



# THE SECULAR OUTLOOK

IN DEFENSE OF MORAL  
AND POLITICAL SECULARISM

PAUL CLITEUR

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

# The Secular Outlook

In Defense of Moral and Political Secularism

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# **The Secular Outlook**

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
<b>Introduction: The Secular Outlook</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Atheism, Agnosticism, and Theism</b>	<b>14</b>
The Alpha Privative	16
Atheism and Liberal Concepts of God	17
Atheism as an Unpopular Position	20
A Definition of Atheism	25
Motives for Atheism	42
Atheist Values	45
Spiritual Excellences and the Liberal Decalogue	47
Agnosticism	50
The History of Agnosticism	55
Huxley and Russell	57
Pascal's Wager	59
Pascal's Insight	62
Atheism or Non-Theism?	63
<b>2 Freethought I: Criticism of Religion</b>	<b>69</b>
"Écrasez l'Infâme"	72
Religion and Evil	76
Religious Violence	77
Father and Daughter	80
How to Discover a Relationship between Religion and Violence	84
Ramadan v. Hirsi Ali	86
Religion "per se"	89
Textual Relativism	91

Can Translation Mitigate All Immoral Passages in Scripture?	94
Can Interpretation Mitigate All Immoral Passages in Scripture?	96
Why Are “Moderates” so Reluctant to Criticize Religion?	98
The Bible on Apostasy	102
Biblical Terrorism: The Story of Phinehas	105
Biblical Violence and Modern Legal Practice	108
The Book of History	112
Some Objections	115
<b>3 Freethought II: Freedom of Expression</b>	<b>122</b>
Mill on Liberty	123
Khomeini v. Rushdie	125
Fukuyama Giving Up on the Arab World	130
The Limits of Free Speech	134
The Deontological and Utilitarian Justifications for Free Speech	138
Clifford on the Duty to Critique	141
Freedom of Speech and Philosophers on the Index	143
Intolerance not Restricted to Islam	147
Giniewski v. France	150
Freethought under Fire	152
People Are not Being Insulted for Having a Religion	155
Racism without Race	161
Social Criticism not Identical with the Urge to Provoke	163
Flemming Rose on Why He Published the Danish Cartoons	164
The Theory of Evolution: Too Controversial to Defend?	168
Is There Another Way to Discover the Truth than by Free Discussion?	170
<b>4 Moral and Political Secularism</b>	<b>172</b>
Pope Benedict XVI on the Apostles’ Creed	176
“Who Are You to Tell Believers What to Believe?”	180
What Judaism, Christendom, and Islam Have in Common: Theism	184
Divine Command Theories	188
Abraham and Isaac	194
The Story of Abraham in the Qur’an	196
The Story of Jephtha	201
Adherents of Divine Command Theory	204
Command Ethics or <i>Divine</i> Command Ethics?	206
An Assessment of Divine Command Ethics	210
Kierkegaard and Mill	218
Kohlberg and Moral Education	221



Religious and Secular Ethics	225
Worship	229
Kant's Struggle with Moral Autonomy and Free Speech	234
Kant's Legacy in Nineteenth-Century German Theology	241
Schleiermacher as the Father of Modern Hermeneutics	244
Armstrong's Plea for Liberal Interpretation	248
A New Way to Look at the "Sacredness" of Scripture?	252
Classic Books and Sacred Books	254
Violating the Integrity of the Text	262
Is Hermeneutics the Only Way to Modernize Traditions?	266
Is Islam "Secularization-Resistant"?	272
Two Kinds of Reformers: Liberal Islam and Secular Islam	274
 Selected Reading	 281
 Index	 305

# Introduction: The Secular Outlook

What nobody would have thought possible in the 1960s and 1970s actually happened in the following decades: a widening of the gulf between religious believers and unbelievers. Christianity is growing modestly, Islam is growing exponentially, but atheism also has more adherents than ever before.

