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Assertive Secularism, Fear of Religion and Political Mobilization: Proposing a Comparison Between the United States and Turkey

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Abstract: This article examines the mobilization strategies of assertive secularist movements in Turkey and corresponding patterns among political movements in the United States. It analyzes the possible constituency for assertive secularism in the U.S. context and compares the role fear of “religious reaction” plays for secularists in both countries. After warning about the dangers of a “secularism trap”, the article proposes further research to test patterns of assertive secularist political mobilization against further cases.

Keywords: assertive secularism; religious conflict; Christian nationalism; religious reaction; Turkey

1. Introduction

On 6 January 2021, a mob of protesters stormed the United States capital, seeking to overturn Joe Biden’s election as President of the United States. The iconography of these protests ranged from American and confederate flags to patriotic symbols of all kinds, to images associated with Donald Trump and his MAGA movement, and in one particularly famous image, even included a pagan figure known as the Q-anon shaman. Yet, in a story made famous in his recent book *Who’s Afraid of Christian Nationalism*, when scholar Mark David Hall was contacted by journalists for comment about January 6, they asked him about the Christian Nationalist imagery on display. After careful examination of the scene, Hall found very little Christian imagery of any kind (Hall 2024, chap. 1). Yet, the story of January 6 as a “Christian Nationalist” insurrection remains a prominent media narrative in the United States.

Almost 112 years earlier, an abortive coup launched in what was then the Ottoman Empire drew a similar reaction. On 31 March 1909, a rebellion broke out against the new government of the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP). The reasons for the rebellion were complex, stemming from dissatisfaction by traditional military officers who were being supplanted by their Western-educated counterparts, desire for a more liberal or federal solution to the turmoil in the empire, and disgruntlement by some Islamic elements about the assertive secularism of the CUP (Azak 2010). Though the coup was spearheaded by the opposition Liberal Party, the narrative of the CUP described March 31 as an example of “irtica”, or Islamic reaction (Azak 2010).

The similarity between these two elite secular reactions is striking. In both cases, non-religious explanations carried at least as much, if not more, causal force than religious explanations. The January 6 storming of the capitol occurred amid a highly polarized political moment and was itself relatively devoid of Christian iconography. To be sure, many evangelical Christian supporters of Donald Trump believed he had actually won the 2020 election, but there was no evidence that they held these views at higher rates than non-evangelical supporters of Trump. Likewise, the 1909 coup was supported by a number



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of groups, of whom the Liberal Party was likely the best organized and the most politically potent. Nevertheless, in both cases, the narrative embraced by a highly educated, largely secular elite was one of the religious reactionaries seeking to exert power in the state. This commonality, then, raises an interesting question: is fear of reactionary religion part of a broader similarity in the discourse of assertive secularist movements and regimes around the globe?

Secularism is a complex phenomenon, and scholars of comparative politics and international relations have both defined and categorized secularism in several different ways. It is hardly controversial in the secularism literature to stipulate that, for example, America and France are both “secular” countries, but that the varieties of secularism in the two countries differ. The conversation becomes even broader if we compare, for example, secularism in highly religious India with the secularism of various Marxist-Leninist regimes during the 20th century. Alfred Stepan identifies no less than seven different possible relationships between religion and the state, of which three or four might be classified as secular (Stepan 2010, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1643701, accessed on 2 January 2025). While Stepan’s seven-fold breakdown is highly descriptive, for the purposes of this study, Ahmet Kuru’s typology, which divides secularism into “passive” and “assertive” forms, will be employed. Kuru’s work focuses more closely on the way in which varieties of secularism respond to religion, and as such, his categories establish a useful framework for testing secular responses to religion.

Kuru describes assertive secularism, which is sometimes also described by the French term “laïcité”, as a doctrine that “requires the state to play an ‘assertive’ role to exclude religion from the public sphere, and confine it to the private domain” (Kuru 2009, chap. 1). Put differently, assertive secularism envisions the state ensuring freedom from religion and seeks to minimize or altogether eliminate any religious expression in the public square. Assertive secularism is always a project tied to state power and control since assertive secularists see the state as necessary to protect a vulnerable society from the hostile presence of public religion. In short, assertive secularists will always perceive themselves to be acting defensively, protecting society against what they perceive to be oppression at the hands of politically active religion. Thus, for assertive secularism, a certain type of politically active religion takes on the role of the feared other against whom the right-thinking public ought to be mobilized.

Yet, as Kuru makes clear, there is another variant of secularism—which he calls “passive secularism”. He argues that passive secularism “demands that the state play a ‘passive’ role by allowing the public visibility of religion” (Kuru 2009, chap. 5). As he explains the difference: “Assertive secularism is a ‘comprehensive doctrine’, whereas passive secularism mainly prioritizes state neutrality toward such doctrines” (Kuru 2009, chap. 1). America, as Kuru rightly points out, not only has a long history of passive secularism but may, in fact, be close to the ideal case. Turkish secularism, by contrast, has historically been quite assertive. However, Kuru further points out that, in systems dominated either by passive or assertive secularism, the other form of secularism is likely to be present, at least in opposition (Kuru 2009, chap. 1).

