

## Note

### COINED BY GEORGE J. HOLYOAKE IN 1851? ANTEDATING THE OED ENTRY FOR ‘SECULARISM’

The earliest occurrence of the word ‘secularism, n.’, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter ‘OED’), dates back to 1851, and the individual credited for first using it is the Victorian freethinker, co-operator, author, and newspaper editor George J. Holyoake (1817–1906).<sup>1</sup> That Holyoake coined the term ‘secularism’ in 1851 in the pages of the *Reasoner*, the freethinking periodical which he edited, is taken as an established fact in scholarship, including general studies on secularism and unbelief,<sup>2</sup> as well as more focused examinations of nineteenth-century British

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘secularism, n.’, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1203390679> (accessed 5 Nov. 2025). *Merriam-Webster* concurs: ‘secularism, noun’, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secularism> (accessed 5 Nov. 2025). In 1851 Holyoake also used for the first time the term ‘secularist’, although he certainly did not coin it: Sophia Dobson Collet, *George Jacob Holyoake and Modern Atheism: A Biographical and Critical Essay* (London, 1855), 21. Holyoake distanced himself from the label ‘atheist’, and instead adopted the term ‘secularist’ which he defined as “[o]ne who has no theory concerning a future world, but has a code of ethics concerning the present one”: Frederick Wonham, ‘Mr. Holyoake’s Lecture on the Martineau and Atkinson Letters’, *Reasoner*, X/32 (1851), 478.

<sup>2</sup> See T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA, 2003), 23, n. 6; I.T. Benson, ‘Considering Secularism’, in *Recognizing Religion in a Secular Society: Essays in Pluralism, Religion and Public Policy*, ed. D. Farrow (Montreal, 2004), 85; P. Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 294; P. Cliteur, *The Secular Outlook: In Defense of Moral and Political Secularism* (Chichester, 2010), 4, 64; A. Wakefield, ‘The Theological Roots of Secular Modernism’, in *Enlightenment and Secularism: Essays on the Mobilization of Reason*, ed. C. Nadon (Lanham, MD, 2013), 105; D. Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx* (New York, NY, 2015), 195; A. Copson, *Secularism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2019), 5; M. Horii, ‘Religion’ and ‘Secular’ Categories in Sociology: Decolonizing the Modern Myth (Cham, 2021), 74. Graeme Smith does not engage with the question of the coinage of the term in his very brief discussion of Holyoake: *A Short History of Secularism* (London, 2007), 172–3. Charles Taylor and Jocelyn Maclure have ignored Holyoake in their works: C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA, and London, 2007); and C. Taylor and J. Maclure, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, trans. J. M. Todd (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

freethought.<sup>3</sup> Recently, Jacques Berlinerblau has questioned this, stating that ‘[a]lthough the dating is a bit in doubt it would appear that Holyoake first made use of the term *Secularism* in 1851’, while also suggesting that Holyoake was not the first anglophone writer to attach ‘the fashionable -ism suffix to the ancient stem, “secular”’.<sup>4</sup> In their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (2017), Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook have rightly noted that Holyoake ‘brought “secularism” into wide usage in 1851’ and ‘connected it to an affirmative ethical and civic agenda’, but the term ‘had appeared in print before

