

## Varieties of Secularism in American History

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### RATIONALE

This course is designed for advanced undergraduates at a small liberal arts college who, ideally, are majors and have previously taken my two-semester sequence on American religious history. As a capstone of sorts, this course challenges students to think about issues of religion, culture, and power, variously construed. Students who enroll in this course will arrive possessing substantive knowledge of the content and narrative forms of American religious history, the major institutional players, key figures and trends, as well as a healthy appreciation for the range of activities that may be understood as having something to do with the problem of religion as it has evolved since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

So why secularism? For no better reason than to point out that the notion of the secular in all its various guises shadows both scholarly approaches to religion and, more importantly, those individuals, on the ground, who somehow have convinced themselves that they are religious in theory and/or practice. To begin to prise open the process of such conviction has the capacity, in Michel Foucault's phrasing, to turn the study of religion into a "concerted carnival." And who doesn't like carnivals?

The course calls into question notions of the secular, the ideology of secularism, and the secularization thesis from the very first lecture. I begin with the deconstructive move not simply to revel in the porous play of categorical boundaries but to create a space in which to rethink the nature of the lines between categories. My goal is to encourage students to walk away from this class with a more sophisticated appreciation of categories. For the kind of work they do. For their effective and affective power. In other words, I wish for students learn to cultivate their aesthetic judgment. Such judgment is often ignored within a climate that increasingly values instrumental modes of analysis—common sense realism, post-millennialism, ironic or otherwise, and social networks revolving primarily around the energy of passionately shared consumer choices (myspace.com, ebay.com, facebook.com, etc.).

This syllabus is designed to be a template that will enable revision and incorporation of new material as my research interests change over time. I also see it as a springboard for students who wish to continue to think about the problems of "America," "religion," and/or "history"—the three entities that are not only the most pressing categories in our field but also ones that were formulated in and through "secular" modernity.

## STYLE

As I do with all of my classes, I begin with a week or two of theoretical reflection in order to frame the issues at stake during the semester and to give students a common vocabulary to discuss the issues before them. The theoretical discussion continues throughout the semester as students are encouraged to test the lenses, as it were, seeing what they can see and noting the limitations of various perspectives. Historiographically speaking, this course unabashedly requires students to walk and chew gum at the same time, that is, to inquire into the past while simultaneously historicizing their categories of inquiry.

This syllabi is heavily indebted to Foucault's genealogical method and, in particular, Talal Asad's recent use of genealogy to rethink the relationship between secularism, religion, and modernity. I have found both Foucault and Asad extremely helpful in finding leverage upon the debate that arguably began in the 1960s with Wilfred Cantwell Smith's suggestion that scholars drop the term "religion" as an analytical category. Whereas Smith was concerned with the imprecision of "religion," he was not necessarily interested in the power associated with that term in the past or in the present. Smith's gesture has recently been taken to its bizarre, but quite logical conclusion, by certain scholars who claim that other scholars "manufacture" religion for various ideological purposes. The latter, claims the former, are smuggling religion into the academy and/or affirming in their scholarship an often-regrettable political persuasion. (The most regrettable being the trace of anti-Semitism present in Mircea Eliade's operating "myth of the eternal return.")

This trajectory of scholarship has been nothing but provocative. In its effort to expose the theological lineage of an organized field of Western intellectual inquiry, however, important issues are neglected—the consequences of such theological inquisition, in the present as well as across time, as well as how this discursive trajectory has resonated in the visceral lives of individuals. What I have found frustrating about this style of critique is its unabashed scientism. By scientism I mean its embrace of economies of cause and effect that are rather linear and empirical and its assumption that there is, in fact, an explanation, a category, if you will, for the intellectual history they are narrating.

In addition to its unwillingness to acknowledge the lineage of its own "gotcha" empiricism, it is my position that this critical style does not sufficiently address the complex dynamics coursing through the very categories it is utilizing. Admittedly, to simultaneously interrogate and use a category of analysis is somewhat of an impossible task. But it is precisely this kind of logical impossibility that I believe should be presented to students in all of its complexity and absurdity. To confront, face-to-face, the proposition that religion does not exist in essence, or at the very least, cannot be verified to exist in essence, is not enough. Another question must be entertained. How does one remain a scholar of religion—somebody who claims to study religion—when religion is a figment of the imagination? To study the evolving history of secularism(s), then, is to begin to grapple with the ethics of interpretation and the political consequences of posing some questions while leaving others unaddressed.

