

Scholars seek to reclaim a dirty word: secularism

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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A conference at Georgetown University in Washington this week focused on cleaning up what many Americans consider a dirty word – secularism.

The goal of the conference, called "Secularism on the Edge," was, in part, to define what secularism is and what it is not. It drew participants from France, Israel and the United States – all countries with strong secular and religious strains.

"(Secularism) is a guarantee of two things: freedom of religion and freedom from religion," said Jacques Berlinerblau, a Georgetown professor, conference organizer, and author of "How to be Secular."

"In a perfect world, it balances the citizen's need of those two fundamental rights."

Secularism is not, Berlinerblau continued, a synonym for godlessness or atheism or any other form of anti-religiousness. Secularism is interested in maintaining government's disinterest in religion, he said.

How successful the United States has been at separating religion and government was the subject of the first session, an interview conducted by Berlinerblau of John Fea, a professor of American history at Messiah College and author of "Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?"

Berlinerblau showed a film clip of John F. Kennedy's famous 1960 speech before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association in which he proclaimed that his belief that "the separation of church and state is absolute" and that presidents' religious views should be private.

Berlinerblau then showed a clip of President Obama speaking at an Easter prayer breakfast about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. Berlinerblau looked at Fea and asked, "Are these presidents of the same country?"

How the United States went from Kennedy to Obama in less than 50 years formed the bulk of the interview, with discussions of the rise of the religious right in the 1970s and how secularists – who can be both religious and nonreligious – failed to respond.

Other sessions at the conference explored secularism in France, where there has been conflict over how much the government can regulate Islamic dress in public spheres, and in Israel, a secular state where religious groups, particularly ultra-Orthodox Jews, wield heavy influence. There was also a focus on American "nones," those who claim no religious affiliation and whose ranks have grown to 19 percent.

"I think we should have had this conference 25 years ago," Berlinerblau said. "What happened then is that secularism had its butt handed to it by the Christian right, Islamists around the world and the ultra-Orthodox Jews. Secularism was sleeping."

Fea, an evangelical Christian, and Berlinerblau, an atheist, found that they agreed more than they disagreed. Both argue that the Founding Fathers were "to a man," in Fea's estimation, religious believers – but not necessarily Christians. Some, like Jefferson, were deists.

And both agreed that religion and government should not mix. —RNS