

United Moderate Religion vs. Secular and Religious Extremes?

Written by Patricia Sohn

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/04/03/united-moderate-religion-vs-secular-and-religious-extremes/>

PATRICIA SOHN, APR 3 2023

Scholars of religion and politics tell us that religion is not diminishing; if anything, it is expanding in many parts of the world. The most prescient tension relating to religion for the immediate future may be, as Fox suggests, between religion and secularism; although the “clash between and within religions is ubiquitous and permeates most elements of state religion policy,” globally (Fox 2015, 36). Some scholars argue that other variables (such as nationalism) may play a more significant role in wars and conflict than do battles regarding religion, philosophy, and theology (Raudino 2022, 48-49, 55, 59-60, 62), *per se*, or that attitudes toward political and economic variables are more significant than religiosity in defining a person’s attitudes toward conflict (Tessler 2022, 40-41; Tessler and Nachtwey 1998). Still others highlight a concern with “‘religionizing’ politics,” where religion, nationalism, and violence are likely to meet (Juergensmeyer 1996, 11; see also 5, 13, 19). Or they may outline both violent and non-violent paths in the relationship between religion and conflict, including such ecumenical measures as seeking to, “learn from their [other religions’] teachings” (Midlarsky and Lee 2022, 403, emphasis added; see also 381, 385, 394). Indeed, the resilience and resurgence of religion (Tessler 2022, 35) that has been recognized for non-Western societies may also be the case in Western countries themselves (Sohn and Raudino 2022, 19-22). Thus, as outlined below, religion matters for Western politics. But can it matter in a positive manner?

Let us discuss, then, religion in a decidedly western country: the U.S. Most U.S. Southerners *and* most Americans, more broadly, believe in God and practice religion at some point during the year (results below are from Pew 2014 and 2007; for some discussion of these results see, Sohn and Raudino 2022, 21-22). Most people in the U.S., or 70.6% of the population, are part of one of the branches of Christianity as a whole. When the Abrahamic Religions, Judaism and Islam are added, the total is 73.4%, a vast normative majority. Likewise, when combining the Abrahamic Religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and all major and/or world religions, the total number of Americans identifying as adherents of some formal religion is 76.5%, or just over three-quarters of the American population. For the U.S. South, those numbers are Christianity (some branch), 76%; and Christianity and the Abrahamic Religions, Judaism and Islam, 78%. When combining, in the U.S. South, the Abrahamic Religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam plus all major and/or world religions, the total number of Southerners identifying as adherents to a religion is no less than 80%. And, importantly, only 3.1% of Americans identify as atheist, and 4% as agnostic, in the reporting years.

There are differences in belief and (ritual) practice among the major world religions even as expressed in the U.S. However, they share many core religious principles and values, as discussed in a preliminary manner below. Across the U.S., Protestants (46.6%) and Catholics (20.8%) are in large majority; non-Abrahamic religious adherents, such as Hindus (0.7%), Buddhists (0.7%), and others represent far smaller populations. In Europe, by contrast to the U.S., Catholics outnumber Protestants (Pew Research Center 2013, reports 35% of Europeans are Catholic, while some popular sources give higher estimates). Estimates vary regarding the relative distribution of Catholics and Orthodox Christians across (geological) Europe.

Regarding the religiosity of Americans as measured by belief in God and extent and types of practice, the Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study is excellent, methodologically. It measures for a range of variables related to belief and practices rather than asking the more traditional binary question, “Are you religious or secular?”

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Most people may not be able to identify a completely correct answer to that question (e.g., religious persons who believe in a secular social or political order, etc.). Indeed, there may not be a correct answer to such a question for many, if not most, Americans when presented in binary terms.