Contra the ideological analysis of history, Foucault's genealogical style opens up the possibility of a historical analysis of ideology—"religious," "secular," and shades of grey. Genealogy does not simply attempt to expose biases among scholars, although there is an element of that implied in its attitude. What this "historical style" does, however, is to try to think more critically, i.e., historically, about the biases of the "philosophers" and their relationship to other aspects of their world. Such a style has much in common with Geertz's claim that the study of religion is, for all intents and purposes, the study of the history of the imagination. The insight, then, that institutions, ideas, practices, sentiments, etc., are made to be real is not news to scholars of religion. It is central to how I conceive of Religious Studies as approaching the material, bodily, and cognitive effects of (and on) those institutions, ideas, practices, sentiments, etc.

The course follows a temporal arc, from the so-called age of discovery to the contemporary moment. There are, however, numerous moments when the past and present bleed together. For example, when discussing meteorology, we will move from a mid-nineteenth-century evangelical assessment of a tornado to the militarization of weather by the United States government. Recurring themes include media, race, sexuality, gender, law, art, natural as well as human science. The course also has a ton of reading assignments, a burden I address by guiding students, week-to-week, about what readings should be read closely, what readings need to be read as background, and what readings may be dropped altogether. It has been my habit to improvise during the semester, adding this, excising that, depending on what issues and questions arise. Optional readings are included for the more rigorously inclined.

- JL

## Varieties of Secularism in American History

John Lardas

Tuesday/Thursday  
10:00-11:30 am

Office Hours: Tue/Th  
12:30-2:30 pm or by  
appointment

### OVERVIEW

“Secularism,” so closely allied to the rhetoric of “progress” and “civilization,” has come to describe a transparent world “set apart” from divine monarchy, clerical influence, and things that go bump in the night. Although “secularism” was first defined as a formal platform in the mid-nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic, it had already pervaded developments, principles, and technologies integral to the emergence of Anglo-European modernity—the colonization of the “new” world, missionizing strategies, the scientific method, laissez-faire capitalism, the human sciences (including the comparative study of religion), consumerism, and journalistic objectivity to democratic pluralism, imperialism, universal human rights, moral autonomy, not to mention freedom *of* as well as *from* religion.

This course will entertain the ironic possibility that secularism possesses a religious history of its own. This course will also interrogate the commonplace definition of secularism as everything that religion is not by dwelling within a series of philosophical and historical spaces—spaces in which secularism emerged as *both* an extension of, and alternative to, religious beliefs, practices, and categories.

Throughout the semester we will explore how versions of the secular have defined and authorized such things as the meaning of the human subject, the structure of the political collective, the proper code of ethics, the nature of history, experiences of space and time, standards of cruelty and health, the ways and means of the sense perception, as well as sexual and racial differences. The goal of this course is not simply to point out that the ideals of secularism have failed to materialize but, on the contrary, to explore the degree to which its definitional categories and attitudes regarding “religion” have. What versions of secularism are operative within public discourses about religion, scholarly assumptions regarding their object of study or in the way in which “modern” individuals are asked to identify and understand themselves as religious, spiritual, or non-religious? To what extent have they delimited certain perspectives on the history of secular modernity?

### READINGS\*

Brett Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (New York: Vintage, 1998)

Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)

Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003)

Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991)

Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)

\*all other readings to be found on Blackboard

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

Completion of reading assignments before class is an absolute necessity. Class discussion is also an essential component of this course. You will be expected to participate on a regular basis and will be evaluated on the quality of your ongoing contribution. Class Participation will count for 20% of your grade.

Each student will be responsible for being the “point-person” for one of the weeks, beginning with the week of Sept. 13-15. This will entail a short presentation on Tuesday at the beginning of class, summarizing the main issues of that week’s reading as well as posing a discussion question for that session as well as at the beginning of the Thursday session. The questions are due (email) to me 24 hours before class (i.e., the day before). The “point-person” will also write a summary of that week’s discussion to be distributed to the rest of that class in class the following Tuesday. This assignment will count for 20% of your grade.

