Syllabus: American Secularism

Not a day goes by without a journalist, public servant, professor, or policy analyst invoking the term “secularism” in a discussion about contemporary American politics. But what exactly is secularism? What does it stand for? What is its historical genealogy? Who are those who speak on behalf of, or against, secularism? How is it invoked in debates about religion and politics in the United States? And why is there such tremendous confusion as to what this concept signifies?

Everything about the history and development of secularism, as we are going to learn this semester, is strange. Worse yet, everything about this concept is shrouded in sound, fury, rancor, and dissensus. It follows from this that the answers to the aforementioned questions are often completely unexpected. They are also quite fascinating and fun to engage.

Our inquiry begins with an examination of secularism’s Medieval, Reformation and Enlightenment roots. Many of the heroes of this narrative (e.g., William of Ockham, Marsilius of Padua) are relatively unknown. Those who are known (i.e., Martin Luther) are never assumed to have anything to do with something as “profane” as secularism. Even a figure, like John Locke whose contributions to secular political theory are widely discussed, is often misunderstood in terms of how he conceived of the proper relation between church and state.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the kernel of the secular idea voyages across the ocean and comes to America. To this end, we will look carefully at the writings of Roger Williams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and various Founding Fathers. It is by reading these statesmen that we will begin to understand some of the core principles of the American secular vision. We will also begin to understand that secularism cannot be reduced to just one political policy. One form of secularism might be built upon separation of church and state. Another might emphasize disestablishmentarianism. Still another might speak of “non-cognizance.” And there are many more.

Moving forward in time, our study will introduce you to obscure, though highly significant, 19th-century anti-Catholic and anti-Mormon movements. These movements often described themselves as “secular.” With this we will learn one of the cruelest lessons of the semester (especially for self-professed secularists): secularism has a dark side.

By the late 19th and 20th centuries, secularism comes to be associated with new phenomena—most curiously, atheism. Our analysis of groundbreaking Supreme Court cases in the 20th century will help us appreciate the sheer complexity and fluidity of the American secular tradition.
Perhaps it will also solidify our understanding of what unites all secularisms—namely, the conviction that religious groups and individuals must always, in some way, be subordinate to the power of the state.

To think about secularism in the contemporary political context is to wrestle with some of the most contentious issues that confront our democracy. These include the question of LGBT rights; women’s reproductive freedoms; freedom of speech (both religious and blasphemous); the role of science as a driver of public policy; how students are to be taught in public schools, and so much more. In short, developing a robust understanding of the American secular tradition casts an illuminating light on these, the most intractable of our national dilemmas.

**Getting This Class**

This course is designed to maximize student learning, independent thinking, analytical writing, and, yes, believe it or not, student fun. If you follow these basic rules, you will have a very profitable semester (as will I).

1. Always come to class having done your reading. Usually the reading assignments are reasonable (e.g. 30-40 pages), and it’s important that you take them seriously because…
2. We begin every class by talking for a good half hour or so about what we read. You lead the discussion, and you identify the themes that we will interrogate. Students have told me they really like this model. It works pedagogically, as well.
3. Bring your readings to every class, and bring yourself, as well. Try to minimize absences and latenesses. We are all adults, so if you have a problem or concern, just tell me in advance and everything will be fine.
4. When you get a paper assignment don’t wait until the night before to start it. Come see me early and often in office hours.
5. Never stop thinking about the materials we read and the discussions we have in class.

**Course Objectives**

1. To acquaint students with the historical development of a political philosophy known as “secularism.”
2. To identify the various connotations of the term across historical time and space.
3. To familiarize ourselves with the leading architects of American iterations of secularism.
4. To understand how secularism as an idea is invoked in contemporary political and cultural debates in the United States.
5. Oral presentation: to learn how to make insightful arguments and analyses pithily.
6. Analytical skill: to develop techniques of breaking down texts and identifying deeper levels of meaning, as well as advancing original and creative interpretations.
7. Writing: learning how to compose clear, crisp, creative, and thought-provoking essays.
Books:
(Available in the university bookstore)


All other readings are on the course website: https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/jciv-264-spring2017/

Schedule of Classes:

1. **Monday, June 4th**: Introduction; Opening Discussion: Secularism and the Contraception Mandate

   
   [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/campus-overload/post/sandra-fluke-georgetown-students-continue-fight-for-contraception-coverage/2012/04/20/gIQAiP0BWT_blog.html?utm_term=.e2baa5a80159](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/campus-overload/post/sandra-fluke-georgetown-students-continue-fight-for-contraception-coverage/2012/04/20/gIQAiP0BWT_blog.html?utm_term=.e2baa5a80159)

   **Due Monday June 4th, 8PM:** Getting To Know You Blog

2. **Tuesday, June 5th**: Opening Discussions: Burqa Ban


3. **Wednesday, June 6th**: Secularism: The Genealogy
   **A-K Blog Posts L-Z Comments**

4. Thursday, June 7th: The Pre-Modern Masters
L-Z Blog Posts A-K Comments
Kids: please do both these readings for today, they may seem dense but provide crucial core ideas


5. Monday, June 11th: Martin Luther: The Pivot
A-K Blog Posts L-Z Comments
We’d like you to read pages 1-34 really hard. The third section, which starts on page 34, is interesting but a bit daft if you ask me. Please read it as well but invest your energies wisely.


6. Tuesday, June 12th: Martin Luther Continued
L-Z Blog Posts A-K Comments

7. Wednesday, June 13th: John Locke: Architect of Modern Secularism
A-K Blog Posts L-Z Comments
Kids: read carefully. This is a masterwork, and one that will stick with you throughout your college career.