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, O. Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (repr., Cambridge, 2000), 91; E. Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866-1915* (Manchester, 1980), xi; E. Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement 1791-1866* (Manchester, 1974), 155-6; T. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 2008), 91; M. Rectenwald, ‘Secularism and the Cultures of Nineteenth-Century Scientific Naturalism’, *British Journal for the History of Science*, xlvii (June 2013), 232–3; M. Rectenwald, ‘Mid-Nineteenth-Century British Secularism and its Contemporary Post-Secular Implications’, in *Global Secularisms in a Post-Secular Age*, ed. M. Rectenwald, R. Almeida and G. Levine (Boston, MA, 2015), 43–44; M. Rectenwald, *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism: Science, Religion and Literature* (London, 2016), 72, 74; P. J. Corbeil, *Empire and Progress in the Victorian Secularist Movement: Imagining a Secular World* (Cham, 2022), 1–2; A. Stone, *Women Philosophers in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2023), 165, 187. See also, E. Royle, ‘Holyoake, George Jacob (1817–1906), freethinker and co-operator’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sept. 2004, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-33964> (accessed 5 Nov. 2025); J. McCabe, *Life and Letters of George Jacob Holyoake, Vol. 1* (London, 1908), 208; R. Argyle, *Inventing Secularism: The Radical Life of George Jacob Holyoake* (Jefferson, NC, 2021), xi; and R. Kaczynski, *Friendship in Doubt: Aleister Crowley, J.F.C. Fuller, Victor B. Neuburg, and British Agnosticism* (New York, NY, 2024), 3, n. 6. Laura Schwarz seems to be implying it in stating that ‘[a]s editor of *The Movement* and then *The Reasoner*, Holyoake began to develop his idea of ‘Secularism’, which sought to abandon the old adversarial and negative connotations of the term “infidel” and to argue instead for Secularism as a positive agenda and alternative value system, independent of religion’: *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women’s Emancipation, England 1830-1914* (Manchester, 2013), 8. Callum G. Brown makes no reference to Holyoake at all, or to the supposed coinage of the term ‘secularism’ by him, in *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, 2nd edn (London and New York, NY, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> J. Berlinerblau, *Secularism: The Basics* (London, 2021), [88], 92. See also, J. Berlinerblau, ‘Political Secularism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, ed. P. Zuckerman and J.R. Shook (New York, NY, 2017), 85 and n. 1.

then'. 'Those earlier appearances of "secularism"', they add, 'retained the term's indication of a contrast with churchly or spiritual matters, or even a degradation to worldly and materialistic ways.'<sup>5</sup> Zuckerman and Shook cite two such examples: first, Noel Thomas Ellison's 1829 book, *Protestant Errors and Roman Catholic Truths*, which asked the question of 'whether the Church of England is vulnerable to "the charge of secularism and worldly-mindedness"'; and second, an article in the Tory *Quarterly Review* published in December 1842, attacking '[Popery's] "pretensions to exclusive spirituality, and its gross and materializing secularism"'.<sup>6</sup> Building on Zuckerman and Shook, in this note I provide further hitherto unknown or overlooked instances of the use of the word 'secularism' prior to 1851. In doing so, I am making a case for the need of the *OED* to correct its entry for 'secularism' by antedating it. Before doing this, I would first like to make an intervention in regard to Zuckerman's and Shook's second example. In citing the *Quarterly Review* article ('Todd on Antichrist'), they fail to identify its anonymous author. Using the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, we can, with some confidence, trace its authorship to the English clergyman William Sewell, who famously threw into the fire a copy of J.A. Froude's *Nemesis of Faith* (1849) at Exeter College, Oxford, where he was a tutor and fellow.<sup>7</sup> Sewell had thus employed the term 'secularism' in the British periodical press almost a decade prior to Holyoake's purported coinage of it.

Partly responsible for the claim that the term 'secularism' originated with Holyoake are some highly vocal Victorian agnostics, such as the eminent woman of letters Harriet Martineau, who enthusiastically adopted and propagated it, as well as

the term 'secularist'.<sup>8</sup> Sharing somewhat this responsibility are historical works, encyclopaedias, and dictionaries published in the second half of the nineteenth century, which pointed to Holyoake as the individual responsible for naming and propagating a system of ethics under the term 'Secularism'.<sup>9</sup> But Holyoake himself bears the largest share of the responsibility: for one, his publications solidified in public consciousness the association of his name with this term;<sup>10</sup> for another, he claimed time and again that he was its originator. At the beginning of the Chapter 'Origin of Secularism' in his autobiographical *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life*, for example, Holyoake announced the following: 'As my name has been associated with Secularism for forty years, and as I have no intention of disconnecting myself from it, nor evading any responsibility for having originated it, I give some account of it before ending the present autobiographical series.'<sup>11</sup> In tracing the 'rise and development' of his views in *The Origin and Nature of Secularism* (1896),

