



A Trend Of Secularism

Who would you rather go to for a source of wisdom: the president of the Church of LDS or the president of the NSF? Which would be a better choice for public policy advice: the head of the NAE or the head of the NAS? Who would you rather have teaching your children: renown evangelist John Hagee or renown science pedagogue Isaac Asimov? Who would you rather work with to solve civic problems, a TV evangelist or renown philosopher Daniel C. Dennett? Who would you rather have on the board of your local municipal council: Jerry Falwell or Noam Chomsky?

(For reasons that go beyond this scope of this essay, this is analogous to asking which you would want informing public health policy: the head of AHIP or the head of the NIH? Put another way: Which would you rather have tutor you in macro-economic principles: a member of the Chamber of Commerce or Joseph Stiglitz?)

God help anyone who found the choice difficult in any of these questions.

The choice in each case should be clear because the alternatives represent dogmatism vs. non-dogmatism; glorified charlatanry vs. genuine erudition. It is analogous to the choice between religionism in its undiluted form and secularism in its undiluted form. Why, we might ask, is the latter consistently preferable to the former? Why IS the National Science Foundation or the National Academy of Science a more dependable source than the Apostles of the Mormon church or the National Association of Evangelicals? In other words, why does the most wisdom always come from the more secular institutions / people?

A common response to such questions is: Your alternatives are unfair, because you're comparing the "worst" of religionism with the "best" of secularism. But, in fact, these choices simply represent what happens when each is taken to its logical conclusion. The present essay addresses the role that secularism has had (vis a vis the role of religionism) in bettering our world—since the inauguration of the Enlightenment (itself a process of secularization).

As a point of departure, we can recognize certain facts. Nelson Mandela did not require religion to do what he did in South Africa. Why not? His message transcended religion, pure and simple. Did the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

predicate his fight for organized labor, for civil rights, and against U.S. military interventions on religious dogmas? No. Why not? Because such things transcend particular creeds and doctrines.

It is safe to say that—by far—those who have contributed the most to societal progress did not do so because they opted to more strictly adhere to a sacred doctrine—to some creed that they’d inherited from their ancestors. Luminaries of human history did not accomplish anything by gesticulating more vociferously at the Wailing Wall, genuflecting more vigorously before a crucifix, bowing more vehemently toward Mecca, or memorizing sacred scripts more voraciously. Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, such activities have never actually accomplished anything for human society. Reciting incantations before an altar has never enabled any person, ever, to help make the world a better place...except, perhaps, in his own mind. So, naturally, the question follows: Would we simply be better off without religion?

To answer this question, we might conduct a survey of the world’s greatest minds. That is to say: those who made the most significant contributions to human knowledge, to societal progress, and/or to the well-being of mankind overall. The survey would be based on religiosity vs. secularity. The problem is that this is not a binary state; it is a spectrum (rather like the Ph Scale of acidity). It is not easy to attempt to quantify that which is inherently only qualifiable. But for the sake of this survey, the attempt will be made.

METHOD: Establishing the Ph Scale of Religiosity:

In order to conduct the following inquiry, it is necessary to first establish what we mean by “religiosity”. A rudimentary definition is: Degree of heteronomy (i.e. systematic / systematized / formalized dogmatism couples with groupthink and an abiding beholden-ness to the ordinances of established power structures). This entails subordination to orthodoxy, an acceptance of “received wisdom”, and—invariably—some kind of tribalism. Secularity is simply defined as LACK OF religiosity. (Secularism is nothing other than the absence of religionism.)

Religiosity-secularity is not binary, but exists as gradations along a vast spectrum. For the present purposes, I will employ the Ph Scale as an analogy. Thus the extreme of religionism is one pole (7) and complete secularism is the other pole (0).

In this model, the analogue of religiosity is “acidity” while secularity is “basicity”. (Note that I have reversed the numbers on the poles. The actual Ph Scale has acidity at the lower end, basicity at the higher end.)

