

5 Myths About Secularism

August 21, 2011 Category: Religion

Download as PDF

When people portray “secularism” in a flawed way, four typical mistakes are made:

1. Correlating secularism with *materialism*
2. Associating secularism with a *spiritually vacuous life*
3. Conflating secularism with *atheism*
4. Holding that an *objective ethical framework* can’t exist via secularism

Such mischaracterizations lead to a distorted depiction of secularism. They should be debunked whenever they are encountered. But it is not enough to assert THAT they are wrong; it is necessary to explain WHY they are wrong.

An immediate rebuttal to such misconceptions is pointing to a known counter-factual: myself. I am secular. I am an anti-materialist who is very spiritual. I am not an atheist. I adamantly eschew moral relativism. There are many free-thinkers like me. In fact, most humanists are like me: non-materialistic, with a spiritual dimension to their lives.

Humanists often have some conception of the transcendent / divine, and are adamant about immutable, universal moral principles. Indeed, we free-thinkers generally recognize the existence of an objective ethical framework—and *do so without resorting to dogmatism*. Why? Because free-thought is based on affirming Reality—acknowledging the ontologically objective. Recognition of objective reality (a.k.a. Reality) is the basis of our search for Truth.

The irony is that religiosity involves an imposter absolutism: it is relativism masquerading as anti-relativism. Moreover, religionism offers an faux spirituality and a sophomoric (if not utterly degenerate) conception of the divine. Piety often involves an ersatz morality—conduct based on obedience of authority, following *rules*, and conformity to prescribed norms. The religious life gives one’s life a veneer of “meaning” and “purpose”, but the meaning is contrived, the purpose assigned. Pre-fab meaning/purpose is inauthentic. It misses the essence of human-ness by evading what is best in humanity. It defaults on the capacity to be fully human by transplanting one’s humanity with a sanctimonious script-following charade.

One can’t at the same time be true to oneself and be doctrinal. Want to see an exercise in pathological self-deception, visit a Cardinal at the Vatican or a Salafi imam or a Hassidic rabbi or a New Age mystic. The inauthenticity is jaw-dropping to behold. We should ask: Why is a Rick Warren, Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, or a John Hagee inauthentic? The answer: For the same reason a Deepak Chopra or a Rhonda Byrne is. Cult activity is an incubator for charlatanry.

The question, “What really matters in life?” can be answered in purely secular terms—and, the case could be made, may *only* be answerable in secular terms. After all, *human* solidarity, and *human* values, needn’t be grounded in dogma or doctrine; they need only be based on *being fully human*.

With this in mind, let’s address each mis-characterization of secularism, one at a time.

MATERIALISM: Equating secularity with *superficiality*.

This misimpression brings to mind the distorted impression with which Sayiid Qutb was left after living in 1950's American suburbia. Let's review two common stereotypes. A typical caricature of the secularist is a gluttonous trust-fund playboy indulging in extravagant luxury. A typical caricature of "the devout" is the contemplative ascetic dedicated to charity and a minimalist life. Both caricatures are extremely misleading. A more accurate representation of religionism (when taken to its logical conclusion) would be the likes of Creflo Dollar and other mega-church sheisters, not Mother Theresa and Benedictine monks. A more accurate representation of secularism (when taken to its logical conclusion) would be Ludwis Wittgenstein, Henry David Thoreau, Peter Singer, Charles Sanders Peirce, or Thomas Paine (each in his own way the antithesis of materialism and superficiality), not some spoiled urban socialite who happens not to go to church.

Surveying the secular humanist population of the world, it would seem an outrageous proposition that materialism defines its existence. Between crunchy granolas, New England Transcendentalists, Gaia-oriented environmentalists, and most human rights activists, one would be hard-pressed to make the case that materialism is the basis of the secularist's modus operandi. When one observes the Peace Corps, Doctors Without Borders, Engineers Without Borders, Oxfam, Amnesty International, and the Sierra Club, it becomes quite clear that the hallmark secular organizations of the world are based on anti-materialism, anti-greed, and anti-avarice. Meanwhile, when we take note of the Vatican or the upper echelons of Mormonism and Wahhabism, we see the epitome of self-indulgence and decadence. What's really going on here?

This brings us back to the two caricatures: the religious ascetic and the "godless" playboy. Both religionists and secularists can be philanthropic, just as either can be impelled by avarice. But the annointed high-priest is materialistic largely due to the religionism he exploits, while the materialism of the greedy secularist has almost nothing to do with his being secular. The fact of the matter is, *neither* type of person is a free-thinker, as each has enslaved himself to something ignoble. We should recall: freethought is the essence of secularity..and material covetousness is hardly a corollary of individual autonomy.

The irony of the "Qutb fallacy" is that most of the materialistic Americans that Qutb observed were probably a sample set of America's more religious. Too bad he didn't get to live next to Robert Frost; his prognosis may have been much different when he returned to Egypt.

ABSENCE OF THE SPIRITUAL: Holding that secularity entails *lack of spirituality*.

Religionists commonly misconstrue superstition as "spirituality". Sadly, they see spirituality as necessarily involving the positing of the supernatural. It is no surprise, then, that they accuse freethinkers of lacking a spiritual element to their lives. In this view, naturalism is antithetical to spiritualism.

What religionists don't understand is that dogmatism-based spirituality is an inane spirituality. Authentic spirituality doesn't require dogmatism; it is consummate with a naturalistic view of the cosmos. Most importantly, what religionists fail to recognize is that spirituality is perverted whenever it is institutionalized, choreographed, prescribed.