<sup>8</sup> In an 1855 letter to the editor of the New York *Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison, Martineau sought to defend Holyoake against certain charges brought against him (one of which was that he was trying to get rid of the word 'atheism' and replace it with the word 'secularism'). In her letter she stated that: 'The adoption of the term Secularism is justified by its including a large number of persons who are not Atheists, and uniting them for action which has Secularism for its object, and not Atheism. On this ground, and because by the adoption of a new term a vast amount of impediment from prejudice is got rid of, the use of the name Secularism is found advantageous; but it in no way interferes with Mr. Holyoake's profession of his own unaltered views on the subject of a First Cause': George J. Holyoake, *Bygones Worth Remembering, Vol. I* (London, 1905), 184–5. Three years earlier, Martineau wrote to the Revd Charles Kingsley, proudly calling herself a 'secularist': 'The end is, after a steady development of 30 years, – not atheism in its true sense (the denial of a First Cause, wh[ic]h I take to be a mere confusion of words) but atheism in the vulgar sense, – of a denial of the popular theology. I am, in fact, (if one must take a name) a secularist. I believe in a first Cause because the human mind is so constituted as to be unable (whatever J. Mill may say) to conceive of any thing existing apart from & proceeding otherwise than by causation': Harriet Martineau, *The Collected Letters of Harriet Martineau, Vol. 3*, ed. D.A. Logan (London, 2007), 236.

<sup>9</sup> For example, William Nassau Molesworth, *The History of England from the Year 1830–1874, Vol. II* (London, 1874), 235. In *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, the article on 'Secularism' traces the origins of the term to the year 1846 instead of 1851, while ascribing it to Holyoake: *Chambers's Encyclopaedia: A Dictionary of Universal Knowledge for the People, Vol. VIII* (Edinburgh and Philadelphia, PA, 1871), 596.

<sup>10</sup> For example, G.J. Holyoake, *Secularism, the Practical Philosophy of the People* (London, 1854).

<sup>11</sup> George J. Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life, Vol. II*, 3rd edn (London, 1893), [290].

<sup>5</sup> P. Zuckerman and J.R. Shook, 'Introduction: The Study of Secularism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, ed. P. Zuckerman and J.R. Shook (New York, NY, 2017), 2. Cf. P. Zuckerman, ed., *Atheism and Secularity, Vol. 2* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2010), 93.

<sup>6</sup> Zuckerman and Shook, 'Introduction', 2.

<sup>7</sup> W.E. Houghton, ed., *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals 1824–1900, Vol. I* (Toronto and London, 1966), 725; [William Sewell], 'Todd on Antichrist', *Quarterly Review*, 71/141 (Dec. 1842), 197–243. On Sewell, see S.A. Skinner, 'Sewell, William (1804–1874), clergyman and author', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://www-oxforddnb-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref.odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-25148> (accessed 6 Nov. 2025).

Holyoake claimed that the principles of secularism (prior to the apparent coining of the term) were articulated in the preface to one of the *Reasoner's* 1846 issues.<sup>12</sup> In addition, he cited an article from the *Reasoner* dated 10 December 1851 in which the term 'secularism' had appeared; this, Holyoake informs us, 'was the first time the word "Secularism" appeared in the press.'<sup>13</sup>

Holyoake was doubly mistaken. The *Reasoner* had actually first used the term 'secularism' not on 10 December, but on 25 June 1851.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, this was not the first time it had appeared in the press, as he asserted. It is hard to prove whether Holyoake was actually aware of this, but it is unarguable that the term had already been in circulation in the early decades of the nineteenth century, not just in Britain but also in Ireland and America. In June 1834 the word 'secularism' appeared in the article 'The Kevin-Street College' authored by the Church of Ireland clergyman Samuel O'Sullivan and published in *Dublin University Magazine*. O'Sullivan's article critiqued the Archbishop of Dublin's proposed plans for the foundation of a new university, and protested 'against any institution for the education of our clergy which is to be exclusively an ecclesiastical establishment.'<sup>15</sup> O'Sullivan clearly outlined his objection, pointing to the problems arising out of the separation of the education of the clergy and the laity: 'There will be no more of that mutual influence, that unseen alternation of sentiment and feeling, between the clergy and the laity, which, commencing in youth, retained its force throughout life, preventing the religion of the one from becoming morose, and the *secularism* of the other from being profane.'<sup>16</sup> O'Sullivan did not use the term 'secularism' in the materialist, humanist, and anti-theological sense rooted in Positivism, as Holyoake would define it,<sup>17</sup> but in the sense of a lay *modus vivendi* distinct from the

