Trying to Square the Secular-Sacred Circular: Reading Core Texts Historically

Neil G. Robertson

University of King’s College

There is, of course, an assumption at work in the very terms of our conference’s theme: “The Intersection of Religious and Secular Cores in Liberal Arts Education". Namely, that we can reasonably securely distinguish the secular and the religious, so that we can then talk about an “intersection”. Undoubtedly the need to distinguish these spheres is felt in all modern western democracies, as they come to terms with a very wide array of cultures and religions, each needing to be respected and each recognizing a common ground for shared civil life as a powerful necessity. The great liberal theorist, John Rawls, speaks of this common ground as an “overlapping consensus”. If it is to be overlapping then it must be a common ground for atheist and religious alike: a standpoint that is resolutely this-worldy, that remains agnostic about metaphysical or religious claims of ultimate grounds. So we can speak of this as secular.

Of course, for Americans this articulation of the secular was already in place prior to the deep diversity that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries ushered in. Thomas Jefferson, writing in the context of the first amendment, was able to speak of a wall of separation between church and state: a wall that in the twentieth-century became powerfully defined through a set of important Supreme Court judgements. So for many of us in North America – and here Canada, while importantly different from the US has developed parallel principles – it is natural to take as given the distinction of the secular on one side, the sacred or religious on the other: the one constituting the work of public life and public institutions, including, presumably public universities, the other a matter for private life and private associations, perhaps including some private universities.

So, as this conference has already made clear we are faced with a dilemma: many of the texts in core text programmes are “religious” in nature, indeed some actively advocate for a particular religion, above all Christianity. How can we teach these in public, secular institutions without violating the fundamental distinction necessary to the proper functioning of our societies? How can we teach these texts without violating the distinction between what is public and what should remain private, and for our students may be deeply personal?

There are no easy answers here and obviously mindfulness to the problem and its challenges is a good practical starting point. But I want to go back to the original assumption: the separation or distinction between the secular and the sacred. My argument is going to be that it is crucial to distinguish two ways of approaching this distinction: as given, as simply describing a basic categorical distinction between two natural kinds, or as a result, as a distinction that arises from a history and indeed a particular history: that of Western Europe.

Let me begin by problematizing the distinction by going back to the figure, who in a way, at least intellectually, actually first establishes this distinction. Here I am thinking of Descartes. Descartes is, of course, most famously the father of modern philosophy. But Further, I want to point out that he is also (and they are connected as we shall see) the father of explicitly secular science. Descartes is, of course aware that the content of something approaching a secular science had been in the works for decades, perhaps especially in the thought of Galileo. But it is with Descartes that three things are articulated that establish a fully independent and complete secular science: 1) the world, *res* *extensa*, is to be explained purely through material causes that belong entirely to that world ; 2) those causes must be mechanical, or entirely transparent to human understanding, so eradicating all mysterious causes (whether metaphysical, magical or religious) and 3) this causality removes forever the old hierarchical distinctions of heaven and earth: all the world and everything in it is one thing, one substance with a universal causality. So the world is for the first time being articulated in entirely this worldly, secular and rational terms.

But Descartes argues in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* that the ground and basis for such a fully secular science is only attainable from the standpoint of a *res cogitans* that has engaged in a purgation of all its beliefs and opinions that do not rest in the *cogito/sum*. Beyond this, Decartes argues that the *cogito* can have no knowledge of the "world" - the secular *res extensa -* except as based on the knowledge of an infinite and perfect God. So we can only know the world, that is, rely on a science of clear and distinct ideas, insofar as our knowledge is based on the being of God.

This disturbing connection of the secular and the sacred becomes even more interesting when we think through what Descartes has to say about the *cogito* that can have this secular knowledge: it in fact can only be a *cogito* through a doubt generated by that very knowledge of God. Descartes tells us that more fundamental and clearer than the *cogito/sum,* the idea of myself, is the idea of God. For Descartes, as he makes clear in Meditation 3, I only know myself through a prior knowledge of God. Now, it is vital that this knowledge of God is not a "religious" knowledge based upon or dependent upon "belief": but that makes it all the more curious. What Descartes is pointing to as the ground of the secular knowledge of the world is a divine-human relation. This relation is then neither secular nor sacred exactly. What gives the human the capacity to know the world is the inner unity of God and the human in the *cogito*. Here can be found a secular rational science of nature. In grounding this knowledge on the certainty of the self, Descartes is setting aside the route of Platonic assent from opinion that rises by steps to a more adequate knowing. Rather the whole demand if Cartesian certainty was to attain directly a complete or divine knowledge of the world in our fully self-complete human knowing.

