

## **II. The Secular**

## 4. A History of the Secular

### Introduction

Secularity, as a social force, did not emerge spontaneously, without precedent. Rather, it has developed over time, and although this has been most notable in the past few centuries the roots of secularity stretch well into the past and across cultures. Indeed, it is difficult to separate the history I will be detailing here – the history of secularity as it has emerged in the West – from intellectual development in other times and places. I will note some of these sources, in particular works from the vibrant intellectual centers of the Middle East and Spain during Islam’s intellectual golden age. However, since the Renaissance, Western nonreligious thought has developed largely independently, and where it has imported this has generally been form rather than substance. Thus, this chapter is primarily the story of the development of European secularity from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

The fifteenth century saw the first major break, in European thought, from trends that had dominated the Middle Ages. The humanist movement in arts and letters began to celebrate humanity on its own terms rather than as related to divine providence. Following from this, the scientific revolution brought about by discoveries from men such as Galileo and Newton demonstrated that the world at large could also be understood in human terms. Both movements began within the religious worldview of the time, seeing their new knowledge as a celebration of God’s creation. However, by the Enlightenment this had been turned on its head – the achievements of nonreligious knowledge and dissatisfaction, even disgust, with the apparent ills of religion led many to take an active stand against church authorities. These processes were refined but also moderated in the nineteenth century, so that by the beginning of the twentieth the staying power of nonreligiousness – of secularity – was indisputable. Of course, all of this happened parallel to, and often in conjunction with, developments in Christianity,

notably the Reformation and its aftermath in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

However, such events are here secondary to the main theme, the rise of secularity.

Throughout this story, there are two key points. The first is the elevation of rational judgment and its corollary, empirical observation, as hallmarks of secular thought. The second is the emergence of the idea of the public sphere, and the application of rationality to it. Rationalization is evident beginning with the scientific revolution, and affected much that came after it – in economics it spurred the industrial revolution, in politics the rights-based revolutions in America and France. Even the Romantic response, which emphasized the felt over the reasoned, was often very this-worldly in its nonreligious forms. Few, religious or non-, successfully challenged this trend towards rationalization on its own terms, and for good reason, given its record of empirical success and explanatory power. A subplot of this story is the increasing tendency to view secularity not as a way of viewing things, but as viewing things as they are – that is, not as a partial worldview but as an unbiased, empirical report of the world. The strength of rationality and its totalizing worldview have profound effects on the relation between secularity and religion.

### **Precursors to the Renaissance**

First, a brief mention of Medieval precursors to Renaissance thought. As I noted above, Muslim thinkers in particular had an extensive impact on the development of European thought. They both preserved Classical Greek philosophy and expanded upon it. In the Middle East of the ninth and tenth centuries, Abu Yusuf Ya'qub Ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (801-866) and Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Zakariyya' al-Razi (865-925) hailed Socrates as an exemplar of the philosophical life. In al-Razi's words this was, "making oneself similar to God."<sup>1</sup> In the century following, Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi

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1 1. Butterworth, Charles E., 1995, "Abu Bakr al-Razi," in: McGreal, Ian P., ed., *Great Thinkers of the Eastern World: The Major Thinkers and the Philosophical Classics of China, India, Japan, Korea, and the World of Islam* (New York, NY: HarperCollins): 443-445, p. 444. Many of the names, dates, and facts throughout this chapter are not footnoted – they represent the "standard history," and only direct quotes, uncommon facts, or authors' opinions are noted.

(870-950) and especially Abu 'Ali ibn Sina (known in the West, from "Ibn Sina," as Avicenna, 980-1037) synthesized Aristotelian and Platonic thought and sought to make the metaphysics of the former amenable to both Muslim and Christian authorities. Muslim Spain also brought forth its share of thinkers, the most famous of whom being Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Rushd (again, Westernized from Ibn Rushd to Averroes, 1126-1198). Ibn Rushd saw no contradiction between faith and reason as sources of knowledge, and introduced the "doctrine of twofold truth" that recognizes that different people may need different sources of the same truth to explain this.

Ibn Rushd's work was echoed in Europe by thinkers like John Duns Scotus (1220-1308), who objected to the tendency of Medieval Scholastic theologians like Aquinas and Anselm to seek rationalistic proofs of God. Duns Scotus limited the number of matters of faith he thought were also amenable to reason. His student, William of Occam (1300-1349), took this further, denying that any matter of faith was demonstrable by reason. Occam's emphasis on empirical and logical methods for gaining knowledge about the observable world would have great impact on subsequent developments, particularly in the sciences. Moreover, as James Thrower argues in *A Short History of Western Atheism*, the tendency of thinkers like Ibn Rushd, Duns Scotus, and Occam to separate but still value both faith and reason allowed Renaissance thinkers to begin to concentrate their efforts on reason and the natural world.<sup>2</sup> Intellectually, the Renaissance – and all that followed – was less a sharp break from Medieval thought and more a fruition of changes that had been taking place, and which would not be complete for some time. However, while in Medieval thought faith alone was the source of divine knowledge and reason could only explain observable phenomena, making faith superior, by the Enlightenment this ranking would be reversed.

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2 Thrower, James, 1971, *A Short History of Western Atheism* (London, UK: Pemberton), pp. 65-68.

The advances of the Renaissance and after also rested more abstractly on technical developments and scientific and medical discoveries, particularly in the Muslim world. The introduction of Arabic numerals<sup>3</sup> and other advances in Muslim and then European mathematics were highly important. Superior navigational equipment, developed both in the Muslim and European spheres, enabled the voyages of discovery that would, in part, fuel the rise of science. Moreover, the development early in the period of the printing press and an increase in long-distance travel allowed both scholars and their works to move more widely. Coupled with the establishment of universities from the thirteenth century onwards and the rise of vernacular languages and literature across Europe, these events created an atmosphere conducive to intellectual development. There developed an international “republic of letters,” to use a phrase of the time, that allows one to view the rise of secularity as one great narrative, although it was widely dispersed through space and time. It was in the Renaissance that such changes began to have significant impact on the way people thought.

### **Renaissance and Scientific Revolution: Humanity in God’s World**

Much debate still revolves around the nature, salient features, and even the temporal extent of the Renaissance. In assessing the development of secularity in it, responses have been equally varied. Ludovic Kennedy, in *All in the Mind: A Farewell to God*, holds that it was a time of rather great irreligion. James Thrower, in *A Short History of Western Atheism*, is more nuanced – for Thrower the Renaissance was not so much atheistic as it was a period in which scholars became more interested in pursuits other than theology.<sup>4</sup> However, this is partly a disagreement in dating – Kennedy is specifically referring to the period after 1540, whereas Thrower includes a broader

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3 Or, sometimes, Hindu-Arabic numerals, as the interaction between these two cultures was a spur to their development: see al-Hasan, Ahmad Yusuf, 2000, “Knowledge and the Sciences,” in: al-Bakhit, Mohammad Adnan; Bazin, Louis; and Cissoko, Sékéné Mody, eds., *History of Humanity: Scientific and Cultural Development*, v. 4, *From the Seventh to the Sixteenth Century* (Paris, FR: UNESCO/London, UK: Routledge): 96-199.

