



Where does secularism come from?

KEY QUESTIONS ??

- Where does secularism come from?

STIMULUS

Secularism through the ages

In this resource we are going to look at a selection of snapshots and broad historical concepts that have contributed to the development of secularism as we see it today. This is simplified by necessity and can't capture the variety of secularist thought that has developed in different cultures or times in history.

People have probably been asking themselves questions central to secularism since societies first became complicated enough to:

- Have a significant diversity of opinions on how to live a good life, and/or have a good afterlife.
- Have a clerical class with a position of power based on their perceived religious authority.

Throughout the ancient world we can find examples of thinkers and philosophers who questioned religious authorities, hierarchies and orthodoxies. Just because people were thinking about questions central to secularism, doesn't mean they were secularists. Religion and its role in society might have been too different from how it is today for us to meaningfully call thinkers or movements secularist.

EXERCISES

- Q1.** Compare and contrast the historical snapshots above. What are the similar factors that led people in these different settings to consider questions that are core to secularism?
- Q2.** Does "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's" provide a Christian-based argument for secularism?
- Q3.** What are the similarities and differences between the idea of "Celestial Insurance" or empires permitting subject people to maintain their religious practices and modern ideas of religious tolerance?
- Q4.** What are the similarities and differences between the two kingdoms doctrine and modern secularism?

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Research the development of secularist thought in a historical context not covered above. Make use of at least two primary sources.
- Write a short essay supporting or opposing the claim that secularism is an intrinsically Protestant Christian worldview.
- Write a short essay on the topic of why India and Pakistan were founded with secularist constitutions.

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Empires

Empires and states throughout most of history haven't been particularly concerned with the rights of individuals or minorities. Many had official religions or privileged the religions associated with their ruling class. Most empires have gone through periods of enforcing certain religious views that they deemed important to the order and stability or spiritual health of the empire.

On the other hand, large empires tend to have a diversity of religions within their borders and many practised some form of what the Mongol Empires would go on to call "Celestial Insurance". This was a limited form of religious tolerance that allowed religious groups to practice their religions as long as they also pray or act for the empire's best interest and maintain its laws.

In the specific example of the Mongol Empire, subject peoples kept their religions but were required to pray for the health of the Khan. From the Khan's point of view, he would benefit from the protection of the deities of his subject people and they would not be tempted, as a result of having their religion suppressed, to rebel against the Empire.

During Muhammad's lifetime and the early Islamic empires, Muslims signed peace treaties with various groups who were permitted to maintain their religious practices. In return, these groups were required to pay a tax and not to disrupt the growing empire by challenging its secular or religious claims to authority.

In the Roman Empire, subject peoples were required to make offerings and pay taxes to the state. Many Jews objected to this, but refusing to pay would be treason.

In the biblical narrative (Matthew 22:21), the Jewish religious authorities seek to trick Jesus into advocating treason by asking him whether Jews (at this time Christianity hadn't split from Judaism) should pay these taxes. Jesus asks his questioners to produce a Roman coin, and asked whose face was on it. They answered, "Caesar's," and he responded: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's". This, along with "My kingdom is not of this world," (John 18:36) is interpreted as reflecting a traditional division in Christian thought by which state and church have separate spheres of influence.

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Reformation

The Protestant Reformation is far too complex a subject to cover here, but had a huge impact on political and religious thought in Europe throughout the 16th and 17th Centuries. It unleashed political and religious turmoil and horrific religious conflict as rival sects of Christianity attempted to establish their supremacy. Such was the level of conflict at times that some people thought it was a sign of the end times. It would exacerbate conflicts in which millions died, many for their beliefs, and would lead to the establishment of state churches in many European states. Despite all this, the reformation helped lay the foundations of religious and political liberalism.

As there isn't time here to go into huge depth, we will concentrate on one thinker, Martin Luther.

Martin Luther

Born in Germany in 1483, Martin Luther was a professor of theology, a priest and leading figure in the Reformation. A lot of his theology and religious criticism isn't relevant here, but Luther was a fierce critic of the Catholic Church's abuses of power and relationships with Europe's rulers, which he felt furthered their earthly, rather than spiritual ambitions.

