

First Teaching Conference of the Program on Secular Traditions  
and the Liberal Arts

**May 24-25, 2006**  
**Lenox, Massachusetts**

The Roots of the Secular Tradition in the West

The following courses were presented by Trinity College's ISSSC Faculty Fellows:

1. Course Title: [Science and Religion in Early Modern Europe](#)  
Faculty Member: Dr. Sean Cocco, Assistant Professor of History
2. Course Title: [From Theocracy to Democracy: the Foundations of Modern Liberal Politics](#)  
Faculty Member: Dr. Christopher Nadon, Associate Professor of Political Science
3. Course Title: [Skepticism and Toleration in Early Modern Philosophy](#)  
Faculty Member: Dr. Todd Ryan, Assistant Professor of Philosophy

*External Evaluators*

Prof. Donald L.M. Baxter, Philosophy, University of Connecticut

Prof. Hans Peter Broedel, History, Hamilton College

Prof. Aaron Garrett, Philosophy, Boston University

Prof. Robert Faulkner, Politics, Boston College

Prof. Paula Findlen, History, Stanford University

Prof. Manfred Kuehn, Philosophy, Boston University

Prof. Bojana Mladenovic, Philosophy, Williams College

Prof. Patrick Neal, Politics, University of Vermont

Prof. John Rudisill, Philosophy, the College of Wooster

Prof. James Schmidt, Politics, Boston University

Prof. Steven Smith, Politics, Yale University

## **Aims of the Meeting**

Our aim was to mount an informal and high engaging meeting for a group of about 30 scholars, including the Program Fellows and Institute staff. We identified and invited a group of philosophers, political scientists, and historians of science who already teach courses with themes or focus similar to those that our group was working on this year. Ideally, we hoped to produce an audience with roughly equal numbers of representatives from each discipline. We concentrated on identifying likely candidates, mostly from liberal arts institutions in Southern New England and adjacent parts of New York.

At the meeting, four types of organized discussion took place: presentation of our new courses; interaction with the keynote speaker; three discipline-specific conversations in which specialist colleagues discussed the new syllabi and teaching issues and opportunities involving the secular tradition as they appear in the disciplinary fields, and a general wrap-up round table involving all participants in the meeting. Plenty of opportunity for informal discussion was also provided. Participants were asked to provide written evaluations of the meeting, the proposals, and the larger project.

## **Excerpts from Participants' Evaluations**

### **I. Overall comments on the Program on the Secular Tradition in the Liberal Arts:**

*"I think it's a terrific idea. The discussions at the meeting made me realize how little I've thought about secularism and secularization. I think the project is very exciting."*

Prof. Aaron Garrett, Philosophy, Boston University

*"There has been, for some time now, relatively little attention paid amongst "analytic" philosophers to the concept of secularism...The revisiting of the idea of secularism and critical inquiry into its promise and shortcomings is, thus, timely and vital importance."*

Prof. John Rudisill, Philosophy, The College of Wooster

*"This strikes me as very important and potentially quite interesting project. As I mentioned in the discussions, we are awash in institutes on "religion and public life" and it is refreshing to see a project devoted to a consideration of secularism."*

Prof. James Schmidt, Politics, Boston University

*"I do think the subject is a fascinating one, and the project potentially very promising. I think it's true that there is today a lot more study focused on the "public elements of religion" than there are on the idea of secularism itself, and that working this "other side of the street" is a very fruitful idea."*

Prof. Patrick Neal, Politics, University of Vermont

*“In general, the problem in the academy is not too little secularism, but too much complacency about secularism... One effect of the complacency: a lack of awareness of how these secular outlooks, say moral relativism or free sexuality, offends the religious, e.g., the Islamists. Another effect: a lack of awareness of how belief in present day secularism is in the process of being undermined in the advanced countries by the post-modern attacks on enlightened reason & science...*

*Addressing the premises of science & enlightened rationalism, reminding of the philosophic battles against theocracy and orthodoxy – is important.*

*Part of that useful effort is bringing together circles of academics to be provoked, aided, and stimulated. You are doing that.”*

Prof. Robert Faulkner, Politics, Boston College

## **II. Are we asking the right questions? Is the current project, as structured, likely to stimulate more teaching and research in American universities on the role of secular ideas and traditions?**