4 Kennedy, Ludovic, 1999, *All in the Mind: A Farewell to God* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton), 163. Thrower, *A Short History of Western Atheism*, pp. 71-72.

period, from the mid-1400s, in his history. Thrower, in fact, refers to not one but two Renaissances. The first was a largely aristocratic revival of classical arts and literature, while the second was a popular and more forward-looking movement,<sup>5</sup> which is much more Kennedy's understanding. I divide the period similarly, though what Thrower calls the later Renaissance I call the Scientific Revolution. While describing this, I will briefly touch on political and cultural developments, and, in particular, the religious Reformations, but my main concern is with changing understandings of the world. Regardless of specific definitions, the story remains largely the same – a revival of the classics in the 1400s leads, by the 1600s, to an outright challenge to religious beliefs. However, this was still usually a challenge to prevailing beliefs about the relation of God and humanity within a religious framework – it is not until the Enlightenment that one begins to see an outright challenge to religion itself.

To be fair, interest in Greek and Roman learning did not begin in the 1400s. Indeed, there had been interest in the Roman Empire since soon after its fall. However, the Catholic Church had influenced what sources had been preserved, and it favored those that did not conflict with its doctrine. What changed in the 1400s was a rediscovery of other classical texts. These came from Eastern sources, including Byzantine refugees fleeing the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and also in Rome itself. This is the beginning of the Western Humanist tradition, which many trace back to Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457) and his *De Elegantiae Linguae Latinae (On the Elegance of the Latin Language)*. For Valla, the era was one of “reawakened and revived” classical arts and letters,<sup>6</sup> and this is the sense in which I use “Renaissance” – as the contemporary feeling of being on the cusp of a rebirth of ancient culture. On one hand, it was a time of renewed appreciation for the works of humanity and the individual, Pico della Mirandola's (1463-1494) *De Dignitate Hominis (On the Dignity of Man)* being perhaps the foremost

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5 Thrower, *A Short History of Western Atheism*, pp. 72-73.

6 Huizinga, Johan, 1920, “The Problem of the Renaissance,” in: Holmes, James S., and van Marle, Hans, trans., 1959, *Men and Ideas: History, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984): 243-287, pp. 245-246, quote from Valla.

single expression of this. However, it was also a time when people should “remain good Christians but profit by ancient wisdom,” as Gerhard Gerhards (better known by his Latin and Greek pen name Desiderius Erasmus, 1478-1535) put it.<sup>7</sup>

Still, this ancient wisdom would have profound effects on what being a good Christian was. The appearance of different versions of the Bible, particularly the Byzantine but also the Hebrew and early Greek texts, allowed for comparison with the received Latin text. Scholars found discrepancies, even errors. Erasmus, like others, published a corrected version of the Bible in 1516 and, in his later years, began to take a rather skeptical view of the intentions of the church in perpetuating the incorrect Latin text.<sup>8</sup> However, he did not become a radical reformer. Martin Luther (1483-1546) did. Doubts that had been building for years found expression in Luther’s “95 Theses” of 1517, citing numerous abuses of doctrine within the Catholic Church and calling for reform.<sup>9</sup> Although Luther did not originally intend to create a new religious movement but only called for reform within the existing church, within a few decades the Protestant Reformation for which he was the catalyst had become a permanent movement. The hallmark of both the Protestant and Catholic Reformations<sup>10</sup> was the strengthening of personal religion. In both Protestantism and Catholicism individual access, for example the availability of the Bible or sacraments, came to the fore, albeit to different degrees in each.

Within this atmosphere of religious change, humanists discovered that the classics did not reveal a “proto-Christianity” as found in those works of Plato and Aristotle favored by the Catholic Church, but entirely different philosophical and moral systems. This encouraged some thinkers to begin developing their own non-Christian

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7 Kennedy, *All in the Mind*, p. 164.

8 Rietbergen, Peter, 1998, *Europe: A Cultural History* (London, UK: Routledge), p. 178.

9 Not, as is sometimes thought, by nailing a list of his objections to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral itself, but by posting them on the castle church’s door, the bulletin board for the local university.

10 “Catholic Reformation” captures the scope of changes that occurred within the Catholic Church much better than does the oppositional “Counter-Reformation,” though it did, in part, arise to combat Protestantism.

philosophies. Particularly reviled at the time was Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), who, in *Il Principe (The Prince)* in 1513 discusses politics as removed from religion, even going so far as to suggest that religion was a useful tool to control the people. Others, like Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), did not go as far. Montaigne did, however, doubt how much he could practically take from religion. Instead, he praised self-knowledge and self-discipline, key classical virtues, as roots of morality, situated within formal religious observance.<sup>11</sup> Neither of these writers was antireligious, however. Although Kennedy found some examples of outright atheism – and its persecution by the Catholic Church – as early as the mid-1500s,<sup>12</sup> generally these were individual acts of rebellion and not examples of a broad social movement. Writers like Machiavelli and Montaigne merely questioned how much faith alone could bring them, and sought additional avenues of advancement within a society still dominated by faith. Similarly, most other developments, such as the Renaissance idealization of the human form in painting and sculpture or the more realistic Reformation era Baroque style, also occurred largely within the religious framework. However, in the coming century scientific and technical developments would challenge that framework far more thoroughly.

The 1600s encompass the Scientific Revolution, although, as with the Renaissance, it borrows heavily from preceding years and such divisions can never be strictly accurate. However, it is worthwhile to differentiate between Renaissance and Revolution because, while arts and letters developed largely within the prevailing worldview, scientific developments brought into question the very fundamentals of that worldview. Instead of Erasmus challenging or even Luther confronting the orthodoxy in favor of reform, the new scientists brought into doubt the entire edifice. Moreover, the Scientific Revolution differed from Renaissance in that it was not philosophical speculation but practical discovery at the center. The most striking and symbolic events were astronomical-

11 On Montaigne and Machiavelli: Thrower, *A Short History of Western Atheism*, pp. 75-77.

12 Kennedy, *All in the Mind*, pp. 164-165.

mathematical advances and their reception by the religious authorities, which form the core of the discussion here. However, a number of other scientific discoveries took place at this time, not least in anatomy, and there was also much interest in things like alchemy and astrology that today are considered pseudo-science. Often, the scientists noted here held as many wrong views as they did right. What matters is the way they pursued knowledge.