Two papers are due as indicated on the course schedule below. (20% and 40% of grade, respectively). Late papers will not be accepted except in cases of personal or family emergency. The midterm paper will allow you the opportunity to attempt to define, redefine, and/or “undefine” the category of secularism. The final paper is designed to allow you the opportunity to explore, in-depth, an issue and/or historical figure related to the emergence of secularism in America. The goal of this paper is to integrate theoretical reflection with historical research in order to illuminate a particular facet of the history of secularism. Drawing upon the theoretical and historical resources from the course, your charge is to grapple with any number of related questions—what, if anything, is religious about the notion of secularism? To what extent does secularism possess a religious history? What are the consequences of performing a genealogy of secularism? How might a genealogy affect the way in which one approaches phenomena traditionally associated with religion?

## COURSE SCHEDULE

Thursday, August 25

What Might a Religious History of Secularism  
Look Like?

Tuesday, Aug. 30

Secularism in Historical Perspective

(1) "Secularism," in *Chambers's Encyclopedia: A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge for the People VIII* (Edinburgh: J.B. Lippincott, 1869): 596-98.

(2) George Jacob Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism* (London: Austin and Co., 1870), 5-13, 25-47.

Optional:

(3) Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *American Historical Review* 108:4 (October 2003): 1061-80.

Thursday, Sept. 1

Secularism in Theoretical Perspective

(1) Charles H. Long, "Silence and Signification," in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 54-62.

(2) Jane Bennett, "Disenchantment Tales," in *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 56-74.

Sept. 6-8

Genealogical Methods

(1) Talal Asad, "Introduction: Thinking About Secularism" (1-17) and "What Might an Anthropology of Secularism Look Like?" (21-66) in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Sept. 13-15

Ownership, Wonder, and the Age of Discovery

(1) Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

(2) Excerpts from:

Christopher Columbus, (from a *Letter to Lord Raphael Sanchez, Treasurer to Ferdinand and Isabella, King and Queen of Spain, on His First Voyage* (1493)

Amerigo Vespucci, from *Mundus Novus* (1503)

Peter Martyr and Richard Eden: from *The Decades of the New World or West India* (1555)

Michel de Montaigne, from *Of Cannibals* (1580)

Thomas Hariot, from *Brief and True Report of the New-found Land of Virginia* (1588)

Michael Drayton, *To the Virginian Voyage* (1606)

Richard Hakluyt, from *The Famous Voyage of Sir Francis Drake* (1628)

Francis Bacon, from *The New Atlantis* (1627)

Sept. 20-22

Of Sodomites, Maypoles, and the Metaphysics of  
Indian-Hating

(1) Thomas Morton: excerpts from *The New English Canaan* (1637)

(2) Selections from Francis A. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge, 2001)

(3) Michael Warner, "New English Sodom," in *American Literature* 64 (March 1992): 19-47.

(4) Mary Rowlandson: excerpts from *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682)

Optional:

(5) Richard Drinnon, "Maypoles and Pequots" from *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), 3-64.

### **Sept. 27-29** Dictionaries, Deism and Infidelity Panics

(1) Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-70, 111-48. 166-75.

(2) Hannah Adams, excerpts from *A dictionary of all religions and religious denominations, Jewish, heathen, Mahometan and Christian, ancient and modern: With an appendix, containing a sketch of the present state of the world, as to population, religion, toleration, missions, etc., and the articles in which all Christian denominations agree* (New York: James Eastburn, 1784/1817)

(3) Tomoko Masuzawa, "'The Religions of the World' before 'World Religions,'" in *The Invention of World Religions or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 37-71.

Optional:

(4) Harry S. Stout "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 34:4 (1977): 519-41.

### **Oct. 4-6** Separations of Church and State (I)

(1) *The Declaration of Independence* (1776) and *The Constitution of the United States* (1787)

(2) Thomas Jefferson, excerpts from *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991)

(3) Thomas Jefferson, *An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom in the State of Virginia* (1786)

Optional:

(4) \$2 bill and a nickel

### **Oct. 11-13** Separations of Church and State (II)

(1) Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)







