



ANALYZING AND
EXPLAINING THE
PLACE OF RELIGION IN
FRENCH AND
AMERICAN SOCIETY

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During his journey across the United States of America in the nineteenth century, one of the first things that drew the attention of the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville was the religious atmosphere of the country.

According to de Tocqueville this atmosphere was beneficial for the American political context. And, contrary to what we could imagine in France at that time, the spirit of religion did not represent an obstacle for the development of democracy. Instead of putting the democratic institution in danger, religion in America consolidated them. Moreover, the set of values that ensue from religion are the "foremost" points of the institutions.

Tocqueville's stupefaction was due to the context of his homeland which seemed to him to be totally opposite. Religion is often seen as an obstacle to the development of the democratic institutions and freedom in France. This opposition of thoughts between France and America is still relevant even today; yet it is part of both countries' culture.

According to many scholars such as Max Weber, modernity is the enemy of religion, as it makes the world become more and more rational and less religious¹. Studying these two countries appeals because of French generalized secularization--which perfectly fits with this paradigm--and American's resistance to this thesis--as we can still see the importance of religion in the United States.

Our first critical point would be the evaluation of the place of religion in these two societies. By "place" I mean their importance in the people's mind and their manifestation in the public sphere. Then I will initiate an explanation on the causes of these differences.

French laws regarding religion often establish a demarcation between the private and public sphere, this distinction would be used in order to give a structure to our evaluation of the place of religion in the French secularized society and, as polling data suggests, a more deeply religious America.

Private sphere

The indicators that are about to be used show the place of religion in American and French private sphere. As we are talking about private sphere, the feeling, beliefs, and religious habits of the citizens are concerned.

The societies' thoughts about God

According to a Gallup opinion poll on religion (Gallup International Association, 2015), 92% of the American population believed in God in 2011. The French are much more divided on that question since 56% of the respondents said so in 2011 according to an Ifop poll (Ifop, 2011). These figures show a clear gap

¹ Max Weber, 1917-1919 *Wissenschaft als Beruf et Politik als Beruf*.

between French and Americans on the question of the existence of a God and are powerful indicators to highlight our thesis.

Do American and French believe in heaven?

Going deeper in France's largest religious community (Catholics) beliefs, can be quite revealing. In 2010 36% of the population believed in heaven after death, only 44% of the declared Catholics (CSA, 2010). Whereas in the US in 2011 85% of the population said they believed in heaven². A large majority of French people do not believe in life after death for good people and not even the majority of the largest French religious community does. While this belief comprises a still majority in the U.S.

What about people relationship with religion?

After seeing the general beliefs we should observe the direct relationship with religion. In the 2014 Gallup annual survey (Gallup International Association, 2015), French and American respondents were asked about questions regarding their religious views: 56% of the American population considered themselves as "religious persons", 33 declared themselves as not religious and 6% were convinced atheists. In France 40% described themselves as religious persons while 53% of the population considered themselves as not religious or convinced atheists. The confirmation of this gap is total as here the feeling of the respondents are concerned, the share of non-religious or atheist in France is comparable to the share of religious persons in the US.

American and French people worship attendance

As we consider these populations' beliefs and relationship with religion, let us study their worship place attendance.³

35% of the Americans report going to a place of worship every week. Most sociologists recognize that this number is inflated and that only about 25% actually attend religious services every week. Yet only 4.5% of the French Catholics, according to Ifop survey of the French population, attend worship every week (Ifop, 2014).

These data are strong indicators of a society's link with religion. Even if the American figure seems low in comparison with the other answers, it is still more than five times French attendance.⁴

Public sphere

The distinction made by the French law-maker implies that in order to ensure the national unity, religious and others signs highlighting people's differences

² As my sources are different, I have to let you know that the French opinion polling is about hell and heaven while this 2 items are not put together in the American one (75% for hell)

³ -according to me this is actually a part of the private sphere since it only involves an individual and his community, furthermore I don't think church are considered as a public space at all in France

⁴ French muslim are actually 40% but they represent a much smaller share

should not be visible in the public sphere. This vision has influenced many French laws such as the one addressing religious symbols at school.⁵

Place of religion in people's minds⁶

In the 2014 Gallup survey, respondents were asked about the importance they give to religion, state and their local institutions (city, state, county) (Gallup International Association, 2015). This question is in the public sphere partly because it has to be understood this way "what interests you value the most" which has a direct influence on behavior and political choices.

The most important thing for 25% of Americans respondents was "religion" while 5% of the French population answered the same. The most common response among the French was "nation", with 39% reporting it was the most important. According to this figure the thing that Americans value the most is religion while it has a minor importance for French people. When the moment of making important choices occur among Americans, religious beliefs would weigh more heavily in the final decision, while few in France consider religion important in decision making.

A further study on Americans - which I unfortunately didn't find a parallel query for France- actually says that 52% (Gallup International Association) of the American think that the Bible could help them solve their problems.

