The World Disenchantment: The Origins and Impact of Secularization

Department of History
Trinity College

Jonathan Elukin
Associate Professor
Department of History

Introduction: For most of human civilization, people thought the world was filled with the spirits of gods that directly affected their lives. This “enchantment” took the form of beliefs in magic, angels, demons, and miracles. Such a conception of an enchanted world thrived in the Christian society of pre-modern Europe as well and continues to characterize many societies or sub-cultures throughout the contemporary world. The process of secularization—that is, the shift away from thinking of the world as enchanted—should be studied systematically. Moreover, the impact of the process of secularization needs careful study as well. The disenchantment of the world affected many aspects of European society in the early modern period, including attitudes towards tolerance, nature, human identity, authority and government. In many ways, our contemporary debates about the nature of secular societies grow out of these medieval and early modern ideas about the enchantment or disenchantment of the world.

Week 1: Ideas of Secularization

Charles Taylor, A Secular Age (Harvard University Press, 2007)
Gabriel Vahanian, Praise of the Secular (University of Virginia Press, 2008)
Robert Coles, Secular Mind (Princeton University Press, 2001)
Steve Bruce, God is Dead: Secularization in the West (Wiley-Blackwell 2002)
Owen Chadwick, Secularization of the European mind in the 19th century (Cambridge University Press, 2008)

The introduction to the course will survey attempts to understand what secularization means. Does it happen to different societies at different times? Is there one definition of secularization? Is it purely a post-Enlightenment European phenomenon? Are there secular or religious ways of thinking? Can we really divide society into sacred and secular?

********************************************************************

Week 2: Christianity and the Miraculous

Augustine, Confessions and City of God
Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (Yale University Press, 1999).

**Week 3: Supernatural Beliefs in Medieval Europe**

Cuming and Baker eds., *Popular Belief and Practice: Papers Read at the Ninth Summer Meeting and the Tenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society (Studies in Church History)* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)
John Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (Hodder Arnold, 2005)

**Week 4: Miracles and Skepticism in the Middle Ages**

Susan Reynolds, “Social Mentalities and the Case of Medieval Skepticism” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* Ser. 6, 1 (1991), 21-41
Stephen Justice, “Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?” *Representations* 103 (2008) 1 -29
Deirdre Jackson, *Marvellous to Behold, Miracles in Illuminated Manuscripts* (British Library, 2007)

This part of the course will survey the nature of religious belief in the ancient and medieval worlds. It is crucial here to note that the readings will introduce the problem of the extent and nature of belief in the miraculous in these societies. In other words, we will study the complicated reality of religious belief and challenge the idea of a uniformly religious medieval or pre-modern world. Secularization happened to societies that had been grappling with different levels and kinds of religious belief for centuries. The vocabulary of skepticism and un-belief had its origins in religious societies.
Week 5: Sacred and Secular in the Early Modern World


Week 6: Science and Secularism


This section of the course will study the development of secular thinking in the early modern period, with a particular focus on the evolution of critical attitudes towards the biblical text and the appearance of scientific modes of thought. In both cases, however, we will try to see these developments as arising out of a religious context rather than appearing as an alternative to religious mentalities.

Week 7: Secularism and Tolerance


Week 8: Tolerance in the Medieval World

Cary Nederman, Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration Before the Enlightenment (Penn State Press, 1997)
Gervers and Powell, Tolerance and Intolerance: Social Conflict in the Age of the Crusades (Syracuse University Press, 2001)
Laursen and Nederman, eds., Difference and Dissent: Theories of Toleration in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (Rowman and Littlefield, 1996)
Stroumsa and Stanton, eds., Tolerance and Intolerance in early Judaism and Christianity Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Week 9: Tolerance in Early Modern Europe

Benjamin Kaplan, Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe (Harvard University Press, 2007)
Stuart Schwartz, All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World (Yale University Press, 2008)
Grell and Scribner, Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation (Cambridge University Press, 2002)
Hans Bödeker, Clorinda Donato, and Peter Hanns Reill, eds., Discourses of Tolerance and Intolerance in the Enlightenment (University of Toronto Press, Center/Clark Series, 2009)
B. J. Skopol, Shakespeare and Tolerance (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Secularization is often thought to have created the possibility of a new kind of tolerance. Human beings were no longer trapped in the religious mind-set of absolute truth that promoted or facilitated persecution of one faith by another. Recent scholarship on the nature of medieval and early modern religious relations has challenged that narrative. This section of the course will attempt to assess this new historiographical challenge to the narrative of secularization and tolerance.

***********************************************************

Week 10: Whither Secularism?

Adam Sutcliffe, Judaism and Enlightenment (Cambridge University Press, 2005)
Ziolkowski, Modes of Faith: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief (University of Chicago, 2007)
Week 11: Science Fiction or The Survival of Religion in Secular Forms
Kraemer, et.al. The Religions of Star Trek (Basic Books, 2008)
Readings of selected science fiction novels, including Frank Herbert, Dune
Screening of selected science fiction films, including The Matrix.

Week 12: Return of Religion
Stephen Jenkins, The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South (Oxford University Press, 2006)
Mark Taylor, After God (University of Chicago Press, 2009)

Week 13: Conclusion

The final weeks of the seminar will study the resurgence of religion in the modern world and the creation of alternative modes of enchantment. Is religion or religious mentalities being preserved in art or science fiction? Can true secularism survive? How will new religious cultures in the developing world and in some western societies interact with modern secular ideology?