

***Secularization and Modernity:  
Interdisciplinary Readings, 1750-1914***

To make a case for the topicality and relevance of the secular in contemporary Western European and North American societies today may seem like an exercise in redundancy. After all, with a steady stream of books issuing from the popular press, and featuring such nuanced titles as *God is not Great* (C. Hitchens), *The God Delusion* (R. Dawkins), or *God: the Failed Hypothesis* (V. Stenger)—to say nothing of a veritable torrent of equally shrill publications from the other side of an intensely polarized debate—the apparent antinomy of religion and the secular continues to give rise to an often militantly acrimonious culture of debate. Yet precisely this polemical nature of the ongoing debate over the secular also continues to forestall a genuinely informed and searching consideration of social processes that, for several centuries by now, have been often axiomatically viewed as teleologically oriented towards a fully secularized world. Coveting instead short-term notoriety in the publishing world or deliberately manufacturing sound-bite claims for speedy consumption by an endlessly voracious and distracted media-culture, current arguments about secularization have themselves emerged as a major obstacle to thoughtful debate and the advancement of knowledge.

A principal objective of the course on *Secularization and Modernity*—to be enhanced by materials contained on this webpage—is to preserve and extend the scope of civic literacy for a new generation of adults by helping them think through the complex historical and intellectual origins and development of these two key-concepts. If the current, vigorous and, at times merely vociferous, debate regarding the legitimacy of (supposedly) secular or anti-secular communities is to yield meaningful results, its participants will have to begin by

elaborating a philosophically coherent and historically differentiated framework for that debate. In undertaking an at least partial reexamination of the twin concepts of “modernity” and “secularization, this new lecture course aims to make a contribution to what might be called “civic literacy.”

Such a task is significantly complicated, however, by our own situation in the contemporary academy, which is far from innocent in its outlook on either of this project’s eponymous concepts. For the prevailing methodological commitment to neutrality, objectivity, and to detached or dispassionate inquiry—so studiously cultivated by the social sciences since their inception at the end of the nineteenth century—cannot be regarded and embraced as a wholly “innocent” perspective. Rather, as a number of intellectuals have remarked, the modern university’s basic disciplinary configuration and counter-intuitive methodological habitus, to say nothing of its overwhelmingly corporate mode of “knowledge-production,” leaves its members strongly, and often enthusiastically implicated in an underlying, “progressive” narrative of secularization; as we shall find, that narrative in turn rests on one’s unexamined belief in an accumulative conception of knowledge as a professional commodity.<sup>1</sup>

A critical examination of secularization and modernity thus cannot begin without a reflection on the extent to which our own institutional culture may potentially interfere with its aims, simply because it is itself a central product of the development under investigation. Part of the course’s initial mission thus involves clearing the ground for a genuinely open consideration of secularization. Doing so,

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<sup>1</sup> See the titles by Hannah Arendt, Charles Taylor, Alasdair McIntyre, Louis Dupré, Michael Buckley, and John Milbank on the general bibliography.

however, means exploring the genesis of the “secular” not merely as an academic topic such as it has been explored by a variety of disciplines (history, political science, sociology, religious studies, etc.). For behind the professional narratives of secularization as the inexorable melting away of metaphysical or outright mystical practices before the onslaught of modern Liberalism and a variety of methodologies aimed at (putatively) value-neutral inquiry, what we find when pursuing the twin questions of “secularization” and “modernity” in a thoughtful and informed way is ... us. For if we truly scrutinize the prevailing (if varied) story of secularization as a process moving ahead slowly but unrelentingly towards our own present, we will find ourselves confronting our own, deep-seated, albeit problematic assumptions about the nature and ends of knowledge itself. It follows that one ought to guard against the apparent circularity of telling the story of secularization from within a single disciplinary and methodological vantage-point, since the latter will in all likelihood turn out to be itself a *product* of secularization. Thus our course will consider accounts about modernity and the secular as they issue from a variety of disciplines; in some cases, it will also become apparent how the disciplines in question (e.g., sociology) could only emerge by virtue of having settled on “secularization” as their privileged “object” of professional inquiry.

A related aim of this class, then, is to counteract the prevalent undergraduate experience of college as so many ephemeral and disjointed intellectual encounters with so many topics, methodologies, and disciplinary perspectives. Its internal ambiguities notwithstanding, the concept of secularization can be most helpful in this regard; for it may justifiably be investigated as *the* master-trope choreographing the seemingly unrelated, complex strands of political, economic,

scientific, and cultural change that are often subsumed under the umbrella concept of “modernity.” Particularly in the first couple of weeks, then, we shall parse and sift a number of key concepts, either surfacing for the first time or revived during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Among them are those of (human) rights, Liberalism, political economy, moral philosophy, individual freedom, teleology, and natural law, etc.—all of which have decisively shaped the questions, approaches, and objectives of advanced inquiry in the humanities and social sciences to this very day.

