The Secular–Religious Competition Perspective

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/10/09/the-secular-religious-competition-perspective/

JONATHAN FOX, OCT 9 2015

**This is an excerpt from *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century.*
Available now on Amazon (UK, USA), in all good book stores, and via a free PDF download.
Find out more about E-IR's open access books here.**

While it can be said that the study of religion in world politics has deep roots, many of those roots stem from what has come to be known as secularisation theory. This body of theory predicted that modern phenomena such as urbanisation, mass literacy and education, science, technology, rationalism, the increasing power of the modern state, mass participation in politics, and geographical mobility, among others, would lead to the demise of religion worldwide.[1] In the 1960s, prominent social scholars such as Anthony F. Wallace confidently predicted that the 'evolutionary future of religion is extinction . . . . Belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world.'[2] While Wallace's predictions were extreme, though by no means unique, the sentiment that religion was at the very least in significant decline was the dominant social science view on religion in the 1960s and well thereafter.[3]

Interestingly, international relations theory ignored religion on a more profound level. Rather than addressing why religion would become less important, until recently it simply did not address religion. Before 2001, international relations scholarship that addressed religion as a significant causal factor in world politics was rare.[4]

Clearly, the prediction of religion's demise as a significant political force was inaccurate. How could social scientists have gotten it so wrong? I posit that, in a sense, they did not. All of the modern factors predicted to undermine and challenge religion are real and, in fact, do undermine and challenge religion. The failure was not in the perception of the nature of these modern challenges to religion but in the belief that religion would succumb to these challenges. I posit that religious actors remain active and important in world politics because they have effectively responded to these challenges.

Specifically, these factors led to the rise of a family of ideologies that are today called secularism. Secularists, the adherents of this family of ideologies, seek to at the very least reduce religion's public role. I define political secularism as *an ideology or set of beliefs which advocates that religion ought to be separate from all or some aspects of politics and/or public life*. This definition focuses on secularism as a political ideology. Though it does not deny that secularism can also have non-political manifestations, my focus here is on politics.

This insight is key to what I call the *secular–political competition perspective* (or for short, the *competition perspective*), which, I posit, explains much of religious politics worldwide. Political secularists seek to at the very least reduce religions' public role. At the same time, however, religious actors seek to increase the public role of religion. Put differently, no matter how strongly a state supports religion, there are people who feel that it does not support religion strongly enough; and no matter how secular a state, there are those who feel it is not secular enough. These actors compete in the political arena to influence state religion policy.

This insight is necessary to understand a key aspect of religious (and anti-religious) politics. It is also necessary to understand why secularisation theory remains an important source of understanding. The *inevitability* of religion's

The Secular–Religious Competition Perspective

Written by Jonathan Fox

demise is so central to secularisation theory that, arguably, removing it removes the heart and soul of the theory to the extent that what remains can no longer be called secularisation theory. However, when religion's inevitable demise is removed from the equation, this body of theory becomes an important source of insight on the origins, nature, and motivation of religion's opposition in this worldwide political competition.

The *competition perspective* is the central theoretical argument that I outline in my forthcoming book, *Political Secularism, Religion and the State*, which is part of my larger *Religion and State* (RAS) project.[5] In the book I examine 111 types of government religion policy for 177 countries between 1990 and 2008. In this chapter I refer to some of the basic findings from this larger study.

While the competition between religious and secular actors is present in multiple political, social and even economic venues, in this chapter I focus on one specific political venue, government religion policy. A government policy can include laws, decisions by government officials, both national and local, as well as court decisions. Religious and secular actors compete to influence policy with religious actors seeking to get the government more involved in supporting religion, or at least their version of religion, while secular actors seek to separate government from religion and get the government to limit religion in the public sphere.

Among the 111 types of religion policy included in my study, 51 involve state support for religion. This type of policy is in flux but there is a clear trend. Thirty-seven of these types of policy have become more common between 1990 and 2008, with six becoming less common and eight remaining the same. Examining the same information by country shows that 72 (40.7 per cent) countries increased their overall levels of support while 20 (11.3 per cent) decreased their levels of support. Thus, a bit over half of the world has changed its policy of support towards religion, with some supporting religion more and some supporting it less. This is clearly consistent with the competition perspective, but there is also a clear trend during this time period as religious actors have had more success in this competition than their secular counterparts.

A Complex Competition

The *competition perspective's* view of religious politics as a competition between religious and secular actors, while important, only depicts part of a complex set of relationships. The competition between secular and religious actors is complicated by several additional relationships and phenomena. In this chapter, I focus on three of them: competition within the religion camp, competition within the secular camp, and the complex relationship between supporting and restricting religion.

Both the religious and secular camps are complex. Obviously, there is no single religion that the world's religious population agrees upon. Furthermore, religious traditions are often divided into competing denominations and even within a single denomination there are usually diverse views on both how the religion should be interpreted and practised and the extent and nature of that religion's proper influence on politics. Thus, within the religious camp there is competition both between and within religious traditions. Put simply, at the same time as religious actors compete with secular actors in the political arena they also compete with each other.

