

ENLIGHTENMENT AND SECULARISM

Essays on the Mobilization of Reason

Edited by

CHRISTOPHER NADON

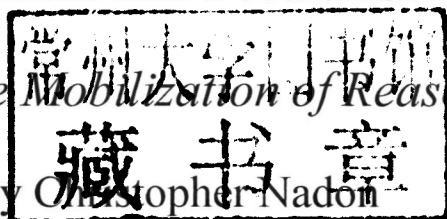
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Enlightenment and Secularism

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Christopher Nadon
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Foreword

It might be surprising to the writers of the classic texts of the Enlightenment and the early proponents of secularism to learn that their ideas and values are still contested in the twenty-first century especially in the United States, the first polity to embrace them and put them into practice. In light of the re-emergence of explicitly religious politics, the current generation of university students finds itself facing a situation in which the clash of religious ideas and beliefs is a crucial factor shaping their contemporary world. Young people today obviously need to be knowledgeable about the provenance and meaning of these competing understandings of the world if they are to make informed choices as citizens and as leaders. This makes relevant and important the study of the writings of the key Enlightenment thinkers who sought to mobilize the power of reason and science as opposed to dogma and tradition to solve problems afflicting humanity and society. Rethinking the secular tradition would likely then be welcomed by those who contributed to it as a necessary means to prevent it from becoming merely a tradition or dogma.

The Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC) is engaged in encouraging the publication of comparative and multidisciplinary teaching tools through “state of the art” readers on the themes of secularism, secular values, and the secular tradition, especially for undergraduate teaching. The aim is to motivate students to connect with current ideological and political debates but also to convince them that in order to do so they need a proper grounding. Thus we first have to encourage them to engage in relevant study through offering them suitable, quality educational materials. This volume is dedicated to that goal. It has its origins in a series of course development grants initiated by ISSSC at Trinity College, Hartford and Claremont McKenna College devoted to this theme of Secularism and the Enlightenment, which then led to a national academic conference attended by

scholars from the fields of history, political science, sociology, and literature held at Claremont McKenna College in the summer of 2008. Participants were responsible for selecting a particular text and contributing an essay discussing its importance and relevance to our overall theme. These texts and essays form the core of this reader which was then expanded in light of the conference discussions to incorporate a wider array of thinkers.

Christopher Nadon, who led the curriculum development project at Claremont McKenna College, undertook to assemble and edit this volume. He has accomplished the task of organizing the essays so as to map out the interrelationship of enlightenment ideas and secularism in relation to several discursive and scholarly fields: the study of the natural world; human nature, social order, law, and government; knowledge, literary and aesthetic criticism. Anyone who reads and studies these essays cannot but emerge as a more fully educated and enlightened human being.

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Enlightenment and Secularism: Introduction

Christopher Nadon

I. ENLIGHTENMENT

Thomas Aikenhead was executed for blasphemy in Edinburgh on January 8th, 1697, the last such execution to take place in Great Britain. Yet, as late as 1856, when Thomas Macaulay inserted an account of the young student's trial and public hanging in his *History of England* to illustrate the ignorant zeal of the Scottish clergy,¹ there could still be found a party willing to take objection and vindicate the original action.² This seems to be no longer the case, at least not in Scotland, nor those parts of the globe that today consider themselves to be part of the West or to have undergone significant Westernization. This change is due in large part to the reforms wrought by the Enlightenment—*Écrasez l'infâme*—and the process of secularization that perhaps in some way preceded, but most certainly followed, in its wake.

On the testimony of his accusers, Aikenhead was part of an intellectual movement that denied the veracity and hence authority of Scripture, the existence of the Trinity, and Jesus' divinity; they considered the world eternal and thought that man's ingenuity, exalted by art and industry, could rival the omnipotence believers ascribed to God; accordingly, they looked forward to the extirpation of Christianity, perhaps sometime around the year 1800.³ By his own admission given in a remarkable speech read from the gallows after his attempts to recant and repent were rejected by the court and clergy, Aikenhead claimed that "the only cause that made me assert the things that I asserted, and deny the things that I denied" was "an insatiable inclination to truth" that forced him "of necessity to reject the authorities and testimonys, both of my parents and others, instilled into me . . . *gratis dictum*."⁴ Aiken-