This article suggests that a cohort of irreligious, white, educated Americans has, perhaps unconsciously, adopted assertive secularism. While passive secularism takes no doctrinal positions, assertive secularism brings with it an associated ideology that is remarkably consistent across cases. This ideology includes fear of public “reactionary” religion as a core motivation and source of mobilization, a juxtaposition of “bad” politicized religion against “good” apolitical religion, a narrative that assertive secularism is under constant threat, even as it advances in culture and politics; and the eventual development of religious or quasi-religious modes of expression through which secularism itself becomes a

source of transcendent meaning. This assertive secularism, in the American context, would likely intensify cultural, political, and ideological polarization, potentially leading to what David Buckley calls a “secularism trap”, which he defines as “the breakdown of democracy due to the decision of either religious or secular elites to pursue maximalist demands related to the place of religion in democratic politics” (Buckley 2017, p. 3). To be clear, a secularism trap is not a desirable outcome for either assertive secularists or their antagonists. Much like the security dilemma in international relations, it arises from misperceptions, as one actor makes moves that it perceives to be “defensive”, that is, perceived by the other actor as “aggressive” (Jervis). In short, assertive secularists believe, probably quite genuinely, that they are acting defensively. Yet, in practice, assertive secularism’s tendency to mobilize fear of religion as a means of achieving its ends risks creating that which it claims to fear most.

To explore these claims, this article provides a comparative historical analysis of assertive secularist elite discourse in the United States and Turkey. In particular, the analysis compares discourse among assertive secularist elites in the late Ottoman and early Kemalist periods with elite discourse among potential assertive secularists in the contemporary United States. The underlying circumstances of the two cases are, of course, quite distinct, which might lead to an argument that the cases are not comparable. On the one hand, the United States is a mature democracy with a long history of peaceful transitions of power, robust protections for civil rights and religious freedoms, and democratic institutions designed to withstand social upheaval. On the other, assertive secularism in Turkey emerged in reaction to an authoritarian regime which, in its latter years, was heavily reliant on political Islam for its legitimacy. Whatever their excesses, Turkish assertive secularists were indeed responding to a regime that was reactionary and drew on religious justifications for itself. The degree to which America’s would-be assertive secularists are aggressive or reactionary is hotly contested, and as will be discussed below, one’s perception on this point heavily depends on one’s own partisan and religious alignments. But there can be no doubt that Turkey’s assertive secularists were responding to very real religious authoritarianism from the regime of Abdulhamid II. Equally, there can be no doubt that their response was far more authoritarian than any assertive secularist project in the United States could reasonably hope to be, given the institutional constraints of the American system.

However, the very differences between the Turkish and American cases are, in fact, illustrative of the arguments this article advances. Despite their very different contexts, this article will demonstrate that elite assertive secularists in the U.S. and Turkey have developed a remarkably similar narrative regarding fear of religion, which they use to support attempted political mobilization from their allies. To be sure, there are differences dictated by the differing circumstances. Turkey’s assertive secularists used their real, tangible control of the military and bureaucratic levers of Turkey’s “deep state” to constrain any expression of public religion in Turkey. While it certainly could be argued that at least some American assertive secularists might support a similar policy, institutional constraints on any antidemocratic limitations of religious freedom in the United States remain robust. As a result, American assertive secularists, necessarily, must pursue more democratic strategies reliant on building a coalition for their preferred policies.

While their strategies differ, the demographics, ideology, and rhetorical strategies of Turkey’s assertive secularists have been remarkably consistent with those pursued by some secularist elites in the contemporary United States. On this basis, we can, at least conceptually, argue for assertive secularism as a new and relatively influential phenomenon in the U.S. In Turkey, assertive secularism was a phenomenon of the educated elite, and the constituency most hostile to and fearful of politically active religion in the United States is also a relatively elite cohort. Both Turkish assertive secularists and American

elites hostile to politically active religion draw on fear of reactionary religion as a source of political mobilization while also manufacturing a category of “good” religion that is either apolitical or supportive of assertive secularist ends. Finally, just as American elites hostile to politically active religion could risk creating a secularism trap, assertive secularists in Turkey played no small role in creating the conditions that have given rise to the nation’s more recent turn to assertive political Islam. Thus, notwithstanding the many differences between the Turkish and American cases, we can draw two conclusions at a conceptual level. First, American elites that are hostile to politically active religion have enough in common with their Turkish counterparts that it is reasonable to describe them, using Kuru’s typology, as “assertive secularists”. Second, and following from the first, the lessons of assertive secularism in Turkey may prove instructive in charting the potential trajectory of the corresponding movement within the United States. In so far as this is the case, the outcome for the U.S. could be rather grim, but our analysis concludes with a hopeful note: America has a long and largely beneficial tradition of passive secularism. By leaning into this passive secularist tradition, Americans, both secular and religious, have ample opportunity to avoid a secularism trap.

2. The Case for Assertive Secularists as a Distinct, Elite Minority in the United States

According to a Pew Forum report from January 2024 ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)), approximately 28% of Americans identify as irreligious, or in a popular social-scientific term, “nones” ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)). These “nones” break down into three sub-groups: atheists, 17%, agnostics, 20%, and those who describe their religious beliefs as “nothing in particular” 63% ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)). On the whole, Pew finds that atheists and agnostics are whiter, more male, and more college-educated than those who said “nothing in particular”, and have higher rates of civic participation ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)). In fact, while “nones” overall have lower rates of civic participation than religious Americans, atheists, and agnostics participate in civic activities at the same rate as religiously affiliated Americans who regularly attend religious services ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)). Atheists and agnostics also had more negative views of religion than those who said “nothing in particular”; while all “nones” have generally less favorable views of religion than religiously affiliated Americans, atheists and agnostics were the most likely to reject any statements about positive contributions religion makes in society ([Pew Research Center 2024](#)).