One manifestation of this competition between religions is religious discrimination. I define religious discrimination as restrictions placed on the religious practices or institutions of minority religions that are not placed on the majority religion. This is different from the restrictions placed on all religions, including the majority religion, in that restrictions placed on all religions usually represent hostility towards, or fear of, religion in general. Or, at least, restrictions placed on all religions reflect a desire to control religion or limit its political power. Resections that focus specifically on minority religions effectively give those religions left untargeted an advantage over the former. Thus, they represent, among other things, government intervention in the religious economy on behalf of the favoured religion or religions.

Religious discrimination is quite common and increasing. In 1990,[6] 136 countries (76.8 per cent) engaged in religious discrimination against at least some minorities. By 2008 this had increased to 146 (82.5 per cent). Of the 30 types of religious discrimination tracked by the RAS project, 28 became more common between 1990 and 2008

The Secular–Religious Competition Perspective
Written by Jonathan Fox

while only the remaining two remained stable. Also, 86 (46.9 per cent) states increased levels of religious discrimination during this period, while only 23 (13.0 per cent) lowered levels of religious discrimination. Thus, in this arena of government policy, the competition within the religion camp is strong and getting stronger. Types of religious discrimination which were particularly common in 2008 include restrictions on proselytising and missionaries (92 countries), the requirement of minority religions to register with the state (73 countries), restrictions on the building, maintaining or repairing of places of worship (65 countries), and restrictions on the public observance of religious practices (43 countries).

There is also considerable competition within the secular camp. While political secularists agree that governments should become less involved in religion, philosophies differ considerably on what this means and how it should be accomplished. By limiting the discussion to philosophies found only in democratic states, I have identified three categories of secularist ideology. These ideologies are defined by how they answer the following questions: 1) May the state support religion? (2) May the state restrict religion? (3) May the state restrict religious discourse and expression appropriate in the political speech? (4) May the religious ideals of a specific tradition influence public policy?

The most extreme of these ideologies is the *secularist-laicist* conception that views religion as undermining democracy. Accordingly, religion is banned from the public sphere but allowed in the private sphere. This means that the state may not support religion and restrictions on religion are not only allowed as long as they are limited to the public sphere and applied equally to all religions. Also, religion is not appropriate for political expression and should not influence state policy.[7] France's 2004 law that bans overt religious symbols in public schools, including traditional Islamic head coverings, is a classic example of this model. Unlike most other European restrictions on religious clothing and symbols, this law explicitly includes all religions rather than focusing only on the head coverings worn by Muslim women. While someone from another tradition of secularism might consider this policy a restriction on religious liberty, from the French perspective, religious symbols constitute an aggressive encroachment of religion—something that should be a private matter—on the public sphere.

The second model, the *absolute separation of religion and state* model, bans all government support for religion as well as all government interference in religion. In relation to the four questions I outline above, this model clearly bans any support for religion as well as any restrictions on religion, but there is some debate within this philosophy over the proper role of religion in public political discourse and in influencing public policy. In the US, most believe that religion has a place in public life, but there is debate over the exact role religion should play in society. More specifically, a majority believe that the use of religious language in political speech is acceptable and that religious input into policy is allowed as long as it does not lead to advantaging any religions over others or restrictions on religious minorities. However, a minority believe that the Jeffersonian wall of separation between church and state should extend to religious motivations for policy decisions and even religion's intrusion into political discourse.[8]

The final model, the *neutralist* model, requires that the government treat all religions equally. States may become involved in religion as long as this principle of equality is maintained.[9] Thus, in relation to the four questions I list above, both support for religion and limitations placed upon it are allowed as long as these policies are applied equally to all religions. This concept of equal application also applies to political discourse and religious influence on policymaking.

These three models have important implications for day-to-day policy. Take, for example, religion in public schools. Under the secular-laicist model, any public expression of religion, including wearing overt religious symbols such as crosses, Jewish yarmekahs and Muslim head coverings, can be banned; and there would certainly be no religious education. Under the absolute separation doctrine, the wearing of religious symbols can be allowed but there would be no state-supported religious education in public schools. Under the neutralist doctrine, even religious education in public schools would be allowed as long as it was provided equally to all religions for which there are a significant number of students and it was not mandatory. Thus, there are serious divisions within the secularist camp. Outside of the liberal school of thought these divisions deepen, as there are even more extreme forms of secularism, though they are less common today than they have been in the past. For example, most communist and some fascist regimes ban religion from government, the public sphere *and the private sphere*. Thus, these extreme secular

The Secular–Religious Competition Perspective

Written by Jonathan Fox

ideologies severely limit religion in all aspects of public and private life, or they attempt to ban it altogether.