Religion and political institutions

Another significant indicator is in the speeches made by political actors. Mentioning God is nearly a requirement among politicians in the USA. On the contrary speaking about God in France is reserved to the unsuccessful Christian democate party, a minor part of the right wing party and to a part of the extreme right. The usual reference to religion is the so called "cultural judeo-christian inheritance" of the country with little or no direct mention of God⁷.

Moreover, the fact that presidents swear their oath on the Bible is an important indicator of religion's place in the institutions, taking God as a witness and a guarantee of ones engagement to the nation is a strong symbol that would be deemed unacceptable in France as the *laïcité* model do not accept religious presence in the public sphere. This vision of separation between state and religion is often difficult to understand for Americans who find it too radical. This incomprehension is due to the secularization and the permanence phenomenon that are caused by the historical and cultural background of both societies.

5 <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/jan/14/languageresourcesfrench.languageresources>

6 It influences their choices and behavior in societies

7 this reference is more about cultural links and have nothing to do with faith

Understanding the origins of these differences

Historical and cultural backgrounds toward religion

We have noted the importance of religion in the minds of Americans and their institutions. In the US, both the private and the public spheres leave an some room for religious expression. This runs contrary to France where the society seems to be fully secularized and does not leave much room for the religious expression in the public sphere. As mentioned before, the cultural and historical background of both countries are responsible for the analysis we are making.

American historical harmony between religion and freedom

The American state was founded by deeply religious persons - the Pilgrim Fathers. The American's declaration of independence was elaborated with the inspiration of religious values.⁸ American's manifest destiny--part of their cultural background--considers the United States as God's Promised Land, and it is God's protection that makes this country so special. The link between the importance of religious values in their society and their history seems obvious. What can we say about French views on this topic?

French disharmony between religion and democracy

The ancient regime--which has been deposed by the revolution--was deeply religious, as the absolute monarchy--the king had all the powers--was said to be "from God's right", God was the protector of this regime. And yet it was deposed because of the inequalities it used to maintain. A special status was offered to religion and religious leaders who took advantage of the power given to them at the time. As a conclusion, the revolutionary group who wanted to shut down this regime to gain more freedom held no confidence in the members of the clergy who had benefited from the status quo.

Respect of the separation between state and religion

In America

As Tocqueville said, religious actors are staying out of political concerns, they would less directly intervene in some debate. Religion could be used to justify a political idea but the church official do not directly side with one party vis a vis another. Tocqueville shows their adaptations to modernity since they would not intervene unless they judged political intervention as morally necessary.⁹

8 declaration of independence 1776 "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

9 "In America religion is a distinct sphere, in which the priest is sovereign, but out of which he takes care never to go. Within its limits he is the master of the mind; beyond them, he leaves men to themselves, and surrenders them to the independence and instability which belong to their nature and their age"

"All the American clergy know and respect the intellectual supremacy exercised by the majority; they never sustain any but necessary conflicts with it. They take no share in the altercations of parties, but they

In France

As the Catholic Church in France lost power its leaders grew nostalgic for the ancient regime. The context of laicization and modernization of the society by the major Republican Party--which was mostly opposed to the conservatives who wanted a return to the former regime--led the church to side with the monarchist party. Republicans who were already working on the laicization had more reason to sanction the church which directly showed its opposition to their vision of progress¹⁰. While the republicans worked on the development of the institutions and its freedom, the church supported the opposing party, making them seen as enemies of progress.

Currently, 69% of the French population (Gallup International Association, 2015) do not trust the religious leaders, while 39% do not trust them in America.¹¹ We need to consider the primary reasons explaining these differences.

The cultural and historical differences explain the disparity between the different places occupied by religion America and France. French made religion go away from the public sphere to preserve national unity and attachment to the institutions; America took some of its principle and values from religious principles¹² while making a separation between the 2 entities in order not to leave too a strong influence, one over the other.

Before concluding, a couple of things should be clarified. First of all, the American incompatibility with the thesis of religious collapse in time due to modernity seems to be less and less relevant. If you watch carefully the Gallup poll on religions you'll see that some answers that traditionally have indicated an important religious establishment in the U.S. decreased across time. Religion appears to be losing influence, even in the United States. At the same time, the emergence of a growing Muslim population and their claims in France¹³ in addition to the rapid development of telecommunications and other new technologies¹⁴ - the *laïcité* model is coming under greater scrutiny, even as the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack made the non-religious majority even more attached to it.

readily adopt the general opinions of their country and their age; and they allow themselves to be borne away without opposition in the current of feeling and opinion by which everything around them is carried along. “

10 in the 1880 French church sided with the conservatory party based on a roman support:

The syllabus Erarum 1864, Pi IX pope: The Vatican pointed liberalism and people sovereignty as an enemy

11 The pedophilia cases are some of the reasons of French problem with religious leaders according to me, mostly because they are highly mediatized.

12 ”In god we trust” is one of the American motto

13 As the actual “laïcité” model was made to deal with Christians and Jewish, not Muslims.

14 Thanks to social network and the communication techniques French religious person see what happen in other countries such as the USA and are protesting against the actual “laïcité” vision

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Alexis de Tocqueville: “*De la démocratie en Amérique*”