In a separate study, Pew analyzed Americans’ view of public religion as a whole and, again, found atheists and agnostics to be outliers. On the whole, 57% of respondents in this survey held positive views of religion, with 49% saying that religion’s influence is declining, and this is a bad thing, while 8% believed religion is gaining influence and saw this as positive ([Smith et al. 2024](#)). By contrast, 19% expressed negative views of religion, with 13% saying religion’s influence is shrinking and this is good, while 6% claimed religion’s influence is growing, which they viewed as a bad thing ([Smith et al. 2024](#)). While Christians were more likely than the general public to hold positive views of religion, atheists and agnostics were statistically more likely to hold negative views, and those who chose “nothing in particular” were, again, in the middle ([Smith et al. 2024](#)).

The Pew study also provides useful context relevant to the danger of a secularism trap, operating domestically along the logic of the security dilemma in international relations. In the same study, Pew asked two separate questions on whether secular liberals or conservative Christians had gone too far in trying to push their views on the public. In other words, these questions measure the degree to which conservative Christians or secular liberals are seen as the aggressors in the culture war. When asked about secular liberals, 83% of white

evangelicals, along with smaller majorities of non-evangelical white Protestants, white Catholics, and Hispanic and African-American Protestants, said yes (Smith et al. 2024). By contrast, when asked if conservative Christians have gone too far, 91% of atheists and 85% of agnostics said yes (Smith et al. 2024). In terms of the secularism trap, this means that evangelical Protestants, on one hand, and agnostics/atheists, on the other, are predisposed to think of the other side as the cultural aggressor. This could predispose both sides to (A) use fear of the other to mobilize their political constituents and (B) take actions they perceive as “defensive” that is perceived by the other side as “aggressive”. These religious divides are also reflected in political partisanship. Pew found that about three quarters of Republicans think secular liberals have gone too far, and a similar number of Democrats think conservative Christians have gone too far (Smith et al. 2024). A long history of pre-existing social science data has shown that regular attendance at religious services is one of the most accurate predictors of white political partisanship in America: African Americans, of course, tend to vote overwhelmingly Democratic regardless of religious participation. There is some evidence from the 2024 election that Hispanic/Latino Americans are beginning to vote more like white Americans: that is, evangelical Hispanic/Latino voters appear to be tilting toward Republicans at an accelerated rate as compared with non-evangelical Hispanic/Latino voters. Among non-Christian but religious Americans, the picture is more mixed: the Pew Forum study shows that over 70% of Jewish Americans think Christian conservatives have “gone too far” (Smith et al. 2024), but this does not disaggregate for religious observance among the Jewish population. For other religious minorities, such as Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, and Asian-Americans of non-Christian backgrounds, there are likely to be tension points between concern about the explicitly Christian emphasis of many religious conservatives and the “naked public square” ethos of assertive secularists. It is noteworthy, for example, that recent protests against public school LGBT curricula deemed explicit in Montgomery County, Maryland, prominently included Muslims. Thus, we would expect to see these groups possibly viewing both sides as “going too far” in pushing their beliefs on the public.

Taken together, these findings indicate several things. First, college-educated white atheists and agnostics represent a dissenting minority viewpoint that is statistically highly likely to be more supportive of assertive secularism than the general public. Since atheists and agnostics think religion is harmful at a far higher rate than the American public at large, it logically follows that they are the most likely cohort of Americans to be open to the idea that the government must limit religion’s role in order to protect the public. And indeed, this cohort overwhelmingly sees Christian conservatives as the aggressor in the culture war, which would make them even more predisposed toward more government intervention to regulate religion. In an American context, this assertive secularism would likely pursue policies permitting governments to restrict free exercise while restricting governments’ ability to provide benevolent/neutral support for religion. Assertive secularists, then, might hypothetically favor the removal of religious monuments from public land, restriction of tax-exempt status for religious organizations, and other strict interpretations of the establishment clause of the First Amendment. At the same time, they might oppose robust conscience protections for religious objections to secular policies from the provision of abortion to support for LGBT rights claims to religious exceptions from government dress codes (such as the burqa for Muslims, the kirpan for Sikhs, or wearing of a crucifix for Catholics).

Second, these hypothetical assertive secularists would be out of step with a modest majority of Americans who believe religion does more good than harm (and less than a fifth of the American population finds religion harmful). However, an assertive secularist dissenting minority would find more support—roughly half the country and a majority of

Democrats—for the idea that conservative Christians, in particular, have gone too far in pushing their agenda. Thus, a politically active, assertive secularist cohort would be highly likely to focus its attention on limiting the influence of conservative Christians, with an eye toward using those limits to pursue their preferred policies in the country as a whole.

Finally, this dissenting minority's actions and attitudes have been noticed by their political opponents, and majorities—either slight or substantial—of America's largest Christian traditions by population are concerned that secular liberals have gone too far in pushing their agenda. Thus, the actions of Christian conservatives perceived as “aggressive” or “going too far” by potential assertive secularists are themselves perceived as defensive by conservative Christians. As religious participation has become a proxy for voting patterns, the tension between assertive secularists and conservative Christians, each of which seeks to use fear of the other as a tool to mobilize its own side, will only increase this polarization. In the worst case, such polarization can lead to what David Buckley calls a “secularism trap”. Buckley describes the logic of a secularism trap as follows: “Both religious and secular elites have incentives to make maximalist demands. . . . However, if either group does so, democracy fails because either religious demands undercut rights protections or secularist restrictions cut off political participation by religious actors. . . . In such contexts, a trap looms. Democracy could empower an antidemocratic religious majority, but limits on that majority would cut off any meaningful democratization. Fear of religious domination provokes a backlash as anti-religious forces exclude religious movements from public life and in the process cut short democratic participation” (Buckley 2017, p. 3).

