NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Georgetown conference explores secularism

Religion News Service | Mar. 15, 2013
Washington

On Feb. 20, a conference at Georgetown University here focused on cleaning up what many Americans consider a dirty word -- *secularism*.

The goal of the conference, called ?Secularism on the Edge: United States, France and Israel,? was to define what secularism is and what it is not. It drew participants from all three countries.

?[Secularism] is a guarantee of two things: freedom of religion and freedom from religion,? said conference organizer Jacques Berlinerblau, Georgetown professor of Jewish civilization.

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

Secularism is not a synonym for godlessness or atheism or any other form of anti-religiousness, said Berlinerblau, author of *How to be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom*. 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, professor of American history at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, Pa., and author of *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction*.

Berlinerblau showed a film clip of John F. Kennedy?s famous 1960 speech in which he proclaimed 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 Barack 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 religious and nonreligious secularists failed to respond.

Other sessions at the conference explored secularism in France, where the government is at odds over how to 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 the growing group of American ?nones? who claim no religious affiliation.

Fea, an evangelical Christian, and Berlinerblau, an atheist, found that they agreed more than they disagreed. Both argue that the Founding Fathers were religious believers -- but not necessarily Christians.

And both agreed that religion and government should not mix.

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