Philosophically, the core change was in the elevation of reason and experimentation above adherence to revealed knowledge. This was expressed by writers such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and René Descartes (1596-1650). Bacon, in books such as *The Advancement of Learning*, 1605, laid out an orderly process for acquiring knowledge through observation and categorization of things, and not through authority, even of scripture. Descartes went even further. In his *Discours sur la Méthode (Discourse on Method)*, 1637, he outlines the method of doubt, a thought experiment whereby he doubts everything – what he has been taught, what his senses seem to indicate – until he is left with only the proposition *cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am. From this basis he rebuilds his understanding of the universe only through things he can prove, much in the manner of Bacon.

The first person to more directly challenge the prevailing Aristotelian worldview was Nicholas Copernicus<sup>13</sup> (1473-1543), a Polish astronomer. Aristotle positioned the Earth at the center of the universe, around which the heavens traveled as perfect, crystalline spheres. The churches supported this view as it put God's Earth at the center of things, and separated it from immaculate heaven. Through experiment and calculation, Copernicus established that the Sun was at the center and the Earth and other planets revolved around it. Moreover, the motion of the stars was due to the daily rotation of the Earth, not the movement of the sphere of the stars. This he finally published in 1543, in *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium (On the Revolution of the Celestial*

<sup>13</sup> Copernicus is a Latinization of Mikolaj Kopernik or Niklas Koppernigk, depending on the source. With no clear indication of the Polish, I will use his Latinized name.

*Spheres*). Tellingly, in the dedication to Pope Paul III, Copernicus says, “If some people, of a superficial and ignorant mind, want to use some passages of Holy Scripture against me, distorting their sense, I reject their attacks: mathematical truths can only be judged by mathematicians.”<sup>14</sup> Copernicus presaged the main form the ongoing conflict between scientists and theologians would take – a conflict of experiment and calculation against tradition and revelation.

Nonetheless, Copernican theory avoided controversy for some time, partly because it was a complex treatise of interest to relatively few, and partly because Copernicus’s theory was not particularly more explanatory than the Aristotelian. For instance, Copernicus, demonstrating the Renaissance tendency toward idealization, insisted that the orbits the planets were perfectly circular. Protestant theologians quickly but mildly criticized the theory, primarily because it conflicted with points of scripture<sup>15</sup> – much as Copernicus had thought they would. In Catholic circles, because those who worked with it stated that it was a theoretical and not a practical explanation Copernican theory was for a long time acceptable. Thus, during the next several decades, Copernican theory slowly developed. Tycho Brahe (1546-1601), a Dane who himself posed a rather complex theory with the Earth at the center, made naked-eye observations of the sky. In 1571 he recorded a nova in Cassiopeia and in 1572 a comet that clearly crossed the presumed locations of the heavenly orbs, both of which contradicted the Aristotelian idea of a changeless heaven. The German Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) used these observations in his work, and in 1609 published *Astronomia Nova (New Astronomy)*, which, along with later writings, included several crucial modifications to Copernican theory. Basing his theories on Brahe’s observations, Kepler proposed that planets travel in elliptical orbits, and with adequate calculations rendered Copernican theory powerfully predictive of the actual locations of planets in the sky. However, it was not

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14 Devèze, M., and Marx, R., eds., 1967, *Textes et Documents d’Histoire Moderne* (Paris, FR: SEDES), p. 120; quoted in Rietbergen, *Europe*, p. 302.

15 Kennedy, *All in the Mind*, p. 154.

Kepler but Galileo who was to come into direct conflict with the Catholic Church.

Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), although not the inventor of the telescope, was among the first to use it extensively. In 1610 he published *Sidereus Nuncius* (*Starry Messenger*), in which he observed the satellites of Jupiter and mountains on the moon, among other non-Aristotelian things. At this time, such work was accepted by the Catholic Church – indeed, Jesuit astronomers were among those who confirmed his findings<sup>16</sup> – perhaps because simple observation contradicted relatively little. However, Galileo wanted to tackle the Aristotelian worldview itself, using Copernican theory in a treatise explaining tides. In 1616, however, the Vatican placed *De Revolutionibus* on the Index of Forbidden Books, and church authorities instructed Galileo not to pursue the matter further. With the arrival of a new Pope, Urban VIII, in 1624, Galileo inquired into the status of his work. Gaining an audience with Pope Urban, Galileo left believing he had permission to continue his work. The result was *Dialogo dei Due Massimi Sistemi del Mondo, Tolemaico e Copernicano* (*Dialog on the Two Great World Systems, Ptolemaic and Copernican*), 1632, Ptolemaic astronomy being a more refined version of Aristotelian.

*Dialogo* was written in vernacular Italian, not in Latin, and took the form of a dialog between people expounding different views as to the nature of the world. As such, it was a rather accessible piece, and this may have contributed to its being the focus of Inquisitional ire.<sup>17</sup> In any event, although in the text the Aristotelian view has a defender, *Dialogo* is quite clearly against it. The Inquisition summoned Galileo to Rome where, in 1633, he was put on trial for breaking his 1616 oath not to publish. Claiming he meant no offense, Galileo officially recanted his belief in Copernican theory. Still, the Inquisition sentenced him to life imprisonment, which Galileo's

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16 Harris, Steven J., 1999, "The Study of Nature and the Universe," in: Burke, Peter, and Inalcik, Halil, eds., *History of Humanity: Scientific and Cultural Development*, v. 5, *From the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Paris, FR: UNESCO/London, UK: Routledge): 83-95, p. 87.

17 Rabb, Theodore K., 1965, "The Crisis of the Scientific Revolution: Galileo's Ordeal, 1615-1633," in: Spitz, Lewis W., and Lyman, Richard W., eds., *Major Crises in Western Civilization*, v. 1, *The Greeks to 1660* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World): 209-246, p. 227.

admirer the Archbishop of Siena managed to have commuted to house arrest.<sup>18</sup>

Although so confined, between 1633 and his death in 1642 Galileo conducted experiments into linear motion and gravitational acceleration, the results of which prefigure the scientist who would present a thorough alternative to Aristotelian physics, Isaac Newton.

Before Newton (1642-1727), Copernican theory could accurately predict planetary motion and outline the paths planets took, but lacked an explanation for how it worked. Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (*Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*), published in 1687, uses invariant laws of gravity, observable on Earth with Galilean experiments, to accurately predict Keplerian orbits. Coupled with the mathematical tool of calculus for computation,<sup>19</sup> a workable alternative to the Aristotelian system was now complete. *Principia Mathematica*, coupled with Newton's *Opticks*, 1704, praises and demonstrates the power of observation and calculation. Rather than just a philosophical concept, as with Descartes' *Méthode*, Newton's work linked reasoned theory with practicable observation.