With this context in mind, it is reasonable to hypothesize that college-educated white atheists and agnostics who see religion as harmful might use fear of Christian conservatives pushing their agenda to try and mobilize support for a more assertive secularist approach to public religion.

Suppose the conditions are ripe for the rise of a more assertive secular movement among white, college-educated atheists and agnostics. In that case, there is, as yet, little evidence that such a movement would have mass appeal beyond this segment of the population. After all, as the above Pew data indicates, the majority of Americans still see religion as more helpful than harmful. Yet, the Turkish case demonstrates that, if sufficiently organized and motivated, elites can capture state institutions and impose an assertive secularist ideology even when most people do not desire it. After all, if the soil of early 21st-century America does not seem to be fertile ground for assertive secularism, this is even more true of early 20th-century Turkey. Yet, as we will see, in less than two decades, the ideology of the Ottoman, and later Turkish, state was transformed from political Islam to assertive secularism.

3. The Origins and Ideology of Assertive Secularists in Turkey

It is worth examining how an educated elite in Turkey was able to impose assertive secularism on a relatively devout Turkish population long habituated to modes of rule based on political Islam. This process began in the late Ottoman period under the Committee for Union and Progress (commonly called the “Young Turks”) but accelerated and intensified under Atatürk and the other founding fathers of the Turkish Republic. What is most consistent from the Young Turks to Atatürk is the rational, secular nationalist, social-scientific positivist ideological core of their state-building project, (Findley 2010, chap. 3). They were secular in a very continental European sense of the word, valuing technocratic efficiency, centralized authority, and the power of the military as a tool of social change. They viewed Islam, and political Islam in particular, as retrogressive, an obstacle to progress and reform, and useful only in so far as it could serve to promote solidarity among the Turkish people.

The Committee for Union and Progress came to power through a confluence of factors revolving around Abdulhamid II, the last effective Ottoman Sultan. Abdulhamid's mode of rule can best be described as bureaucratic authoritarianism justified on the grounds of political Islam (Findley 2010, chap. 3). However, political stagnation, military defeats, and discontentment among a rising class of professionally educated military officers led to a soft coup that saw the CUP gradually consolidate power from 1908 to 1913 (Findley 2010, chap. 3). The military and civilian members of the CUP were influenced by the German philosophy of "vulgar materialism" propounded by German philosopher Ludwig Buchner. As M. Sukran Hanioglu explains: "This was a vulgarized version of the doctrine of materialism, fusing popular notions of materialism, scientism, and Darwinism into a simplistic creed that upheld the role of science in society. The late Ottoman version of this materialism was a further simplification of the German original and a medley of highly disparate ideas, the common denominator of which was the rejection of religion. The Young Turks were oblivious to the irony inherent in their own uninhibited worship of prominent German materialists" (Hanioglu 2017, pp. 48–49). In this respect, among others, Mustafa Kemal built on, and in some ways surpassed, the work of the Young Turks.

Like the CUP, Mustafa Kemal was committed to eliminating political Islam from the public square, as demonstrated by his campaign to abolish the Caliphate once he gained control of the Turkish state. Ataturk and his allies in the Republican People's Party were motivated by ideology. As Ahmet Kuru puts it: "It is not possible to analyze the Kemalist reforms without taking assertive secularist ideology seriously. A simply interest-based approach would have a hard time explaining certain reforms, from the Hat Law to the ban on the Arabic ezan (call to prayer), which had little to do with material interests. Economically, these reforms did not contribute to development. Politically, they were very risky and costly because they resulted in popular opposition. Ideology was the main impulse behind these reforms" (Kuru 2009, chap. 7). What Ataturk seems to have hoped for was a gradual withering away of Islam, to be replaced by Turkish nationalism. Taking to heart the late Ottoman saying that "religion is the science of the masses", he sought to use religion to shape a national character, and firmly believed it would eventually pass away as society modernized. Thus, Turkish Islam was to be a waystation on the way to nationalism.

Whatever his thoughts about the "science of the masses", Ataturk was profoundly committed to laicite for the elites and in the educational sphere. Moreover, he sought to replace devotion to Islam with a fervent embrace of Turkish nationalism, which he sometimes took to bizarre, ahistorical extremes (Hanioglu 2017, chap. 7). On the whole, the CUP and Ataturk oversaw one of the most massive transformations of a predominantly Islamic society in the 20th century. The secularists banished all forms of Islamic legitimacy from the public sphere and transformed the legal and political apparatus of the state in a consciously and rigorously irreligious and scientific direction.

