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# The Secular-Religious Competition Perspective in Comparative Perspective

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**Abstract:** Political secularism is defined as "an ideology or set of beliefs advocating that religion ought to be separate from all or some aspects of politics or public life (or both)." In the *secular–religious competition perspective*, I argue that political secularists compete with religious political actors to influence government policy around the world. Yet this competition is complicated by many factors. The contributions to this symposium demonstrate that this is the case in their examination of secular–religious tensions and state–religion relations in Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Turkey, and Tunisia. These cases show that government religion policy evolves over time and is deeply influenced by secular–religious competition but that this competition is a complex one involving many other factors and influences.

This volume examines the issue of political secularism in Western Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. I define political secularism as "an ideology or set of beliefs advocating that religion ought to be separate from all or some aspects of politics or public life (or both)." (Fox 2015, 2) While this definition is straightforward, political secularism, in practice, is not. There are multiple strands of political secularism which have very different implications for government policy. Secularism–laicism, of which France's policy is a classic example, requires that public space be secular and effectively relegates most religious expression to the private sphere. Absolute separation of religion and state, the model used in the United States, bans any government interference in religion which effectively means that the government may neither support nor restrict religion. As a result, this model allows free religious expression

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both in public and in private, as long as it is not supported by the government. The neutrality model, which is present in a number of Western European states, requires that all religions be treated equally. In this context, a government may both support and restrict religion as long as it does so equally for all religions (Fox 2015; 2019).

I argue that in all countries there is a competition between political secularists and religious political actors to influence government policy. While the status quo is different in every country, even in the most religious of countries there are those who feel that the government is insufficiently religious and in the most secular of countries there are those who advocate policies that advance their preferred version of secularism. I call this the *secular–religious competition perspective*. This perspective assumes that all the processes inherent in secularization theory—which predicted the demise of religion—are present, but that rather than causing religion's demise, they contributed to the rise of secularism which challenges religion in the public sphere without necessarily causing its demise.

While the secular–religious competition perspective is in essence simple, the way it plays out in most countries is complex. This complexity comes from several sources. First, as noted above, political secularism is not a monolithic ideology and there is a contention among political secularists over what form of secularity they would like to achieve.

Second, religion is less monolithic than political secularism. This includes competition between religions as well as competition within the same religious tradition over how that religion should be interpreted and how it should influence government policy. In fact, it is possible for someone who is personally religious to support political secularism because political secularism focuses on limiting religion in politics and government but not necessarily in one's personal life. Even deciding what counts as "religion" is a fraught issue across multiple contexts.

Third, motivations for religion policy are complex. For example, a government can support a religion because it wants to strengthen and support a religion. Yet that same support can also be a form of control. For instance, government financial support for religion can be a form of control. If religious institutions become dependent upon that support, they can be vulnerable to threats of its withdrawal. In practice, most governments which overtly seek to control and limit religion also support it (Fox 2015). State support for religion can also determine matters of theology. For example, in several European countries with state religions, the government can influence matters of theology. Government pressure is

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likely responsible for the Lutheran churches of Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and Denmark allowing women to be ordinated as priests[1] (Kuhle 2011).

Fourth, local and national governments are often at odds over religion policy. For example, the wearing of head coverings and more conservative forms of religious dress such as Burkas is restricted by many regional and local governments in Europe but far less often by national governments. Also, in the West, restrictions on building Mosques are far more likely to come from local rather than national governments (Fox 2015; 2016).

Fifth, not all government religion policies are motivated by religion. For example, governments can see minority religious populations as well as the religious institutions of the minority religion as a challenge to their political power and, in the case of religious minorities especially, as a threat to national security. This can result in government restrictions on religious institutions (Cesari 2009). Motivations for discrimination can also be cultural. For example, governments and religious majorities can also see religious minorities as non-indigenous, having no legitimate presence in the country's national culture. Other motivations include past or present conflict with religious minorities, anti-cult policies, minority practices that are in some manner objectionable to the majority scapegoating by political entrepreneurs and societal prejudices, among others (Fox 2016).

