

Thank God for the secular: Thank God for religious freedoms

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 10, 2004](#) issue

Turkey advertises itself both as “secular,” thanks to its constitution of 1923, and as “98 percent Muslim.” India is called “secular,” thanks to its constitution of 1947, and is often seen as having the highest level of religious participation of any major nation. The United States has had a “secular” Constitution since 1787 and has a population ranked first in religious participation among the industrialized nations. All three countries assure religious freedom. This suggests there are links between a secular polity and a religious people, connections that are being strained in our time.

I was in Turkey in May, watching events signaled by headlines such as “YÖK Law Contradicts Secularism.” That Turkish law would bring “advantages to imam-hatip [religious school] graduates during their entrance to universities.” Turkey is under strain because its top leadership is both Islamist and interested in being part of the European Union. It is debating whether it should lose its secular base and legally favor Islam.

Meanwhile, in India the Hindu nationalist—some would say quasi-fundamentalist—BJP party was upset in elections, mainly because of the economy. But Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Christians and others who had experienced some repression under the rule of BJP religionists cheered the election results. The American conservative-evangelical magazine *World* (May 29) declared that the “rise of a secular-minded government in a Hindu-dominated country is good news for Christian and cultural minorities.”

In the United States, meanwhile, Jim Towe, head of White House faith-based operations, was blasting “a culture war that really gets to the heart of the questions about what is the role of faith in the public square.” When faith is not privileged there, he argues, “you almost wind up creating a godless orthodoxy.” His remarks are among the many signs of the movement in American religion and politics to “religiocify” governmental operations and expressions.

When I heard of what happened in Turkey and India and thought of what the U.S. has been—I almost said “had been”—I was ready to pray and praise, using a phrase that might sound oxymoronic to some: “Thank God for the secular!” Not for secularism or for “godless orthodoxy,” of course. But for a secular approach that lets the things of this age belong to this age (*saeculum*) and the mundane remain mundane. The Vulgate translates John 3:16: “sic enim dilexit Deus mundum,” God so loved the “mundane,” the world.

Think of the power of religion that makes its way by persuasion rather than by coercion, privilege or favor. Think of the decline of religious participation in the European nations where “establishment” and governmental privileges lasted too long and left the churches complacent. Think of philosophers like Montesquieu, who advised that the way “to attack a religion is by favor,” and that to promote it, “invitations are stronger than penalties.”

Thank God for the secular, as an adjective attached to words like “law,” “constitution,” “polity” and the like. Thank God for the religious freedoms it helps assure and the right to counter “godless orthodoxy” it guarantees. Let there be tens of thousands of crèches voluntarily placed on individual and church lawns, but none on the courthouse lawn. Let the Ten Commandments be engraved in hearts, mounted in homes and learned in synagogues and churches, but let them not be graven images in courtrooms and capitols. Let prayer and praise for a free nation sound out from 250 million hearts and throats. Oppose secularism but thank God for the secular.