Near “7”, one can find demagogues and crackpots of all stripes. Here, dogmatism is at its most severe. (Meanwhile, dogmatism is all but eliminated at the other end of the scale, at “0”, where we find the likes of Isaac Asimov, Thomas Paine, and David Hume.)

For the purposes of categorizing people as “primarily secular”, let’s say it translates to being between “0” and “2” on this Ph scale (the “base” end of the spectrum). 3 and 4 would be moderately religious; 5 thru 7 would be increasingly fundamentalist / fanatical (the “acid” end of the spectrum). In this sense, the achievements of the luminaries listed essentially contributed to the alkalinity of mankind’s on-going enlightenment. In other words, their contributions to human society can be attributed in part to secularism.

Here is the rule I’m employing for the present analysis: For religious figures, cases where the contribution made was a matter of moving away from the “acid” end of the Ph scale toward the “base” end (i.e. further from “7” and closer to “0”) constitute a corroboration of this essay’s thesis. It illustrates the point being made about secularity vis a vis religiosity. In essence, such men served as an alkaline to the established religious order.

(Criminals who turn to religion in order to wean themselves off of crime do not serve as a counterfactual. Sometimes, when people aren’t capable of grasping good reasons for being good, they need to resort to dubious-yet-appealing reasons to conduct themselves in an acceptable manner. This is typically done out of sheer pragmatism. It does not follow from this that religiosity is the source of goodness. It merely demonstrates that religion can serve as an ethical prosthetic...for lack of a better remedy. Doing good things for dubious reasons is preferable to doing bad things.)

Keep in mind, the spectrum of religiosity has nothing to do with devoutness. It is possible to become more secular while remaining devout. There are, for example, very liberal Reform Jews who are just as devout as the most fanatical Hassidic. It is the dogmatism that dissolves, not necessarily the devoutness, when one secularizes.

To the degree such men transcended their religiosity, they were able to contribute to the progress of human understanding. Whatever credit they may have given to their Faith is beside the point. To base one's insights on secular grounding, then retro-actively attribute it to a deity's magical hand, is a common mistake. This is a post hoc ergo proctor hoc maneuver that simply imports the desired narrative to the achievement after the secular work has already been done.

The fourteen archetypes of unbridled religiosity enumerated above are well-known examples of what happens when religiosity goes haywire. What do these figures have in common? Though quite diverse in particular doctrines, their position on the aforesaid scale is consistently close to "7". Dogmatism, after all, is the scam artist's best friend. (Indeed, a con man is simply a meme-peddler; a cult leader is essentially a dogma-monger.)

Cult leaders exploit credulity, groupthink, ignorance, and insecurity—conditions that provide the optimal incubator for dogmatism—in order to push their agenda. The savvy demagogue, then, offers false certainty, false pride, and a false sense of security / hope / empowerment (a.k.a. delusion) to his target audience. Such was the case with the fourteen religious figures listed above.

By stark contrast, history's archetypes of secularity represent intellectual integrity / courage—what Kant called "maturity". Theirs is the antithesis of the degenerate modus operandi endemic to the religious archetype. This puts them close to "0" on the aforementioned Ph scale. The same goes for most great chemists, humanitarians, astronomers, civil rights activists, biologists, leaders in education, physicists, statesmen, environmentalists, anthropologists, sociologists, creative geniuses, moral philosophers, neuroscientists...

Why is it that those who think the best are consistently the most secular? Because great thinking is about resisting dogmatism and groupthink (the hallmarks of cult activity) while emulating individual autonomy, free inquiry, bold and novel thinking, meticulous critical analysis, careful deliberation, and—when necessary—iconoclasm / heterodoxy.

But WHO ARE the great thinkers? Including the Postscript, 240 will be listed, 134 of which were primarily secular, thus revealing a clear trend. (Another large sample-set will be offered in Part 2 of this series.)

The explanation for the trend is quite plain to see. The vast majority of all great thinkers have been great thinkers because they are very close to “0” on the religiosity-secularity spectrum (the analogue of “bases” on the Ph Scale). In other words, the greatness of a thinker is inversely proportional to his/her dogmatism. Consequently, to be a religionist is to automatically preclude oneself from being able to contribute positively to human society—except, perhaps, in accidental ways.

