode of consciousness. On the other side are formal organizations that reflect the institutional manifestations of the secular in the political realm and public sphere.

The second distinction is between 'hard' and 'soft' secularism. This relates to attitudes towards modes of separation of the secular from the religious and the resulting relationship between them. In what follows, a typology will be presented that combines

these two sets of distinctions. In addition its uses for analysis and policy will be demonstrated.

The terms “secular,” “secularism,” and “secularization” have a range of meanings. The words derive from the Latin, *saeculum*, which means both this age and this world, and combines a spatial sense and a temporal sense. In the Middle Ages, secular referred to priests who worked out in the world of local parishes, as opposed to priests who took vows of poverty and secluded themselves in monastic communities. These latter priests were called “religious.” During the Reformation, secularization denoted the seizure of Catholic ecclesiastical properties by the state and their conversion to non-religious use. In all of these instances, the secular indicates a relative opposition to the sacred, the eternal, and the otherworldly.

It is important to note that the Church defined the secular domain for its own purposes. The secular did not make sense without the sacred. The distinction was routinely used to convey a two-tier image of the human being, whereby the secular corresponded to the lower needs, desires, and faculties, and the religious corresponded to the higher order of ideas and ideals. The higher tier was to govern the lower.

In the centuries that followed the secular began to separate itself from religious authority. Its association with a ‘lower’ form of human existence was challenged. But have we now gone further in creating an autonomous existence for the secular? Since the 1780s on the reverse of the US national seal and since the 1930s on the reverse of the dollar bill the phrase *Novo Ordo Seclorum* has appeared. My interpretation of the adoption of that Latin phrase is that the founders of the American Republic viewed the ‘new order of the ages’ quite deliberately as a new era when the old order of King and Church was to be displaced from authority over public life by a secular republican order.

The two revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the American and the French, produced two intellectual and constitutional traditions of secularism. One was associated with the French Jacobin tradition, and was unreservedly antagonistic to religion and promoted atheism. This approach continues under the regime of *laicite* bound up with *La Loi de 1905*. This tradition has only a marginal place in American public life. The reason, of course, is that the United States adopted a more moderate approach characterized by indifference towards religion or encouragement of religious pluralism as promoted by Deists and Liberal Protestants of the early republic.

In light of this sketch of the historical background we can devise a typology based on a binary model of hard and soft secularism. The starting point of this distinction has to do with the Enlightenment but more specifically with theories of knowledge that became prominent in the writings of Enlightenment thinkers. With the rise of modern science Enlightenment thinkers began to consider knowledge and its acquisition as the paramount consideration of what it was to be a human being. This intellectual tradition gave rise to the view further developed by positivist scientists and philosophers in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that was predicated on the idea that knowledge and meaning are coextensive and should be clearly demarcated from metaphysics, theology and their popular manifestations such as myths and superstition. This is the basis of “hard secularism”. The hard secularist considers religious propositions to be epistemologically illegitimate, warranted by neither reason nor experience. It followed from this view that these propositions are morally pernicious and politically dangerous.

Alongside this view of human knowledge and behavior an alternative tradition arose. This maintained that the human intellect was inherently fallible and that the distinction between knowledge and belief was not absolute. The attainment of absolute truth was impossible and therefore skepticism and tolerance should be the principle and overriding values in the discussion of science and religion. We characterize the variety of positions that arise from this tradition by the term “soft secularism”. So in light of the fallibility of human judgment propositions of faith should be respected along with others.

This epistemologically driven bifurcation of secular perspectives on religion comprises only one dimension of our typology. The second dimension is based on the distinction between individuals and society. Here the individual aspect primarily pertains to states of consciousness. The societal aspect relates to social structure, institutions and their cultural systems.

The typology based on these two dimensions can be presented as in the matrix below. In actual fact these are not four closed cells but ranges stretched between the polarities of the dimensions. There can exist between soft-soft and hard-hard secularism a range of intermediate positions. In addition the division between the individual and the societal involves gradations that can cater for social expectations and constraints on the one hand and extreme subjective mental states that cannot be shared. For example, the concept of role refers to both structural constraints and personal sentiments and beliefs.

## A Typology of Modern Secularisms

	Individual States of Consciousness	Social structures institutions
SOFT SECULARISM	+/- Locke, American Pragmatists, Popper	+ India USA
HARD SECULARISM	+ Hobbes Marx Berger Kurtz	+ France, Turkey USSR

Now we are in a position to classify and examine whether and how the various secular traditions operate in different realms of life – society, economics, politics, education and culture. Who are the proponents of the two different traditions stemming from the revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century today? Where do they have influence in contemporary American society? How should we investigate such questions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

In modern sociological theory (Parsons, Robert Bellah, Gertz, Peter Berger) secularization followed *differentiation*. Differentiation describes the growing division of labor in modern society as life goes through a process of fragmentation into numerous spheres, each operating according to its own laws and principles. There is no master, integrating principle or narrative that holds the differentiated plurality of social life, institutions, ideas and ideals together.

