

AlbertMohler.com

A Tale of Two Crises? America, Europe, and Secularism

Thursday, June 7, 2007



America is becoming *more* secular while Europe is growing *less* secular? That counter-intuitive analysis is offered by Ross Douthat in the current issue of *The Atlantic*. In “[Crises of Faith](#),” Douthat argues that secularism is on the rise in the United States even as Islam expands across Europe and some forms of Christianity appear newly resurgent.

The differences between America and Europe when it comes to secularization are well known and undeniable. As he explains:

Nothing divides the United States from Europe like religion. America has its public piety and its multitude of thriving sects, Europe has its official secularism and its empty, museum-piece churches. Ninety percent of Americans say they believe in God, while only about 60 percent of Britons, French, and Germans say the same. American politics is riven by faith-based disputes that barely exist across the Atlantic, while European debates take place under a canopy of unbelief that’s unimaginable in the United States, where polls show that a Muslim or a homosexual has a better chance of being elected president than an acknowledged atheist.

But, will it always be so? In the United States, resistance to secularization has often been explained by American “exceptionalism.” What is that exception that is expiring? Europe, a continent that has embraced secularism as a means of liberation from older prejudices and divisions, may be experiencing something like a reversal of secularization.

In Douthat’s words:

In the United States, the Bush era has summoned up—arguably for the first time in this country’s history—a mass secularism that looks to Europe and sees a model for America to follow. In Europe, meanwhile, a rising Islam and a more assertive Christian remnant are touching off American-style culture wars on a continent that had prided itself on being past those messy controversies.

On the American front, Douthat argues that the generation now reaching adulthood is far more secular than previous generations, with perhaps 20 percent identifying themselves as holding to no religious beliefs.

Furthermore, hard-line secularism has hit the American scene in the form of several best-selling books. Books by authors such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens have, he argues, made atheism more respectable.

More:

This hard secularism is a relatively radical idea in the American context, where the separation of church and state has rarely separated God from politics: From abolitionist and “Social Gospel” activism in the 19th century to the civil-rights and anti-abortion movements of the 20th, religiously motivated political action has been a regular feature of our national life. Indeed, the America that many secularists seem to desire looks an awful lot like the Europe of today, where politicians who mention God are a rarity, and governments keep a wary eye on “sects” that stray too far outside the mainstream.

Meanwhile:

Yet the Europe of tomorrow may look more like ... the United States, with a politics that's increasingly shaped by clashes between believers, or between belief and unbelief. Already, the Continent is experiencing a low-grade culture war, created by the collision between the religious zeal of Muslim immigrants and the secular culture that surrounds them. In flash points that range from the murder of the anti-Islamic filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in Holland, to the controversy over the supposedly blasphemous Danish cartoons, to the question of whether to admit Turkey to the EU, secular Europe has found itself in unfamiliar, God-haunted, almost American territory. Such disputes may subside as Islamic immigrants assimilate to European norms, but for now, at least, resistance to assimilation by Muslims suggests that they may succeed in changing those norms as much as they are changed by them.

Douthat also points to Pope Benedict XVI's announced mission to reclaim Europe. Taken together, Douthat sees these trends as signs that America and Europe may look far more alike in these respects in the future. As he explains, "America remains a deeply religious nation and its secularists an embattled minority, while Europeans remain strongly invested in preventing faith from intruding into politics. But both continents may be drifting into a zone where religious belief is likely to be a persistent source of tension, rather than a commonplace or a curiosity."

The result of all this is that Douthat predicts a heating up of the culture wars on both continents. While America has historically avoided this controversy by its "near-universal piety," Europe escaped the culture wars "by cultivating near-universal skepticism."

But now the scene has changed. America's piety may be weakening while Europe's skepticism is slipping. If the continents now move closer together, Douthat predicts big trouble: "the divides *within* each one are likely to open ever wider, and religious peace turn increasingly to culture war—or worse."

In a very interesting section of his article, Douthat points to this research:

Religion stirs up the most controversy, a group of Harvard economists recently argued, when roughly half the population is actively religious; conflict ebbs when the devout constitute large majorities or small minorities. The more evenly divided a culture finds itself on the ultimate questions, the more likely politicians are to pursue "strategic extremism" and mobilize one side against the other. Precisely this kind of polarization dominated European politics from the French Revolution until the middle of the 20th century, sparking regular clashes—Germany's Kulturkampf, France's Dreyfuss Affair, Spain's Civil War—between secular and religious ideologies.

What this means for the United States and Europe remains to be seen. Nevertheless, Douthat is certainly on to something when he argues that generational change is likely to mean big changes in the nation's cultural contours — not to mention changing ground in controversies over issues like abortion, homosexuality, and marriage.

Christians cannot assume that American exceptionalism will continue far into the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, Europe may become a fertile ground for evangelism. Christians on both continents should keep a close watch on these trends.