That the Muslim world never underwent a Reformation corroborates the present thesis. Muslims never experienced an “Islamic Enlightenment”...except—perhaps—to the degree that the West’s Enlightenment was able to spill over into Islamic societies. The consequences of this are quite plain to see. For the first 13 centuries of Islam, the few figures in the Muslim world who WERE able to confer a modicum of progress on their society did so NOT because they suddenly started scrutinizing / memorizing the Koran more diligently. Rather, they stopped reciting Suras for long enough to engage in critical reflection, turned away from their imams, and opted to make full use of their pre-frontal cortexes. (More on this in Part 2 of this essay.)

The examples of such Muslim luminaries are illustrative: from the Sufi humanist, Mevlana to the Persian philosopher, Avicenna...to the Persian mathematician, al-Khwarizmi. Such men were able to effect some progress because they put aside their holy book for a moment, and got on with the task of **thinking**. The same went for Maimonides in Judaism and Thomas Aquinas or Duns Scotus in Christianity. In each case, the person looked up from the sacred texts provided to him and, of his own accord, decided to buck the prevailing trend by engaging in **critical analysis**. Their notable heterodoxy illustrates the relevant movement along the Ph scale of religiosity.

The lesson here is simple. Each apparent “exception to the rule” took the initiative to do some genuine philosophy / science even as his compatriots were mindlessly memorizing verses from the assigned scripture. What, after all, **was** the difference between Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Ibn Sina (Avicenna)? Both Ibns were intelligent men, but one was a coward while the other was courageous. One was a charlatan; one was a great thinker. But even more to the point: one opted to seek “received wisdom” by delving deeper into a sacred text...while the other searched for genuine wisdom by **resisting** dogmatism—and engaging in critical inquiry.

History has demonstrated the divergent consequences of such different approaches. We need not go into the drastic difference between, say, the Haqqani network and the policies of Akbar the Great to illustrate the point. Again, this is not to cherry pick the worst examples of religionism and hold them against the best examples of secularism. The point is that WHEN we take the worst examples of humanity, they are consistently at the higher (acidic) end of the Ph scale...while the greatest examples are consistently at the lower (basic) end.

Those who did manage to transcend the ambient dogmatic quagmire in which they lived did so because they marshaled the courage to rise above the prevailing climate of heteronomy. Only by bucking the status quo did they managed to realize some degree of autonomy. They accomplished this noble feat contrary to the religious influences by which they were beset. In other words, these few men achieved individual autonomy in spite of the cultural milieu in which they were daily immersed. This was a secular feat—a process of alkalynity.

The achievements of notable Muslims corroborate the present thesis. As with the few iconoclasts who emerged within medieval Christian-dom, no worthwhile insight was gleaned from their sacred text. In fact, any worthwhile insight required ignoring the sacred text—even if for the isolated windows of time that were devoted to free enquiry.

Contrast two Jews: Baruch Spinoza and Israel Baal Shem Tov. Contrast two Christians: Saul of Tarsus and Giordano Bruno. Contrast two Muslims: al-Farabi and Sayyid Qutb. Such juxtapositions are staggering. The former were consistently positioned high on the Ph scale while the latter were all clearly at the lower end. Correlation doesn't entail causation; but surely this overwhelming trend calls for an inquiry into causal explanations.

We're forced to ask: What accounted for the enormous differences of such men? It is plain to see that one immersed himself further into his dogmatic system while the other rose above it. We might ask, then: For which has the world been made better off...the Martin Luther Kings of the world or the Joseph Smiths of the world? To wit: By which route has humanity been made better off?