A lively debate on religion is also taking place. Books like Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006)<sup>1</sup> are being sold in huge numbers, but so are books written from an explicitly Christian or other religious point of view (e.g. those by Karen Amstrong).

At the same time, the world is being confronted with a relatively new phenomenon: religious violence – in particular, religious terrorism. Governments are suddenly facing religious leaders who issue death sentences for writers, and they are struggling with the demands of religious minorities in the midst of their liberal democracies.

This book addresses some of these issues and makes a case for a “secular outlook” on life. That implies that it is not primarily concerned with defending atheism, nor does it defend theism – its central concern is to show how religious believers and unbelievers can live peacefully together and what principles the state should try to stimulate in its citizenry to achieve social harmony and social cohesion. The underlying idea is that the basic principles of secularism are important for the time in which we live.

\* \* \*

In recent decades we have, according to many people, witnessed an upsurge of religion. Among scholars there seems to be a nearly universal consensus that the so-called “secularization thesis” has failed. The secularization thesis, advocated by seminal social thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, held that religion would gradually fade in importance and even

<sup>1</sup> Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion*, Black Swan, Transworld Publishers, London 2006.

## 2 Introduction: The Secular Outlook

cease to be significant with the advent of modern society. Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud, amongst others, all subscribed to this vision of the future course of events. However, in 2000, the sociologists of religion Rodney Stark (1934– ) and Roger Finke (1954– ) suggested that it was time to bury the secularization thesis.<sup>2</sup>

Up until the 1970s and '80s secularization seemed to be on the march in Europe, especially in the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. But this, some scholars say, all changed 10 to 20 years later. A number of them referred to a “revanche of God,”<sup>3</sup> or a “return of the sacred.”<sup>4</sup> Even so notorious a secularist philosopher as Jürgen Habermas (1929– ) seemed to have second thoughts.<sup>5</sup> Secularization was not an irreversible process, many scholars now write. Theodore Dalrymple (1949– ) captures the mood rather well:

In my naive, historicist way, I assumed that secularization was an irreversible process, like the breaking of eggs: that once people had seen the glory of life without compulsory obeisance to the men of God, they would never turn back to them as the sole guides to their lives and politics.<sup>6</sup>

Whether this reversal of the climate of opinion is real or superficial, whether it is temporary or permanent, remains to be seen. But what can be said is that ideas of secularism and the secular state no longer go unchallenged. This challenge comes from two sides. On the one hand, it comes from those advocating a greater influence of religion on the state and the public domain *on religious grounds*. On the other hand, it comes from those who, on *non-religious grounds*, claim that we should give more attention to religion.

<sup>2</sup> Stark, Rodney, and Finke, Roger, *Acts of Faith*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, p. 79. For the opposite view, see: Paul, Gregory S., “Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Social Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies,” *Journal of Religion and Society*, 7 2005, pp. 1–17.

<sup>3</sup> Kepel, Gilles, *La Revanche de Dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde* [The Revenge of God: Christians, Jews, and Muslims Out to Reconquer the World], Le Seuil, Paris 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Bell, Daniel, “The Return of the Sacred,” in: Daniel Bell, *The Winding Passage. Essays and Sociological Journeys 1960–1980*, Basic Books, New York 1980, pp. 324–355.

<sup>5</sup> See on this: Habermas, Jürgen, and Ratzinger, Joseph, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2005, and for an analysis of this exchange of views: Bowman, Jonathan, “Extending Habermas and Ratzinger’s *Dialectics of Secularization*: Eastern Discursive Influences on Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age,” *Forum Philosophicum*, 14 2009, pp. 39–55, p. 29: “Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger agree that we have entered a postsecular age (2006).”

<sup>6</sup> Dalrymple, Theodore, “When Islam Breaks Down,” in: Theodore Dalrymple, *Our Culture, What’s Left of It: The Mandarins and the Masses*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago 2005, pp. 283–296, p. 283.