It is undeniable that secularism accommodates a spiritual element to one's life. Such an element is concerned with grasping the sublime and experiencing a sense of wonder. Secular spirituality involves a profound appreciation of life and the universe...and embracing the mystery of existence. In this sense, heaven is not some otherworldly place; it is here, in life. Eternity isn't some span of time after death; it is now, in each moment we live. To claim that being religious is necessary to be spiritual is analogous to

claiming that taking drugs is necessary to be happy.

Anyone who can think his way out of a paper bag can recognize that spirituality isn't predicated on a particular formal doctrine or routine. Once we learn that the most profound spiritual thinkers in human history were secular (e.g. Lao Tzu, Siddhartha, Arthur Schopenhauer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, William James, Herman Hesse, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ernest Becker, Joseph Campbell, etc.), it becomes quite clear that spirituality has nothing to do with religiosity—and isn't delivered via an institution.

NO DIVINITY: Assuming secularity means that one doesn't posit *the divine*.

Some secularists are atheists; many are not. Most deists and pantheists, for example, are primarily—if not entirely—secular: Spinoza, Kant, Jefferson, Franklin, Paine, Einstein, etc. *The divine* means different things to different people, and is consequently treated in various ways.

Religionists tend to personify the divine—then assume that anyone who doesn't *personify* the divine doesn't *have a valid conception of* the divine. Yet religion-based conceptions of the divine are often inane. That is to say: the divine needn't be worshipped (idolized) in order to be “divine”. To not treat the divine as a deity isn't to declare that there is nothing divine. In other words, to refrain from anthropomorphizing the divine doesn't entail denying the existence of something divine.

Free-thinkers understand that making the divine *the other* is a fundamental mistake. The three Abrahamic religions conceive of the divine as a discreet entity, then make it *other than* nature. Secular spirituality typically recognizes that—in being transcendent—the divine pervades all, and it permeates everything. Thus, we are all part of it; it is within all of us. There are many ways of “getting in touch with” the divine. One reveals a flagrant misunderstanding when one claims that religion is the only means by which one can connect with the ineffable, transcendent, and mystical.

The divine isn't outside of nature...nor is it outside of us; it is not “above” us any more than we homo sapiens are “above” nature. We are *part of* nature—just as is the divine. We are part of the divine—just as the divine is part of us. To fail to recognize this is to cheapen the divine, and diminish the meaning of humanity.

NO OBJECTIVE ETHICS: Insisting that secularity entails *moral relativism*.

Religion-based ethics is based on heteronomy. It declares certain things to be “absolutes”, and is then under the impression that it is avoiding relativism. But that which is absolute isn't absolute by institutional fiat—or by plebiscite.

Religionists render X sacrosanct, then interpret that proclamation as entailing X is genuinely absolute. Reality isn't based on a referendum or an official decree. Typically, in religion, one is given an instruction manual of some kind, and told to adhere to its dictates. Within the context of religion, then, ethics is a matter of the following:

- Do as you're told by authorities
- Only engage in activity that you've been notified is permissible
- Obey the commands found in this book

In this scheme, a man's conduct is dictated to him, his life-purpose is assigned to him, and the meaning he ascribes to things follows a script provided to him from “on high”. Here, moral-ness boils down to one thing: “Follow instructions.” What such a worldview fails to grasp is the key insight: Morality is not a

matter of complying with imposed laws, conforming to convention, or obeying a master. A moral person does moral things not because he was instructed to do so.

In reality, morality is based on human solidarity, compassion, and rectitude—not on membership in a particular club. *The divine* doesn't favor particular groups; *people* do that. Only an autonomy-based morality is authentic. Only a secular morality is truly autonomy-based.

In the context of religion, a person is told what he is “supposed to” do, and is expected to submit to this sanctified routine. But morality isn't programmatic, nor is it derived from without. Following a designated choreography does not a good person make. Anyone who thinks that life is about following rules and kow-towing to anointed authorities has not only missed the essence of morality, but has missed the point of life.

THE BIGGEST MYTH OF ALL: Pointing to some bad consequences of religion, and insisting that they are bad consequences of secularism.

Lastly, it is important to understand the nature of cult activity vis a vis secularism. Much of the most flagrant cult activity in the modern era has been erroneously associated with (or even attributed to) secularism. The following five cases of (blatant) cult activity are typical examples of such misattribution: Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism, Juche, and the Khmer Rouge. Each movement was the *antithesis* of secularism. Moreover each was antithetical to cosmopolitanism—as each was a matter of tribalism on steroids (and pathological parochialism).

Blaming the occurrence of any of these horrific movements on “secularism” would be like blaming vegetarianism when people eat too much meat. Even if we attribute these cults to a refusal to adhere to a “traditional” religion, we completely miss what the underlying causes of each movement actually were. Shall we attribute what Pol Pot did to his agrarian sensibilities? Is the lesson we should take from him, “If only he'd been a Mormon, that wouldn't've happened”? What, then, are the *salient features* of each movement? Systematic hyper-dogmatism, strictly-enforced groupthink, flagrant idolatry, a lack of individual autonomy, and a glaring absence of critical inquiry.

Each of the above movements was prototypical cult activity—replete with all the hallmark traits of religion. We should keep this in mind the next time we discuss what religionism really is...and what secularism really is not.

(For more on secularism, see my essay, *Secularism 101*. For more on the secular basis for objective morality, see Kai Nielson's *Ethics Without God* and Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork For The Metaphysics of Morals*.)