4. Comparing the Scope and Scale of Assertive Secularism in Turkey and the United States

To be sure, America's assertive secularists lack the means to transform American society as thoroughly and rapidly as the CUP and Ataturk. Whatever its flaws, American democracy is certainly more robust than that of the late Ottoman Empire or early Turkish Republic. In addition, as Ahmet Kuru makes clear, the establishment of assertive secularism was made possible by a wide-open window for institutional change. As he puts it: "The Kemalists succeeded in establishing assertive secularism during the founding of the republic, which was a critical juncture, when the old regime was declining, and the new regime was unpredictable, and charismatic leaders like Ataturk had enormous leverage to change dominant ideology and institutions. During this critical period, both agency and

structure were ready for change in Turkey” (Kuru 2009, chap. 7). It is by no means clear that conditions in the United States are so ripe for institutional transformation.

Still, Atatürk’s transformation of Turkey is important for this comparative study because it shows how thorough and ideologically assertive secularism can be as a doctrine. And, as Atatürk’s biographer M. Hanioglu makes clear, Atatürk did not emerge in a vacuum. As he explains: “Many of the radical ideas destined to become central planks in Mustafa Kemal’s reform program were widely held in intellectual circles at the turn of the twentieth century and were expressed with increasing explicitness after the Young Turk Revolution” (Hanioglu in Stepan and Kuru 2012, chap. 4). Thus, if Atatürk’s radical transformation of society from political Islam to assertive secularism is unlikely to be replicated in the American case, it is nevertheless instructive to examine whether his predecessors in the CUP and the intellectual milieu from which they emerged have any parallels with the views of white, educated atheists and agnostics in America.

With this in mind, we can indeed see some ideological parallels between the materialistic, scientific ideology of the CUP and the views of American atheists and agnostics. Like secular Turkish elites, America’s would-be assertive secularists have a faith in science that could easily tend to be uncritical or unskeptical. James C. Scott describes this uncritical view of science as “scientism” or “high modernism” (Scott 1998). Popular progressive slogans like “trust the science” may betoken such a shift. Perhaps more telling is the selling of prayer candles for medical experts like Anthony Fauci during covid, with a description of him as the “patron saint of reason amid chaos”. This echoes some of the cults of Atatürk developed and maintained among some Turkish secularists to this day.

Like Turkish secularists, college-educated agnostic and atheist Americans also view religion as harmful and see the political process as a means whereby religion’s harmful effects can be mitigated. This is also indicative of assertive secularism. It would be unreasonable to expect that American assertive secularists will seek to achieve these ends through the undemocratic means used in Turkey. Yet, if the means are different, the desired end may be quite similar.

There is one other crucial difference between assertive secularism in early 20th-century Turkey and its potential counterpart in 21st-century America. The current paradigm in the United States is characterized by passive secularism rather than political Islam, meaning that any would-be assertive secularists in America would be seeking a much more modest shift from benevolent neutrality toward religion to a more assertive posture that views religion as harmful to politics and actively seeks to limit its influence. Paradoxically, the less dramatic nature of the change could make it harder to achieve. In the nearly 250-year history of the United States, most Americans have been satisfied, be it sometimes grudgingly, with passive secularism. What would be needed for such a transformation, then, would be a fear that the passive secularism with which most Americans have traditionally been satisfied is under a new, pressing, and dangerous threat, requiring a more assertive government role to protect it. Any shift toward more assertive secularism in the United States, therefore, would almost certainly seek to draw on and mobilize this fear.

5. Fear of Religious Reaction Among American Assertive Secularists: A Comparison of Elite Discourse

Christian Nationalism and *The Handmaid’s Tale* are likely familiar talking points for even casual observers of American politics over the past 8 years. Based on a dystopian novel of the same name written by Margaret Atwood in the 1980s, *The Handmaid’s Tale* rapidly became a popular TV show at the beginning of the Trump administration. Iconography related to the show was prominently displayed in the 2017 Women’s March, and among subsequent public protests and social media associated with opposition to Trump. The

show and novel depict a future, post-apocalyptic society in which an ostensibly evangelical Christian theocracy has taken over America, relegating women to second-class status as either breeders or servants of the ruling male patriarchy. References to *The Handmaid's Tale* are ubiquitous in media discussions of legislation related to abortion, the role of public religion, and other socially conservative causes. The irony is that increased access to surrogacy, an issue that educated white atheists and agnostics tend to support, has been significantly less associated with *The Handmaid's Tale* in political media, notwithstanding its potentially direct relevance to themes of surrogacy found in the show.

The political discourse surrounding *The Handmaid's Tale* has been consistent since its debut but is limited to a subset of issues. As Mark David Hall exhaustively documents in his recent book *Who's Afraid of Christian Nationalism*, the recent rise of fear-based discourse on Christian Nationalism is both more widespread and somewhat all-encompassing. Hall documents a staggering mismatch between the relatively sparse available defenses of some form of Christian Nationalism, a handful of neutral scholarly and media investigations of the perceived phenomenon, and an avalanche of negative, fearful, or hostile commentary on it (Hall 2024, chaps. 2 and 3). According to the dominant narrative in both scholarly and media sources, up to half of the American population is supportive of an entirely new and highly dangerous Christian Nationalist ideology, which seeks to replace American democracy with an exclusive, theocratic nationalism for white Christians (Hall 2024, chap. 3). As Hall demonstrates, most of this argument is drawn from the work of two scholars, Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead, who probably more or less accurately determined that about 50% of the U.S. population holds traditional socially conservative views. They then conflate these socially conservative views with Christian Nationalism (Hall 2024, chap. 3). By his own estimates, using data drawn from a *Neighborly Faith* survey, Hall argues that, at most, something like 21% of the U.S. population would be sympathetic to “some form” of Christian Nationalism, though he argues that this form is, in the main, fairly non-exclusivist (Hall 2024, chap. 5). Nevertheless, Hall also critiques a relative handful of highly theoretical Calvinist Christians who have sought to offer some defense of Christian Nationalism—a program which, he rightly points out, would have little mass appeal even among white evangelical Protestants of a non-Calvinist bent, let alone an electoral majority in the country as a whole (Hall 2024, chap. 4).