Modernity has been the trigger for differentiation with its attendant process of secularization. It freed the spheres of cultural life, such as art, law, politics, learning, science, and commerce, from their embeddedness in a comprehensive Christian culture and allowed them pursue their own paths of development. Thus, the U.S. Constitution set politics on a new course by wisely prohibiting a “religious test for public office.” This is an example of a political initiative to establish soft secularism at the societal level

of institutions that leaves matters of conscience to individual choice. (Arrow goes from societal to individual).

Politics, in the modern secular understanding now had its own immanent principles and values. Religious principles and values were to be more or less differentiated from political ones. This does not imply that religious principles and values can have no role in politics and public life in American democracy. It only implies that, in terms of the perspective of the constitution and the law, religious institutions and governmental institutions are differentiated. The philosophical term for this condition of differentiation is pluralism. Its opposite is monism – i.e. theocracy and totalitarianism. Most Americans, regardless of whether they are liberal or conservative, Christian or Jew or other, adhere to epistemological fallibilism and so are pluralists and, hence, soft secularists. They accept at a fundamental level that law, politics, art, and learning should not be controlled by religious institutions or clergy but have their own traditions, spheres, and dynamics. In the social-structural sense, although there are evident strains, America has been and remains a soft secular republic.

As soft secularists most Americans want government to accommodate religious behavior, even within the domain of government itself. For example they accept that institutionalized persons or military personnel should have access to religious services, guidance or leadership and that these may be paid for, as in the case of military chaplains, by federal dollars. They did not balk when the law allowed for religious pacifists, such as Quakers or Mennonites, to be conscientious objectors. The mainstream consensus is that it is crucial to a free society to respect the religious convictions of its citizens; it is crucial to a pluralistic, differentiated, secular political order to carve out a sphere for freedom for religion and to let that sphere be autonomous, to the greatest extent possible, of pressures emanating from Government.

The existence of religion within its proper sphere, alongside the other differentiated spheres of a modern pluralistic society is, of course, an exemplification of differentiation, not a rejection of it. This is why America can be said to subscribe to a “Soft Secularism”. Interestingly that other great democracy India also has an official ideology of political secularism that is similarly interpreted as pluralism and tolerance of religious differences.

“Hard Secularism” is a term that can be associated with Peter Berger’s secularization of consciousness. It is usually more purely intellectual and personal than social or political. A precursor can be found in the writings of Hobbes who claimed that those who followed the light of reason are bound to discard faith as intellectually unreliable and therefore morally dangerous. Following Hobbes and other like-minded philosophers Marx suggested faith was an ideology in contradistinction to knowledge which was regimes for the purpose of political control. Max Weber saw the process of secularization as the culmination of the process of rationalization and as the ultimate *disenchantment* of the world by modern science. In this sense the secular refers to a worldview, a system of beliefs or a modality of sense-making that is determinedly non-religious. A disenchanted universe is a purely physical and material one. It gives no support to either our moral ideals—which are the result of evolutionary processes—or to our religious beliefs—which are the perversely lingering products of more naïve ages, eventually to be swept away by the triumph of a properly scientific outlook.

Disenchantment refers to an emptying out of magic, mystery, hints of transcendence, of faith in realities, entities or forces unseen but intuited and believed to be essential to our welfare and flourishing as human beings. Today’s spokesmen include Richard Dawkins and Paul Kurtz, or California’s activist doctor-lawyer Michael Newdow. They all take hard secularism to its logical conclusion atheism - the belief in the meaninglessness and irrationality of theism. Such Hard Secularists are few and far between in America, although much more common in Western and Eastern Europe.

The soft secularist individual is neither a convinced atheist, nor a principled materialist, and may not be hostile to religious beliefs and institutions. The soft secularist, rather, is willing to take a live and let live attitude toward religion as long as it doesn’t impinge on his freedom of choice or seek control of American public institutions. For the soft secularist, religion is properly a private lifestyle option which must not threaten liberty and social harmony in a differentiated and pluralistic society.

