Secularism in the title of this paper does not refer to the negative anti-religious ideology as which it is normally understood. Instead, I will use the term in its original meaning as a positive plea for a society free from the constraints of a religious doctrine. It had its roots in the epoch of the European Enlightenment with its peak in the eighteenth century but with a longer prehistory on which I will also focus.

By foreign knowledge I mean first of all knowledge about and from the world outside of the Judeo-Christian and Greek cultural sphere, which poured into Europe in the course of its colonial expansion from around 1500. But I will also mention earlier impacts from the Arab world as much as they were of relevance to the topic that is at the centre of this volume: secular thought. My special focus will be on the role of China, which exerted a tremendous influence on Europe in this epoch. What happened in Europe was the product of a global encounter that represents the trans-cultural rather than the specifically European nature of the Enlightenment movement itself. It was the outcome of a confluence of ideas that for concrete historical reasons fell on fertile ground in this part of the world. But it took its ingredients and inspirations also from many other parts.

The European Enlightenment is as much a product of European history as it is an expression of an inter- and trans-cultural dynamics. This also applies to the secularist tendency of the age which is not a European invention only later to be exported to other cultures. I would like to emphasize this point in particular against Charles Taylor’s voluminous analysis of the “Secular Age” which in all its learnedness is a formidable document of North-Atlantic parochialism. It dwells on the topic on nearly a thousand pages, without even once mentioning the influences of non-European cultures with partly much longer secular traditions, influences which are readily noticeable when one reads the relevant Western sources themselves.¹ But many of respective authors like Vossius, Bayle, Wolff  

¹ For a critique of Taylor from a trans-cultural perspective cf. also Holenstein, “China—eine altsäkulare Zivilisation.”
and others are absent from Taylor’s book. Presumably, there is a strategy behind this neglect: To trump secular thought by making it part of the Christian culture itself.

Likewise, no mention is made of a nineteenth century English freethinker who deserves a place in a history of European secular thought: George Holyoake (1817–1906), who to my knowledge coined the term *secularism*, which is not from the eighteenth century itself. Holyoake defines *secularism* as follows:

Secularism relates to the present existence of man, and to action, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life. Its object is the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest perceivable point, as the immediate duty of society. Secularism accepts no authority but that of Nature, adopts no methods but those of science and philosophy, and respects in practice no rule but that of the conscience, illustrated by the common sense of mankind. It values the lessons of the past and looks to tradition as presenting a storehouse of materials for thought, and in many cases results of high wisdom for reverence; but it utterly disowns tradition as a ground of belief, whether miracles and supernaturalism be claimed or not claimed on its side. No sacred scripture can be made a basis of belief, for the obvious reason that its claim always needs to be proven. Individual members yield whatever respect their own good sense judges to be due to the opinions of great men, living or dead, spoken or written, as also to the practice of ancient communities, national or ecclesiastical. But they disown all appeal to such authorities as final tests of truth.²

From the beginning the freethinker Holyoake avoids a pitfall frequently encountered in the discussion of secularism: namely that secularism involves the disappearance of religion and the imposition of a secular ideology, and that, correspondingly, a secular society is unacceptable to religious believers. Although Holyoake was an atheist himself—he was actually the last Englishman to go to prison for denying the existence of God—his secularist project is not primarily a program of fighting religion, nor a program of fighting tradition. It is rather a struggle for a system of rights³ that would allow the free expression of all, not only religious, but

---

² There are different versions of this programmatic description of secularism in publications by and on Holyoake. This one is taken from Fred Lee’s thesis *Secularism from the Victorian age to the Twenty-first century: The History of the Leicester Secular Society*, as quoted on the homepage of the Leicester Secular Society, http://www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk/holyoake.htm.

³ Cf. Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism*, 40: “Secularism, we have said, concerns itself with four rights: 1. The right to Think for one’s self, which most Christians now admit, at least in theory. 2. The right to Differ, without which the right to think is nothing worth.