Such an approach became the byword of the new mathematical philosophers: "If we are to know the world, we must rely on theoretical consistency, reasoned inference, and mathematical analysis."<sup>20</sup> This development is evidenced by the foundation of associations devoted to scientific study, like the Royal Society for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge, London, (founded 1660), the Académie des Sciences, Paris, (1666), the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, (1675), and the Prussian Academy of Sciences, (1700). Such institutions put into practical use Bacon's ideas of systematic data gathering and sampling as methods of gaining knowledge. Coupled with the diverse samples available from Europe's growing overseas colonial possessions, such institutions contributed greatly to knowledge about the natural world.<sup>21</sup>

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18 Kennedy, *All in the Mind*, p. 156.

19 Also developed independently, in Germany, by Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716).

20 Harris, "The Study of Nature and the Universe," p. 89.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 94 and passim.

The development of the scientific worldview took place among other changes. As I mentioned, Reformation religion was itself very much personalized and rationalized, wherein a believer's own worth to receive sacraments and judgment in reading the bible was highlighted. Politically, the rise of nation-states during this time was very much a product of rational thinking. Although the true convictions of the German princes of the Thirty Years War are debatable, the Treaty of Westphalia, 1648, enshrined the rationalist principle that a ruler could determine the religion of the state. This constituted a move away from religious authoritarianism, albeit far from democratic. Moreover, the role of religion in spurring these wars would lead many in the Enlightenment and beyond to view belief as divisive. However, without the intellectual pursuits of the Renaissance and Scientific Revolution that brought about great changes in the way people viewed the world, such feelings would have had no place to crystallize.

The humanism of the Renaissance brought recognition specifically to the abilities and intellect of the individual. Montaigne's virtues are knowledge and self-discipline, not understanding of one's place in the revealed order. Increasingly, autonomous humans acquired the scientific tools of observation and calculation in studying the world, again relying less on traditional interpretation. Nonetheless, all of this still took place within the religious framework. Humanists celebrated God's creation, and scientists regarded the study of nature as the study of God's work, perfectly compatible with the study of the Bible as the study of God's will. Moreover, many of these developments, particularly the scientific ones, were still rather elite pursuits and did not often reach the masses. One can not yet speak of secularity as it would later appear.

### **The Enlightenment: Questioning God**

The rise of secularity, however, would only be one of the outcomes of the Enlightenment, and in itself would take many forms. Thus, as with the last section, I will not be describing all of the developments even in the cultural and philosophical

fields – rather, while I will touch on parallel developments, particularly in religion, my main concern is with the rise of secularity as a viable worldview. Moreover, while it was possible to outline developments in the Renaissance and Scientific Revolution by referring to a few thinkers and their works, in the eighteenth century it is nearly impossible. For this reason, I will approach this section more thematically, still referring to individuals as exemplars, but not attempting as much narrative. Two important things necessitating this are the result of continuing technological advancements in transportation and communication. The first is the increase in the number and economic power of European colonial possessions, and second is the rise of “the public” and its journals, newspapers, reading groups, salons, and so forth. Treating the sheer scope of the Enlightenment, geographically and demographically, would make a narrative too long to fit here. While I will not be telling the stories of colonial or domestic publics in detail, one must keep in mind the presence of individuals as societal agents, especially *en masse*.

While many scholars posit a distinct opposition between Enlightenment<sup>22</sup> thought and the Romantic movement, the two share more than they contest. While “Romanticism” as a movement historically followed the Enlightenment as a response to the emphasis of the latter on analytical thought, particularly after excesses of the French Revolution, its core tenets are evident throughout the period. Exemplars of the two movements are Voltaire and Rousseau.<sup>23</sup> François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), who took the pseudonym Voltaire, wrote voluminously on many subjects, including “tolerance in religion, peace and liberty in politics, enterprise in economics, intellectual leadership in the arts,”<sup>24</sup> all important aspects of Enlightenment thought. Voltaire opposed

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22 The term “Enlightenment” was not used until the nineteenth century, when it competed with, among other phrases, “Age of Reason” as the title. Nonetheless, a common metaphor used by contemporaries was that of the light of reason illuminating what had been hidden. See: Im Hof, Ulrich, 1994, Yuill, William E., trans., *The Enlightenment: An Historical Introduction*, “The Making of Europe” series (Oxford, UK: Blackwell), p. 4, lists several examples.

23 That they are both French is emblematic of the profound effect the French Revolution would have on people’s conception of the center of later eighteenth century thought, when in many ways the Netherlands was its geographical hub before 1750.

24 Davies, Norman, 1996, *Europe: A History* (London, UK: Pimlico, 1997), p. 606.

authoritarianism in all its forms, arguing passionately for developing the power of the rational intellect and its application to all fields. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), on the other hand, asserted the primacy of feelings and human nature. His *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts (Discourse on the Sciences and Arts)*, 1750, and *Discours sur l'Inégalité (Discourse on Inequality)*, 1755, explore civilization as a corruption of human nature, while *Émile ou l'Éducation (Emile: or, Education)*, 1762, outlined a process of education without books to develop people's natural faculties.

What both thinkers, and both movements, have in common is that they question not just what people thought but how they thought. This emphasis would be a hallmark of many movements of this period, be it found in the systematization of the French Encyclopedieists or the passion of the German *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) artists. Whether or not they rejected the power of purely analytical human thought, all were reasoned in the sense that they looked at how to think, not only what to think about. Indeed, one can find some synthesis in the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), particularly his three *Critiques*, *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft (Critique of Pure Reason)*, 1781, *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft (Critique of Practical Reason)*, 1788, *Kritik der Urteilskraft (Critique of Judgement)*, 1790. While admitting the utility of rational thought in categorizing the material, observed world, Kant notes that many parts of human existence still take place outside that world. He argues that rationality can not explain itself, as it is not material, and so leaves room for feeling as well as analysis in philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Still, Kant's works are about modes of thought itself, about "reason" in its broadest sense. "Reason" in the more limited sense of analytical thought applied to observation – what I shall call empiricism, as opposed to romanticism – was also a major focus of the time, due in no small part to scientific and technological advancements.

Scientific discoveries continued unabated, building on their foundations in the

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25 Ibid., p. 686.

previous centuries. Expanding on Bacon's ideas, it was a period of systematization – for example Carl von Linne's (Latinized as Carolus Linnaeus, 1707-1778), *Systema Naturæ*, 1735, and *Fundamenta Botanica*, 1736, systematized the classification of plants. Moreover, it was a period of the discovery of processes. Perhaps the greatest was Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier's (1743-1794) work on the flow of chemical reactions, although many other physical systems were studied. The science of the eighteenth century was not just a continuation of the idea of studying God's creation, however. Important here was the increasing focus on change – where even Newton primarily studied what *was*, eighteenth century scientists began to study what *could be*. This further challenged religious notions of an unchangeable creation. Moreover, the power of science to explain the heretofore unknown called into doubt the miracles and divine intervention in explaining things.<sup>26</sup> This was compounded by technological advancements. Developments like James Newcomen's (1663-1729) engine of 1711, and James Watt's (1736-1819) improvements thereon from 1763, brought steam power into being. Steam power was the basis of the industrial revolution, which gave people the power to create things in quantities or sizes previously impossible. Coupled with the scientific power of explanation, the technological power of production reinforced the advantages of empirical study of the world.

