

Identify 3 key moments in the emergence of an independent secular system

Throughout the course of human history people have formulated various responses to the great questions of life that originated from their observance of the universe. Up until the emergence of the Ancient Greek philosophers in the 5th and 6th Century BCE all of these responses were mythically or religiously influenced. In the 5th Century a group of travelling teachers called the Sophists turned away from the common mythological view that was used to answer these complex questions about life and instead attempted to discover new answers that weren't influenced by myths. Following in their path Socrates, Plato and Aristotle did the same and so the basis of Western philosophy was formed. As centuries went on people moved further and further away from their ancestors understanding of the world but still asked some of the same questions such as how did the world begin? Eventually non-religious responses began to emerge such as that of secularism.

Secularism is the opposite of religious and can be defined as a belief system that rejects religion and is based solely on human faculties such as logic, reason or moral intuition. Other such non-religious world views are atheism, reductionism and humanism. Secularisation, the process by which a culture defines itself in a 'this worldly' context led to the development of the world view of secularism. This world view places the person at the centre of everything and values the human ability to reason above all else.

The Renaissance meaning 'to be reborn' refers to a cultural movement in the 15th and 16th Centuries. It began in Italy and spread throughout the rest of Europe. This period is a key moment as the origins of secularism can be traced to this time. The spirit of rebirth during the Renaissance influenced science, painting and architecture. The growth of scientific reasoning and skills can be linked to the emergence of secular humanism in the Renaissance. Humanism

is a philosophy which states there is nothing higher than or other than human existence. The fundamental position of this belief is that people are rational beings. Therefore secularism and humanism go hand in hand as there is the belief that no God exists and therefore the focus is on confidence in humanity's ability. During the 'rebirth' there was a renewed confidence in the intellectual abilities of a person and their capacity to decide on what's right or wrong. Today we can see this emphasis on the individual throughout our society for example the world's largest cosmetic company L'Oréal's advertising slogan is "Because you're worth it". This slogan emphasises that you deserve what you wish because you are human and deserve it.

Another key moment in the development of an independent secular system is the Enlightenment. This was a cultural movement of intellectuals beginning in late 17th Century Europe. Like the Renaissance it was a time when more philosophers began to adopt a non-religious world view. The motto of this period could be summed up as "have the courage to know". Philosophers throughout England, Ireland, France and Germany responded to the social and political situation, i.e. widespread revolutions, in Europe at the time by breaking free from the typical blind faith people had in the Church and other authorities. This post-reformation era was aware of the Church's abuse of power such as nepotism and rejected to follow the corrupted authorities. This era saw the founding of the 'coffee-house' as a place where people could meet and discuss their various opinions on different subjects. A vital aspect of this period was the breaking down of class barriers which contributed to the emergence of secularism as equality amongst people is an important secularist value. Also from this period the infamous motto of the French Revolution was coined "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity". The idea of Human Rights also emerged during this period. Thomas Paine wrote a document during this era called The Rights of Man which influenced the US Constitution and much of Europe. The first right of a total of 17 is that 'men are born and remain free and remain free and equal in rights'. This is also very similar to the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states 'all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'. We see the continuation of humanist values during the Enlightenment into the modern world through this emphasis of human life seen in the UN's declaration that reflects Thomas Paine's

document. This era combined the idea of 'reason' and 'liberty' and further encouraged people to adopt a non-religious world view by eliminating the fear of questioning God that had previously existed.

Another key moment in the emergence of secularism and its value system happened in the 20th Century when the philosophy of Existentialism emerged. The beginning of the century saw the most catastrophic war in history take place, World War One. Millions died and many were severely injured. One impact of this event was that it disillusioned many people. Instead of looking to the church for meaning, people instead embarked on the journey to discover meaning alone as they believed the formation of the human identity was of the utmost importance. Previously society and the Church heavily influenced an individual's sense of identity, Existentialists strongly emphasised human autonomy and free will thus affecting the people's values as they moved away from religious based values to self-made ones based upon instinct. Jean Paul Sartre was a prominent figure in existentialism who claimed 'man is condemned to be free'. He believed that human life cannot be given any meaning from the 'outside'. He stated that all anyone had was the fact of their existence. This world view is characterised by the complete rejection of all other possible meanings that have been suggested. By emphasising the individual and distrusting any meaning offered by alternate or divine sources it has contributed to modern secular humanism. This impact can be noticed by observing the values of contemporary Western societies as the belief in God or Gods has declined.

The Renaissance, The Enlightenment and Existentialism saw the emergence of a non-religious world view that still has an impact on the modern world. One of the world's superpowers The USA has a secular constitution and France is also recognised as a secularist state. Each era shares the idea that there is nothing higher than human existence. Century after century this belief evolved and still has its place in the world today. Secularism has made such a strong impact that countries such as France where the governance of the country is strictly secular. The USA is also considered secular and this is reflected in its education system as the theory

of evolution is strictly banned from being taught in public schools. Secularist thought also impacted the Feminist movement of the 20th Century.