head claimed that ever since he was “about ten years of age,” he had been seeking “to build my faith on uncontrovertable grounds.” Yet he found “it was impossible for me or any other I conversed with to produce any grounds really sufficient to confirm” orthodox beliefs. “But with the greatest facility sufficient grounds could be produced for the contrair.” He then gave Hobbesian and Spinozistic grounds for denying the existence of things good or evil in themselves, original sin, particular providence, and the need for either revelation or the Christian way of salvation.⁵ Aikenhead’s *credo* identifies him as a kind of forerunner of what Charles Taylor has recently called “exclusive humanism,” a way of thinking he considers to be the most characteristic form that secularism takes in the contemporary world.⁶ Thus key elements of Enlightenment thought would seem to have become mainstream, if not exactly *status quo*, over a considerable part of the globe.

The essays collected here seek to contribute to our understanding of how and why this came to pass. They do so by focusing, for the most part, on a single author and text, a secularized version of the traditional sermon on a text. This form should make the volume particularly useful for those teaching and studying within a liberal arts curriculum, as they bring forward potential readings and suggest possible lines of inquiry and interpretation for those interested in our theme. A generation ago such a volume would likely have taken as its point of departure Peter Gay’s largely celebratory presentation of the Enlightenment in *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (1966) and *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation: The Science of Freedom* (1969) and would itself have shared in that celebration. Yet the intervening years have seen powerful critiques of the Enlightenment take hold on both the left and right, if not yet in popular discourse, certainly within the academy.⁷ Even Taylor, an advocate of human rights and equality and therefore no root and branch critic of the Enlightenment, worries that the kind of “closed immanent frame” that underlies “exclusive humanism” leads to an atomistic individualism that cuts us off from the possibility of real “human flourishing.”⁸ Yet long before Taylor, certainly beginning with Rousseau, and perhaps from its inception, the Enlightenment has been subject to interrogation, doubts, and attacks that would seem to open the way for a return to orthodox religion.⁹ Some of the more radical expressions of discontent perhaps owed much of their boldness to the conviction that the Enlightenment had in fact achieved a decisive victory, that the powers it worked so hard to oppose have been dissipated and spent, that one could now express reservations and disagreements without giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Such a judgment may have been premature. Today the most pointed and politically effective critiques of the Enlightenment and Secularism are articulated from the point of view of Islamic fundamentalism, which, unlike the Enlightenment’s original opponents, renders its judgment not merely on the basis of the Enlighten-

ment's promise and immediate impact, but also its fruits or long-term effects.¹⁰

Of course one need not be an adherent of fundamentalism to question Gay's advocacy or analysis of the Enlightenment. "Perhaps I exaggerated a bit when I hinted before that the Enlightenment is responsible for everything that is good in the twentieth century."¹¹ Gay could put these words in the mouth of a resurrected Voltaire only by identifying the core of the Enlightenment with Voltaire and his allies. His account of the Enlightenment leaves itself open to the charge of being too narrowly constituted, temporally and geographically, by his "little flock" of authors centered around Voltaire and preselected for their easy-going skepticism and open-minded spirit of toleration. Jonathan Israel intends his two volume study of the Enlightenment (*Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested*) to supplement these shortcomings in Gay's survey. No one can complain of the narrow scope of his interests. But Israel wishes not only to broaden, but above all to correct Gay's "pivotal mistake," his conception of the Enlightenment as essentially one Enlightenment.¹² Israel does not, however, mean to contribute to the discovery of yet more Enlightenments, e.g., the French, English, Dutch, German, American, Scottish, Italian, etc., etc. Taken to its logical conclusion, and Israel is a historian who both reasons and sees reason as a historical force, this line of interpretation ends in the denial of the existence or perhaps even possibility of Enlightenment *per se*. Instead Israel thinks that at its core the Enlightenment has always consisted of "a mutually antagonistic duality . . . between moderate mainstream and Radical Enlightenment," a duality that works itself out in related and recognizable patterns across various national cultures.¹³

Aikenhead's speech from the gallows, with its view of reason as a self-sufficient human faculty in opposition to traditional religion, marks him as a fairly typical representative of what Israel calls Radical Enlightenment. His fate confirms Israel's claim that this radical underground was "fiercely denigrated and persecuted by virtually the whole of European and American society."¹⁴ Although the radicals' greater philosophic coherence exercised a deeper and more powerful influence on the ultimate shape of modernity, according to Israel, they would not have enjoyed this influence or had much if any historical effect had it not been for the "moderate mainstream Enlightenment" which was characterized by the effort to blend or harmonize the insights of "the new critical-mathematical rationality" with the claims of traditional morality and religion. Yet this synthesis is "problematic," "unstable," and "shot through with contradiction."¹⁵ Israel thus leads us to contemplate the possibility that the Enlightenment was successful, paradoxically, precisely because of its lack of clarity.