Process and system were key features of other developments in knowledge. In historical theory, there was a general move away from records of divine providence to theories of history focusing on facts and human actions.<sup>27</sup> Representing the more analytical strain, Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu's (1689-1755) *Considérations*, 1743, introduces the idea of environmental determinants to history. The more romantic Giambattista Vico (1668-1743) presented a cyclic approach to history in *Scienza Nuova (New Science)*, 1725, speaking in terms of the birth, maturity, and death of civilizations. Vico also paid much attention to the role of humanist

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<sup>26</sup> Thrower, *A Short History of Western Atheism*, pp. 104-105.

<sup>27</sup> Davies, *Europe*, p. 604.

considerations like mythology.<sup>28</sup> While all who focused on process over providence could challenge religious teaching, some historians more clearly did so. Writing at the beginning of the period, Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), in his *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique (Historical and Critical Dictionary)*, 1697, in part set out a catalog of religious errors.<sup>29</sup> That in many ways Bayle's criticism contained factual, historical points to challenge theology indicates future developments in the philosophy of religion.

Bayle's work was also a forerunner of the great systematizing encyclopedias of the eighteenth century. The most influential of these was the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Arts, des Sciences, et des Métiers (Encyclopedia: or, Analytical Dictionary of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions)*, published in volumes from 1751 to 1765, with additions to 1782, under the editorship of Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Jean d'Alembert (1717-1783). Their quest was nothing less than, according to d'Alembert, "to set forth, as well as possible, the order and continuity of human knowledge."<sup>30</sup> They did this by editing together hundreds of articles on diverse subjects. Most of the articles were innocuous, but some were controversial, particularly those relating to religious or political authority. Diderot, like many thinkers of the time, sought to go beyond merely cataloging knowledge to "changing the general way of thinking,"<sup>31</sup> which inevitably challenged contemporary authorities.

Challenge to authority would also mark developments in religion and belief. While often characterized as an antireligious age, religious institutions easily persevered, and often expanded, especially in the first half of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, Enlightenment ideas had marked effects. Catholicism underwent its own

Enlightenment, aided by Ludovico Antonio Muratori's (1621-1750) *Of the Well-*

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28 Ibid., p. 611.

29 Beales, Derek, 2000, "Religion and Culture," in: Blanning, T.C.W., ed., *The Eighteenth Century: Europe 1688-1815*, "The Short Oxford History of Europe" series (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press): 131-177, p. 134.

30 Gay, Peter, 1965, "Encyclopédie and Enlightenment: "Changing the General Way of Thinking," 1745-64," in: Spitz, Lewis W., and Lyman, Richard W., eds., *Major Crises in Western Civilization v. 2, 1745 to the Nuclear Age* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and World): 1-39, p. 13; Gunzenhauser, Nina B., trans.

31 Ibid., p. 7.

*Ordered Devotion of Christians*, 1747, which in many ways was the fruition of the Catholic Reformation, as it called for a less ostentatiously Baroque, more personal religion. Jansenist Catholics, purveyors of this trend, advanced in many places against proponents of Papal authority. In Protestant countries, personalized movements like John Wesley's (1703-1791) Methodism, which offered a personal spiritual method instead of formal worship, echoed this trend. In defining the Enlightenment, Kant would say that it was a movement encouraging people to use "their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters, without outside guidance."<sup>32</sup> Even Voltaire, whose wit could be scathing when turned against abuses by religious authorities, was amenable to religious belief.

Nonetheless, others would use their understanding to confront religion, as well as the political authority with which it was often intertwined. Jean Meslier (?-1729), himself a renegade French priest, radically proposed that there would be no salvation until "the last king has been strangled in the entrails of the last priest."<sup>33</sup> Not everyone went this far, but many philosophical developments of the time went against received beliefs. John Locke (1632-1704), in an *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690, advanced the *tabula rasa* thesis, stating that human minds start as a blank slate, and that all knowledge is gained through experience. This contradicts theological points such as innate morality and original sin, bases of Christian teaching.<sup>34</sup> From a more Romantic perspective, The Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789), whose *Coterie Holbachique* was a center of French atheism, argued in *Système de la Nature (The System of Nature)*, 1770, that humanity, being a product of nature, is subordinate to natural laws and is naturally moral – society and religion only corrupt. David Hume (1711-1789), the arch-skeptic, doubted whether it was possible to even prove or disprove the existence of god. His *The Natural History of Religion*, 1757, along with Bayle's *Dictionnaire* and similar

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32 Beales, "Religion and Culture," p. 152.

33 A phrase also credited to Diderot. Thrower, *A Short History of Western Atheism*, p. 100 for Meslier; Davies, *Europe*, p. 601 for Diderot.

34 Beales, "Religion and Culture," p. 134.

writings by Locke and others, called into question the historical role of the Church. Many noted that both the ancients and other contemporary civilizations seemed to exist well enough without it. The overall effect was that, by the end of the eighteenth century, in many places atheists could profess their beliefs without fear of charges of blasphemy, although they might not have had fully equal rights.

Locke was equally influential in challenges to political authority. His 1690 *Treatises on Government* challenged hereditary privilege in favor of government by popular consent. This theme is also evident in Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois (The Spirit of Laws)*, 1748, which delineated a separation of powers not found in aristocratic, absolutist governments of the time. In economics, Adam Smith's (1723-1790) *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776, argued much the same, contrasting the faults of centrally planned mercantilist systems against a more free-market model. While such writings represent an analytical, empiricist approach to power, Montesquieu, among many others, was also a social critic – his 1721 *Lettres Persanes (Persian Letters)*, by portraying the reaction of a Persian traveler to Paris to its ills, highlighted social concerns. Indeed, growing knowledge of foreign cultures, often supplied by missionaries, supplied Enlightenment critics with much of their ammunition.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, most political tracts of the day were rationalist rather than Romantic. Tom Paine's (1737-1809), *Common Sense*, 1776, *The Rights of Man*, 1791, and *The Age of Reason*, 1793, were central texts of the revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic. Romantic writing often criticized social systems but did not provide alternatives in the way the empiricists did.