Anti-secularism, of course, has taken as many forms as secularism. The former has given us Vatican City in Italy, Watchtower in Brooklyn, Sea Org in Florida, illegal settlements in Palestine, the killing fields in Cambodia, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Nazism in Germany, Stalinism in Russia, Maoism in China, and Juche on the Korean

Peninsula; the latter has given us Taoism, New England Transcendentalism, Amnesty International, the civil rights movement, the U.S. Constitution, humanitarian activism, the Sierra Club, Engineers Without Borders and Doctors Without Borders. One engenders parochialism and tribalism; one engenders cosmopolitanism and humanism.

Another way to pose the question: Has human society benefited more from provincialism or from worldliness, from theology or from philosophy, from Leviticus or from Paine's Common Sense? To reiterate: Who would you rather have teaching your children, Pat Robertson or Isaac Asimov? Why?

"But wait, that is unfair," one might be inclined to respond. "For you're simply taking the extremes of secularism and the extremes of religionism to make your point." Ah, but therein lies the rub. If the extreme of secularism is the BEST OF secularism, while the extreme of religionism is the WORST OF religionism, then what does this tell us about the nature of each? Certainly, the lesson to draw isn't: "split the difference". The closer one is to "0" on the aforesaid spectrum, to more amenable one is to contributing to the weal of society. The closer to "7" one is, the less likely. To fail to see this requires ignoring mountains of evidence...and an overwhelming trend.

Those who have contributed to the betterment of mankind—to progress in human society—have done so via what Kant called "maturity", not via religiosity. The script by which their fellows were being incessantly indoctrinated played no role in fostering their erudition. If these figures had limited themselves to searching for wisdom in the passages of the holy books given to them by ancestors, they would never have been able to garner the wisdom they did.

This goes for every person the Muslim world now, the same went for the iconoclasts in the West who effected the Enlightenment: if they'd remained mired in the prevailing dogma, no Enlightenment would have transpired. Try as one may, calls for civil / human rights and liberties cannot be found in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament or the Koran...or Dianetics. Only by putting the sacred texts down and engaging in critical reflection were the great thinkers of history able to be the great thinkers of history.

A few fleeting passages that recommend we not kill, steal, cheat or lie can be found amongst the pages of preposterous drivel in the Pentateuch, yet look at how much good that did mankind. Contrast **Deuteronomy** to Thomas Paine's **Rights of Man**,

and decide which offers more wisdom. If one juxtaposes the **Talmud** or the **Haddith** with, say, Kant's **Critique of Pure Reason**, the difference in the caliber of thinking is mind-bending to behold. One is mankind at its most naïve, the other at its most brilliant. One is the epitome of dogmatism, the other the epitome of *arête*. Only if one is thoroughly deluded (or utterly oblivious) can one insist that there is parity between such writings while keeping a straight face.

It should be noted that most religion exists somewhere between the two extremes on this vast spectrum (i.e. around "3" or "4", give or take)—where it is considered "moderate". The closer to "0" religion operates, the more diluted—and thus the healthier—it becomes. (1 or 2 is often called "liberal" or "cultural" religion.) Great thinking and dogmatism are mutually exclusive. It is no surprise, then, that most of the great minds of history are found—if not at "0"—then quite close to "0". This is like noting that those who are best at sports are the most athletic.

Meanwhile, the most notable saboteurs of human progress have been located—if not at "7"—then in much closer proximity to "7" than most "mainstream" religionists. Pol Pot and Heinrich Himmler both managed to embody "7"...as do the most fanatical Jews/Christians/Muslims. The disastrous cult leaders listed above are archetypes indicative of the undiluted religion pole on this spectrum (the analogue of "acids" on the Ph Scale). Most cult activity spans the full range of religiosity, be it Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or even Scientology. (Some religions tend inherently to operate closer to "0": Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Quakerism, Baha'i, and Shinto, for example.)

If you're waiting for a Pentecostal, a Hassidic, a Salafist, a Jehovah's Witness, or a Scientologist to change the world for the better via a landmark discovery, don't hold your breath. When will a religious fundamentalist become a groundbreaking human rights activist? Lord only knows. The fact of the matter is that cosmopolitanism is antithetical to parochialism, intellectualism is antithetical to dogmatism, and humanism is ultimately based on secular principles. I must confess, if a person ever contributed to the progress of mankind by becoming MORE religious, I'd be utterly dumfounded. Indeed, it would be the first time in human history such a bizarre thing happened.