Still, without denying the historical existence of these two strands of the Enlightenment, one could perhaps doubt the proper placement of certain

figures into their respective camps. While it is difficult to understand how moderation can be a genuine intellectual virtue, almost anyone can appreciate its political benefits. Might not an astute radical who understood the greater political efficacy of the moderates' approach willingly present his thought in moderate form not due to his own incoherence or self-contradiction but rather his clear understanding of the practical demands of his historical situation? Montesquieu, perhaps the most moderate of the moderates, contemplates just this possibility. In his notebooks he wrote of Spinoza and especially of his rhetoric: "He seeks to flatter me with the idea that I am merely a modification of matter . . . [and] very much wants, in my favor, to destroy liberty in me." Turning then to Hobbes, Montesquieu characterizes him in contrast to Spinoza as "much less extreme, *and therefore much more dangerous* than the first."¹⁶ But, if Hobbes, by being less extreme therefore becomes more dangerous, Locke would be more dangerous still. Perhaps Montesquieu's famous moderation, particularly on questions touching religion,¹⁷ makes him and others similarly inclined the most dangerous of all, and hence in some ways more revolutionary than the open radicals? Montesquieu seems to have practiced what he implicitly preached, which makes him difficult to classify. Here he is arguing against applying penal laws in matters of religion.

One does not succeed in detaching the soul from religion by filling it with this great object [fear of punishments and death], by bringing it closer to the moment when it should find religion of greater importance; a more certain way to attack religion is by favor, by the comforts of life, by the hope of fortune, not by what reminds one of it, but by what makes one forget it; not by what makes one indignant, but by what leads one to indifference when other passions act on our souls and when those that religion inspires are silent. General rule: in the matter of changing religion, invitations are stronger than penalties.¹⁸

Is this the statement of a radical or moderate? As a number of essays in this volume will argue, the border between these two camps or strands within the Enlightenment is porous and difficult to police. For the phenomenon of Moderate Enlightenment derives not simply from a lack of clarity or coherence, but sometimes from a judicious or enlightened and limited application of reason.

Political success on such terms comes with a price. John Adams could boast that in contrast to earlier peoples who claimed their laws derived from divinities, "the United States of America have exhibited, perhaps, the first example of governments erected on the simple principles of nature. . . . It will never be pretended that any persons employed in that service had interviews with the gods or were in any degree under the inspiration of Heaven . . . ; it will forever be acknowledged that these governments were contrived merely

by the use of reason and the senses.”¹⁹ When it came to the Federal Constitution, however, no less an authority than James Madison admitted that its future success would depend upon drawing a certain reverence from the people based not only on reason and enlightenment but even “prejudices.”²⁰ Thus when the philosophic radicalism of the Enlightenment depends for its success on political tempering, it forever runs the risk of becoming what it once most claimed to hate: an authority based on something other than reason. This problem lies at or near the heart of Charles Taylor’s concerns about secularism. For the debilitating effects of “exclusive humanism” are exaggerated when the presuppositions that underlie the modern secular project come to be held more out of cultural or class prejudice and habituation than reasoned consideration.²¹ On this view, many partisans of secularism today would have been for the same reason advocates of divine right had they lived in centuries past. Taylor observes, “Unbelief for great numbers of contemporary unbelievers is understood as an achievement of rationality. But it cannot have this without continuing historical awareness.”²² It is the intention of this volume to contribute to the increase or maintenance of that awareness.