Regarding belief and practice in the U.S., combining on the same question, “Believe in God; absolutely certain,” with, “Believe in God; fairly-certain,” the numbers from the Pew Religious Landscape Survey are quite high: U.S. South, 87%; U.S. as a whole, 83%. That is, Southerners – and Americans more broadly – believe in God to a fair certainty, or to an absolute certainty, in high combined numbers. Similarly, combining on the same survey question, “Attendance at religious services at least once a week,” with, “Attendance at religious services once or twice a month/a few times per year”: U.S. South, 74%; U.S. as a whole, 69%. Thus, likewise, Southerners, and Americans across the board, practice formal religions at least to some degree throughout each year (from low to once or more weekly). That is, Southerners – and Americans more broadly – are religious in belief and moderate but engaged in formal religious practice.

Some political scientists have emphasized differences even within a single religion and have noted that our religious worship tends to be relatively segregated by ethnicity and/or race (McKenzie and Rouse 2013, 219). Such numbers are significant and do appear to reflect variation in certain types of political attitudes (McKenzie and Rouse 2013, 219, 222-23, 229). Likewise, in terms of ethnicity, the Pew Religious Landscape Study finds that 66% of Americans who self-identify as Christians also self-identify as “white;” and 34% of Americans who self-identify as Christians also self-identify as belonging to a range of other ethnic groups.

Given these differences, there is a rationale at the level of nation-building and social solidarity for highlighting the commonality in moral-ethical principles at the macro-level rather than differences and fissures in the same at the micro-level. Such an approach allows, within a country, for: (a) the fostering social cohesion, and (b) emphasizing that which we share and do well in common. The suggestion herein is to shift the lens to the macro-level commonalities in service of social cohesion without losing our appreciation and support for cultural difference (e.g., pluralism, long-standing bodies of cultural knowledge, etc.). That is, we do not all need to worship in the same spaces in order to note – and to highlight for ourselves – that most of us worship in some legitimate way (e.g., ways that are lawful; the current analysis in no way legitimizes, or acts as apologist for, violence or cults in religion).

To the extent that we emphasize and protect freedom of religion in both theory and practice, it is safe and wise to discuss these ideas and shared moral-ethical principles, and to teach them to our youth. If we choose to emphasize our fissures and differences within a country, we run the risk of not joining across those differences. It might even contribute to unraveling those areas of unity and solidarity that we have developed over time.

An important rationale for emphasizing those uniting principles, rather than ruminating (and simmering) on the micro-level differences, can be found in theories of nationalism. As cited by ethnicity and nationalism scholar, Benedict Anderson, the late 19th century French scholar of nationalism, Ernest Rénan, was famous for arguing that national solidarity and the building of a nation, *per se*, are dependent upon both memory and forgetting. Following Rénan, Anderson argues that what we choose to remember together in common (or, at least, to emphasize), and what we choose to forget together, in common, are what make possible our ability to imagine ourselves as a nation united. It allows us to be aware that we have some things in common, and some things shared in our forgetting of them (or de-emphasizing) (Anderson 1991, 6, 199-200; and Rénan 2023). For Anderson, one must first find a set of ways to imagine – in terms of individual self-consciousness and culturally – ourselves as being a nation, after which it becomes real in empirical and political terms (Anderson 1991, 4-6).

The U.S. has not always been identified as a nation-state by scholars (Liah Greenfeld is an oft-cited exception, see Greenfeld 1992), because it was built upon a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society from its beginnings, and because people came from varying “national” origins (Greenfeld 1992, 402). By contrast, the concept of nation-state in its 18th and 19th century origins was tied with a single ethnic community, often with a dynamic of a single, dominant prior religion, since nationalism was associated with the seeking of a secular alternative basis for political authority to replace monarchy and the divine right of kings. The current writing suggests that, while we are not an ethno-national nation-state, we remain a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Federated nation-state. One way to reinforce that positive

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imagination of national unity and solidarity across (well-respected) differences is to accept the numbers on religion.