A SURVEY: The Enlightenment & Its Legacy:

Secularism as a social phenomenon can't be simply boiled down to a catalogue of people who are secular. Nevertheless, ultimately, it is PEOPLE who are secular (or not)...and it is people who influence the degree to which institutions are secular... and it is institutions that influence the degree to which society-as-a-whole is secular. Therefore, a survey of people doesn't mean secularism as a macro-phenomenon (a feature of society) can be simply reduced to the micro-level (attributes of particular individuals). The present essay does not pretend that historical events (and social movements) can be distilled by making a simple list of key people. Nevertheless, surveying major figures in the advancement of human society can indicate salient trends—namely: the degree to which progress can be attributed to religionism.

Institutions are only based on secular foundations insofar as the people involved in them (be they secular or not) base the operation of those institutions on secular principles. For example, even as a devout Christian, John Adams saw fit to base the new federal government of the American Republic on secular principles, as he recognized that the mechanism driving a genuine democracy must be meta-religious. He didn't let his personal religiosity undermine this crucial insight—an insight that was secular in nature. It was this insight—one that he shared with secularists like Paine and Jefferson—that consequently translated to a secular institution...and, eventually, to a more secular society.

People are a product of their culture just as any culture is the product of its people. There is a feedback loop involved, day in and day out—a reciprocal causation that can't be captured by merely listing key figures. What I deal with here are key figures that shaped their environment...even as they themselves were invariably—in some way—shaped by their environment. This essay focuses on those key figures, with the understanding that this is only part of the story. Broad cultural trends are also eminently relevant to societal progress, but would be the topic for another essay (see, for example, my essay series, “Secularism In History”).

A survey of the major contributors to human progress is, therefore, in order. As a point of departure, I offer a list of what I surmise to be the most important luminaries of the Enlightenment—and of the ensuing modern era. These figures were selected without any consideration of their religious status.

Late 16th Century:

Michel de Montaigne, Nicolas Copernicus, and Galileo Galilei



Early 17th Century:

Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon

Late 17th Century:

Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Gottfried von Leibniz

Early 18th Century:

David Hume, Denis Diderot, and Montesquieu

Late 18th Century:

Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Paine

Mid-19th Century:

John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, and Arthur Schopenhauer

Late 19th Century:

Gottlob Frege, Charles Darwin, and Fredreich Nietzsche

Early 20th Century:

Max Weber, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Alan Turing, and Albert Einstein

Late 20th Century:

John Maynard Keynes, Noam Chomsky, and John Rawls

Lo and behold, a trend reveals itself:

- Montaigne: non-dogmatic “Catholic”
- Copernicus: Deist
- Galileo: Deist (apostate Catholic)
- Descartes: Deist
- Newton: Deist
- Bacon: Deist (with sympathies for both non-dogmatic Christianity and atheism)
- Spinoza: Deist
- Locke: Deist
- Leibniz: Deist



- Hume: Atheist (anti-religion)
- Diderot: Deist
- Montesquieu: Deist
- Smith: Deist
- Kant: Deist
- Paine: Deist (anti-religion)
- Mill: Deist
- Marx: Deist
- Schopenhauer: Pantheist (anti-religion)
- Frege: Fascist sympathizer (anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic)
- Darwin: Deist
- Nietzsche: Atheist (anti-religion)
- Weber: quasi-Protestant (non-practicing)
- Wittgenstein: non-descript secular
- Einstein: Deist
- Turing: non-descript secular
- Keynes: non-descript secular
- Chomsky: non-descript secular
- Rawls: non-practicing Episcopalian

In other words, of the 28 most important thinkers since the Renaissance, 27 were primarily secular. Newton could be said to have various superstitions and loose affiliations, but an adherent to formal religion (i.e. subscriber to church doctrine) he was not.