Many credit Luther with starting the Reformation, when he posted his famous *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of churches in Wittenberg – this criticised the Church’s sale of indulgences and would eventually see him excommunicated.

As the Reformation gathered steam there were increasing conflicts between the Catholic Church and various Protestant Christian sects for the control of nations and city states across Europe.

While Luther was primarily concerned with issues of theology, he made significant contributions to contemporary Christian views on the relationship between secular and religious authority. In his 1518 sermon (*The Two Kinds of Righteousness*), Luther argued that Christians should follow righteousness *coram deo* (in the eyes of God or faith) and *coram mundo* (in the eyes of the world, civil or legal righteousness).

While this sort of worldly or secular righteousness was not in Luther’s view worthy of salvation, it was still a moral duty. Lutheranism (the branch of Protestant Christianity most associated with his legacy) developed the “two kingdoms doctrine”. This was the belief that that the church should not exercise worldly government, and princes should not rule the church or have anything to do with the salvation of souls.

In a letter to the Duke of Saxony, Luther wrote:

“God has ordained the two governments: the spiritual, which by the Holy Spirit under Christ makes Christians and pious people; and the secular, which restrains the unchristian and wicked so that they are obliged to keep the peace outwardly... The laws of worldly government extend no farther than to life and property and what is external upon earth. For over the soul God can and will let no one rule but himself.

Therefore, where temporal power presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God’s government and only misleads and destroys souls. We desire to make this so clear that everyone shall grasp it, and that the princes and bishops may see what fools they are when they seek to coerce the people with their laws and commandments into believing one thing or another.”

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Enlightenment

The Enlightenment (also known as the Age of Enlightenment or the Age of Reason) was an intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated the world of ideas in Europe during the 18th Century, though its roots lay in the scientific revolution of the 17th Century and the Reformation of the 16th.

The Enlightenment questioned traditional sources of religious, moral, political and intellectual authority. A range of thinkers began to view reason as the primary source of authority and legitimacy and came to advance ideals like liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government and separation of church and state.

The Enlightenment, like the Reformation, is a hugely complicated period which, depending on your view, might stretch over more than a century. We only have space to consider four thinkers in this period and their contribution to the development of secularist thought: Locke, Voltaire, Kant and Jefferson.

John Locke

Born in England in 1632, John Locke was an early though influential enlightenment philosopher. A lot of his work revolved around “social contract” theory and theories regarding how property and rights could emerge from nature.

In *On the Difference Between Civil and Ecclesiastical Power* (1674) Locke distinguished between two spheres of concerns or authority; civil and religious society. The first was the realm of the state, and the second of the church.

In the aftermath of religious conflicts following the Reformation, Locke wrote a series of pieces that would become *Letters Concerning Toleration*. In it he makes three central arguments for religious toleration: (1) Earthly judges, the state in particular, and human beings generally, cannot dependably evaluate the truth-claims of competing religious standpoints; (2) Even if they could, enforcing a single “true religion” would not have the desired effect, because belief cannot be compelled by violence; (3) Coercing religious uniformity would lead to more social disorder than allowing diversity.

Locke believed that human nature was created by God and characterised by reason and tolerance. For Locke, the only way a Church can gain genuine converts is through persuasion and not through violence. This relates to his central conclusion, namely, that the government should not involve itself in the care of souls. From this he reasoned that civil societies could come together to address common concerns.

However in reality Locke’s toleration for Catholics and atheists was far more limited. He believed that while Catholics should be free to practice their religion, their loyalty to Rome was a threat to state order in protestant countries.

Voltaire

If you’ve heard of Voltaire (real name François-Marie Arouet), you might have heard the quote “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it”. This actually comes from his biographer Evelyn Beatrice Hall almost a century after his death, but many feel it sums up Voltaire’s views.

Born in France in 1722, Voltaire would go on to be a prolific writer, historian and philosopher famous for his wit. Like many leading thinkers of this time Voltaire was a deist – he believed that a god had created the rules of nature (including human nature), but that these were governed by reason, while the god played no role in human affairs.