That is, in the U.S., we are religious on dimensions of religiosity, and we tend to hold secular values in regard to what we view as normatively appropriate sources of social and political authority. We should encourage our politicians to have an open, frank, and public discussion regarding which moral-ethical principles we can all agree upon across pluralist lines. That is, we may need to re-identify those domains of agreement. By avoiding the discussion, we hand the narrative regarding what will count as religion over to the extremes, who, by definition, do not represent the majority of religious adherents.

Minority religions exist as individuals and sub-communities among us, and they may add to small but significant populations. In the Pew Religious Landscape Study, it appears that somewhere between 10% and 23.4% of our population is secular, if counting atheists, agnostics, *and* all unaffiliated persons as “secular” on dimensions of religiosity. Some unaffiliated people (e.g., in the Pew Religious Landscape Study reporting, “Nothing in particular”) may reflect a form of secularism, while others may reflect Native American religions, Asian-American religions, religions practiced at home, “spirit” oriented religions, non-monotheistic or animist religions such as Shinto, or others who may refrain from reporting their religious practices because it puts them in a religious minority or highlights an association with an historically enemy regime. In European context, interestingly, belief in “spirit or life force” was captured in a Eurobarometer survey as a significant alternative to belief in a formal God in European context (Eurobarometer 2005, 9-10; see also Sohn and Raudino 2022, 20-22).

That is, 52% of European Union members believe in God, and 27% believe in spirit or life force; meanwhile, 18% do not believe in either (Eurobarometer 2005, 9). Some sources report higher numbers on non-belief as of 2019. Religious affiliation is widely regarded as decreasing in Europe. However, religion remains important as a factor of identity and attitudes (see Salazar 2017; Pew 2018). Religion and state are linked in various ways including some aspects of taxation in 11 Western European countries (Fox 2015, 88; see also 39, 103). According to Fox’s framework, 34 European countries have some formal relationship between state and religion: eight have “active state religion” whereby the state maintains an official relationship with religions, which are nonetheless non-compulsory, including the UK; ten have multi-tiered preferences favoring one religion; seven have multi-tiered preferences with a bloc of preferred religions; and nine have a cooperative state relationship with some religions (Fox 2015, 44). In addition, two have minimal support for religions (with the U.S. included in this category); one, France, has strict separation of religion and state; and several have no official relationship between the state and religion(s) (Fox 2015, 44-45). That is, where the European experience seems to emphasize relatively lower (although still significant) belief and practice, it includes wider-reaching official relationship between state and religion; while the U.S. experience appears to reflect the converse.

The Pew survey reports that only 2% of U.S. Southerners identify as, “Atheist,” *per se*; and 3% as, “Agnostic.” That is, claims and conventional assumptions that our modal, normative intellectual center as a country gravitates toward secularism is almost certainly incorrect – if the measures relate to religiosity rather than attitudes toward appropriate sources of social or political power and authority. In relation to the former (religiosity), we are a religious society; in relation to the latter, we may hold secular attitudes toward power as well as social and political authority. That is, the suggestion herein is that we are a religious society, which, nonetheless, supports a secular state (e.g., national government). (Regarding the mutual construction of religion and politics, see, Anna Grzymala-Busse 2012; for mutual construction of state and religion in the context of the Chinese state’s relationship with religious resurgence and religious institutions, see, Ashiwa and Wank 2009, 3-6; regarding China see also Wongsurawat 2022; and Liang 2022).

Which shared moral-ethical values? It might be useful to begin, briefly, by considering those shared among the Ten Commandments and Noachide Laws across Eastern and Western religions. For the purposes of the discussion below, world religions will be treated as including: Ancient Israelite religion; Judaism; Christianity; Islam; Hindu religions; Buddhism; Sikh religion; Shinto; Native American religions; original, indigenous, and/or animist religions of Africa, Europe, South America, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Northern Asia, including Vodou. Unlawful traditions are not included.