SIDE NOTE: At least 4 of these men were gay (Bacon, Wittgenstein, Keynes, and Turing). There may well have been more. This is relevant for, among other reasons, the case for gay rights: recognizing the dignity of every human irrespective of sexuality. It is safe to say that a large portion of the greatest artists, scientists, philosophers, and other intellectuals (Leonardo da Vinci, R.W. Emerson, Oscar Wilde, Michel Foucault, Gore Vidal, Anthony Appiah, etc.) in history were gay. We should keep this in mind the next time we withhold merit based on what society deems to be “deviant” thinking / behavior.

Just to ensure our sample set is not overly narrow, let's survey 100 other major contributors to human progress:

1. Leonardo da Vinci
2. Johannes Kepler (non-dogmatic Lutheran)



3. Christiaan Huygens
4. Voltaire (deist)
5. Thomas Jefferson (deist)
6. Ben Franklin (deist)
7. James Madison (deist, Episcopalian up-bringing)
8. Mary Elizabeth Wollstonecraft (deist)
9. Elizabeth Cady Stanton
10. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
11. Abraham Lincoln (deist)
12. Ralph Waldo Emerson (pantheist)
13. Henry David Thoreau (pantheist)
14. Charles Babbage
15. Ludwig Feuerbach
16. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
17. Mikhail Bakunin
18. Peter Kropotkin
19. August Comte
20. Herbert Spencer
21. Leonhard Euler (Christian)
22. Carl Gauss
23. Henri Poincare
24. Pierre-Simon Laplace
25. Joseph Fourier
26. Joseph-Louis Lagrange
27. Simon Denis Poisson
28. A.L. Lavoisier
29. Augustine Cauchy (Catholic)
30. Alonzo Church
31. Nicolaus Otto
32. Nicolas Leonard Sadi Carnot
33. James Watt
34. Nicola Tesla
35. James Clerk Maxwell (Presbyterian)
36. Max Planck (deist)
37. Max Born
38. Niels Bohr
39. Erwin Schrodinger
40. Werner Heisenberg (quasi-Lutheran)



41. Wolfgang Pauli
42. Enrico Fermi
43. Paul Dirac
44. Charles Sanders Peirce
45. Michael Faraday (Presbyterian)
46. Bernhard Reimann
47. Kurt Godel
48. David Hilbert
49. Jon von Neumann
50. Paul Erdos
51. Georg Cantor (deist)
52. Georg Simmel
53. Alexander Graham Bell
54. Alexander Fleming
55. Louis Pasteur
56. William James
57. G.E. Moore
58. Bertrand Russell (atheist)
59. A.N. Whitehead
60. Otto Neurath
61. Rudolph Carnap
62. W.V.O. Quine (atheist)
63. A.J. Ayer (atheist)
64. W.E.B. Du Bois
65. Pierre Bourdieu
66. Erving Goffman
67. Eleanor Roosevelt
68. George Orwell
69. C. Wright Mills
70. Richard Hofstadter
71. Douglas Hofstadter
72. Robert Noyce
73. J. Robert Oppenheimer
74. Carl Sagan (atheist)
75. Karl Popper
76. Thomas Kuhn
77. Isaac Asimov (atheist)
78. John Dewey



79. John Searle
80. John Kenneth Galbraith
81. John Maynard Smith
82. Jurgen Habermas
83. Richard Feynman
84. Walter Kauffman (atheist)
85. Stuart Kauffman
86. E.O. Wilson
87. Amartya Sen
88. Anthony Appiah
89. Ernest Becker
90. Seymour Benzer
91. Stanislaw Lem
92. Kenneth Arrow
93. John Holland
94. Murray Gell-Mann
95. Ronald Dworkin
96. Robert Nozick
97. Stephen Hawking (atheist)
98. Richard Rorty
99. Peter Singer (atheist)
100. Daniel C. Dennett (atheist)

[Where I was aware of the specifics, I specified in parentheses. Note that Jurgen Habermas did say some sympathetic things about “Christianity”, but he was not referring to dogmatic / doctrinaire Christianity; he was referring to “Christianity” in the pejorative sense.]