In *A Treatise on Toleration* (1763) Voltaire argued for freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and separation of church and state.

“It does not require great art, or magnificently trained eloquence, to prove that Christians should tolerate each other. I, however, am going further: I say that we should regard all men as our brothers. What? The Turk my brother? The Chinaman my brother? The Jew? The Siam? Yes, without doubt; are we not all children of the same father and creatures of the same God?”

Voltaire’s fiction and non-fiction work often focussed on abuses of power by religious and aristocratic authorities, who presented their self-interest as the will of God.

Immanuel Kant

Kant was a German philosopher considered a central figure in modern philosophy. He was born in 1724. Much of his work concerned ontology (studying being) and epistemology (studying knowledge).

Kant was religious, but criticised religious abuses of power and hierarchies. He believed that religion should be constrained by rationality, and that rationality properly understood supported a certain type of religion:

“An inner disposition lying wholly beyond the civil power’s sphere of influence”.

He appealed for “public use of one’s reason” to describe a common mode of deliberation, though much of his work focussed on the limits of reason.

Kant described his liberal view of the state as: “Freedom (independence from being constrained by another’s choice), insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of every other in accordance with a universal law”. He therefore argued that the state should hinder actions that themselves would hinder the freedom of others. However he also thought that the state should allow “all vices that do not contradict the civil covenant between citizens” and that this meant “permitting any irreligious behaviour”.

Thomas Jefferson

Jefferson was born in Virginia in 1743 and would go on to be the United States’ third president.

He was one of the intellectual leaders of the USA's founding and instrumental in the development of the constitution's first amendment, which guaranteed separation of church and state.

The phrase "separation between church and state" is generally traced to an 1802 letter by Thomas Jefferson, addressed to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut, and published in a Massachusetts newspaper. Jefferson wrote:

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties."

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"Great men of history"

When we consider the broad history of thought that led to the development of modern secularism in the European and later British tradition, we realise that many of the thinkers are white, European, Protestant men. The ability to contribute to public debates has often been restricted to certain groups, and some people's contributions are more likely to be preserved for history because of their privileged status.

But if you want to learn more about the development of secularist thought, it would be negligent not to consider the development of secularist ideas by other thinkers, including those in various Arabic, African, American, Indian and Asian traditions.

By the standards of today, few people would describe Locke and Luther as tolerant, liberal or secularist. Locke helped lay the intellectual foundations for political liberalism, yet he supported slavery and colonialism. Luther helped lay the intellectual foundations for religious liberalism, yet he had very clear and dogmatic ideas on the correct way to live and on who was going to end up in Hell.

If you met them today you might think they were bigots, yet their ideas helped inform many of the freedoms and tolerances we enjoy today. It is for this reason that some people argue that liberal secularism owes its foundations to Protestant Christianity. Others argue these ideas would have developed anyway.

Whenever a social idea comes along, it tends not to have one source, but is influenced by the events of its day and ideas that people have thought about for a long time before.

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The 19th Century

Secularism in the UK has a long history and was influenced by the historical setting discussed above. The development of modern British secularism starts with the freethinkers of the 19th Century. Again because there isn't a space for an in-depth look at all these speakers we are going to focus on three thinkers in particular: Richard Carlile, George Jacob Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh.

The Victorian Age, while one of huge technological and social progress, saw a lot of authoritarianism as the authorities sought to put down radical and working class movements which might upset the status quo.

Richard Carlile

Richard Carlile was the first person to establish a permanent secularist and campaigning organisation in the UK and was the most prominent British campaigner for freedom of thought and expression in the first half of the 19th Century.

Carlile was born in 1790. He moved to London as a young man and was soon involved in radical politics. In 1817 he took over a radical publishing business and was soon in trouble for reprinting parodies of church services. For this Carlile was imprisoned for four months without trial.

In 1819 he witnessed the Peterloo massacre – when the army attacked a huge crowd of peaceful protesters in Manchester. After publishing criticisms of those responsible he was again imprisoned for a week.