Thus, Hall does much to counter the Christian Nationalist narrative found throughout media discourse, raising still unanswered questions about both the methodology underlying its specific social-scientific claims and the assumptions this narrative makes about a necessary link between traditional social attitudes and exclusivist nationalism. For the purposes of this article, however, what is more interesting is the way in which the Christian Nationalist discourse seeks to mobilize fear of religion. As the Pew Forum study indicates, roughly half of American adults think Christian conservatives may have gone too far in seeking to advance their beliefs. The Christian Nationalist discourse, then, puts a specific label on this fear, seeks to tie it into broader concerns of racial justice by attributing racial motivations to Christian Nationalism, and often ties the movement directly to Donald Trump.

The irony, of course, is that even the social-scientific work most associated with the Christian Nationalist narrative, Perry and Whitehead's *Taking America Back for God*, claims that at least a plurality of African Americans are sympathetic to what they define as “Christian Nationalism”. Political mobilization of religious communities, invocations of scripture in support of political goals, and even politicians speaking from the pulpit are quite normal elements of African-American political behavior, with a long, generally positively regarded pedigree stretching at least back to the Civil War and prominently including the civil rights movement. Thus, we see one of the hallmarks of assertive

secularism: an attempt to separate “good” and “bad” forms of religious expression. Indeed, critiques of Christian Nationalism from the ostensible movement’s co-religionists often figure prominently in the Christian Nationalist discourse.

In short, whether or not Christian Nationalism is the dangerous, growing movement its critics claim, it has certainly become the means whereby politically active critics of Christian conservatism have sought to mobilize the political participation of those who worry about conservative Christians going too far.

6. Fear of Religious Reaction or “Irtica” Among Turkey’s Assertive Secularists

Again, this pattern is reminiscent of the mobilization tactics used by assertive secularists in Turkey, beginning in the state formation period. In the 1920s, the Kemalist regime faced the Sheikh Said rebellion, which they partially attributed to some of the traditional Sufi brotherhoods that had been popular in Ottoman times. Beginning with the suppression of this rebellion, the Kemalist government used fear of irtica (religious reaction) to justify a purge of their opposition, political consolidation, and the advancement of their program for the nation (Azak 2010, introduction). Another such incident came in 1930 at a small village known as Menemen. A few minor disgruntled members of an outlawed Sufi order seem to have rallied around a figure who claimed to be the Mahdi, or Muslim messiah (Azak 2010, pp. 21–25). These rebels briefly occupied the small village of Menemen, beheading a young Kemalist officer and schoolteacher named Kubilay in the process (Azak 2010, pp. 21–37). The Kemalist government turned Kubilay into a national hero, using his martyrdom as a symbol of the danger of irtica in an attempt to reinforce the secular nature of society and the danger of political Islam (Azak 2010, introduction). Azak argues that this represents part of a broader program undertaken by the Kemalist government to differentiate “good” nominal, apolitical, personalized, and Turkified Islam from “bad” political, pan-Islamic, and “superstitious” Islam (Azak 2010, introduction). For Kemalists, freedom of conscience entailed not so much the classic notion of freedom of religion but rather the idea of government-instituted freedom from superstition, which would allow religion to take on its “natural” “reasonable” dimensions (Azak 2010, pp. 76–81). In practical terms, the Kemalists sought to achieve these ends through two main policies: the translation of the Qur’an into Turkish, and the translation of the call to prayer into Turkish (Hanioglu 2017, chap. 6). The irony is that, for Ataturk and the Kemalists, transforming Islam into a more nationalist force was the desired end goal.

7. Comparing Fear of Religious Reaction Among American and Turkish Assertive Secularists

Where there are differences in American and Turkish assertive secularists’ approaches to mobilizing fear of religion for political purposes, they seem to be driven more by circumstances. Turkey’s assertive secularists supported the unmodified vision of Ataturk. While never electorally popular, assertive secularists controlled the commanding heights of the deep state. Assertive secularists, therefore, always saw themselves as playing an extra-constitutional guardian role in protecting the modernizing vision of Ataturk against irtica (Azak 2010). As a result, they drew on nationalist themes, valorized the military, and saw secular education as a necessary vector to preserve and spread their ideology. As a result, it is not surprising that Kubilay’s death “became central to the narration of the rebellion. Representing the two most important institutions of the secular state, namely national education and the army, he was the embodiment of the national ideal” (Azak 2010, pp. 38–45).

American assertive secularists operate in somewhat different circumstances. Their actual attitude vis-a-vis religion is a minority position: a significant portion of their possible coalition thinks religion, in general, does more good than harm. However, that coalition does have fears about what it perceives to be the aggressive expansionism of Christian conservatives. As a result, America's assertive secularists can be expected to spend proportionately more energy emphasizing the idea that assertive secularism is necessary to protect "good" religion from the negative effects of "bad" religion. Additionally, an equal proportion of the American population fears that secularists have gone too far in pushing their agenda, meaning that each side has more support for countering the perceived excesses of the other than for implementing any aspect of their agenda. Assertive secularists, in short, lack the ideological cover of Turkish nationalism or the commanding heights of state control of their Turkish counterparts. Notwithstanding American rhetoric about the "deep state", Turkish Kemalists controlled a very real and powerful incarnation of the phenomenon unlike anything currently operative in twenty-first-century America.