The trend is quite clear: virtually every great mind in modern history was secular. Of the 100 luminaries just listed, **only six** could be said to be marginally “religious”: Kepler, Cauchy, Euler, Faraday, Maxwell, and Heisenberg. (Cantor was a deist. Planck was a non-practicing Lutheran—and is most accurately categorized as a deist.) This is quite remarkable if for no other reason than that most of these men lived in an extremely religious environment. The vast majority of the 128 figures just listed lived in a world dominated by religion...**yet THEY were aberations**. The question must be asked: **What’s going on here?**

Regarding the five anomalies to the prevailing trend, it should be noted that none of their achievements can be attributed to their religiosity. The scientific insights of each occurred utterly independently of—nay, in spite of—any Faith he may have harbored. This becomes quite clear upon evaluating their Faiths vis a vis their respective intellectual contributions.

The conclusion is unavoidable: The majority of people who have contributed substantially to human society were either secular, or—if marginally religious—did so in spite of their religiosity. How many religious leaders have contributed significantly to human society BECAUSE OF their religiosity? Almost none. The greatest minds have been the secular minds. This has been the case almost without exception.

We could go on and on—adding to our sample set indefinitely. Most of the greatest mathematicians in history have been mentioned. Other great mathematicians include Karl Weierstrass, Hermann Weyl, John Horton Conway, John Forbes Nash, Nikolai Lobachevsky, János Bolyai, W.K. Clifford, Ernst Zermelo, and Abraham Fraenkel: ALL SECULAR.

[Possible exceptions to the trend are British mathematicians John C. Lennox and George Stokes. The former is an (Irish) Anglican. The latter was a non-practicing British Anglican.]

In addition to Babbage, von Neumann and Turing, other progenitors of the modern computer: George Boole (secular Unitarian), Donald Knuth (non-practicing Lutheran), Grace Murray Hopper, Edsger Dijkstra, Jacek Karpinski, and Claude Shannon: ALL SECULAR (some, deistic). Coincidence? No. Almost every great philosopher, scientist, and artist in the modern era has been far more secular than religious. Even when marginally religious, it is clear that any contribution made was made in spite of that element of religiosity. In such cases, none of the insight was gleaned by adhering more strictly to sacred doctrine or a more scrupulous reading of some holy book.

For each luminary loosely affiliated with a Faith, any religiosity that may have been present ended up being entirely beside the point with respect to his achievements. (To corroborate this point, further sample sets will be provided in the postscript...as well as in part two of this essay series.)

This is not to say that the figures in this hallowed pantheon were without flaws. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were misogynists, Frege was an Aryan supremacist, and Keynes at one point thought eugenics might be a good idea. Even

Newton, for all his scientific-mindedness, still gave credence to alchemy (not to mention the fact that he was an arrogant jerk). Of all the Founding Fathers, though most were for emancipation, Thomas Paine was THE ONLY ONE who insisted that blacks were categorically equal to whites, and that women were categorically equal to men.

The key is that the defective thinking that DID occur occurred in spite of, never because of, the secularity.

For all their missteps, these men were—to varying degrees—critical of religion...if for no other reason than that they were all constitutionally against groupthink and dogmatism. Each championed free inquiry, critical reflection, iconoclasm, naturalistic explanations, and individual autonomy. If nothing else, a palpable degree of secularism is what they had in common. The same has gone for almost every other important philosopher, scientist, mathematician, and civil rights activist in history. Indeed, this is precisely the reason they were able to achieve what they achieved.

The most ardent religionists in history have a drastically less stellar record.

Before proceeding, let's nip in the bud a possible criticism: confirmation bias (a.k.a. "cherry-picking"). Am I guilty of this transgression? I don't think so; it is, of course, possible. There is a straight-forward way to find out. After concluding this and its follow-up essay, I leave open the challenge to the reader to find a sufficient number of counterfactuals to the thesis that such examples can no longer be written off as mere anomalies to an overwhelming trend.