The final complexity in government religion policy stems from the tension between supporting religion and restricting it. Supporting religions is inexorably intertwined with control. When a government supports a religion, that religion becomes, to some degree, dependent upon the government and susceptible to control even if control was not the original intent. In fact, one of the best ways to control religion is to support it while tying that support to some form of government control.[10] For example, when a government supports religious education it can influence what is taught in those classes as well as who teaches them. Similarly, a government that supports a religious institution, perhaps by establishing an official religion, can control aspects of that institution's inner workings through the appointment of religious officials.[11]

Both restricting and supporting religion are common. In 1990,[12] 132 (74.4 per cent) states restricted their majority religion, and usually all other religions, in some way. By 2008 this increased to 146 (82.5 per cent). Twenty of the 29 types of restrictions on all religion in a country tracked by the RAS project became more common during this period while only five became less common. Sixty-eight (38.4 per cent) countries enacted more restrictions in 2008 than they did in 1990, while only 20 (11.3 per cent) enacted fewer. Some of the most common types of restrictions in 2008 included restrictions on religious political parties (63 countries), government harassment or arrest of religious officials (43 countries), and government monitoring or restrictions on clerical sermons (41 countries).

Perhaps the best indication of the overlap between control and support is that every single country which restricts religion also engages in at least a few of the 51 types of support for religion tracked by the RAS project. Even more interestingly, setting aside countries which are generally hostile to religion, the countries which regulate and control religion the most are those that support it most strongly. In fact, levels of regulation and control of religion—and this includes regulation and control of the state's majority religion—are on average over twice as high in states with official religion as they are in states which generally maintain separation of religion and state. Thus, this complexity in state motivation is clearly present not only in theory but also in practice.

This means that when we objectively see a state supporting a religion this does not necessarily mean that the government looks favourably upon religion. It can also mean that the state seeks to limit or control religion. Often this control is focused on religion's political influence, with governments supporting religion in society but limiting its political influence. The 63 countries which limit religious political parties are a good example of this phenomenon. However, whether the intent is to support or control religion, the increasing levels of religious support and the fact that in 2008 all countries other than South Africa engaged in at least a few of the 51 types of religious support tracked by the RAS project mean that religion certainly remains relevant across the world.

Conclusions

Given all of this, the *competition perspective* depicts a complex relationship between religion and politics. While the religious and secular camps compete for political influence, there is at the same time competition within each of these camps. Also, while it is possible to identify a government's policy towards religion, it is often difficult to fully know the complex motivations behind that policy.

That being said, two things are clear. First, religion policy across the world is in a state of flux. Second, governments are becoming more involved in religion than they were in the past. Looking at three types of policy—support for religion, restrictions on the majority or all religions, and discrimination against religious minorities—98 of 177 countries tracked by the RAS project increased their involvement in at least one of these factors without decreasing it on any of the others. By contrast, only 22 lowered their overall involvement and 28 increased some aspects while lowering others. Only 29 experienced no changes at all.

Thus, between 1990 and 2008, religious actors have had more victories in their competition with secular actors, but secular actors are still active and successful in many cases. Just as secular actors did not succeed in eliminating religion at the peak of secularism's influence in the mid-twentieth century, it is unlikely that religious actors will succeed in eliminating secularism. While in recent years religious actors have learned how to successfully counter

The Secular–Religious Competition Perspective

Written by Jonathan Fox

secular political actors, it is likely that in time, secular actors will also adjust tactics and strategies to more successfully compete. Thus, the competition between the two, which is the central insight of the *secular–religious competition perspective*, will likely continue for the foreseeable future.

Notes

[1] Jonathan Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013); and Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[2] Anthony F. Wallace, *Religion: An Anthropological View* (New York: Random House, 1966): 266-267.

[3] Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, Il: University of Chicago Press, 1994): 17; Phillip S. Gorski and Ates Altinordu, 'After Secularization', *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, (2008): 55-85; and Monica D. Toft, Daniel Philpott, & Timothy S. Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

[4] Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005); Nukhet Sandal and Jonathan Fox, *Religion in International Relations Theory: Interactions and Possibilities* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Daniel Philpott, 'The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations', *World Politics* 55 (1) (2002): 66-95.

[5] Jonathan Fox, *Political Secularism, Religion and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); also see Jonathan Fox, *The Religion and State* (RAS) *Project*.

[6] This includes several countries which did not become independent until after 1990. In these cases I include the first year of available data.

[7] Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies Toward Religion: The United States, France and Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[8] Ibid.; also see Carl H. Esbeck, 'A Typology of Church-State Relations in American Thought', *Religion and Public Education* 15 (1) (1988): 43-50.

[9] John T. S. Madeley, 'A Framework for the Comparative Analysis of Church-State Relations in Europe', *West European Politics* 26 (1) (2003): 23-50.

[10] Metin Cosgel and Thomas J. Miceli, 'State and Religion', *Journal of Comparative Economics* 37(2) (2009): 403; N. J. Demerath, III, *Crossing the Gods: World Religions and Worldly Politics* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001): 204; and Brian J Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 207.

[11] Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies Toward Religion*, 8, 166-167; and Oliver Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007): 27–28

[12] This includes several countries which did not become independent until after 1990. In these cases I include the first year of available data,

About the author:

The Secular–Religious Competition Perspective

Written by Jonathan Fox

Jonathan Fox is Professor of Political Science at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel. He specialises in the influence of religion on politics, using both quantitative and qualitative methodology to analyse the impact of religion on domestic conflict, international relations.