Yet, as Taylor also argues, for such historical awareness to live up to the standard of rationality, it cannot assume or take for granted that the historical development of secularism is either inevitable or necessarily progressive. Whatever the ultimate worth of a book like Bernard Lewis’ *What Went Wrong: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, it has the defect of presupposing the political, social, and economic trajectory of Western Europe as the standard by which the deviations of others are to be measured, understood, and diagnosed.²³ Better to begin from the premise whose validity such an outspoken proponent of the Enlightenment as Jürgen Habermas seems to grant when he relates this observation of an Iranian colleague: “The comparative study of cultures and religious sociology surely suggested that *European secularization* was the odd one out among various developments—and that it ought to be corrected.”²⁴ Of course, being the “odd one out” is not by itself sufficient grounds for repentance and correction. But if one is to defend something, especially a deviation, one ought to know what one is defending.

II. SECULARISM

If the Enlightenment is, as Foucault observed, “the first epoch which names its own self,”²⁵ this has not stopped others from appropriating the title and applying it *ex post facto* to earlier times and places that seem to bear some passing resemblance. Thus we can now read of an Athenian or Classical Enlightenment, a Roman Enlightenment, a Christian, Islamic, or Jewish (prior to the Haskalah) Enlightenment, even, in what would have seemed an

oxymoron to many Enlightenment figures themselves, a Medieval Enlightenment. While these earlier “Enlightenments” were characterized by an intense or renewed interest in philosophy and reason, only the Enlightenment proper gave birth to secularism as a lasting political and social force. Thus the focus of this volume hopes to get at what is perhaps most distinctive and central to the Enlightenment, even while the phenomenon of secularism itself resists any easy or neat definition. We find ourselves tempted to side with Justice Potter Stewart who, when faced with a similarly difficult case, simply declared, “I know it when I see it.” Without denying the commonsense of such an observation, it seems that some level of generalization is possible provided one does not take the following distinctions to be hard and fast, or the boundaries drawn impermeable. The essays in this volume, while arranged in chronological order, could also be categorized according to the types of secularism each stresses.

Political Secularism

If secularism is understood as the favoring of this-worldly political concerns over religious claims or scruples, the phenomenon well antedates the Enlightenment. Think only of Thucydides’ Athenian spokesmen at Melos. Yet their arguments were not spoken in the presence of the people and they made no pretense to act on their behalf. Machiavelli, however, did both, and later Enlightenment figures, such as Spinoza, openly acknowledged “the most wholesome advice” of this “far-seeing,” “ingenious,” and “learned man.”²⁶ Bacon gives a cautious endorsement of Machiavelli’s moral intention, and the debts of others are more often recorded in the catalogues of their libraries than in their public thanks.²⁷ The secular thrust of Machiavelli’s thought is usually and rightly considered to be manifest in a doctrine of *realpolitik* that shows the incompatibility of the demands of religion and traditional morality with those of politics, with the latter taking precedence, as, for example, among *les politiques* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Christopher Lynch (Chapter 1) argues that Machiavelli sided with the people, whose ends are perhaps “more decent” than those of the great, not simply because he thought them to be the stronger party, but because he considered them more amenable to reason or rational control than the prelates or other elites of his day. For Lynch, Machiavelli’s political secularism is intimately connected to enlightenment of a kind, as his deepest motive was the desire to restore elements of the political and social conditions of independent thought that had been undermined by the Church’s appropriation of the philosophic tradition.

Dean DiSpalatro (Chapter 12) shows how Pierre Bayle radicalized the Machiavellian subordination of religion to *raison d’état* to the point of denying the political necessity of religion altogether. Indeed, the kind of condi-

tioning Bayle finds typical of religious education can be more effectively directed toward the secular and immanent goals of national strength and prosperity. Such atheistic states had to await the twentieth century for empirical testing. Yet well before this time would come, others sought to subject religion to political control without eliminating or inflicting upon it a mortal wound. George Thomas (Chapter 19) argues that democratic constitutionalism has been the most successful, if indirect, means to this end. His analysis of the *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* reveals a Madison concerned to provide for religious liberty but only on terms favorable to a doctrine of popular sovereignty that stands in some tension with traditional claims to freedom of conscience. The predominance of political concerns is also the theme of Allan Arkush's essay (Chapter 22) on Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, a defense of liberal principles against the charge that they in effect "abolish Judaism." Arkush argues that Mendelssohn could complete this task only on the historically and theoretically questionable grounds that the destruction of the Temple and subsequent Diaspora changed the character of the obligations required by the Torah. In this way the Law submits to political circumstance. For both Madison and Mendelssohn, separation of church or synagogue from the state might thus be better understood as its sequestration.

