Book Review, Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American Politics

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Commandments. Law and religion have long been intertwined in a way that bolsters the goal of this project, first, because religious studies should have a lot to say on law and religion. It also adds to the intractability of their relation. Whatever our separationist conceits, we cannot seem to stop talking about law and religion. I suspect, it is because we cannot.

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doi:10.1093/jcs/csab059  
Advance Access publication October 4, 2021


*Secular Surge*, by the political scientists David Campbell, Geoffrey Layman, and John Green, is really two books. In the second part of the book, the authors identify a growing and highly secular cohort of Americans, which is the “secular surge” of the title, and provide valuable insights about the meaning of this phenomenon for American politics. Through sophisticated statistical analysis and some imaginative experiments, the authors come to three important conclusions. One is that not only does secularism affect politics, but also the politicization of religion by the Religious Right has helped drive disaffiliation from religion: politics affects religion. The book presents important new evidence in support of the Backlash Hypothesis. Another conclusion is that a secularist-religionist divide is now embedded in party politics and is likely to harden. This is the case not only between the two major political parties but within each party. The book briefly examines a little-noted phenomenon of religiously non-affiliated voters attracted to the candidacy of Donald Trump, for example. Finally, the book shows that while nonbelief in God is a serious detriment to candidates in both parties, secularism itself is not. The authors have some suggestions for packaging secularism that potential secular candidates will want to read. While the book tries to end on a hopeful note that bridges can be built between secular and religious voters and coalitions, the overall picture is one of increasing polarization that tends to be self-reinforcing.
The problem is that these useful analyses are built upon a methodological foundation that is highly flawed. In the first part of the book, the authors take up a “challenge” (p. 25). The existing literature on secularism tends to divide Americans into two groups—religious and nonreligious. But this characterizes secular people by what they are not. The authors set out to divide Americans into four groups instead, based upon both the degree to which people are affiliated with religious beliefs and practices and the degree to which people affirmatively adopt a secular worldview, which they call personal secularism. The result is a grid of Americans into Non-Religionists (persons who have little conventional religion in their lives who lack a secular worldview), Secularists (persons with little religious involvement who possess a secular worldview), Religionists (persons who are both conventionally religious and lack a secular worldview), and Religious Secularists (persons with religious practices and beliefs who exhibit a secular worldview).

This attempt is an important one. There is a difference between disaffiliation from religion and any kind of consistent secular attitude. The authors consider it an important accomplishment to have identified Non-Religionists, persons the authors consider as lacking any serious guiding principles, and Religious Secularists, who hold both secular and religious beliefs. Furthermore, the authors believe they have defined a secular worldview without regard to religion. But it is much harder to identify a secular worldview than the authors realize. It might be said that almost all Americans have a naturalistic attitude toward the world. After all, COVID-19 was not seriously regarded as an expression of God’s will, which certainly would have been the case centuries ago, before the Death of God. The authors choose as their measure of a secular worldview eight statements, five of which affirm a secular perspective and three of which represent the rejection of secular values. Respondents then indicated their level of agreement.

Because the authors want to track political choices influenced by secularism, they chose statements to which “card-carrying” secularists would respond in a certain way (p. 29). This brings an implicit hostility to religion into the definitional stage. Thus, two of the five positive statements were, “To understand the world, we must free our minds from old traditions and beliefs” and “All the greatest advances for humanity have come from science and technology” (p. 28). Conversely, one of the three statements demonstrating a rejection of secular values was “What we believe is right and wrong cannot be based only on human knowledge” (p. 28). The other statements were along the same lines. Though I reject supernaturalism
and a personal God, my responses defined me as a Non-Religionist rather than a Secularist, as would the responses of anyone who believes that values are real and that religion had contributed positively to world history.

The reason for this failure is that the book exhibits a surprising lack of philosophical grounding. Thus, the “opposite” of moral relativism, which the authors regard as quintessentially secular, is not “moral traditionalism,” but moral realism, to which many secularists, including Sam Harris, subscribe (p. 89). Without addressing the meaning of secularism in fuller terms, the project of distinguishing different types of religious nonaffiliation cannot succeed. Further, the bridges the authors want to build between secular and religious Americans cannot be constructed without a deeper understanding of what their differences in outlook actually are.

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doi:10.1093/jcs/csab058
Advance Access publication September 21, 2021


Michael McNally’s Defend the Sacred: Native American Religious Freedom beyond the First Amendment is a significant contribution to scholarship on law and religion. This well-written, incisive book describes the possibilities and limits of legal protections for Indigenous religions in the United States. McNally, a Professor of Religious Studies at Carleton College, is an expert in Native American religious traditions. He undertook targeted legal training as he conducted research for Defend the Sacred in order to better understand and interpret the complex areas of federal Indian law and policy and tribal law. As McNally notes, there is often a disconnect between discussions of legal and political systems that pertain specifically to Native Americans and discussions about American religious freedom more generally. His excellent book plays an important role in bridging these two areas of scholarship.

In the introduction to Defend the Sacred, McNally surveys recent scholarship on religious freedom within the United States as well as
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