Sixth, as Gill (2008) and Sarkissian (2015) point out, government religion policy can often be motivated by the desire of politicians to stay in power and rule more efficiently. Religious institutions which support a government can make that government more legitimate and it can encourage moral behavior. Both of these reduce the need for expenditures on law enforcement and security.

Seventh, the competition over government religion policy incudes multiple actors and interests competing in a complex political and religious economy. While this form of complexity overlaps with those already discussed, it is important to emphasize that policy is not formed by abstractions such as "secularism" and "religion" but by people and individuals. Religious leaders and political leaders are obvious examples but there are many potential actors that can influence this process. As noted above, individuals who are ostensibly in the same camp often have very different ideas on how the abstract ideas that influence their camp should be interpreted, understood, and translated into policy.

Eighth, secular–religious competition does not occur in a vacuum. This competition interacts with other political and social agendas and forces such as nationalism and competition over a wide variety of social and

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political issues. The issue of religion policy also competes with others for attention and resources.

Finally, as Wilson (2012) points out, the meaning of religion can change based on its context and the perspective of the actor who is viewing religion. I would add to this complexity that the nature of religion and how it relates to politics and society can also evolve over time and that these issues also apply to political secularist ideologies.

From my perspective, the case studies included in this volume support both the secular–religious competition perspective and my contention that this competition is a complex one. Matthias Kortmann examines the debates around "the role of Islamic organizations in welfare delivery in Germany and the Netherlands." The use of non-governmental non-profit organizations, including religious ones, as providers of welfare services is not uncommon worldwide and is becoming more common in the West. Any cases where religious organizations are considered as potential welfare providers involve issues of religion and state as well as secular–religious competition. While neutralist models would allow religious providers of welfare services, as long as organizations from all religions are given equal opportunity to become providers, several strands of political secularism oppose such involvement altogether. Such a policy would violate the secularist–laicism and absolute separationist perspectives on political secularism. Thus when the first religious institutions enter such a market, this changes the status quo between religious and secular institutions. It also often changes the status quo between religions, as in most cases not all religions become providers of social services. There is also competition between potential providers of different religions to gain contracts.

As Kortmann focuses on Islamic welfare organizations in Christian-majority countries, the competition in his case study between Christianity and Islam adds complexity to an already complex structural situation. In Germany, the issue is whether the government will allow an Islamic welfare organization or Islamic organizations similar to already existing Christian and Jewish welfare organizations. While on a macro-level Germany's government adopts a neutralist perspective and supports "the inclusion of Islamic organizations as a means of both equal treatment and integration," there remain many obstacles to this goal. Some are technical including questions of whether these organizations are sufficiently "qualified and professionalized," though the extent to which "professionalized" equates with "secularized" is an issue raised by several authors (Lynch and Schwartz 2016; Ngo 2018). Others are

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more overtly religious–secular issues. For example, Islamic welfare organizations are seen as not having "a separation of religious and social activities, a division which in Christian organizations is seen as the consequence of a long process of social differentiation." German Christian Democrats argue "that social services were not rooted as much in the tradition of Islam" as they are in Christianity. Even the organizational issues include religious undertones with suggestions that Islamic organizations are not as centralized as Christian churches which make them less suitable organizationally to be welfare providers.

Interestingly, Christian welfare organizations are among the more vocal supporters of an Islamic welfare organization. This is primarily because they feel this will strengthen religious participation in welfare and that their own organizations are not well positioned to serve the Muslim community. Also they fear losing their Christian identity when they serve Muslims. Yet, even these organizations ask for a level of secularization in the Muslim welfare organization, in that such an organization serves members of all religions, not just Muslims.