In the face of these intellectual currents, it is not surprising that there were great social changes. However, the revolutions of 1776 onward, even the French, can not be reduced entirely to being cases of radical Enlightenment thought confronting entrenched privilege. Indeed, one must remember that French Enlightenment thinkers often

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35 Davies, *Europe*, p. 581.

flourished in the salons of the upper classes, and were not only rebels. Moreover, the American Revolution took the form it did due to the relative openness of the British colonial social system, not because of its rigidity. Even the French government of King Louis XVI took some reformatory steps – at least compared to absolutist predecessors like Louis XIV. Unfortunately for him, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, a period of reform and increased openness is one of the most dangerous times for a government.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the general vision of antiauthoritarian thought challenging untenable sociopolitical situations is valid. Citing Locke and Montesquieu, American revolutionaries asked why freedoms available in England did not apply to the colonies. French thinkers felt that, if British colonists had things to complain about, they undoubtedly had more. Still, differences in the political situations led to vastly different revolutions. Whereas religious tolerance had by that time a long history in British politics, at least *de facto*, the American Revolution made it *de jure*. On the other hand, French society did not have as strong a tolerant tradition, and aristocratic and ecclesiastical powers were more intertwined. Thus, as the French Revolution progressed it banned the clergy along with the nobility, creating not just a political but a social and antireligious revolution.

One social movement that warrants specific mention was the nascent feminism seen during this time. While there had always been a few thinkers willing to question the relative social positions of the sexes, Enlightenment emphasis on reason prompted some people to ask why, when it appeared that men and women had equal cognitive capacity, they should have different legal rights. Often, the same arguments that supported human rights generally featured in feminist tracts. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) followed her *Vindication of the Rights of Man*, 1791, a defense of the ideals of revolution, with *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792. Olympia de Gouges (pseudonym of Marie Gauzes, 1748-1793) wrote *Les Droits de la Femme et du*

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36 Ibid., pp. 688-689.

*Citoyen (The Rights of Woman and the Citizen)*, 1791, in answer to the 1789 *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen (Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen)* of revolutionary France, mirroring its language. Likewise, the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 in the United States issued its Declaration of Sentiments, a document expressly replicating the style of the American Declaration of Independence. Romantics also argued for the status of women. Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse (The New Heloise)*, 1761, extolling the value of romantic femininity as an antidote to masculine calculation, was as popular as *Émile*.

The revolutions, in particular the French, had a great impact. They spurred similar events across Europe. However, the excesses of the French revolution also stiffened resistance to both radicalism and pure empiricism, empiricist Enlightenment thinkers being associated with those excesses. Nor were all revolutionary changes permanent. After the Napoleonic wars, the powers of Europe would seek to restore the status quo ante, and not without success. Nonetheless, the core aspect of Enlightenment thought, reason, be it empirical or Romantic, was too well established to disappear. This does not mean that the Enlightenment was the fullest application of reason. Notably, moves towards extending rights to women or non-Europeans did not get far at all, and it would take decades, sometimes centuries, before these groups would achieve any form of political equality. This does not represent a failure, however – rather, the ongoing struggles for these principles are the continuing unfolding of seeds that were sown during that time. For European men, however, these seeds were well established, and in the nineteenth century, reason would take center stage in social and cultural life. From its beginnings during the Enlightenment, an identifiably secular world would emerge over the next century.

### **The Nineteenth Century: Secularity Triumphant?**

This secular world was largely the creation of European power. In the words of E.J.

Hobsbawm, at its height the European nineteenth century “was an age of superlatives.”<sup>37</sup> Things could rise higher, travel farther, and happen faster than ever before, and there seemed to be no end to such advances. Moreover, by the end of the century Europe influenced, directly or indirectly, most of the rest of the world. As such, it is difficult to differentiate one particular development, that of secularity. By some counts, modernization, as a description of the transformation that occurred in Europe at this time, consists of nearly fifty interlinked developments ranging from heavy industry to organized mass leisure pursuits.<sup>38</sup> A much simpler approach is to assess the period as Hobsbawm’s “dual revolutions,” the industrial revolution typified by the British and the sociopolitical revolution typified by the French. I have described the beginnings of both in the previous section, instead of dating the “long nineteenth century” from 1789 as Hobsbawm does. The reaction against the French Revolution in 1815 and the slow development of industry meant that neither was fully felt until midcentury, the time of the 1848 revolutions, placing the fruition of secularity squarely within the nineteenth century. However, even with the useful analysis of “dual revolutions,” highlighting secular thinking remains difficult. Thus, this section even more than the last is a survey rather than an exhaustive treatment.

In the nineteenth century it is not theoretical advances but practical applications that are most striking. Throughout the century, new sources of energy such as the introduction of electricity and the change from coal to oil meant that more raw power was available for use. Coupled with advances in materials such as the development of steel, people were able to apply this power to ever grander enterprises. Travel became increasingly fast with the growing use of trains and steel-hulled ships, not to mention, at the very end of the “long nineteenth century” in 1914, powered lighter- and heavier-than-air craft. Communication became even faster, with the introduction of the

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37 Hobsbawm, E.J., 1962, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848* (London, UK: Penguin/Abacus, 1977), p. 359.

38 See Davies, *Europe*, “Modernization: The Component Processes” in app. III, p. 1293, where he lists 48 such elements.

telegraph in 1835 and radio by 1896. After Great Britain lost its early lead in industrialization, such developments became internationalized, evidenced by the creation of organizations like “the International Postal Union (1874), the International Telegraph Union (1875), the International Bureau of Weights and Measures (1875), and the Central Bureau for Railway Traffic (1890).”<sup>39</sup> Economically, such advances, coupled with the rise of the mass market, gave certain segments of society a preponderance of productive power, and militarily they gave them a preponderance of political power. How this power was applied, both within Europe and without, was one of the major political issues of the period.

Many historians divide the nineteenth century into three sections. These are the period to 1848, during which reformers and radicals battled politically or otherwise with conservatives; 1848 to the 1870s, during which a progressive liberal outlook held sway in many places; and afterwards, when economic depression in Europe and colonial rivalry around the world created political and social tension. After the French Revolution and the fall of Napoleon, reactionaries had been able to reverse many of the changes it had brought. However, no one could ignore what T.C.W. Blanning calls “the central political lesson of the French Revolution – that no regime could be deemed legitimate that did not incorporate popular participation.”<sup>40</sup> Some countries, like Great Britain, changed relatively slowly, while others faced revolutionary upheaval in 1830 and especially 1848. Most powers eventually seemed to conclude that allowing some form of democratic governance was better than facing further rebellion. Those that did not, like the Russian and Ottoman Empires, collapsed by the end of the First World War. A key social change of the period is thus the rise of the public sphere as an active political entity, a process that has roots in the previous century. One sees this in the growth of the number of public institutions – museums, libraries, concert halls, as well

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39 Davies, *Europe*, p. 768.