Who in America today has beliefs of this kind? According to the national surveys Ariela Keysar and I have conducted and that are reported in our newly published book *Religion in a Free Market* between 1990 and 2001, the number of adults in the United States who did not identify themselves as having a religion more than doubled, growing

from 14 million to 29 million. A greater number, 16 percent, said they had a “secular” rather than a “religious” outlook.” These statistics are based on two large surveys The 1990 National Survey of Religious Identification (NSRI), with 114,000 respondents, and the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) with over 50,000 respondents. The most striking change discovered by ARIS in the course of a decade, in all of the categories that it explored, was a doubling of the non-religious population from about 7 percent to about 14 percent of the national adult population.

The majority of these so-called “religious nones” fit the profile of soft secularists sketched above. They are by no means hard core atheists or even agnostics, who together constitute under one percent of the population. Sixty-seven percent of self-described secularists believe in the existence of God. Fifty-six percent agree that God intervenes personally in their lives to help them. Fifty-seven percent of secularists believe that God performs miracles. The upshot of such findings is that, in America, the majority of secularists are religious in a sense. They do not belong to religious institutions, nor do they identify with religious communities but they have theistic beliefs and concerns. Thus, although the self-described secular population of the U.S. has doubled over the past decade and a half, we cannot say that American society has become more irreligious or anti-religious.

Secularity, like religion, takes many forms in American society. Also like religion, it varies in intensity along the trajectories of belief, belonging, and behavior. Our recently published book *Religion in a Free Market* shows that the American public does not subscribe to a binary system. Our research found self-identifying Catholics and Lutherans who say they don’t believe in God, Mormons who claim a secular outlook, and religious people who despite their religiosity are comfortably married to people of other faiths or no faith at all.

In America, secularity is one option among many in a free-market-oriented society. The boundaries between religion and secularity, and between different religions, are not clearly fixed because, to quote from *Religion in a Free Market*, “the government has found it is not equipped or inclined to provide a precise definition of what constitutes a religion or religious belief or practice. . . . This laissez-faire attitude by the state means

there is plenty of organized religion around for Americans to consume and numerous options and places to do so.”<sup>1</sup>

Secularity and secular people in America have gone largely unresearched until now. Manifestations of secularity are difficult to distinguish and isolate in the U.S. because people are not compelled to opt into or out of “religion.” Many countries still operate either legally or in practice under a binary system that offers very limited choices between a monopolistic supplier of established religion and outright irreligion. In contrast, in a free market, secularism and manifestations of secularity can take both positive (pro-secular) and negative (anti-religious) forms. It can offer a range of alternative non-theistic belief systems as well as levels of irreligion and indifference to religion across the realms of belonging and behavior. Thus in the U.S. we can observe populations of “freethinkers” of different types, sizes, and proportions according to the variable or issue being examined. This confusion is to be expected. Secularism like religion has developed in various forms at different levels and in different realms.

By way of institutional differentiation, modernization has involved a degree of secularization. As societies modernize, their religious beliefs, behaviors, and institutions can change in many different ways. This can include forms that are a reaction to secularism, both hard and soft that are embedded in modernization. Religious fundamentalism, which must not be confused with pre-modern traditional religion *per se*, is an adaptation to conditions of modern secularization. The contemporary United States, by contrast, exhibits both high modernity and substantial religiosity among the populace and so shows that secularization has not been sweeping, thorough and total. This is just what many “soft secularist” thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Locke, Adam Smith, and Jefferson, both desired and predicted. (Minus on column 1 and plus in column 2)

Institutional soft secularism combined with endeavors to revitalize religious consciousness at the individual level was exemplified in the American tradition of religious liberty. Created by Roger Williams, William Penn and James Madison’s theologically charged “Memorial and Remonstrance” it was a product of the moral and religious imagination of dissenting Protestantism. The very phrase, separation of church and state, which Jefferson used in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association,

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<sup>1</sup> Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans, Who, What, Why and Where*, Paramount Market Publications, Ithaca, NY, 2006 p. 7.



derives from Roger Williams, who sought to keep the garden of the church separate from the politics of the world. Religious liberty as a constitutional principle arose in a world where many people believed that their duties to God were more primary than their duties to the state; that the state had to make room for its citizens to conduct a higher business than the business of citizenship. Thus the achievement of a secular political order was in service to the religious imperative. Constitutionally the establishment clause was to serve the Free Exercise clause and from this perspective social-structural secularization was not meant to further the secularization of consciousness, but to inhibit it. Or, to put it more sociologically, social-structural “soft secularization” was meant to accomplish in part religious ends. The secular end was democracy as against theocracy as well as the unfettered progress of science. Religion was to have an instrumental role in disciplining individual behavior and making a free society and a democratic, federal republic a viable collective reality.