So where are we? Is Descartes on the secular or the sacred side of our divide? Of course, the answer is both and neither: there is no simply given secular and sacred divide, rather the division is a result and, at least in its proximate causes, of a particular history: that of the Western European tradition.

What I am suggesting then is that there is a way of approaching core texts that specifically raises the question of how they are not simply subject to the assumed distinction of secular and sacred, but actually are part of the very history that brings this division into being. In short, to address this issue in a core text context is to read those works not as ahistorical or as simply about certain perennial or eternal questions, but to read them as in some manner, if not constituting, as articulating a history. This is to read these texts as taking up standpoints that are not fixed in the nature of things but as precisely arising from earlier moments in a development. In essence, this is the approach detailed in the Foundation Year Programme at the University of King's College. In this we are not reducing texts to their historical context or suggesting this history is simply linear or progressive. Indeed these questions are very much matters of debate and disagreement, as different views about the ancients, the medieval, the moderns and the post-moderns come into play with one another. However, what is being suggested is that certain questions, indeed certain phenomena, only become actual on the basis or in relation to other moments. In particular, the distinction between the sacred and the secular is just one of these.

Here I want to invoke the argument that has been put forward by a fellow Canadian, Charles Taylor. Taylor in his massive and over-long book from 2007, *A Secular Age*, argues that the secular is not a certain natural and inevitable human condition that arises as modern science and modern social forms dissolve the mythology of more benighted ages.Nor does he see modernity itself as a terrible mistake, a radical assertion of human will, that will destroy itself in a collapse into nihilism. Taylor precisely charts a course between what he elsewhere refers to as "knockers" and "boosters", arguing that secularity is the result of a history: it is an accomplishment, an unintended consequence, but a consequence. Taylor describes accounts of modernity that see it as a kind of natural condition attendant upon modern science and society, subtraction theories. They fail to grasp the historical nature of modern secularity. Equally, Taylor does not subscribe to the claim that modernity is simply the result of one or another form of intellectual deviation; for Taylor, while modernity produces undeniable loss, there are other significant and irrefutable gains, gains constitutive of a irremovable historical development and reality.

For Taylor the history that is basic to the possibility of modern secularity, of the secular as a realm experienced as self- complete or immanent, is the specific history not just of Western Europe, but more accurately of Latin Christianity. For Taylor secularity is not the outcome of forces of irreligion and naturalism, but just the opposite, it is the result of many things, but most deeply and determinatively of specifically religious forces and especially of what he calls the Reform Master Narrative". This is to say that Taylor sees secularity as the result of something distinctive in the tradition of Latin Christianity. This difference he articulates by drawing on the observation made by Karl Jasper's that there was in many cultures around the world a crucial contemporaneous shift: the Axial Age. The nature of this shift was to develop forms of religion that didn't simply posit the purpose of religion as some form of this-world flourishing. Rather, religion had some higher, hyper-good beyond this world flourishing, as its end. This shift happened somewhere around 800-600 BCE: its result was the appearance of world religions engaged in a higher spirituality. What characterized the structure of these religions was a crucial distinction that was seem as essentially fixed, between those who were fully dedicated to living out this new hyper-religion with full integrity and the vast majority who participated in the higher religion in a more remote or secondary way. This lead to a basic sense of spiritual hierarchy, however inflected by a sense of complementarity, between the levels. What distinguished Latin Christianity is that it was continuously unhappy with this hierarchical arrangement: it was crucially imbued with a drive to reform the hierarchical arrangement relative to a demand that the higher requirements of Christianity be realized by all. So there is a terrific tension in Latin Christianity to resolve the hierarchical structure. For Taylor this development has a centuries' long history that comes to bring about a set of practices and forms of thought that result in a disenchanted secular world. So the really significant thought here is that secularity is not the result of a subtraction of the religious, but of its most complete realization.

So the secular, in a crucial sense, is inherently related to and belongs to the secular and visa versa. The secular and the sacred form one larger spiritual totality, whatever oppositions,and distinctions are also present. It is important to see here that Taylor is not saying, as do others who provide a theological derivation for modernity and secularity, that modern secularity is illegitimate or that it can or should be retracted. Nor is he requiring that the distinction of secular and sacred be dissolved: he is pointing to a more complex view of the situation that requires one to attain to a standpoint that can affirm both moments.