*“From my perspective, your questions are fine – they stimulate course design and pedagogical discussion, and encourage us to find new ways to make our course offerings more relevant to students ... The project will, though, encourage teachers to focus more specifically upon secular ideas and traditions. When I next teach history of modern science, for example, I will certainly rely upon strategies and perspectives I’ve taken from the conference, and will certainly borrow shamelessly from Sean’s syllabus as well.”*

Prof. Hans Peter Broedel, Hamilton College

*“This is a hard question to answer, because it seems that the project is still developing its sense of what the questions to ask are. I do think the questions underlying these particular course proposals (i.e. how did secularism emerge in early modern Europe?) is very good question to structure pedagogy and curricular development around. I found the comments of the historians at the conference quite fascinating, and they made me aware of just how complicated an issue this notion of the “rise of secularism” is. I think the contact between historians, scientists and political theorists is the most promising aspect of the program. I know that as a political theorist, I found myself thinking throughout the conference that it would be quite fascinating and invigorating to be involved in a project like this that involved close and sustained contact with people in the other fields.*

*I am unable to say much about the likelihood of the project stimulating teaching and research in other universities. So much of that depends on resources and outreach. I will say, though, that I left the conference thinking that I might talk with one of my colleagues in the English department here at UVM who teaches early modern literature about the program.”*

Prof. Patrick Neal, Politics, University of Vermont

*“Yes. Just participating in this conference, thinking about the courses, hearing the thoughts of colleagues, will likely affect my teaching and research. I have for years taught an introductory course—Philosophical Classics—in which themes of skepticism and freedom of thought and expression played a large role. Thinking about Todd Ryan’s course has made me consider talking about toleration more extensively in my own.*

Prof. Donald L.M. Baxter, Philosophy, University of Connecticut

**III. Did the conference help you reassess your own teaching or courses? If yes, in what ways?**

*“Yes, quite a bit. I’d taught a course last year as part of the core program for the University Professors Program (an “interdisciplinary” honors college in Boston University) on civil and ecclesiastical authority. It was a way of introducing students to broad issues in political philosophy, but I wasn’t entirely satisfied with the way it went. I can now see that some of the problems that I found in the course “From Theocracy to Democracy” were also shared by my course (e.g. a tendency to concentrate on “great theories” rather than look more closely at the actual disputes as they developed historically). Attending the conference gave me quite a bit of enthusiasm about reconfiguring the course and trying it again in the fall of 2007.”*

Prof. James Schmidt, Politics, Boston University

**Additional Comments:**

*“Great workshop! When have I ever discussed someone’s syllabi with such a large group of colleagues? Thanks again for the invitation.”*

Prof. Paula Findlen, History, Stanford University

## **Teaching Conference Program**

**Wednesday, May 24, 2006**

**1 p.m.: Arrival at Cornell Inn, Lenox.**

**2-5 p.m.: Session One: Restaurant 218 (across the street from the Cornell Inn)**

Welcome: Professor Barry Kosmin, Director, ISSSC

Presentations on the Courses Developed in 2005-06 in the Institute’s Program on Secular Traditions and the Liberal Arts

Chair: Andrew Walsh, Coordinator, Program on Secular Traditions and the Liberal Arts

“Science and Religion in Early Modern Europe,” Sean Cocco, Assistant Professor of History

“From Theocracy to Democracy: the Foundations of Modern Liberal Politics,”  
Christopher Nadon, Associate Professor of Political Science

“Skepticism and Toleration in Early Modern Philosophy,” Todd Ryan, Assistant  
Professor of Philosophy

**5-6:30 p.m.: Break**

**6:30 p.m.: Session Two: 218 Restaurant**

Dinner and keynote presentation by Prof. Paula E. Findlen, Ubaldo Pierotti Professor of Italian History at Stanford University, director of the university’s Science, Technology and Society Program, and co-editor of *Configurations*, the journal of the Society for Literature and Science.

**9 p.m.: A gathering at Duffy's Pub, Cornell Inn**

**Thursday, May 25, 2006**

**8-9 a.m.: Breakfast at the Cornell Inn**

**10:30 a.m-12:30 p.m. Session Three: Cornell Inn**

Working Group Discussions

Participants will divide into three groups (philosophy, political science, history of science) to discuss the proposed courses and the pedagogical issues involved in addressing the development of the secular tradition in each discipline.

**1 to 3 p.m.: Session Four: 218 Restaurant**

Lunch and a roundtable wrap-up discussion