The latter approach is defended under the banner of “multiculturalism.”<sup>7</sup> Those two positions, although leading to the same end, must be carefully distinguished.

Moreover, there is another distinction that we have to honor.

On the one hand, we have the discussion among sociologists of religion about the validity of the secularization thesis. Does it hold? Is it true that modernization is pushing religion to the margins of existence? Or should we follow Stark and Finke in burying that thesis?

This “secularization debate” is to be distinguished from a debate among constitutional scholars, moral philosophers, and political theorists on the question of how the state and society should react to the presumed comeback of religion in the public arena.<sup>8</sup> This second debate is not about the process of secularization but about the value of secularism in both ethics and politics. We should carefully distinguish secularization from secularism.

First: what is *secularization*? Daniel Philpott (1967– ) avers that:

Secularization is a rather descriptive statement, holding that the political ends of citizens, organizations, and societies themselves are no longer as explicitly religious as they once were or are no longer explicitly religious at all.<sup>9</sup>

In the words of the American sociologist Peter L. Berger (1929– ) secularization is the “process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.”<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to secularization, “secularism,” in the sense in which I will use the term, is a normative or ethical creed. The secularist contends that the best way to deal with religious differences is a morally neutral vocabulary that we all share and a morality that is not based on religion. The

<sup>7</sup> See: Baber, H.E., *The Multicultural Mystique: The Liberal Case against Diversity*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY 2008, p. 26 ff. Severe criticism of multiculturalism is also found in: Rooy, Wim van, *De Malaise van de Multiculturaliteit* [The Malaise of Multiculturalism], Acco, Leuven/Voorburg 2008; a defense in: Parekh, Bhikhu, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Macmillan Press, Basingstoke 2000; Parekh, Bhikhu, *A New Politics of Identity: Political Principles for an Interdependent World*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2008.

<sup>8</sup> See on this: Sajó, András, “Preliminaries to a Concept of Constitutional Secularism,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, July 29, 2008, pp. 1–25; Sajó, András, “A Reply,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, June 15, 2009, pp. 515–528; Zucca, Lorenzo, “The Crisis of the Secular State – A Reply to Professor Sajó,” *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, June 15, 2009, pp. 494–514.

<sup>9</sup> Philpott, Daniel, “The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations,” *World Politics*, 55 2002, pp. 66–95, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Berger, Peter L., *The Social Reality of Religion*, Allen Lane, London 1973, p. 113; for a commentary see: Madan, T.N., “Secularism in Its Place,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 46, no. 4 1987, pp. 747–759, p. 748.

#### 4 Introduction: The Secular Outlook

words “secular” and “secularism,” in the sense that I use them, do not entail any negative attitude to religion.<sup>11</sup> Although George Holyoake (1817–1906) coined the term “secularism” as a “policy of life for those who do not accept theology,” I will not subscribe to his semantics.<sup>12</sup>

Secularism should also be clearly distinguished from the position of those who predict the demise of religion (i.e. “secularization”). In her book *The Case for God* (2009) Karen Armstrong (1944– ) writes: “Contrary to the confident secularist predictions of the mid twentieth century, religion is not going to disappear.”<sup>13</sup> My point is that Armstrong, like some other authors writing on religion and secularism, mixes up “secularism” and the “secularization thesis.” A secularist to her is someone who believes in the secularization thesis. This book is mainly devoted to secularism, not to secularization. Armstrong and others may, of course, gleefully criticize the secularization thesis, but that is flogging a dead horse. Their argumentation has no consequence whatsoever for the viability of secularism as a moral and political philosophy or a vision of how the state should relate to religion. On the contrary.