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1. Divinity. While many world religions are not monotheistic, there remains a common admonition to obey divine authority, and not to curse, profane, or to blaspheme it intentionally. There is a notion common across world religions that there is something divine and/or Holy, however that divinity or holiness is conceived. Many world religions have a notion of a single divine Creator, including some otherwise polytheistic traditions. Likewise, most world religions include within them an admonition not to turn to false gods or “demons,” variously identified. Major world religions today hold dark magic practices, witchcraft, and human sacrifice to be religious crimes.
2. Creation. Most world religions have a cosmic story of creation, meaning that most religions believe in Creation *per se*, in some form. For some, the origin of the earth is less significant than the origin of the first lives on earth, be they understood as human, flora, land animal, aquatic, geological, divine, or some combination thereof.
3. Idolatry. Idols are differently defined by religion. Most world religions use material objects, statues, art, and/or images to help direct prayer or meditation, while some others do not. An effort not to make human-products or individuals themselves into idols (either conceptual or material) that would stand in the place of divinity is a common value and admonition. Adherents may be respectful to statues or art used to direct prayer or meditation without claiming that the statue is divinity, *per se*. Exceptions include highly abstract spirit religions, which may view a forest as divine in the sense of, “the spirit of the forest,” etc.; religions in this category may hold environmental protection at a high premium as a theological principle.
4. Adultery. Most world religions (although not all) hold adultery to be a religious infraction or crime. It is variously defined, and punishment may be none, mild, and may range to very severe. Punishment, where it exists, may be applied to one or both parties, and it may be applied legally by social and/or state actors depending upon national context. For some world religions, adultery is defined as one married person joined with another who is not his or her spouse; it does not apply to unmarried persons; and only the married person is punished. For other world religions, both parties are punished and may be so regardless of imperfect information regarding one another. For a few religions or denominations, adultery may involve married or unmarried persons, including all such forms of premarital relations, and may or may not involve religious stipulation of punishment. That is, courting with intent to marry (allowed in various forms in most world religions) and dating without intent to marry (not allowed in many world religions) are practices reflecting wide-ranging difference across religions.
5. Libido. Most religions advise that the human libido should be disciplined in some way and that it can, otherwise, be a socially destructive force in either men or women. It is particularly regarded to be a potential disruption to the social institution of the family. As the family is the primary social unit in many societies, that admonition is considered important in many world religions. If the family is perceived to be injured, repercussions vary from minimal to severe and may be legally punished by a social actor or the state depending upon national context.
6. Respect of Animal Life. The admonition not to eat from a still-living animal in parts taken over time is common to most world religions; in a few, under quite exceptional circumstances involving life and death, it might be allowed. (Nonetheless, there might be a material or spiritual religious penalty for such action.)
7. Remaining Commandments and Noachide Laws. The establishing of courts or tribunals for the maintaining of justice; respect for immediate parents or more distant elders and ancestors; and the requirement not to murder, steal, bear false witness, or covet are all common to most world religions. What is sanctioned by government or religion varies. Likewise, most religions take religious holidays, some on a weekly basis, and some monthly or quarterly. Holidays may include admonitions not to work or conduct financial business, and the like. Thus, the notion of something akin to the Sabbath is recognized broadly while its corollaries in other world religions may be practiced differently and less often. Nonetheless, in part thanks to the Sabbath tradition in Judaism, most of the world today keeps at least one day off for a “weekend.”

It is almost as though we keep arguing that the world is flat; and, yet, the world is round. The country is religious (de Tocqueville 2012 [1835]); and, by most accounts, the world is increasingly (not decreasingly) religious. One can avoid the pitfalls of extreme religion (Marty and Appleby 1994), and maintain a potentially useful counterweight to extremes in secularism, precisely by acknowledging the importance of religion and commonly shared moral-ethical

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values at the macro-level for the greater good of national unity across a plural U.S. social fabric. It could also (continue to) contribute to important dimensions of mutual understanding at the international level.

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