40 Blanning, T.C.W., 2000, “Introduction: The End of the Old Regime,” in: Blanning, ed., *The Nineteenth Century*: 1-9, p. 6.

as schools and hospitals – which, though often with aristocratic or industrial patronage, catered to the masses. However, these encouraged semi-private enjoyment,<sup>41</sup> and the rules of use generally upheld individualism and protected the private sphere.

From the 1870s, the great liberal governments that held sway, particularly in Great Britain and Germany, suffered as economic depression and colonial competition brought conservative or populist parties to power. Many reacted against the individualism of liberals by promoting communal causes; sometimes nationalist, sometimes socialist or communist. They disputed the propriety of the social system – the distribution of economic and political power noted above – but few did not feel, as Hobsbawm describes, “that human life faced a prospect of material improvement to equal the advance in man’s control over the forces of nature.”<sup>42</sup> This belief was the key tenet of nineteenth-century secularity, and, given its strength, all European thought had to relate to it.

Broadly speaking, secularization, as one of the interlinked elements of European modernization, had two sides. First, production both of material and cultural goods became increasingly oriented toward secular consumption. For instance, some of the grandest construction projects of the period were concert and opera halls, and the works composers produced to fill them did not focus strictly on religious motifs. Second, in philosophy, religious belief became less taken for granted. Rather than being a given of social life, philosophers explored religion like other points of view. Thus, secularization was not necessarily antireligious – new churches were constructed alongside the concert halls and hymns continued to appear. Secular philosophers like Georg Hegel and even Karl Marx could even agree with religious ones as to the directionality of history, though they disagreed on its direction and the importance of the present.<sup>43</sup> Rather, secularization denoted a change in the relationship between religious

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41 Sheehan, James J., 2000, “Culture,” in: Blanning, ed., *The Nineteenth Century*: 127-157, p. 130.

42 Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, p. 361.

43 Sheehan, “Culture,” p. 141.

and nonreligious aspects of life – the latter gained a great deal relative to the former.

However, interpretations of this change varied greatly. On one hand some feared of the disenchantment of the world and the loss of the religious basis of morality, while on the other came outright attacks on the necessity of that basis.

It is useful here to note that this was only one of many great debates of the age. The distribution of wealth, the relative merit of individual and community, and the philosophical value of reason itself were all hotly debated. Intellectual currents sometimes cooperated and sometimes conflicted depending on the issue at hand. Romanticism, as the antirationalist current continuing from its eighteenth century origins, had religious or secular variants. Communitarianism, too, could be religious or secular-nationalist. There was no absolute reason why the various responses to secularization outlined below should have taken the political forms they did, and I shall note this again where necessary.

Although the prominence of religion may have declined relative to secularity during the nineteenth century, in absolute terms religion maintained itself and even expanded. Mainstream denominations suffered the most, as much because of their ties to older regimes as to strictly philosophical issues. Indeed, the religious toleration of the liberal states allowed for a flourishing of nonconformist religions and sects within Protestantism. The prime institution, the Catholic Church, itself alternated between being reactionary and being moderately liberal, often in opposition to political changes. Pope Pius IX (r. 1846-1878), whose reign coincides with the height of liberalism, introduced the Syllabus of Errors in 1864, denouncing most of the key tenets of liberalism and the Enlightenment. His doctrinal constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, 1870, promulgated the doctrine of Papal infallibility, an absolutist position not taken even by medieval Popes. On the other hand, the 1888 Encyclical *Libertas* of Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878-1903), affirms liberalism, democracy, and freedom of conscience while the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, 1891, promotes social justice. Pope Pius X (r. 1903-1914),

in his Encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, 1907, returned to the reactionary cast by calling modernism the “résumé of all heresies.”

The conservatism of Popes like Pius IX was caused, in part, by theological, not secular, developments. Theological debate, in the words of Norman Davies, was encouraged by three things: “the interchange of Protestant and Catholic viewpoints, ... profound interest of the Romantic period in exotic religions, [and ...] the growth of scientific attitudes.”<sup>44</sup> The last of these was particularly evident in historical studies of religion. Among the most influential was the work of Johann Gottfried Strauss (1808-1874), whose *Leben Jesu (The Life of Jesus)*, 1835, questioned the historical veracity of the Bible. At Strauss’ memorial in London, Daniel Conway summed up his message: “So long as men will accept religious control based not on reason, they will accept political control based not on reason.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Ludwig Feuerbach’s (1792-1872) *The Essence of Christianity*, 1841, held that, as God is a projection of human ideals, to study theology is to study humanity.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the belief of many secular thinkers that religious reform was key to social reform was eminently part of contemporary religious thought as well.

As mentioned before, varying philosophies of social and religious reform were not strictly opposed. There is no absolute reason why seculars who sought radical social reform needed to be antireligious. Indeed, many religious sects promoted various social changes as well. However, given the strong ties between mainstream political, social, and religious institutions, being a radical often required being secular, and vice versa. An illustrative case is the career in Parliament of Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891), who founded the National Secular Society in Great Britain in 1866. Elected in 1880, government authorities denied him the right to affirm without reference to God, rather than swear, his oath before taking his seat. There may have been added confusion

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44 Davies, *Europe*, p. 795.

45 Quoted in Kennedy, *All in the Mind*, p. 219.

46 Thrower, *A Short History of Western Atheism*, pp. 119-120.

because Bradlaugh called the oath meaningless. Although he was probably referring solely to the “so help me God” clause, many fellow MPs believed he meant the entire oath to the Queen. Despite being denied his seat, his constituency returned him repeatedly until 1886, when a new Liberal government allowed him his seat.<sup>47</sup>

G.J. Holyoake (1817-1906), a colleague of Bradlaugh’s who was imprisoned in 1842 for his antireligious work, coined the term “secularism” as the position that secularization is not only a process but a necessity for social justice.<sup>48</sup> However, the most famous secularist position is that of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Frederick Engels (1820-1895). In his “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” 1844, Marx says “religious suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against suffering. Religion is the *opium* of the people.”<sup>49</sup> A liberal reading of this passage is that religion disguises the true material ills of the people and so should be reformed. However, Engels focused on the idea that authorities use religion to delude the people, which requires that one actively oppose it.

Not all champions of secularity took as hard a line as the secularists. Many philosophical or political liberals valued the social stability provided by religion, and generally promoted toleration of religious belief. However, there was widespread agreement that the advancements of science were quickly outstripping religion in their ability to explain the world. Perhaps the clearest proponent of this belief is Auguste Comte (1798-1857), whose *Philosophie Positive (Positive Philosophy)* of 1854 argued that humanity passes through stages of knowledge – mythical, religious, and finally positive or scientific. To Comte, science naturally displaces religion as the foundation of knowledge and thereby of social order. Such a position obviously conflicts with religious authority. However, Comte sought to create what amounted to a “secular

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47 Kennedy, *All in the Mind*, pp. 225-226.

48 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1st 1933), Simpson, J.A., and Weiner, E.S.C., co-eds., in. al. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1989), v. 14, p. 849.