This subject is topical. It has been said that “In spite of the critiques of religion put forward by scientists and atheists, the number of people professing some kind of religious belief is actually increasing worldwide.”<sup>14</sup> The approximate numbers of adherents to the largest faiths as percentages of the world’s total population are as follows: Christianity 32%, Islam, 21%, Non-religious 15%, Hinduism 12.5%, Primal religions 5.5%, Chinese traditional 5.5%, Buddhism 5.5%, Sikhism 0.35%, Judaism 0.25%, other 2.4%.<sup>15</sup>

What makes this rising trend for religions even more important is that, according to perspicacious observers, we are not only witnessing the return

<sup>11</sup> See on this: Davison, David, “Turkey, a ‘Secular’ State? The Challenge of Description,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102, no. 2/3 2003, pp. 333–350, p. 334: “*Secular* may thus convey a negative translation to religion and religiosity.” Although it is widespread, I will not follow this use of the term “secular.” Karen Armstrong contends that “in the Muslim world, secularism has often consisted of a brutal attack upon religion and the religions.” See: Armstrong, Karen, *Islam: A Short History*, Random House, Toronto 2002, p. 158. It is not clear what she means by that and she does not give examples, but, whatever the case may be, secularism is not necessarily anti-religious, as I will try to make clear in this book. Secularism has nothing to do with a “brutal attack upon religion” but with fostering a moral attitude and developing political institutions that make it possible for people from different religious and non-religious persuasions to live together.

<sup>12</sup> Holyoake, George Jacob, *The Principles of Secularism*, third edition, Austin and Company, London 1870, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Armstrong, Karen, *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means*, The Bodley Head, London 2009, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Wilkinson, Philip, *Religions*, Dorley Kindersley Limited, London 2008, p. 338.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

of religion in general, but that of violent, fundamentalist, or even terrorist varieties of religious belief. In 2007 the United Nations published a report with the shocking (although not unexpected) conclusion that religious tolerance (in the sense of tolerance exerted by religions)<sup>16</sup> is on the wane everywhere.<sup>17</sup> The special reporter for the UN, Asma Jahangir (1952– ), noted that religious groups in general are tending to be less and less tolerant toward criticism of their beliefs. This religious intolerance manifests itself not only in Islam, but also in Christianity, and even in Buddhism.

This intolerance can be discerned in the increasing number of complaints from people who feel they have been offended in their religious convictions. More and more people are protesting about what they read and hear from others.<sup>18</sup> As you can see if you carefully study what these people complain about, the complaints, in many cases, relate to trivial matters. Nevertheless, the grievances arise, and for those affected they seem to be terribly real.

That brings us to the subject of “religious violence,” a notion that is central to this book. In the words of Mark Juergensmeyer (1940– ) there seems to be a “global rebellion” against the secular state.<sup>19</sup> Catholic theologian and leading public intellectual George Weigel (1951– ) formulates the significance of the religious upsurge referring to 9/11:

Viewed through history’s wide-angle lens, the events of September 11, 2001, were one lethal expression of the fact that, contrary to secularization theory and the widespread assumptions of the world’s elites (including governmental elites), the twenty-first century will be one in which rapidly advancing modernization coincides with an explosion of religious conviction and passion.<sup>20</sup>

Recent decades have witnessed not only an upsurge of religious feelings, but also an increasing willingness by people to perpetrate violence or threaten violence if they are offended in those feelings. We have, for instance, seen an increasing amount of religious violence and even terrorism directed

<sup>16</sup> So this is about tolerance as *practiced* by religions, not tolerance *toward* religions. Although both forms of tolerance are important, the first issue is a blind spot in the literature on this subject, the latter a sole preoccupation.

<sup>17</sup> Jahangir, Asma, *Promotion and Protection of all Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including the Right to Development*, Report by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, A/HRC/6/5, 20 July 2007.