The discourse in the Netherlands is similar with questions regarding the organizational capability and professionalism of Islamic welfare organizations and their commitment to serving non-Muslims as well as the extent of the separation of welfare and religious activities in these organizations. Some political actors even accuse Islamic welfare organizations of using their activities to engage in religious recruitment.

Yet there are differences between the two countries. Germany sees Christianity as a defining element of its country and "the question of involving Islamic organizations in welfare is primarily perceived as the challenge of including them in structures first and foremost shaped by Christianity." In contrast, in the Netherlands "when it comes to Islam, Dutch politicians particularly from liberal and left parties have moved away from the equal treatment perspective in favor of a view that restricts religious activities in the public sphere generally." Thus, while the debates in these countries seem similar, the motivations behind them are different. In Germany, secularist motivations and a desire to maintain a dominant Christian culture are both elements of the debate, while in the Netherlands, it is primarily secularists seeking to maintain a more secular public space.

Luca Ozzano and Chiara Maritato compare Italy and Turkey, two countries which in the past contained the seat of power of their respective religions, though the temporal power of the Papacy has declined significantly and the Caliphate has been abolished and replaced by a state-controlled

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entity. In modern Italy, the Catholic Church has become a political actor which pursues an agenda of influencing policy in several ways. These include lobbying policymakers, appealing directly to the public to influence public opinion, and acting through the Catholic civil societies which it nurtures and supports. With these tools, it competes with secular political actors over issues such as same-sex marriage in order to influence government policy in accordance with its religious preferences.

Turkey's official religious organization, the Diyanet, for most of its history was an instrument of secular control. Yet Turkey's secular ideology established by the country's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk still had to compete with Islam which remained ingrained in society. For most of Turkey's history, while maintaining an overall secularist policy which included bans on wearing the Islamic headscarf in many public places, the government used the Diyanet to control Islam within Turkey and prevent Islam from undermining the country's secular ideology or challenging the country's government. In 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came into power and in time began to use the Diyanet to propagate its more conservative Islamic ideology. In essence, this change of government allowed the religious forces in society, which had not been given much voice in Turkey's until then secular dominated government, to begin pursuing their agenda.

Thus, the Diyanet has been an effective tool for governments motivated by both secular and religious ideologies. While the Diyanet always propagated a single school of Sunni Islam, Hanefi Islam, it was more pluralistic during Turkey's secularist era. When Islam was to be kept in check, internal pluralism was possible. However, when the new religiously conservative government took over, they eliminated the "Diyanet's internal pluralism" in favor of "a blind orthodox Sunni-Hanefi Islam." This is a significant consequence in a shift in the competition between religious and secular political actors. This contrast between Italy and Turkey also illustrates how religious institutions can be both actors and tools in secular–religious competition under different historical and political circumstances.

Hanna Pfeifer examines the politics of secularism in Tunisia. She argues that the pre-Arab Spring regime supported Islam and selectively coopted its intuitions and actors in order to control and limit Islam as a source of opposition to the regime. Thus, the government supported Islam and promoted a particular version of Islam which suited the regime's interests, in order to control it, a tactic that is common worldwide

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(Fox 2015). At the same time, the regime demonized Islamists as dangerous and violent. Pfeifer argues that this is a form of secularist policy.

This history influenced Rached al-Ghannouchi, one of the founding fathers of Ennhada, an Islamic party that was successful in the post-revolutionary Tunisian elections. Ghannouchi argued that secularism was important not to protect the state from religion, but to protect religion from the state. States can potentially be anti-religious and limit all religion or support only one type of a religion in this case Islam, and destroy the religion's internal pluralism. He therefore supported state neutrality on religion. When in power, the Ennhada party largely adopted this policy. In fact, "Ennahda's inclusion into Tunisian political processes exposed it to secularism's normative power to which it reacted, among others, by adapting its discourse on religion, politics, and the state."