Just why religion might itself wish to be sequestered in a democratic society is the theme of Alice Behnegar's essay on Tocqueville (Chapter 16). Tocqueville describes the place of religion in America without regard to specific constitutional forms which, after all, had a limited sway in the early republic. He focuses on a deeper stratum of political life: the effect that "equality of conditions" exercises over human consciousness, including our religious sensibilities. For Behnegar, Tocqueville offers no easy syntheses or satisfying resolutions. Democracy needs religion. Tocqueville traces the difference in health and vigor of the democratic movements in America and France to the fact that in one country the "spirit of liberty" and the "spirit of religion" march together, in the other they are opposed. But if democratic countries need religion primarily to set limits and fix opinions that popular sovereignty leaves in flux, they also need a religion of a particular kind. Tocqueville may call religion "the most precious inheritance of aristocratic times," yet it is an inheritance no longer encumbered by strict laws of entail and therefore more malleable to the will of the grantor. The Christianity he describes in America is neither that of aristocratic Europe nor even the Gospels, but one that accepts and even encourages the pursuit of material well being, so long as it be done by honest means. In order to rule themselves, democratic citizens need to feel themselves limited by some power outside themselves. But they will submit only to a power that has itself been modified by their deepest passions. Religion is both controller and controlled. Perhaps Tocqueville's greatest fear, anticipating Taylor, is that without such

relatively fixed dogmas, man in the coming democratic age risks the enslavement of his intellect directly to the force of public opinion and hence the extinction of independent thinking, precisely the concern that moved Machiavelli to turn to the people and away from religious authorities in the first place.

If politics always entails an implicit outline or assertion of a particular way of life, one would expect secularism as a political movement to contain or advance one as well. According to Benjamin Storey (Chapter 10) such an expectation is addressed if not fully answered by Montaigne. The difficulty, and possible moral debasement that so worries Taylor, of living a life without help from God was a major theme of the *Essays*. If Montaigne ultimately considers a life of moral autonomy to be within reach of more individuals than earlier models of self-rule (e.g., Socrates and Alexander), his insistence on the incompatibility of such a life with formal doctrines makes him doubtful of its potential for popularization and hence political appeal and success. Secularism would then be a way of life that tries in the name of skepticism to do without any particular way of life. Such doubts did not afflict Benjamin Franklin, author of that most powerful secularist (and anti-Biblical) creed mouthed today even by the lips of pastors: "God helps those who help themselves." Ralph Lerner's essay on his *Autobiography* (Chapter 20)—a genre that itself promises a kind of autonomy by overcoming the ancient tension between Homer and Achilles, form and matter, by joining both in one—shows how Franklin fashions his own account of his life in a manner to empower others to do the same with theirs. The result is markedly more democratic than Montaigne's. But, as Lerner demonstrates, this popularization is made possible only by the author's willingness to hide his own graceful artifice and adopt the concerns and even press the flesh of his more malleable readers. David Biale's essay on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (Chapter 28) sketches the difficulties and tensions created when a thoughtful "godless Jew" still experiences and wishes to live his life self-consciously as a Jew.

Economic Secularism

Political realism contains a kind of moral doctrine with its presupposition that the common good or interest ought to take precedence over sectarian or factional interests. Yet when politics no longer sets itself transcendent ends different in kind from individual satisfactions, it implies that collective selfishness is superior to individual selfishness, a claim that goes perhaps more than halfway towards endorsing selfishness simply. This line of argument opens the way for an unprecedented championing of commerce and new economic institutions for both material and moral benefit. Aristotle may finally admit the necessity of loaning at interest, but not without first deem-

ing the practice unnatural and potentially corrupting of the pursuit of human excellence. Few such scruples animate or restrain early Enlightenment thinkers, although Rafael Major (Chapter 3) makes the case that Shakespeare harbored doubts about the efficacy of commerce to secure domestic peace, much less international accord. Major reads the *Merchant of Venice* as dramatizing not just the ancient conflict between Jew and Christian as religious figures, but also a new kind of conflict among competing commercial interests, one that takes place in the context of a new kind of law now conceived as instrumental to private interests rather than as an authority to govern them. More typical are the views expressed by the Dutch intellectual and merchant Pieter De la Court. He considered trade an essential element of Dutch national character and, more generally, a necessary condition of human flourishing. Henry Clark (Chapter 6) shows that De la Court thought the financial independence of Roman priests encouraged fanaticism while amongst Protestants the discipline of the marketplace could be applied to tame radical elements of their clergy. His arguments for competition within a pluralistic religious sphere anticipate much of Adam Smith's more strictly economic analysis in the *Wealth of Nations*.