ecclesiastical sphere—though he also did seem rather perturbed by the potential of secularism to lead to profanity and infidelity.<sup>18</sup> Five years later, a short article in the Tory *John Bull* posited 'secularism' as the opposite of religion. *John Bull* sought to correct the erroneous interpretation of the return of marriages for the year ending 30 June 1838 according to an abstract in the Registrar-General's report laid before parliament. *John Bull* argued that the total number of marriages (111481) was taken by some as the total number of marriages out of Church, 'thereby mak[ing] a fearful excess in favour of these unhalloved and disreputable unions, over those which have been solemnized by the high and binding contract of a religious ceremonial.'<sup>19</sup> In reality, out of 111481 marriages only 4280 were out of Church. *John Bull* thus expressed its gratification for the fact that even during 'the first year of the nauseous experiment' of the Marriage Act (1836) which legalized civil marriage, the nation continued to show respect 'for the sacred obligations and honourable proprieties of life', whilst demonstrating the 'thorough contempt' it had 'for the filthy boon of Ministers, to whom the difference between right and wrong, between decency and indecency, or between religion and *secularism* seems utterly unknown, or, if known, thoroughly and profligately disregarded.'<sup>20</sup>

It seems that during the 1840s the term 'secularism' gained a wider circulation. It appeared, for example, in an editorial response to a reader's letter in the *Musical World* of 6 October 1842.<sup>21</sup> The Revd James Hamilton also cited it in his lecture to the Young Men's Christian Association in London in the winter of 1845–46, in giving the following advice: 'Rationalism, ritualism, *secularism*, universal salvation may do for days of health and hilarity; but they are a poor holdfast in the hour of temptation; they are weak against the seductions of sense, and are poor comforters in prospect of God's holy and righteous tribunal.'<sup>22</sup> Around the same

<sup>12</sup> George J. Holyoake, *The Origin and Nature of Secularism; Showing that Where Freethought Commonly Ends Secularism Begins* (London, 1896), 51.

<sup>13</sup> George J. Holyoake, *The Origin and Nature of Secularism; Showing that Where Freethought Commonly Ends Secularism Begins* (London, 1896), 51–2.

<sup>14</sup> Zuckerman and Shook, 'Introduction', 2–3.

<sup>15</sup> [Samuel O'Sullivan], 'The Kevin-Street College', *Dublin University Magazine*, 3/18 (June 1834), 695, 710.

<sup>16</sup> [Samuel O'Sullivan], 'The Kevin-Street College', *Dublin University Magazine*, 3/18 (June 1834), 711 (emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> George J. Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism Illustrated*, 3rd edn, revised (London, 1871), 11–12.

<sup>18</sup> [O'Sullivan], 'Kevin-Street College', 711.

<sup>19</sup> 'London, July 1[5]', *John Bull*, XIX/970 (15 July 1839), 332.

<sup>20</sup> 'London, July 1[5]', *John Bull*, XIX/970 (15 July 1839), 332 (emphasis added).

<sup>21</sup> Editorial response by M.W. in 'Musical Amateurs: To the Editor of the Musical World', *Musical World*, 17/40 (6 Oct. 1842), 322.