8. Thursday, June 14th: John Locke and the Question of Order
L-Z Blog Posts A-K Comments
Most of today’s class will be spent finishing up our reading of Locke.


PAPER 1 DUE

9. Monday, June 18th: Roger Williams and the Baptist Factor
A-K Blog Posts L-Z Comments
The readings in Martha Nussbaum’s Liberty of Conscience are dense and long. Her interpretations of John Locke, in my opinion, are occasionally questionable. Still, the chapter merits careful scrutiny as Nussbaum cracks open a large set of problematics of great relevance to American secularism. So read carefully!


10. Tuesday, June 19th: The Late 18th Century and the Birth of American Secularism
L-Z Blog Posts A-K Comments
Dear students, the reading below is as crucial as it is fun to think about. Please read the book in its entirety and take good notes. We will spend two classes discussing the many excellent documents collected in this book.


Also, please memorize the sixteen fateful words of the first amendment’s religion clauses, which begin “Congress shall make no law. . . .”. I will call you on it. Be ready.

11. Wednesday, June 20th: The Birth of American Secularism II
L-Z Blog Posts A-K Comments
Note: We will continue working today on the readings from the Church volume. Feel free to read the Witte’s whole article (through 445). It’s quite good.


12. Thursday, June 21th: The Separation Perplex: Danbury and its Discontents
Madison v. Jefferson
A-K Blog Posts L-Z Comments


13. Monday, June 25th: Madisonian Alternatives
L-Z Blog Posts A-K Comments

Federalist 10 and Federalist 51.


PAPER 2 DUE
14. Tuesday, June 26th: The 19th Century I

A-K Blog Posts L-Z Comments

Holyoake is a wild text and you'll have fun with it. You can start on page 11 if you are rushed. You can skip the sections on secular guilds (18-20). But read the rest carefully. This is a very ambitious work and totally different from all that we have read previously. The question to answer: What is Secularism?

George Jacob Holyoake, The Principles of Secularism (You can find it in Google Books).

Philip Hamburger, “A Theologically Liberal, Anti-Catholic, and American Principle” in Separation of Church and State, pp. 193-251. (Read 193-219 carefully. The rest you can skim.)

15. Wednesday, June 27th: The 19th Century II

L-Z Blog Posts A-K Comments

Robert Ingersoll” (pp. 1-18), “God in the Constitution” (pp. 25-43) “Why I Am an Agnostic” (pp. 77-86), and “On Separation of Church and State” (pp. 114-120) in Robert Ingersoll, What’s God Got to Do with It?

“The Demands of Liberalism,” The Index, 1872.

Noah Feldman, Divided by God, pp. 150-185.

Noah Feldman, Divided by God, pp. 111-149.

16. Thursday June 28th: SCOTUS and American Secularism’s Golden Age

A-K Blog Posts L-Z Comments

Jacques Berlinerblau, How to Be Secular, pp. 103-136.

Jacques Berlinerblau, Thumpin’ It, pp. 133-142.

17. Monday July 2nd: SCOTUS and American Secularism’s Golden Age

Please send your SCOTUS case and year to Pietro (pb741@georgetown.edu). He will hand me the list before class and as I get to the period in question you’ll briefly tell us about your case.


Jacques Berlinerblau, How to Be Secular, pp. 53-82.

18. Tuesday July 3rd: SCOTUS and The Fall of American Secularism

A-K Blog Posts L-Z Comments
A-K Blog Posts L-Z Comments


19. Thursday, July 5th: Case I: Abortion/Organized Religion

L-Z Blog Posts A-K Comments


20. Friday, July 6th: Case Study II: Religious Freedom and LGBT Rights

L-Z Blog Posts A-K Comments


Grading policy

Classroom attendance is mandatory because so much of what we learn will be through discussion and public reflection. All absences must be accompanied by an explanation. My sense of a student’s performance is greatly influenced by my sense that she or he is coming prepared to each and every class.

Blogs
In an effort to promote dialogue and a sense of intellectual community, we are asking all students to blog about the readings. Anyone in the course will be able to see your post with your name attached (though this is a private website so no one who is not in our course will be able to view your comments). This assignment involves identifying one central component of an author’s argument and linking that to your own critical and original interpretation. These posts are meant to be short but tight (No fewer than 150 words, no longer than 250). Our website is set up so that you can view others’ blog posts and respond.

You will be required to blog and weekly, submitting a post for one day of class and commenting for the other.

Blogs are to be submitted by Sunday night at 8 p.m. on the readings for Monday’s class. And Tuesday by 8 p.m. for Wednesday’s class.

Comments should be posted by Monday mornings at 9:30 a.m. and on Wednesday mornings at 9:30 AM.

Last names A-K will post for Sunday night and comment for Wednesday morning.

Last names L-Z will post for Tuesday night and comment for Monday morning.

Everyone writes the “Getting to Know You” Blog Post (Due Monday June 4th at 8 p.m.) Relax. This should be fun!

These blogs constitute 15% of your grade. Posts will be evaluated for quality, originality and felicity of style. Please note that late blogs will not be accepted.

Course Website: https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/jciv-264-spring2017/

**Grade Breakdown**

- Paper 1 (1,000 words, 15%) due June 11th
- Paper 2 (1,000 words, 15%) due June 18th
- Paper 3 (1,250 words, 20%) due June 29th
- Final paper (2,500 words, 35%) due July 10th
- Blogs & Participation 15%

*Late papers: Students will be granted one one-day extension to be discussed in advance with the professor. This extension applies to only one of the papers (but not the final paper). Please note, all other late papers will not be accepted.*