The irony, then, is that American assertive secularists must paradoxically avoid a full-court critique of religion while at the same time having less room to maneuver in advancing their ideological vision than their Turkish counterparts. This means that virtually all of their energy will focus on the real or perceived excesses of Christian conservatives, with almost all of their rhetoric serving a defensive, rather than a proactive, purpose. Christian Nationalist theocracy, in this frame, could well be portrayed as one election away almost indefinitely. At the same time, of course, the mobilization of that fear is likely to harden the attitudes of those who think secularists have gone too far, pushing them to extreme rhetoric of their own, thereby feeding a cycle of religious polarization.

8. The Secularism Trap in Turkey

Before discussing possible outcomes for the American case, it is worth taking a moment to examine the ultimate outcome in Turkey. For, notwithstanding the early successes of the assertive secularist program advanced by the CUP and Kemalists, a clear-eyed examination of modern Turkey demonstrates that assertive secularism has almost entirely failed. Even in the immediate aftermath of Atatürk's death, his controversial translation of the Qur'an and the call to prayer into Turkish were abandoned. In the intervening century, assertive secularists in the Turkish deep state launched coups against passive secularists in the 1950s and in fear of Islamists and/or communism in the late 1970s. Yet, political Islam persisted as an underground force in Turkey until it took control of the deep state during the presidency of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Throughout Erdoğan's long domination of Turkish politics, the ability of the deep state to throw up obstacles to his brand of political Islam decreased dramatically. As late as 2006 and 2007, issues such as permission for women to wear headscarves at public universities were still being decided in ways consistent with Kemalism (Kuru 2009, chap. 6). Over time, however, these issues have moved in a decidedly less Kemalist direction. Erdoğan's crackdown on any dissidents that might threaten his power has taken on a scope perhaps not seen since the single-party period. He increasingly seems to be looking toward the Middle East with an eye toward restoring Turkish hegemony while also establishing an authoritarian and autocratic rule legitimized by a variant of political Islam. Many keen observers, not least Erdoğan himself, have compared this approach to Abdulhamid II. Thus, a century after Atatürk, it may be that the very regime he sought to replace has, in its essentials, returned with a vengeance.

Why did Turkey's assertive secularists fail? One plausible explanation is that Turkey's eventual outcome has several hallmarks of a secularism trap. For all the attempts of assertive secularists to supplant Islam with Turkish nationalism, Islam persisted. While even many prominent Muslim scholars in Turkey, such as Said Nursi, were initially supportive

of passive secularism (Vahide and Abu-Rabi' 2005, chap. 17), the tight control and fear of religion showed by the Kemalist deep state seems to have convinced many Muslims that maximalism, and eventually gaining control of the deep state themselves, was the only way to achieve their goals.

The secularism trap is reminiscent of a similar concept in international relations theory: the security dilemma. In the classic logic articulated by Robert Jervis, as one state seeks its own security out of fear of its neighbors, it takes actions to strengthen its military for defensive purposes. However, since the neighboring state is equally fearful, these defensive moves are perceived as offensive, leading the second state to take similar actions: intended to be defensive but perceived to be offensive (Jervis 1978). According to international relations theorists, the logic of the security dilemma often leads to conflict in the anarchic state system. In a 2012 report on religious freedom and violent religious extremism, the Berkley Center identified the radicalization of out-groups due to government restrictions as a pattern that can lead to religious conflict analogous to the security dilemma (Henne et al. 2012). Thus, the secularism trap has the potential to create the very religious reaction assertive secularists fear most.

9. Can America Avoid the Secularism Trap?

Though this article has primarily focused on potential assertive secularists in the United States, a valuable caveat must be added regarding the actual potential for Christian Nationalist movements. In his excellent comparative study of far-right movements in the U.S., France, and Germany, Tobias Kremer found that those who identify as Christians but do not meaningfully participate in their religious communities are actually more prone to radicalization than religious believers who regularly attend church (Cremer 2023). There is also some evidence that self-identified socially conservative Christians who do not meaningfully participate in religious communities have much more negative views of immigrants, other racial groups, and people of other faiths than do socially conservative Christians who actively participate in their religious communities (Hall 2024, chap. 3). Thus, the constituency most susceptible to an extreme counter-reaction to assertive secularism is not religiously active conservative Christians but rather those whose identification is not matched by corresponding participation in traditional religious activities.

In a polarized political environment such as the United States, with each side concerned about the extremism of the other, there is a realistic possibility of either Buckley's secularism trap or a pattern of religious conflict more analogous to the security dilemma. A recent Bloomberg study ranked the United States third among G20 economies in the risk of political violence, behind only Turkey and Russia (Martin 2024). As scholars such as Monica Toft have amply demonstrated, political conflicts often last longer and become more intense when they take on a religious dimension (Toft et al. 2011).