If we give Charles Taylor's argument some credence, however one may want to modify or amend it, then when we are teaching religious texts, at least Latin Christian texts, with a sense not only of their intrinsic meaning, but also as relative to this historical development of the secular that I want to suggest they are a part of. Equally when we are teaching secular texts, they are texts whose stance is inherently connected to the religious. While recognizing and affirming the divide of secular and sacred, these texts from the western humanities tradition can be taught to show they are always involved in the other side. As a footnote, I would want to widen the religious and historical context we are considering to draw in pagan, Jewish, Islamic and other religious sources and aspects of this development of secularity: for the sake of clarity, I am presenting a bit of a straw person here.

Let me give you an example that points to one of the ways I would like to modify, or at least develop Taylor's account. Taylor in his large and meandering book nowhere, that I could find, actually gives us an account of why or from where this master reform narrative derives. In fact, he leaves the matter of it's origin mysterious. It is already picking up steam in the early thirteenth-century, but this reforming proclivity, evidently has deeper roots. And there are undoubtedly complex questions here, but Taylor seems not to note the most obvious implication of his observation that this Reform Master Narrative is peculiar to the Latin Christian West: namely to observe what actually, at least theologically distinguishes Latin Christianity from other forms and above all the Eastern Orthodox, namely the Filioque clause ( a point already recognized by a number of scholars, perhaps most famously by Phillip Sherrard). Another more concrete way of pointing to this is to speak of the distinctiveness and profound influence of Augustinian Trinitarianism. In terms of Taylor's account, this is a deep, not proximate cause or aspect, but it can both help to clarify the ground of the more contingent causes and circumstances that he cites as bringing about the Reform Master Narrative.

So what do I mean here and how does it affect core text teaching? When teaching Augustine's *Confessions*, a central core text work, surely there is no more significant moment then his actual conversion. But this conversion takes place within and against a context: namely his earlier conversion to a form of Neoplatonic spirituality and a somewhat Arianizing account of Christianity outlined however sketchily in Book 7. When I am teaching this moment to students in the Foundation Year Programme, what I want to point to is an absolutely vital shift from a principle of unity: the Neoplatonic where division is subsequent to, not included within unity, within the One, to what I describe as a principle of integrity: namely an Augustinian Trinitarian account. In this Trinitarian account, one that for Augustine properly grasps the incarnation, division is held within unity.

I am sure you all know those famous words at the end of Book 7, where -gusting brings out the limit and frustration of his Neoplatonic stance: "It is one thing to survey our peaceful homeland from a wooded height but fail to find the way there, and make vain attempts to travel through impassable terrain, while fugitive deserters marshalled by the lion and the dragon obstruct and lurk in ambush, and quite another to walk steadily in the way that leads there along the well-built road opened up by the heavenly emperor, where no deserters from the celestial army dare commit robbery, for they avoid that way like torment." To resolve this divide experienced in Neo-Platonism, Augustine converts and in doing so the understanding of his principle, of God, is transformed from the Neo-platonic One to a Trinitarian account, that I would argue is going to lie at the very heart of Latin Christendom, informing not only the basic conception of theology, but also, because we are *imago dei*, human psychology, moral and political life, indeed the whole of Western European history. But even in *The Confessions*, indeed in the very being of *The Confessions*, Augustine is showing us something of the implications of this standpoint. He does this in Book 9, in the figure of Monica: above all in their crucially shared vision of Ostia, when philosopher and ordinary woman come to have, not the isolated vision of the alone with the alone, but a shared one from which there is no collapse in the return to ordinary life and the body. Augustine does this in Book 10, in terms of his own psychology and the new stability he has attained in Christ. He does this in the last three Books in the theological implications for our understanding of time, creation and the church in history. In all of this, he is demonstrating that in this new Trinitarian account, the contingent, historical, divided does not fall outside the principle, as it does it the unifying logic of Neoplatonism, but is grounded and determined by God as one and three. In this stance is a built-in demand to make actual that Trinitarian integrity in historical life: at least or at first, of the individual Christian, but, I want to suggest as Europe comes to try to build a culture not standing over against a pagan, and one could say truly secular ( of the saeculum) culture, but a new order based upon the principle of Augustinian willed stability. It is within this and from out of this Latin Christian stance that modern secularity will be born, but I want to suggest that we can show our students that, if not the seeds, at least some of the necessary conditions for this secularity are already here in this most religious of texts.

So I want to suggest that many of the issues that beset us when we take as given and as rigid the secular/sacred divide, become in fact opportunities for finding in our texts articulations of a rich and multi-sided history. What I am not suggesting is that these texts can or should be reduced to this history of the secular and the sacred, but only that they also cannot or should not be read apart from it and indeed in many cases something of these questions is already at work within them.