

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

THE ROOTS OF THE SECULAR TRADITION IN THE WEST

Introduction

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The curriculum development materials set out here address some of the historical roots of secular traditions in western civilization. They focus on the provenance of ideas originating in Antiquity and Christianity that led to the emergence of secularism as an organizing principle in society and as a cultural and intellectual force in the early modern period.

In choosing “The Roots of The Secular Tradition in the West” as its theme for the first year of its curriculum development project, ISSSC highlights the importance of historical research and teaching within the context of its overall activities. Secular ideas and values highlight the temporary, contingent, and contextual frameworks of human behavior - the ‘here and now’. Hence, secularism is better understood in light of a historical perspective that focuses on its origins and development.

“The Roots of The Secular Tradition” curriculum development project focuses primarily on the 16th and 17th centuries. It is not intended to offer a comprehensive historical view of the secular tradition in western civilization. The period of the 16th and 17th centuries is nevertheless critical to the emergence of modern secularism as an organizing principle in culture and society. Accelerated cultural ferment and diversity, coupled with the growing public awareness of their scope and implications, are commonly acknowledged as the hallmark of early modern western civilization. Numerous studies have been devoted to clarifying its demographic, social, economic, technological, and political underpinnings in different parts and regions of the European continent. Suffice it to note here that the

process generally involved the initial phase of the transformation of an agrarian society into a society based on urban centers, commerce, and industry.

A prominent cultural change that accompanied these social transformations was the secularization of learning and knowledge about the natural world within the system of colleges, universities, and newly founded academies. The 16th and 17th centuries in particular bore witness to the invigorated attention of scholars to the empirical sources of knowledge. Notable factors gradually coincided to engender a stricter adherence to the evidence of the senses: the diffusion of practical information and reports through the printing press enabled scholars to systematically identify erroneous information with greater ease.

Geographic explorations and discoveries dramatically disclosed discrepancies between genuine evidence and entrenched opinion. Travel within Europe and abroad became easier and more frequent, and scholars could more effectively check reports and stories that came by. The development of pedagogical instruments of literacy by humanist scholars upgraded the status of primary sources. The emphasis on literate piety in the Reformation and Counter-reformation movements highlighted the methodical attention to revealed sources of faith.

Further impact on the methodical collation and processing of empirical evidence was made by the gradual rise in social and intellectual status of practically oriented disciplines such as the mixed-mathematical sciences of astronomy, optics and mechanics; related operative disciplines such as architecture and cartography; medical research; and the leisured pursuit of natural history in polite culture. The ascent of these branches of learning enhanced the value of measuring devices, instruments of observation and experimental research, and methods of classification.

The new secular image of knowledge is encapsulated in John Locke's celebrated dictum in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*,

Our Business here is not to know all things, but those which concern our conduct. If we can find out those Measures, whereby a rational Creature put in that State, which Man is in, in this World, may, and ought to govern his opinions, and Actions depending thereon, we need not be troubled, that some other things escape our Knowledge (1991: 46).

Locke's contention that human knowledge ought to be confined to, and integrated with, the "business" of every day life "in this World" did not directly address religion. Rather, it was a defining theme of his empiricist philosophy. More specifically, it conveyed his view that the experimental study of the physical world yielded the most reliable understanding in virtue of its practicality; yet, precisely for this reason, was unlikely to ever approximate either truth or certainty.

Locke's empiricism anticipates modern secularism in yet another manner namely, in considering the human intellect from a perspective that was ultimately ethical, rather than merely logical or cognitive. Human learning was a collective endeavor. Its governing principle was the responsibility of students and teachers for other fellow human beings, rather than to truth or certainty. To illustrate this point, Locke drew an analogy between learning and the art of navigation at sea. The sailor's skill and knowledge were no more and no less than a means to discharge his responsibility for the safety of his vessel. This goal overruled and overshadowed any inclination to "fathom all the depths of the Ocean".

Searching for the origins of contemporary secularism in early modern empiricism is one of the themes that unify the ISSSC courses offered on "The roots of secularism". Another theme addresses the relevance of the problem of knowledge to religion and politics. As Professor Sean Cocco's course *Science and Religion in Early Modern Europe* and the essay by Professor Paula Findlen demonstrate, Christian theology and natural philosophy were regarded as complementary traditions of scholarly work in colleges and universities throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period. It was the common assumption of scholars that the human study of nature glorified divine omnipotence and wisdom. However, the relative unity in medieval scholarship was gradually displaced by a

growing diversity of doctrines, schools, disciplines and professions from the 15th century onwards. Secular ideas and values can be traced more specifically to the response to the growing diversity of religious affiliations during this period of change. For, more than in any other area of cultural ferment, religious diversity was accompanied by the swell of conflicting and divisive claims to truth and authority. These in turn undermined the fabric of law and order. Christian churches were the largest, wealthiest, and most organized of the voluntary associations that made up the social fabric. Religious authorities dominated, and often controlled, systems of education. Christian theology was the single most important scholarly tradition in matters of jurisprudence and law. Hence, across regions and countries, the breakdown of Christian unity was commonly perceived as leading to civil belligerence and disarray.

The courses by Professor Nadon, and Professor Ryan focus, accordingly, on responses to the religious crisis of the early modern period. The common thread weaved through these responses was comprised of endeavors to maintain unity in a society that was predominantly Christian by separating Christian faith from the indubitable authority it traditionally claimed to have possessed. Moreover, the three courses commonly show that secular ideas and values did not mark out a dichotomous division between scientists and theologians, or between advocates of reason and experience on the one hand, and people of faith on the other. In fact, historical evidence suggests that these dichotomies did not prevail in early modern European culture. The hallmark of the secular was not an opposition to religion, but rather the endeavor to contain authority – whether in religion, science, or politics – within the framework set by prudent reflections on everyday life in its diverse manifestations.