While there are reasons for concern, there is also reason for optimism, and the secularism trap is anything but inevitable in the U.S. context. A majority of Americans, after all, believe that religion does more good than harm and wish to avoid either secular or religious extremism. In essence, this means that there remains a relatively robust constituency for passive or benevolent secularism. As Buckley describes it: "Benevolent secularism's most distinctive feature is the cooperative role it encourages for religious actors in public life. It is, in its ideal type, a consensual model of secularism, in which public religion need not lead to division" (Buckley 2017, p. 2). No document better illustrates the sensibility of passive secularism than George Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregations of Rhode Island. In this letter, Washington contrasts the "mere tolerance" accorded to religious minorities in old Europe with the American promise. He summarized this promise in the words of the Prophet Micah: Everyone shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall

make them afraid. Passive secularism entirely accords with Americans' majority belief that religion does more good than harm while eschewing any establishment of one religion as superior to others in law or custom. Passive or benevolent secularism lacks the ideological fervor and fear-based mobilization potential of assertive secularism. Yet, at the same time, it has a much better track record of actually preventing the rise of religious extremism. In the absence of a decisive consensus on either side, the default passive secularism that has served the United States well throughout its history may well continue to endure.

Indeed, there are some reasons for optimism. First, courts have pushed back against attempts to limit the free exercise of religious conservatives in a series of cases since 2012. Courts have defended the right of Christian-owned businesses to bring their religious conscience into their business (*Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, 573 U.S. 682 (2014)), to avoid compelled speech with which they disagree (*Masterpiece Cakeshop, Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* 1584 U.S. (2018)), etc. When assertive secularists have sought to go beyond advocacy for a stricter separation of church and state to actual restrictions on the free exercise of religious actors in the public square, courts have not gone along with it. Additionally, both Christian conservatives and assertive secularists have had a relatively mixed track record in terms of recent electoral victories. Contrary to the fears of assertive secularists, the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* actually improved their electoral fortunes rather than leading to a massive onslaught of "handmaid's tale" legislation. Contrary to their wildest hopes, this backlash was not sufficient to provide Democrats an electoral victory in 2024, despite substantial and consistent attempts to mobilize fear of religious reaction from the Trump administration. On the other hand, Christian conservatives suffered an inverse set of reverses and experienced tempered triumphs of their own. Neither side, in short, can find the current status quo entirely satisfactory, and both sides are in a position of needing to reckon honestly with their failure to persuade a clear majority to their cause. Passive secularism, then, has very little appeal in terms of fear-based political mobilization. Yet, it does seem to be the preferred institutional arrangement of a silent majority of Americans. If the U.S. is to avoid the secularism trap, it will likely be due to a recommitment to some form of passive secularist benevolent religious neutrality.

10. Further Research

This article proposes the theory that assertive secularism may have a constituency within the United States and that, consciously or not, that constituency has already begun to mobilize based on fear of religion in a manner reminiscent of assertive secularism in Turkey. The purpose of this article, then, is primarily conceptual, testing the hypothesis that assertive secularism may exist in the United States and have parallels with Turkish assertive secularism, notwithstanding the substantial differences between the institutional context in the two countries.

Considerably more work could be done to test this theory. First, it would be useful to have actual polling data on questions designed to test for assertive secularism, focused on religiously unaffiliated Americans in general and educated atheists and agnostics in particular. While Pew has substantiated that the latter cohort views religion disproportionately negatively compared to the general population, a negative view of religion will not perfectly overlap with a desire to have the government restrict religion in the public square. Certainly, a view that religion does more harm than good is a necessary precondition for assertive secularism, as the Turkish case makes clear, but it may not be a sufficient one. In that regard, specific data on atheist and agnostic Americans' support for assertive secularist policies would be useful. To what extent do highly educated atheists and agnostics favor removing tax-exempt status from religious groups, removal of religious monuments from public land even if those monuments serve a secular purpose, limitations on conscience

protections for religious business owners and medical professionals, removal of speech and tax protections for clergy, etc.? Most literature examining secularism in the United States assumes that this secularism is always and everywhere passive. With the conceptual argument of this article in mind, specific data can be gathered to test whether or not America's most ardent secularists are truly assertive secularists.

Second, it would be desirable to examine mobilization strategies from other assertive secularist polities or movements, to see if the pattern described here is universal. There is certainly some evidence of similar dynamics in France, though future studies might fruitfully develop that case further. The use of anti-religious propaganda in officially Marxist states is also well-attested, and there are other cases from the Muslim world that might be useful comparisons. Social and political movements advocating for assertive secularism in states where the ultimate balance between religion and state is not so clear-cut might also usefully be compared. For example, the divide between secularists and politically active religious parties in Israel is extraordinarily stark. It would be quite useful to compare different strands of secularism in Israel against Turkish assertive secularism and American secular elites hostile to religion.

Most of all, a re-evaluation of secularism from within the academy is desperately needed. It is far too common for academics to uncritically, unskeptically assume that secularism is both peaceful and necessary for progress. However, as a scholar of secularism, Talal Asad reminds us: "A secular state does not guarantee toleration; it puts into play different structures of ambition and fear. The law never seeks to eliminate violence since its object is always to regulate violence" (Asad 2003). For example, academics will be tempted to take at face value assertive secularists' claims to be acting "defensively" rather than evaluating these claims with equal skepticism to the "defensive" claims of their religious antagonists. Put differently, just as religion, under the right circumstances, can be used to mobilize violence and extremism based on fear of the other, so also secularism, and assertive secularism in particular, may have the same characteristics. It is only by recognizing this potential danger that it can be prevented, and the benefits of a benevolent and pluralistic society can be preserved for all.

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