Teije H. Donker also examines post-revolutionary Tunisia focusing "on tensions around the dismissal of an activist imam, Ridha Jaouadi, from the largest mosque in Sfax." In doing so he discusses multiple views within Islamic society in Tunisia on the role of religion and mosques in the state, each of which has different consequences for government religion policy. They can be a distinct specialized sector that provides a public service that the government should support. The Ennahda party sees them as essential to "strengthening Tunisian identity and society by supporting its religious characteristics." As such it is important that Mosques remain independent of the state. Others see them as independent institutions representing the larger Islamic community which "stands apart from—but still recognizes—Tunisian society." This perspective also supports the independence of Mosques from the government but in order to place public religion above the Tunisian nation state. "Finally, there are those that view that Islam is the fundamental pillar of collective identity in the Muslim world, and that mosques should be the only institution structuring its society. This position places religion as a direct competitor to the nation state."

He also discusses different perspectives on the source of an Imam's authority. It can be based on popular recognition, an independent accrediting organization which may have state support, the state itself, or by religious authorities. Each of these means of selecting Imams has significant implications for religion–state relations. Thus, Donker's discussion focuses less on secular–religious competition and more on the competition within the religious camp of what is the proper role of religion in society. For this reason, it is not surprising that Donker concludes that "a competition perspective is rather limited in its ability to explain the observed

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positions." Yet, I disagree with this conclusion. This is because one may be personally religious but support political secularism—the belief that religion should not be the business of government. Those who support the independence of Mosques from the state in this sense have beliefs that include elements of political secularism.

Donker also criticizes the secular–religious competition perspective on a more theoretical and methodological level. This includes three "critiques." "First, by viewing state–religion relations as an outcome of a competition between political secularism and religion, a complex social process is reduced to a single ideological opposition." Second the question of "drawing the boundary" between religion and politics does not stand on its own. "How actors articulate this boundary closely relates to other social boundaries in public life" and "the articulation of state religion relations cannot be seen in isolation from other conflicts and social boundaries in public life." "Third, by reducing these activities to a one-dimensional conflict between political secularism and religion, the competition perspective underestimates the level of agency actors derive from the multifaceted nature of these conflicts."

These are all excellent questions but I see them less as critiques than issues of what ought to be studied and how it should be studied. For example, I explicitly characterize the competition perspective as "among the most massive of oversimplifications." (Fox 2015, 33) However, many of the best theories are useful simplifications that allow us to understand a more complex reality. Of course this competition exists in a more complex context where many other factors influence government religion policy. As I point out in multiple places (e.g., Fox 2015; 2018; 2019) as well as can be seen from the contributions to this volume, there is a significant disagreement and competition within religious and secular camps. I also specifically argue that multiple political actors are involved in this competition and use quite a few examples of the behavior of these actors to drive this point home. However, I argue that the focus on this secular–religious competition provides important insights that had previously been overlooked or at least under-emphasized.

Thus, I agree with Donker that the social reality is far more complex than a simple secular–religious competition. I also agree that it takes place in the context of other social and political struggles. However, I disagree with his characterization of this as a problem. Rather, I posit that using this theoretical and methodological tool provides a useful and even critical means to understand a complex issue that might get lost in a study that is cluttered with every possible aspect of "social reality."

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Additionally, a study that looks at 183 countries (Fox, 2015; 2019) must in some way focus on the bigger picture in order to discuss such a massive amount of information in any useful manner. I seriously question whether Donker's approach would even be possible in a single work across so many cases. While my approach certainly results in a loss of the detail and color that a case study approach can bring, it can be a powerful method to discern larger patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed. I also am confident that my study of 117 specific policies in 183 countries over a 25-year period provides a good level of detail while still being able to examine the larger picture. In fact, in other forums, I have been accused of providing too many details (Christiano 2017). Thus, from my perspective, I posit that to provide a detailed discussion of "*how* religion is placed versus state power." But, I do so using a macro-level approach.