This is emphatically not the case in some other countries where separation of church and state, in our terms, social-structural secularization, has been instituted in order to further the secularization of consciousness. The prototype for this hard secularism was the French Revolution in its Jacobin phase but perhaps the most radical instance was the former USSR and the remaining Communist countries today. The Marxist-Leninist ideology was based on the conviction that science was superior to religion from an epistemological perspective and that the progress of science would inevitably lead to the elimination of religious consciousness. The ensuing secularization at the social and political levels was designed to assault and eradicate religion using the state apparatus, often in the most brutal ways, in order to bring about a thorough and consistently hard secular society.

Contemporary France and Turkey also separate religion and state in order to advance a secular ideology of republicanism or laicite. The interesting ancillary feature in such polities is that they have developed a highly centralized, statist trajectory particularly in the social and educational realms. The state demands loyalty in terms of consciousness. Its goal is a standardized and homogeneous, relatively hard secularist society. In contrast in the U.S. and India, the polity encourages pluralism amongst the people. So America is much less secularized at the level of consciousness, as well as in the worldview and the moral sensibilities of the majority of its citizens, than is France.

Any social configuration has its benefits and costs. We have discussed the secular patterns that characterize contemporary American society where there is, according to our typology, a plus and minus pattern at the “consciousness level” and a plus at the “structural level”. The main virtue of this constellation is undoubtedly the peaceful co-existence of diverse religious and non-religious individuals and groups. This regime has avoided both religious wars and theocracy. What then are the costs or problems associated with secularism as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This question is a major concern of ISSSC’s work.

Given that around 80 percent of the population has a religious identification of some sort and that half the nation is currently affiliated in some way with a religious group logically we should expect to find a growing dissonance between individuals and secular institutions such as the state, the market, science, education, high tech industries and bio-medical advances. This is likely to generate alienation. It can take different forms: for example passive conformity to the laws of the state; a purely instrumental attitude towards science and technology; indifference and withdrawal leading to disengagement; fear and a sense of threat; emotional and psychological disconnection from secular institutions. As a result of such alienation a significant segment of the public has neither a strong motivation nor an incentive to take part in the leadership of secular institutions and the sphere of public action.

Another deficiency we can observe is that there is very little penetration of religious consciousness into the public realm with the result that a public understanding of religious consciousness does not develop as it could. Beliefs, faith and the religious consciousness are not subjected to critical public debate and examination but tend to be trivialized, minimized or stereotyped. In effect religion is privatized and relativized so that differences between religions are blurred and understated. As a result the secular sector of the population does not have the opportunity to go beyond tolerance and gain an understanding and appreciation of the religious consciousness of individual members of various religious groups.

The most obvious political problem in recent years is that the public sphere has become a battlefield for those who do not accept the status quo of “soft secularism”, notably the hard secularists and the radical religious movements and theocrats. One cost of the alienation referred to above is that the majority that accepts the traditional

American constellation of Soft Secularism lacks morale and adequate tools, both intellectual and organizational, with which to defend and revitalize this constellation.

A major public policy issue is that hard and soft secularism compete particularly in the arena of jurisprudence. In the mid-twentieth century strict separation made the running and succeeded in removing prayer and the Bible reading from the public schools and set greater distance between religious practices and governmental settings than had previously been the case in American history. The conservative political reaction after 1970 limited the trend towards achieving a purer standard of social-structural secularization. Numerous court decisions over the past decade and a half have reversed the locomotive of secularization of the public square or at least complicated the course of this mode of secularization. The use of public monies to provide tuition vouchers at private, predominantly religious schools, the failure of legal challenges to arrest the progress of the faith-based initiative—federal funding for religious social service providers—or the symbolic retention of the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance or the public display of the Ten Commandments under certain circumstances all illustrate the willingness of the present secular order to allow an institutional intimacy with the sacred order. Popular sovereignty and the decisions of the Supreme Court reflect the recently enhanced religiosity of the American people and so the limits of American secularity. From the point of view of the hard secular population these legal decisions are setbacks.

An additional challenge to secular institutions in the public square is that in the minds of most of the American public and electorate the perceived social ills, dilemmas and challenges to family life and values brought by modernity, science and a free market economy have paradoxically convinced them to desire a greater accommodation between church and state and a broader role for religion in society such as “faith based initiatives”. The political consequence is that Soft Secularism tends to lose its coherence and rationale.

Society and culture are constantly evolving yet alongside new issues old questions return. Our understanding of the role of secular values and the process of secularization needs to be re-examined. The task of ISSSC is to study secularism in all its forms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and not as the mirror image of religion but as an intellectual

and social force in its own right. Our goal is to see that secularism *per se* does not go unstudied and under-researched in American academia.