<sup>22</sup> James Hamilton, 'The Lily of the Valley, and the Glory of Lebanon', in *Lectures Delivered before the Young Men's Christian*

time the term appeared in an obscure anonymous publication in Edinburgh.<sup>23</sup> In 1850 it was also cited in an editorial of the *Huddersfield Chronicle* in the context of local debates about education: ‘secularism’ was again taken to mean that which is ‘opposed to religion’.<sup>24</sup>

‘Secularism’ was also in common usage across the Atlantic. A report by the Presbytery of Ohio published in 1836 grappled with the issue of Sabbath-breaking in the United States. The tone of the report was one of alarm: ‘Unless a very vigorous effort be made on the part of the church, to withstand the lax views and loose practice which are thus gathering strength from day to day, the next generation may behold the day converted into a mere festival for popular recreation.’<sup>25</sup> In warning its readers of this possibility, the report made the following statement: ‘Such is the tendency of the feelings we are importing from abroad; such is the result, which both the infidelity and popery of the old world may be expected to aid the *secularism* of the new, in struggling as quickly as possible to realize.’<sup>26</sup> This connection between secularism and popery is similar to that made by the *Quarterly Review* in 1842; its connection with infidelity echoes O’Sullivan’s point in the *Dublin University Magazine*, as shown above. As was the case with Britain, the term was more widely circulated in the American press during the 1840s. One example is found in an essay reviewing the first American edition of Thomas Arnold’s *Miscellaneous Works*, carried in the Boston-published *North American Review* of January

1846.<sup>27</sup> Two further examples are found in *The Southern and Western Literary Messenger and Review* of June 1846 and March 1847. In Part II of an article entitled ‘Poetry and Religion’, the author reflected on the status of poetry in the present society which ‘is in a state of transition’: ‘Between an age of rude simplicity and ignorance, and an age of clear light and genuine moral refinement, there is an intermediate state of gross *secularism* in society, and of brilliant materialism in science.’<sup>28</sup> It is in such a state, the author lamented, ‘that poetry droops and declines.’<sup>29</sup> In publishing Part IV of this article in March 1847, the author employed again the term secularism, this time adding the adjective ‘sordid’ next to it.<sup>30</sup>

Despite his repeated claims to the contrary, Holyoake thus did not originate or coin the term ‘secularism’, though he undoubtedly deserves credit for popularizing it. This note does not purport that the list of these earlier uses of the term ‘secularism’ is exhaustive; on the contrary, it is likely that there are many more examples. This note, therefore, opens up avenues for further scholarly research, discussion, and debate. Its tentative findings will undoubtedly be of interest to historians, sociologists, and scholars in various other disciplines interested in religion, belief and unbelief, and secularization.

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*Association 1845-46, Vol. I* (London, 1869), 164 (emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup> [Anon.], *The Dirge; or, A Voice in the Night. Originally Addressed to a Clergyman at Edinburgh, 1845* (Edinburgh, 1848), 277.

<sup>24</sup> ‘The Chronicle: Saturday, Oct. 26, 1850. Mr Boothroyd’s Letter’, *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 30 (26 Oct. 1850), 4 (original emphasis).

<sup>25</sup> *The Presbytery of Ohio on the Claims of the Christian Sabbath; a Report Read and Adopted April 21, 1836, at a Meeting of the Presbytery, held at Racoon Church* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1836), 7.

<sup>26</sup> *The Presbytery of Ohio on the Claims of the Christian Sabbath; a Report Read and Adopted April 21, 1836, at a Meeting of the Presbytery, held at Racoon Church* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1836), 7 (emphasis added).

<sup>27</sup> [Anon.], ‘Dr. Arnold’s *Miscellaneous Writings*’, *North American Review*, LXII/CXXX (Jan. 1846), 181.

<sup>28</sup> W.C.S., ‘Poetry and Religion. No. II’, *The Southern and Western Literary Messenger and Review*, 12/41 (June 1846), 359 (emphasis added).

<sup>29</sup> W.C.S., ‘Poetry and Religion. No. II’, *The Southern and Western Literary Messenger and Review*, 12/41 (June 1846), 359.

<sup>30</sup> W.C.S., ‘Poetry and Religion. No. IV’, *The Southern and Western Literary Messenger and Review*, 13 (Mar. 1847), 181.

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Notes and Queries, 2026, 00, 1–4

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