<sup>18</sup> An impressive analysis of this process is also to be found in: Malik, Kenan, *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and Its Legacy*, Atlantic Books, London 2009, especially p. 142 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Juergensmeyer, Mark, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to Al Qaeda*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Weigel, George, *Faith, Reason, and the War against Jihadism: A Call to Action*, Doubleday, New York 2007, p. 3.

against public intellectuals, comedians, cabaret performers, cartoonists, playwrights, and others who use the spoken and written word.<sup>21</sup> The fatwa against Salman Rushdie (1947– ) issued in 1989 is a notorious case in point. In 2002 American Islamic scholar Daniel Pipes (1949– ) wrote: “Khomeini himself passed from the scene just weeks after issuing his edict, but the spirit it engendered very much lives on. Since 1989, militant Islamic efforts to silence those who critique Islam or Muslims have had impressive results.”<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, Pipes was not being unduly pessimistic in 2002, and he seems even more right today. Since that time threats against writers have proliferated.<sup>23</sup> In 2004 the Dutch filmmaker and writer Theo van Gogh (1957–2004) was murdered by a jihadist who claimed to be following a “law” that commanded him to chop the head off of everyone who calls Allah and his Prophet names.<sup>24</sup> In 2006 the Danish cartoon affair caused much havoc in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps less well known to the general public is the fact that on March 27, 2008 the Dutch Parliamentarian Geert Wilders (1963– ) put a movie on the Internet under the title *Fitna*. The movie is a 16-minute succession of images connecting Islam with violence and oppression.

From an artistic point of view the film is not very interesting,<sup>26</sup> but the reactions certainly were. As probably never before, representatives of the international community considered it their task to publicly comment on a

<sup>21</sup> See on this: Murray, Douglas, and Verwey, Johan Pieter, *Victims of Intimidation: Freedom of Speech within Europe's Muslim Communities*, The Centre for Social Cohesion, London 2008; Murray, Douglas, “Think Tank: Betrayal of Muslim Reformers,” *Timesonline*, November 23, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Pipes, Daniel, *Militant Islam Reaches America*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London 2002, p. 172.

<sup>23</sup> See: King, Anna, “Islam, Women and Violence,” *Feminist Theology*, 17 no. 3 2009, pp. 292–328, p. 296.

<sup>24</sup> Declared by B. during his trial at 12 July 2005 and to be found (in Dutch) at: <http://www.nos.nl/nosjournaal/dossiers/terreurnederland/verklaringbtekst.html>. Two weeks later, at 26 July 2005, B. was sentenced to a life imprisonment for the murder of Van Gogh. For a succinct presentation of some of the facts of the case, see: Berg, Floris van den, “Zero Tolerance,” *Free Inquiry*, January/February 2005, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> See on this: Sifaoui, Mohamed, *L'affaire des caricatures de Mahomet: dessins et manipulations* [The Affair of the Cartoons of Mohammed: Drawings and Manipulations], Éditions Privé, Paris 2006; Jespersen, Karen, and Pittelkow, Ralf, *Islamisten en naïvisten. Een aanklacht* [Islamists and Naïvists. An Accusation], Nieuw Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2007.

<sup>26</sup> This distinguishes Wilders' film from that of the Dutch politician Ehsan Jami (1985– ) who posted on the internet on December 9, 2008 a sometimes ironic, sometimes comic dialogue with the founder of the Islamic faith with the title “An Interview with Muhammed.” On behalf of the Dutch government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a “declaration” in response to Jami's film (“Verklaring van de Nederlandse regering inzake de film van Jami,” at: [www.minbuza.nl](http://www.minbuza.nl)) stating that the Netherlands has a tradition of freedom of worship but also of freedom of speech. Hurting the feelings of others is not part of that tradition.

film. Wilders' film set the precedent.<sup>27</sup> In a joint statement all the ministers of foreign affairs of European countries distanced themselves from *Fitna*. They emphatically rejected the idea that there was a connection between Islam and violence. In itself this is not a surprising comment and there may even be good reasons for this point of view, but what *was* surprising was that official representatives of European states felt inclined to comment on a film that was – in the opinion of the ministers themselves as well, because nobody declared the film illegal – made under the protection of the European principle of free speech.

