

Alex's Heresies – embracing a physical reality

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By Alex McCullie

[Pew Forum Transcript](#)

At a 2007 *Pew Forum Faith Angle Conference*, Wilfred (Bill) McClay, a professor of intellectual history, argues that US-style secularism is a highly successful mixture of minimal church-state separation and the active participation of religions in society and politics to provide the necessary moral compass. US secularism values individuality through free expression and free association over secular public policy. He calls this *Political Secularism*. By contrast McClay characterises and almost demonises the European alternative, *Philosophical Secularism*, as creating social environment essentially hostile to public expression of faith. Throughout his presentation McClay equates this type of secularism with 'religions are poisonous'-type comments attributed to the so-called new atheists. McClay continues his anti-secular stance with his suggestion that the "higher reaches of secularism...[has]...begun to exhaust itself intellectually".

According to *The Watkins Dictionary of Religions and Secular Faith* by Gerald Benedict, a religious studies lecturer, "a truly secular culture is not anti-religious, but creates the free space in which religions of every kind can benefit from the free choice people make, uninfluenced by established and official policy. A truly secular society is an 'open' and pluralistic society." This is how most Australians and Western Europeans see secularism. However many conservative religionists see institutionalising non-faith governments and public education as an anathema. Instead of offering freedom to make private religious or non-religious choices, they take a "for or agin" attitude expecting their faith to take precedence over the lives of others. In Australia and Europe they represent only a small but unfortunately vocal and very well organised minority.

Compared to Australian and European perspectives McClay advocates a minimalist version of secularism - one that we may not even call secular. With just enough separation between church and the US federal government required by the constitution, US offers an open competitive market of religions, typically Protestant, vying for social and political influence and control. McClay doubts whether Islam would support the individualistic approach required to fit within such as system. Religions are also seen as the major contributors to the moral values of the US society. Much to the amusement and concern around the world, a US president has even declare publicly a personal communication with his god supporting a foreign war.

I agree with McClay that US style secularism isn't transportable to another culture even though he hints that Turkey may benefit. I question, though, whether or not it is superior to the secularism as implemented in Western Europe. His presentation suggests he holds that belief.

So, does the US style active participation of religions in society lead to a more humane society? Put simply none of the happiness surveys and crime statistics support this claim. It appears that the greater support offered by the more secular governments of Europe, Australia and New Zealand, for

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example, leads to happier and more contented lives than those experienced in the US. Australia has a national health insurance scheme that provides protection of all citizens regardless of financial circumstances. Similarly our government provides social services benefits for the most vulnerable of our society including the unemployed, single parents and permanently disabled. Many argue that it is not enough support, but it provides good security for all citizens. Interestingly, other surveys throughout the world suggest that there is a broad correlation between higher levels of discretionary non-belief and greater personal security (Zuckerman 2007).

The presentation is explicitly supporting high levels of religious involvement in society and politics while acknowledging there should a minimal level of state-church separation. I'd questioned the way McKay has presented the US approach and his implied degradation of the European alternative. He presented to a faith conference, so I'm not totally surprised by the uncritical questioning and responses to McKay's propositions.

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References

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