WEEK 3

Secularisms and Other Challenges

Definition(s) of “secularism”

Secularism has to do with law and politics and society-wide value systems. The measure of a society’s secularism is not how religious some of its citizens are, but rather to what extent secular values can be said to underpin the functioning of its political, economic and social systems.

Three basic criteria for secularism:
1. the separation of church and state;
2. the freedom of religion; and
3. the rejection of religion as the organising principle of society.

Secularism is often associated with modernity, but is actually an ancient idea, espoused e.g. by Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius. More recent secularist thinkers are: Baruch Spinoza, Voltaire, Bertrand Russell – and George Holyoake, who coined the term in 1851.

Holyoake’s secularism: not an argument against Christianity, but one independent of it (in other words, his was a soft secularism: see below).

Hard and soft secularism

Soft secularism: skepticism against religion, but also tolerance of religious diversity (i.e. a focus on criteria 1 and 2 above).

Hard secularism: maintains the illegitimacy of religion in every facet of life (i.e. a focus on criterion 3 above).

Many Western (and other) societies are adopting a hard secularism, which is characterised by a blatant intolerance towards religion, a certain puritan-mindedness and philistinism. This attitude is being underpinned by the twin pillars of Neo-liberalism and Fundamentalist (Late-stage) Capitalism.

Michael J. Sandel: “Our reluctance to engage in moral and spiritual argument, together with our embrace of markets, has exacted a heavy price: it has drained public discourse of moral and civic energy, and
contributed to the technocratic, managerial politics that afflicts many societies today.”

A non-secular societal order would be based on:
1. a set of religious or spiritual values; and
2. a religious or spiritual support system to uphold those values.

The origin and rise of religions can to a large extent be attributed to a need to address value-based concerns regarding aspects of reality, namely:
1. an inner, interior reality – in which the individual suffers from angst, most fundamentally death angst;
2. an exterior, interpersonal reality – in which the individual must learn to living peaceably and constructively with others; and
3. a wider cosmic reality – in which the individual must seek a mode of living with the mysteries of Life and the Universe.

The movement to societal secularism tends to bring with it a removal both of the values and the support system for those values. Or it replaces them with secular versions, which, as Terry Eagleton notes, rarely hit the mark.

**A. How secular society addresses 1. death angst.**

Our fear of death remains, and with it our need for consolation.

Secular society is impatient and uncomfortable with neediness, making our longing for comfort seem regressive. It is pathologised and medicalised, interpreted as personal weakness or failure. The field of psychiatric medicine and the wider mental health industry – including life coaches and therapists – leads us to attempt to take at least symbolic responsibility for situations that are not of our making (and are far beyond our ability as individuals to solve). The idea that we are, each of us individually, responsible for the troubles we face, and consequently for solving them, is fuelling the therapy and self-help industries.

One of the Western world’s dominant traits is its irascible (fake?) optimism, its devotion to a narrative of improvement, to “Progress,” and a messianic faith in technology, science and commerce. While individuals feel themselves at the end of the world, the machine of society insists on the official mantra of endless Progress. Secular society invites us to think of the present moment as the summit of all things (so far) and the achievements of our fellow humans as the measure of all things, a grandiosity which further exacerbates our sense of isolation and anxiety.

Something else that secularism has brought with it is the almost exclusive life goal for the individual of
pecuniary acquisition. But this is unsatisfactory goal because 1. many won’t be able, for a number of reasons, to acquire the necessary amount of money for this approach to function even as a temporary palliative; and b. even those who do will find that it doesn’t fulfill our need for meaning.

B. How secular society deals with the life of the community:
In order to live anything that remotely resembles a satisfactory life, we need to form genuine connections to other people, based on a sense of commonality. But much of what is meant by “connection” has been lost.

There is a correlation between a failure to connect with the world (and the things and people in it) and the propensity to treat the world (and the things and people in it) as an end rather than as a means. When this begins to happen, it is because a certain species of corruption has set in, namely the failure to recognise the difference between that which is valuable as a means to something else (such as money) and that which is valuable as an end in itself, such as kindness or justice. Scruton relates it to the Fall:

The tree of knowledge that caused the fall of man gave us the knowledge of ourselves as objects—we fell from the realm of subjectivity into the world of things. We learned to look on each other as objects...

The dissolution of vows into contracts is one example of how our bonds have been eroded. A contract is a secular, legal affair where two parties agree to a set formulation, which in case of a change of heart becomes a battleground for interpretation and a search for loopholes. A vow on the other hand is a transcendent obligation that at best results in a sacred attachment (to person or undertaking).

