

Separation of Church and State

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson discusses the idea of separation of church and state. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Secular States](#)

2. [The French Revolution](#)

1. Secular States

The idea of religious life and civil life being very connected and related goes back quite a long way. The separation of church and state as an idea and concept goes back quite a ways also. The **separation of church and state** as a phrase and ideology is the distance in the relationship between organized religion and the affairs of the nation-state. In this sense, it's a relatively modern term.



DID YOU KNOW

In ancient Greece, the affairs of the state and the affairs of religion were very much involved in the trial of Socrates, who was accused of offending the gods. His philosophy and his Socratic approach to questioning were a challenge to the state religion. The trial of Socrates was an implementation of state power based on religious beliefs and understandings.

The principle of separating the powers of the church and the powers and the jurisdiction of the state has been adopted in several countries. However, there's a lot of variation as to how it is recognized and instituted depending on the applicable legal structures and the prevalent views of the proper role of religion in society. Many modern countries have adopted this position, such as the US. Turkey, whose population is overwhelmingly Muslim, is also an officially secular country. Many countries have rich religious histories yet today are characterized as **secular**.

China is just such a country. During the era of the Han Dynasty in the third century of the Common Era, Confucianism was established as the official state ideology. Today, the country is considered secular. Another country like this is France. France is also a country with a rich and tumultuous religious history that is today strongly secular with a commitment to understanding the balance between freedom and equality.



TERMS TO KNOW

Separation of Church and State

The creation of separate religious and secular spheres in a society.

Secular

Pertaining to the world; not linked to religiosity.

2. The French Revolution

The principles of the French Revolution—liberty, equality, and fraternity—were principles manifested during a time of great discontent with what was called the Ancien Regime, the old regime. This was the aristocracy and disproportionate political and social power and control. These principles guided the overthrow of King Louis XIV. The throne of the king was particularly tied to the power of the Roman Catholic Church, which owned large amounts of land and therefore had control over much of the country's resources and finances.

The revolution of 1789 sought to reorient this relationship of power by demanding that the clergy yield to the authority of the government. Not long after the overthrow of Louis XIV, Napoleon Bonaparte signed an agreement called the Concordant. This agreement brought the Roman Catholic Church under direct control of the new French government, the first Republic of France.

IN CONTEXT

The structure of the Concordant Agreement outlined some of the first formal separations between church and state powers. Some components of this agreement were that the state would pay church salaries, and clergies swore allegiance to the government. The church agreed to yield all of its lands within the borders of France. It also stated that Catholicism was the religion of the majority of the population of France, but it would allow and subsidize certain freedoms of religion and their institutions, including Judaism and some branches of Protestantism.

The issue of state neutrality with regard to religion continued to be a concern. With the second and third Republics, you see a movement toward a very strict secularism. In 1905 under the third Republic of France, secularism was officially instituted. Freedom of religion was acknowledged, but it was not supported. It was not subsidized in the way it had been in varying degrees in the past.

The extremes that France has gone through concerning its understanding and support of church and state relations in a relatively short period of time from 1870 until the mid-20th century is truly a radical form of secularism. It's now called *Laïcité*. This form of secularism is most noticeable in the institutions of education, which have also gone through the turbulence of trying to make good sense of the role of religion in modern life.



SUMMARY

The relationship between religious life and civilian life is a complex one, and it goes back a very long way in history. China has a rich religious history yet today is considered a **secular state**. Turkey has a

population that is predominantly Muslim yet the country defines itself as a secular state. France has a very rich and complex relationship between church and state. Specifically, **the French Revolution** precipitated a strong separation of church and state. The term *Laïcité* defines a radical secularism that is still alive and present in the modern day and has been a model for the separation of church and state in other countries, most notably the US.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY TED FAIRCHILD FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. Please see our [Terms of Use](#).



TERMS TO KNOW

Secular

Pertaining to the world; not linked to religiosity.

Separation of Church and State

The creation of separate religious and secular spheres in a society.