Paul Rahe (Chapter 11) offers a synoptic essay that focuses on Pierre Nicole as author of the *Essais morales* and as a something less than faithful co-editor of Pascal's *Pensées*. Beginning from the Christian doctrine of original sin, Nicole maintains that vanity or self-love (*amour propre*) can elicit conduct superficially indistinguishable (and therefore as politically effective) as genuine piety, indeed, more reliably so given the fallen nature of man. If original sin once called forth the need for grace, this line of interpretation when refined, or debased, most notably by Bayle, Locke, and Mandeville, served to legitimize the pursuit of self-interest more generally. Nasser Behnegar (Chapter 7) finds that Locke gives a deeper argument to justify man's self-concern and even self-assertion. Locke's famous chapter "Of Property" in the *Second Treatise* may open with the claim to be grounded on both Reason and Revelation, but Behnegar's attention to his use of Scripture suggests that Locke considered trust in God's providence and the goodness of creation as obstacles standing in the way to the proper development and even improvement of creation, an argument whose outlines Christopher Nadon finds anticipated by Paolo Sarpi in his writings on the Venetian Interdict (Chapter 2). For Locke, the love of God leads to bitter conflict; but the love of money, far from being "the root of all evil," is what makes it possible for a day laborer to feed, lodge, and clothe himself better than a king among the Indians. Should this passion find encouragement by a "wise and godlike" prince, say, through the establishment of secure property rights, Locke promises he will quickly prove "too hard for his neighbors," thus showing the kind of political success that can follow from an altered understanding of the divinity.

No other Enlightenment thinker engaged in such sustained reflection on the nature and political potential of commerce than Montesquieu. Andrea Radasanu's treatment of Books 24 and 25 of the *Spirit of the Laws* (Chapter 14) suggests that unlike a Bacon or Locke who encouraged man's industriousness in order to mitigate natural scarcity for the relief of man's estate, Montesquieu valued commerce most of all for its tendency to soften harsh mores and the spirit of religious fanaticism that had been exacerbated, if not created, by despotic political systems. Commerce, not theology, holds the key to salvation, or at least peace and individual security, concerns which Montesquieu thought might well supplant religion entirely. Religious indifference is perhaps man's natural condition, recoverable through the artifice of economic institutions. Kent Wright (Chapter 13) shows how Voltaire sought to encourage and exploit the political potential of Protestantism to temper French absolutism under the less threatening cover of introducing English commercial reforms. Brian Glenn (Chapter 17) reminds us how far we may have traveled down the paths sketched by Montesquieu and Voltaire by examining the intellectual and theological barriers that not so long ago constrained the practice of selling life insurance. The means by which an industry that today promises "to take the scary out of life" established itself in the face of religious traditions that held fear of the Lord to be the beginning of wisdom, suggests that economics, and not simply modern science, played an important role in transforming popular conceptions of nature from one subject to the will of an omnipotent God into a force governed by general and immutable laws.

Religious Secularism

Political institutions would not have been able to exercise control over religion to the extent that they have had not religion itself undergone significant transformations. Indeed, secularization (*saeculariatio*) is a term of Christian origin referring to the dispensation occasionally given a member of a religious order under solemn vows to return to "the world" or *saeculum*. In this original usage, the religious did not necessarily become less religious by accepting it. And as a historical question, it is beyond doubt that aspects of secularization have often been initiated and motivated by religious concerns and passions, as, for example, in the role played by Baptists in the establishment of the separation of church and state in the United States. But for the limited purposes of this volume, I mean by "religious secularism" the conscious effort to reform the practice and self-understanding of religion so as to make it more amenable to political or other ends that are not themselves grounded, nor believed to be grounded, on religious presuppositions. Robert Faulkner (Chapter 5) claims Bacon's *New Atlantis* contains something not found in his other works: an outline of the political promise of experimental