There is a lack of proper guidance and support with regard both to our inner struggles, and with regard to our struggles to interact appropriately with one another. While religions have provided us with largely convincing exemplars, or role models, secular society isn’t doing as good a job at helping us connect with our most dignified possibilities. McGilchrist: “When we decide not to worship divinity, we do not stop worshipping: we merely find something else less worthy to worship.”

C. Secular society’s attempt to help us understand the mysteries of life and the world:

Scientific methods help us answer questions about life and the cosmos, such as what (is it), where (is it), when (is it), and to some extent even how (is it). But it cannot answer the question why (is it), because this questions lies outside the scope of the sciences (except in a very strictly limited causative sense). Scientific enquiry is preoccupied with secondary and tertiary causes, but does not engage with first causes. There is no formula that can explain Meaning. Unfortunately for us, it is precisely the question “why” that most of us find the most compelling.
As a result of the shift in emphasis from religious questing to scientific ditto is that we have, as a collective, stopped engaging with a vast range of epistemological, ontological and teleological concerns. Given our species’ particular brand of intellect, capable of so much more than practical problem-solving exercises, many say that it is vitally important to the exercise of our humanity to entertain the types of questions raised within these branches of philosophical or theological thought and that if we cease to practice playing epistemological games we are risking part of our brains and part of our humanity. The very fact that definitive answers to the types of questions raised in these realms are forever denied us makes them even more important to engage with. The ability to live with and – indeed – *thrive* with mystery is what Keats called “negative capability”: the true artist (or true human) has to feel “*capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*”

There have been innumerable displaced substitutes for religion tried out with varying degrees of success over the past 200 years or so – culture, art, science, medicine, technology – and many attendant secular institutions, but none of them individually – nor even all of them together – have succeeded in satisfactorily addressing or alleviating those of life’s ills which we all invariably encounter, sooner or later.

How secularism manifests itself in city planning & architecture.

New towns produced by technicist urbanization projects have often been criticised for failing to offer “places for living”, equivalent to those produced by an older, slower history. Some of the traits of new towns and contemporary architecture are:

1. Homogeneity with regard to form and function.
2. The scale (large) and shape (uniform) of the buildings.
3. They are un-storied. Great buildings connect, not only to landscape, but to history and to myth.
4. They lack “age value.” (*Genius loci* takes time to form.)
5. There is no discernible political philosophy premising the building. Economic and bureaucratic systems and processes are not tantamount to *value*-based systems of thought.
6. The relative height, size and placement of buildings lacks perceptible meaning.
7. Streets have become thoroughfares.
8. Anthropological space (a space in which inscriptions of the social bond or collective history can be seen) has become non-space (a place of circulation and consumption). Anthropological space binds us socially, organically, through complicities of language and culture and history; non-space binds us contractually as “space consumers.” Non-space communicates with us (unilaterally) through text, its ubiquitous “instructions for use.”
9. People are not treated as citizens, fully formed individuals in these non-spaces, but perceived as fragmented identities, such as client, customer, passenger, driver, cyclist, pedestrian, etc.
10. The cities act as hubs, focused on the transport of people, goods and information.

11. There is an external drive rather than an internal one. The secular city looks outward, upward, onward.

12. The secular city has no space for history (other than as a commodity – more on that in lecture 5). There is a break with the idea of a culture localised in time and space. Delocalisation – homogenization of culture.

13. Cultural distinction and the vernacular is being lost.

14. Natural materials (stone, wood) that age well and carry a history of their own prior to being used as building material, are being replaced by industrially manufactured materials such as concrete, stainless steel and sheet glass that do not age well, must be frequently replaced, and encourage the narrative of obsolescence of all things around us. It makes impossible any sense of permanence; everything is – and looks – forever temporary.

15. Traditional buildings have an orientation, whereas contemporary buildings often have no orientation, no privileged approach; the buildings are in a sense faceless.

16. The walls of much contemporary architecture has an “autistic” (McGilchrist) flatness. Scruton “these unarticulated verticals and blank screens of wall…"

17. There is a lack of a vertical order, in spite of the verticality of many buildings. Irrespective of how high they rise, they are still merely a material elongation or duplication of a ground plan.

18. The architecture is not figured to nature, in terms of scale, shape, materials, or colours, but rather act as intrusions into nature.

19. There is a utilitarian (and increasingly commercialized) approach to architecture.

What is the reason for modern/secular architecture looking the way it does?

➢ Globalization, i.e. the extension over the whole planet of the so-called free market and the technocratic, bureaucratic, commercio-cratie networks of communication and information that make it possible, with its promotion of system over history and of the global over the local.