I also agree with Donker's assertion that "it is not enough to explore the outcome of an ideological competition. We have to explore claims and actions of actors as they participate in these conflicts." However, I would argue that there is also value in studying government religion policy itself for several interrelated reasons. My approach is an excellent method to demonstrate that competition between religious and secular political actors not only exists, but it is also ubiquitous throughout the world. That is, I demonstrate that there is a phenomenon that needs to be explained and explored further. While collecting data on polices themselves (or as Donker calls them "outcomes") for the entire world over a significant period of time is a monumental task, it is one that can be accomplished. The type of study Donker suggests requires in-depth case studies each of which would stand on its own because that topic does not lend itself well to standardization when using a classical comparative approach. I also doubt that 183 such studies (assuming one study per country) would fit well into a single volume much less efficiently compare across these cases to determine larger cross-country patterns.

Yet, I not only welcome studies which delve into the minutia of the behavior of political actors, I feel such studies are absolutely necessary. Over my two decades as a social scientist, I have heard many claims, like those of Donker, that only some topics may be studied and that there are only certain ways they may be studied. I reject this type of exclusivist claim. I believe no topic should be excluded from the study and that all topics should be studied from every angle, perspective, and methodology possible. More specifically, I believe that all aspects of the general topic of politics and religion, which includes but is certainly not limited to competition between religious and secular political actors, should be

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open to the study from all possible perspectives and methodologies. No one methodology or perspective has a monopoly on insight. While I choose to focus my efforts in certain areas using mostly large-*n* methodology, I believe that dialogue and interactions between multiple methodologies from multiple perspectives including Donker's, my own, and many others will likely bring us closer to full understanding than methodological exclusivity. The argument that some aspects of the larger topic ought to be excluded from the universe of analysis is a significant obstacle to understanding. Put differently, we should not be arguing over the best way to study the issue of secular–religious competition or what aspect of it to study, but rather, be seeking to accumulate insights from as many perspectives and methodologies on as many aspects of it as possible.

The case studies in this volume are a case in point. They provide a level of detail and insight into each of the cases which are their focus that is usually not achievable in a cross-country quantitative study. In addition, each takes its own perspective and uses its own methodology. Collectively, they provide a glimpse into the many ways that competition between secular and religious political forces in society can emerge, evolve, and influence politics. They also are explicitly influenced by my own work as well as that of many others, making them part of a larger and more fruitful conversation.

Yet their findings show some striking commonalities across the cases. First, the status quo of government religion policy evolves over time and occasionally changes abruptly. While a significant portion of this evolution and change can be attributed to secular–religious competition, many other forces and factors are in play. Second, there is a complex relationship between the religious and the secular as well as within the secular and religious camps individually. In fact, these contributions demonstrate that the line between what is politically religious and secular can blur to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to tell if a policy is truly religious or secular. Third, many of the cases show a trajectory where in the past governments were more closely linked to religion. This was followed by a decline in government support for religion and in some cases hostility to religion. However, recently, religion has returned as a potent or at least relevant political force. These insights make use of and mirror arguments by Juergensmeyer (1993; 2008) and Toft et al. (2011), among others. Fourth, individual actors are often influential in this secular–religious competition. Finally, while the status quo of secular–religious competition varies over place and time, this competition remains ubiquitous but plays out in a unique manner in each country.

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Overall, this symposium is an excellent example of how a group of scholars from different disciplines and sub-disciplines, using different perspectives, methodologies, and cases, can collectively contribute to our understanding of religion and politics more effectively and fruitfully than most scholars can accomplish individually or when limiting their conversation to only those who are like-minded. That is, it is a collective endeavor that benefits from multiple approaches and methodologies as well as scholarly disagreement. It is also a good example of how theorizing about religion, secularism, and politics is a work in progress. I believe the secular–religious competition perspective is a step forward in this collective work in progress but would never argue that it can explain religion and politics in isolation.

## NOTE

1. While Norway and Sweden have since disestablished their national Churches these pressures and changes occurred mostly before this disestablishment.

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