Even the United Nations went so far as to comment on the film. On March 28 the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon (1944– ), criticized the film for being “offensively anti-Islamic.”<sup>28</sup> “I condemn in the strongest terms, the airing of Geert Wilders’ offensively anti-Islamic film,” Mr. Ban said in a statement. “The right to free expression is not at stake here,” he added. “Freedom must always be accompanied by social responsibility.” The EU’s Slovenian presidency said the film served no purpose other than “inflaming hatred.” The irony was, of course, that this film was meant as a *protest* against hatred and violence grounded in religion. Apparently, Ban Ki-moon and Wilders have a different opinion of the nature of a world religion, which is perfectly legitimate. But what was new was that the Secretary General of the United Nations felt compelled to take a stance in a criminological and theological debate about the connection between religion and violence. I refer to the science of criminology because this is the discipline that takes a stance on what the causes of crime are (and perpetrating violence is a crime). Is this judgment by the Secretary General based on scientific research? And if so, what research? The Secretary General also takes a stance on the proper interpretation of a religious tradition. This is a new development in the history of the UN, something that is usually left to theologians. Is the UN the proper institution to proclaim official stances on criminology and theology? This is certainly not something that has a basis in the founding documents of the UN.

And how could the Secretary General contend that “the right of free expression is not at stake here?” If freedom of expression is not at stake *here*, then when is it exactly?

There were hardly any voices that proclaimed the principle of tolerance (in the sense of tolerating religious criticism, not in the sense of abolishing religious criticism), the principle of free speech (as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms) or the freedom of religion (including the right to criticize religion or apostatize, as article

<sup>27</sup> See on this: Ellian, Afshin, “Criticism and Islam,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> BBC, “UN chief condemns anti-Islam film,” *BBC News*, March 28, 2008.



18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims). The Dutch prime minister J.P. Balkenende (1956– ), apparently also an expert on theology, said shortly before (!) the release of the film: “We reject this interpretation.”<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps these highly unusual comments by high-ranking politicians are justified against the backdrop of a terrorist threat.<sup>30</sup> But, if that is the case, there should at least be a coherent analysis of the situation, and a subsequent balancing of the threats with the loss of values and rights that seems imminent. In 1859 the British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) wrote: “If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.”<sup>31</sup> This seems like an echo from a past era. This sentence voices the same worldview as the famous words often attributed to Voltaire (1694–1778): “I may disagree with what you have to say, but I shall defend, to the death, your right to say it.”<sup>32</sup> The values espoused by Voltaire, Mill, and many other important authors are not eclipsed – but they are surely challenged – by violent religious fanaticism.

What is particularly disturbing is the awkward reaction by official institutions to the challenge that religious fanatics make to the values of free speech, tolerance, freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. We may say with Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992) that “the basic principles on which this civilization was built have been falling into increasing disregard and oblivion.”<sup>33</sup>

What I want to do in *The Secular Outlook* is to present what I call a “secular outlook”<sup>34</sup> on life and society as clearly and consistently as I can.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> An attempt to analyze the reactions of Europe’s political elite is made by: Caldwell, Christopher, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam and the West*, Allen Lane, Penguin Books, London 2009; Jenkins, Philip, *God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007; Bawer, Bruce, “Heirs to Fortuyn,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2009; Bawer, Bruce, *Surrender: Appeasing Islam, Sacrificing Freedom*, Doubleday, New York 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Mill, John Stuart, *On Liberty*, 1859, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989, p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> These actual words are not to be found in Voltaire’s works, but they are certainly in harmony with the spirit of his ideas. See: Baggini, Julian, “I may disagree with what you have to say, but I shall defend to the death your right to say it,” in: Julian Baggini, *Should You Judge this Book by its Cover? 100 Fresh Takes on Familiar Sayings and Quotations*, Granta, London 2009, pp. 35–36.

<sup>33</sup> Hayek, F.A., *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1982, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> When I use the words *The Secular Outlook* (in italics) I refer to this book. If I refer to “the secular outlook,” I have in mind the composite traditions of (private) atheism (non-