The overall objective of this class, then, is to pay particular attention to the *interpretive* (rather than merely *informational*) nature of knowledge in humanities and, to some extent, the social sciences. Understood as products of complex traditions of inquiry and histories of transmission, concepts and the ideas that they embody are not merely *tools* (certainly not reliable ones) unless we also understand their history and changing function over significant expanses of human time. For example, our prevailing conception of *method* is of relatively recent provenance, finding its most influential articulation in the writings of Bacon, Descartes, Bayle. As such, the idea of method reveals the breakdown of the ancient Greek notion of *kosmos* (“order”) as it had been variously elaborated by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and other thinkers well into the middle Ages. Within the physical and moral order of such cosmological models (arguably culminating Aquinas’ writings of the later thirteenth century), every being and entity has its own “essence” (somewhat related to what we today mean by “identity”) which, in the course of its existence, it strives to fulfill.

By contrast, the distinctly “modern” idea of “method” replaces the essentially *contemplative* dynamic of such a theory with an *active* and interventionist process of inquiry. Under this

new perspective, there is no pre-formed order (Aquinas' "universals") or *kosmos*; rather, there is merely an aggregate of so many discrete and heterogeneous entities, summarily referred to as "nature." This novel conception, which is pretty much in place by the early seventeenth century, also posits "nature" as a sum total of so many passive and indifferent entities, devoid of meaning or value except for those that a pragmatically-minded observer/user chooses to assign them. To put it polemically, the modern idea of "nature" is not the victim of (ecologically disastrous) conquest but its conceptual justification. What Milton alludes to when telling us of the *conquistadores* "rifling through the bowels of the earth" in quest for gold and other minerals thus is the result of a split between the natural and the ethical order which, for the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Augustinian tradition had always been profoundly entwined. Following that split, it is particularly the latter notion of the *kosmos* as a normative, ethical order realized by what Aristotle calls "practical reason" (*phronēsis*) which rapidly fades away.

It is no coincidence, then, that the emergence of modern, methodological, specialized, and interventionist ways of knowing unfolds more or less parallel to the rise of an isolated or "punctual self" (C. Taylor) as it is being conceptualized by a number of diversely oriented writers during the sixteenth and seventeenth century (Luther, Erasmus, Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz, Locke, among others). There are, of course, numerous characteristics that distinguish this modern, isolated and self-grounded individual from, say, human beings as Aristotle or St. Augustine conceive of them. One of them is that this new type of individual understands itself as endowed with—and increasingly defined by—a set of *claim rights* rather than by a set of inherited, normative ethical obligations towards a given community. Concurrently,

the seventeenth and early eighteenth century witnesses the displacement of a rhythmic, epiphanic, and spiritual conception of time with one emphasizing chronometric uniformity and linear progress—albeit to a "goal" that remains oddly unspecified and murky. This shift in the experience and interpretation of human time in turn facilitates the conversion of practices formerly considered "unfree" (Aristotle) or "sinful" (St. Augustine)—in particular the quest for affluence and personal enrichment so strongly premised by the rise of political economy in the early eighteenth century. What had been long proscribed as instances of greed and a lust for conquest (*cupiditas, libido dominandi*) begin to be reinterpreted as the very grounds of "virtuous" economic behavior. What C. B. Macpherson has labeled the era of "possessive individualism"—arising in the eighteenth century, consolidating itself in the nineteenth, and arguably finding its apotheosis in our own time—thus centers on a new model of human agency. Relentlessly speculative, self-interested, and forever "mobile" (both in the geographical and virtual sense), this model of *homo economicus* eventually defeats the ancient Greek and Hellenistic conception of the self as embedded in specific communities—the *polis*, the church (*ecclesia*)—which in turn would be responsible for socializing the individual and apprenticing it to their norms and to some socially relevant, vocational pursuit or "craft" (*technē*). In its stead, we can observe the emergence of a *professional* and essentially utilitarian conception of learning as the open-ended acquisition of a new commodity known as "information," which is of course the model that defines most of what transpires in schools and universities today. Our own inquiry in this class will pick up just as that process of "disembedding" reaches an unprecedented velocity around the middle of the eighteenth century. – For more information about the trajectory of readings and discussion in this class, please click on "Syllabi."

This course bears an **R** (research), a **CCI**, and an **EI** (writing) designation, and this website has been constructed with the aim of facilitating your awareness of the multiple ways in which the issues of secularization and modernity have been studied to date. To that end, you will find some general and specialized bibliographies, encyclopedia entries on key-concepts, a glossary of terms, biographical accounts of our principal writers, a multitude of links to databases of primary texts and external websites, as well as a number of images (with commentary). Additionally, there will be regular postings of potential topics for student research, as well as samples of outstanding student work from years past.

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