The Theological Revolution of Enlightenment

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Among other things, the European Enlightenment has often been situated at the headwaters of secularization, and this association has, if anything, been recently strengthened by the impact of scholarship on the Radical Enlightenment. Building upon my own work, and the perspectives of William Bulman, Richard Ingram, Charles Taylor, Jonathan Sheehan, and others, I contend that the emergence of the Enlightenment is deeply entangled with religious and theological controversies ignited by innovations in early modern natural philosophy and the fruits of European exploration, conquest, and commerce. The networks of scholarly and textual exchange associated with the Radical Enlightenment are thereby shown to have possessed religious origins, even as discourses associated by some with styles of Religious Enlightenment developed and evolved in dialog with challenges afforded by Enlightenment radicalization. In this lecture, I propose that even the secularization often associated with the Enlightenment might be profitably considered as just an unlikely outcome of a broader early modern cultural revolution in theology and religious practice.