49 Marx, Karl, 1844, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in: Bottomore, T.B., ed. and trans., 1963, *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (London, UK: C.A. Watts):, pp. 43-44, original italics.

religion,” which T.H. Huxley called “Catholicism minus Christianity,”<sup>50</sup> which most liberals did not do. A more illustrative case is the controversy surrounding Darwin’s *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 1859.

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) was not the first to challenge creation as revealed in the Bible. As early as 1669, Niels Stensen (1638-1686, Latinized as Nicholas Steno) proposed that fossils came from extinct species of creatures, sparking debate between scientific and religious understandings of geology. Jean-Baptiste de Monet, Chevalier de Lamarck (1744-1829) presented an early theory of evolution in *Philosophie Zoologique (Zoological Philosophy)* in 1809. However, by the 1860s such theories were reaching a wider audience, and, more importantly, Darwin’s work concerned humans directly.<sup>51</sup> A key moment was the 1860 debate between Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) and Samuel Wilberforce (1818-1873), Bishop of Oxford, at the British Association for the Advancement of Science. To satirize Darwin’s evolution, Wilberforce asked on which side of his family Huxley believe he was descended from an ape. Huxley replied, “I would not be ashamed to have a monkey as an ancestor, but I would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used great gifts to obscure the truth.”<sup>52</sup> Here, then, was the liberal position – Huxley did not reject Wilberforce’s religiosity, only lamented that he misused his intellect to defend it.

Throughout the nineteenth century nonreligious thinkers challenged mainstream liberalism. Romanticism, as an anti-Enlightenment movement, flourished. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), for example, took an antirationalist, subjectivist view – foreshadowing existentialism – in works published throughout the 1840s. By the end of the century, events themselves called into question many of the certainties of liberals. An economic depression beginning in the mid-1870s and lasting for a decade or more, at the time called the Great Depression, challenged notions of permanent progress.

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50 Davies, *Europe*, p. 790.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 792.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 793.

Similarly, increasing rivalry between established and expanding colonial powers demonstrated weaknesses in the political system. Such events created a general feeling of uncertainty, especially in the Modernist intellectual movement that doubted the grand narratives of previous thinkers without necessarily abandoning secularity as some Romantics did. For example, although Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was an advocate of the power of science, his theories stress the role of the irrational and unconscious in human life.

The most ardent critic of social norms of the late nineteenth century was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Although his full beliefs are difficult to divine given how his writings often contradict themselves and his sister's selective editorship of his later works,<sup>53</sup> it is clear that Nietzsche disdained all forms of public, mass morality, religious or secular. In his famous pronouncement, "God is dead," Nietzsche summed up the disenchantment of secularity. Without god, humanity could either fall into nihilism or "become gods simply to appear worthy" of God's murder.<sup>54</sup> Nietzsche clearly preferred the latter, the individual will to power, over any attempt to rekindle, in secular guise, a mass moral system.

By the end of the nineteenth century, then, one can differentiate three general approaches to secularity, the analysis of which will form the rest of this thesis. The antireligious secularist and the tolerant but proscience liberal secular positions were clearly formed by midcentury. Although one could trace the roots of the modernist critical secular perspective to the Romantics or even back to Rousseau, it did not really take shape until the end of the century. By far the strongest current of mainstream secular thought was the liberal one. Much of this strength came from its being the dominant secular ideology – if not the dominant ideology outright – of successful powers like Great Britain.

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53 My gratitude to fellow Department of Peace Studies doctoral student Hazel Street for making this clear in our critical theory reading group.

54 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 1882, Williams, Bernard, ed., Nauckhoff, Josefine, trans., 2001, *The Gay Science*, book 3, sect. 125 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

## **Conclusion**

The end of the nineteenth century is the end of this survey of the development of secularity. Events in the twentieth century will figure over the next three chapters. Overall, the story of the four and a half centuries covered in this chapter has been the story of a fundamental shift in the way people could understand the world. This was the shift from understanding the world in the context of a transcendent, divine truth, around which religions are based, to focusing on the here-and-now. Appropriating the Catholic Latin term, this here-and-now came to be called the secular. As noted above, many of the grand narratives of nineteenth century intellectuals like Hegel did not dispute the importance of the past or future with religious historiography. Rather, they accentuated the importance of the present, this-worldly, secular moment as the crucial point, not an overarching divine plan. Franklin Baumer, in his survey of modern European thought, calls this the triumph of becoming over being<sup>55</sup> – where early humanists and scientists thought they were studying static creation, by the nineteenth century the focus was on process and change.

Broadly, secularity brought with it a focus on reason and particularly applied it to the public sphere. Christianity before the Renaissance could be eminently rational – the complex thought of medieval Scholastic philosophers shows this. However, after that time, and especially after the scientific revolution, a growing number of secular thinkers would ask, “How do we know?” At first they questioned how they knew things about the physical world, but by the Enlightenment thinkers had begun to routinely question fundamental tenets of Christian teaching, such as the primacy given to revealed knowledge. This is also evident in the critical strand of secularity – many critics of rationalism, like Rousseau, were highly rational themselves and asked the same questions of secularity that secularity asked of religion. While James Thrower contends

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55 Baumer, Franklin L., 1977, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950* (New York, NY: Macmillan).

that “for metaphysics [the nineteenth century] is a time of failure of nerve,”<sup>56</sup> because no one presented a successful challenge to naturalism, many did just that. However, too often this constituted attempts to return to revelation by making emotional appeals – for instance, by asking on which side one is descended from a monkey. Given the ability of natural science to produce practicable results, and the social developments that sprung from these, such attempts usually proved philosophically disastrous.

Thus, publicly at least, secularity became the dominant mode of thought in the West. In the next three chapters we study, in turn, three major variants of that secularity. In their eighteenth century incarnations I called these the secularist, the liberal, and the critical. This last, by the twentieth century, is better known as the postmodern. Each shapes a particular outlook on religion, which in turn shapes responses to conflicts understood to be religious. Each also suffers limitations, which I will analyze in terms of strength and openness. This historical analysis provides a basis from which to work, and it also foreshadows some points that will figure in the development of a strong-open secularity. However, we begin with a discussion of secularism.\*

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<sup>56</sup> Thrower, *A Short History of Western Atheism*, p. 116.

\* Not cited but useful in this chapter were: Fernández Álvarez, Manuel, 1999, “[Western European] Culture,” in: Burke and Halil, eds., *History of Humanity: 173-187*; Hobsbawm, E.J., 1975, *The Age of Capital: 1848-1875* (London, UK: Abacus, 1985); Hobsbawm, 1987, *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (London, UK: Abacus, 1994); and Robertson, J.M., 1929, *A History of Freethought*, 4 vols. (London, UK: Dawsons, 1969).