
Christian JOPPKE, *The Secular State under Siege: Religion and Politics in Europe and America* (Cambridge, Polity Press 2015)

Those alarmed by the title of Christian Joppke's new book, *The Secular State under Siege*, will be relieved to learn that the secular state is not, in fact, under siege after all. In the final analysis, Joppke asserts that the secular state is "challenged at best at its fringes but not at its core by religious actors" [186]. However, the drama in the title is of a piece with the rest of the book. *The Secular State under Siege* is a magisterial and often illuminating overview of the contours of the relationship between religion and politics in the West. But it is also a book whose primary claims share space with rhetorical excesses and provocative excursions. It is an insightful read, but also in some respects an exhausting one.

The book begins with a comprehensive overview of how major sociological theorists have conceptualized the relationship between religion and politics. Joppke argues that, to make sense of contemporary trends, one must adopt an approach that is both sensitive to the "cultural stuff" that makes religion distinctive [39], and that is grounded in a substantive definition of religion that permits one to distinguish between religious actors and political authorities. Joppke then proceeds to address secularization more specifically, arguing that secularization is the product of, and to an extent depends upon, Christianity. Joppke provides a supple and enlightening summary of the factors internal to Christianity which helped to speed secularization along; as well as an overview of the contrasting secularisms in Europe and the United States. Much of this material will be familiar to students of religion and politics, but Joppke's artful synthesis skillfully integrates the traditional touchstones with less familiar material from legal history, and even rehabilitates Talcott Parsons as a relevant interlocutor in the secularization debate.

The remainder of the book applies these ideas to contemporary conflicts between religious actors and the state, drawing on paired studies of the Christian Right in the United States and Islam in Europe. In the United States, Joppke argues that the Christian Right's primary effect has been to move the Supreme Court to the right, thereby undermining America's "strict separation" approach to

church and state, an argument Joppke advances via a thorough and well-executed overview of the rise and recent tribulations of legal secularism in the United States. In Europe, Joppke argues that Islam poses a “more profound” challenge to secularism because of certain incompatibilities between Islamic theology and the secular state [128]. Here, Joppke provides a fascinating overview of the points of theological divergence between Islam and Christianity that are potentially important for religion-state relations, though, as I discuss below, these ultimately appear to be less relevant to contemporary politics than the space devoted to them would lead one to expect.

The payoff to Joppke’s approach comes through in his ability to capture important mutations, trends, and dilemmas in the religion-politics nexus in the contemporary West. Joppke concludes that the major threat to the secular state, in both Europe and the United States, comes from the Christian majority rather than from minority faiths such as Islam. He notes an emerging “double standard” in court decisions on both sides of the Atlantic that comforts the majority while undermining the position of religious minorities [180]. In part, this double standard has been wrought by transmuting Christian symbols and practices (such as the crucifix) into “culture,” while interpreting minority symbols and practices (such as the veil) as “politics.” But this “culturalization” of religion, Joppke argues, is not actually a challenge to the secular state; instead, it is “the ultimate victory of secularism, as it allows privileging the majority religion only by denying its religious quality” [4]. In the end, Joppke concludes that today’s religious challenges are not very challenging at all, instead portending only small adjustments in the parameters of church-state relations that leave the Western state’s secular framework largely untouched.

Yet for all these insights, *The Secular State under Siege* is, at times, a frustrating book, because Joppke’s rhetoric frequently runs far ahead of, and at times outright contradicts, his ultimate conclusions. In the United States, this takes the form of accusations that the Christian Right and its allies on the Supreme Court are attempting to impose a “legal theocracy” [110]. But there is no evidence that Antonin Scalia and friends seek to implement Biblical law or make citizenship dependent upon religious adherence. The Christian Right may be restorationist, but it seeks to restore, not Calvin’s Geneva, but a version of the informal Protestant Establishment that dominated American life in the late nineteenth century—a time when the separation of church and state was understood to permit the reading

of the King James Bible in schools, the use of religious missions to “civilize” Native Americans, and Supreme Court opinions outright declaring America to be a “Christian nation.” Joppke devotes very little attention to this period and, as a result, he ends up overstating the historical novelty of the Christian Right and of the more accommodationist regime toward which the Supreme Court is currently groping.

In Europe, by contrast, this takes the form of a coy clash-of-civilizations-style argument about Islam. At times, Joppke appears to take a dim view of Islam’s ability to coexist with the secular state, suggesting that “the squaring of faith and citizenship seems to raise particular difficulties for Muslims” [144], that Islam finds “coexistence with other faiths” to be a “difficult enterprise” [153], and that Islam “may even wish to replace” liberal institutions with (again) “theocracy” [148-149]. Such statements will surely rankle many sociologists of religion, who will be quick to point out that American Muslims, for instance, appear not to suffer greatly from these problems. Joppke himself appears unconvinced by a strong version of this argument, ultimately concluding that these problems reside primarily in elite discourse, while “the integrative powers of liberal institutions” have rendered them largely irrelevant for rank-and-file European Muslims [167-168]. But this just makes Joppke’s decision to foreground Muslim “political thought” rather than the concrete political challenges posed by Muslims in Europe all the more puzzling. Apart from an illuminating discussion of how European family courts have negotiated with Muslims over how to balance civil and religious family law, and a brief analysis of the recent French and Belgian burqa bans in the conclusion, there is surprisingly little in the book on these actual challenges. As a result, one is left with the impression that the primary Islamic challenge to Europe resides in the pens of Swiss scholar Tariq Ramadan and the popular media cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi. While Joppke’s critique of their ideas is thoughtful, one wishes he had spent less time on those critiques and more time discussing the practical challenges Islam is currently posing to European states.

In the final analysis, Joppke backs off both of these claims, arguing that the decline of strict separation is doing little more than making the United States “a bit more like the ‘modest establishments’ of Europe” [126], and that the Islamic challenge in Europe is one “in principle, perhaps, but very little in reality” [171]. These more tempered conclusions appear indisputable, but this only heightens

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the question of why Joppke devotes so much time and energy to making more inflammatory arguments elsewhere in the book. Admittedly, Joppke is known for his rhetorical flourishes, and others may find them more entertaining than frustrating. Either way, the book is well worth reading, both for the excellent theoretical and substantive orientation to religion and politics that it provides, and for its important insights into the changing dynamics of secularism on both sides of the Atlantic.

D A M O N M A Y R L