That year he was also prosecuted for publishing Paine's *The Age of Reason*. He was sentenced to three years (later extended to six) in Dorchester prison and fined £1,500 – a huge sum at the time.

George Jacob Holyoake

Holyoake, born in 1817, is thought to have created the term secularism – though secularist thought had been around for a long time in different names.

As a young man he found it difficult to progress as a teacher due to his socialist views.

He joined the Birmingham Reform League in 1831 and the Chartists in 1832 before moving to Worcester to become a full-time socialist lecturer in 1840.

In 1842 he was visiting his friend Charles Southwell (imprisoned for blasphemy) and was himself imprisoned for blasphemy after a lecture in which he suggested that “the deity should be put on half-pay” and added that “I flee the Bible as a viper, and revolt at the touch of a Christian.”

His prison sentence made Holyoake a radical hero, and he settled in London where he founded various newspapers, despite taxes designed to shut down such publications.

By 1851 Holyoake began to use the word “secularist” to describe himself and his followers. He defined secularism as “a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human”.

Holyoake continued to lecture throughout the country and as time passed his views began to mellow. By the late 1850s his leadership of the secularist movement was being challenged by the young and hugely energetic Charles Bradlaugh, who was more eloquent, more radical and a better organiser.

Charles Bradlaugh

During the mid-19th Century, Charles Bradlaugh would rise to lead the British secularist movement, founding the National Secular Society in 1866.

Charles Bradlaugh was born in 1833. His upbringing was orthodox and as a youngster he was appointed as a Sunday School teacher by Rev. John Graham Packer. After writing to the reverend for advice regarding biblical inconsistencies he was removed from his post and soon renounced his religious beliefs.

In the years that followed, he began to write and lecture, although he struggled to make a living, eventually enlisting in the army. He was sent to Ireland where the misery he saw made a lasting impact. When he returned to London, Bradlaugh edited freethought newspapers including the *National Reformer*.

By 1880 Bradlaugh had emerged as undisputed leader of the secularist cause and the leading radical of his time, regularly attracting audiences of thousands. His books and pamphlets on a variety of radical themes commanded huge sales and he was known nationally for his campaign to publish Charles Knowlton's birth control pamphlet.

As a constitutionalist, Bradlaugh was convinced that the way to change society was through parliament. In 1868 he first stood for election for the Northampton constituency which was then a single constituency electing two MPs.

He chose Northampton, a town of shoemakers, for the radical traditions associated with that trade.

In 1880 Bradlaugh was elected to Parliament as an MP for Northampton. He was re-elected to this seat four times in the early 1880s, but each time he was blocked from taking the seat he was elected to, because he was an atheist. On one occasion he was taken into custody and confined to the prison room of the clock tower for refusing to withdraw from the chamber. After being re-elected again in 1885, he was eventually allowed to take his seat in 1886.

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The 20th Century

In many ways the 20th Century was a high watermark for secularism. New independent nation states which emerged from the breakup of empires or were liberated from European imperialism following the world wars, generally saw secularism as being aligned with modernity. Many placed formal separations of religion and state along with other guarantees of religious freedom in their constitutions.

Both world wars had seen genocide of religious and ethnic groups and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrined freedom of belief. This contributed to the rise of human rights discourses as the dominant way of describing conflicts between different groups and interests in society. Most liberal democracies enshrined increasingly expansive protections for equality and human rights. These both protected freedom of belief, and the rights of minority groups that had previously had others' religions forced on them.

During the 20th Century liberal democracy became the norm across much of the developed world. Alongside this there were social liberation movements which sought to address how privilege and discrimination had marginalised some groups, while keeping others in power.

The 20th Century also saw the imposition of state mandated atheist worldviews in communist countries such as the People's Republic of China and the USSR.

In the UK, momentum for constitutional disestablishment – at least in England – declined in the 20th Century. While social changes undermined religious privilege, religious organisations played an increasing role in the expanding state.

On the other hand, several factors led to increased secularism on a social level. Immigration increased religious diversity and the rise of mass communication led to increased irreligion with religious beliefs being increasingly personalised. All of these contributed to a decline in the idea of the nation having a single accepted religious authority or outlook.