To reiterate: In no way whatsoever did religiosity contribute to the groundbreaking insights of the aforementioned figures. To attribute any of their contributions to religion is to give credit to **the impediments they overcame** in order to do what they did. Montesquieu is a prime example: It was insofar as he thwarted Catholicism that he was able to contribute to political philosophy—and thus to human progress. By bucking the Church, he offered ideas that helped his fellow man improve society. Galileo and Spinoza were each testaments to such noble iconoclasm. (Laplace summed up the mentality of many of the above luminaries when he said of belief in a personal deity, "I have no need for that hypothesis." No need, indeed. Einstein later emphasized the same point: no need whatsoever for a personal god.)



Assigning religion false attribution for wonderful things seems to have become a handy-craft. When religious people feel compassion or do good deeds, they attribute their probity to their religiosity—thereby not only degrading the deed, but insulting themselves. The implication is that, had they not believed in certain supernatural things, they would not have been capable of good will; a sad proposition, indeed. Alas, ascribing one's sense of humanity to the claims of a holy book is just as easy as ascribing a groundbreaking discovery to god's will...or any epiphany to insight gleaned from church doctrine. In such scenarios, one is attributing an achievement to the obstacles that were overcome to make it happen. As Einstein once pointed out, if people do good deeds primarily in order to secure reward or avoid punishment (i.e. to appease a cosmic authority), mankind is in deep trouble.

If one wants an honest assessment of what happens when a person goes in the direction opposite that of secularism, one need only look at a few archetypical cases:

- Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (Wahhabism)
- The Salafi da'wah (Salafism)
- Sayyid & Mohammed Qutb (Muslim Brotherhood)
- Saul of Tarsus (proto-Christianity)
- Augustine of Hippo (Catholicism)
- Joseph Smith (Mormonism)
- Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (Hassidism)
- Ze'ev Jabotinsky / Menachem Begin / Benzion Netanyahu (Revisionist Zionism)
- Avigdor Lieberman (Yisrael Beiteinu / Meir Kahane / Kach)
- Maximilien Robespierre (Cult of The Supreme Being)
- Kim Il Sung (Juche)
- Pol Pot (Red Cambodians)
- L. Ron Hubbard (Scientology)
- Jim Jones (The Peoples' Temple)

...as well as countless snake-oil salesmen, shamans, witchdoctors, popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, imams, mullahs, ayatollahs, rabbis, and other manner of cult leaders. The figures just listed are all cases of "7" on the Ph Scale of religiosity-secularism.

Take, for examples, the impresarios of such cults as Islamic Jihad, Nazism, the KKK, the Judean Settler Movement, the Taliban, the Khmer Rouge, Stalinism, Maoism, and Juche. Though the degree of destructiveness varies from case to case, the common

thread is impossible to ignore: **cult activity** (the vile cocktaile of tribalism, groupthink, and hyper-dogmatism). That such activity has a vast range, from relatively innocuous to horrifically destructive, doesn't change this fact.

It is no coincidence that cult activity throughout history has correlated with standard right-wing attributes. (This includes both Stalinism and Maoism, each a flagrantly right-wing movement that operated under the auspices of "Marxism".) A cult is a cult, regardless of its pretenses.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The vast majority of the figures listed at the beginning of this essay were Deists (non-religious, yet positing a divine Creator); few were full-fledged atheists. All were—for the most part—freethinkers (very close to "0"). This is no coincidence. When we list what may well be the 128 greatest thinkers of modern history, and 121 of them are primarily secular, a trend becomes quite clear. The best thinkers have always been those who are least religious BECAUSE they were least religious. This correlation is not merely circumstantial; it is a matter of palpable causation. After all, eschewing dogmatic systems is the sine qua non of all progress. We can thus thank secularism, not religionism, for any (real) progress that has been made in human society. In case after case after case, this trend is made more and more evident.

In the West, possible exceptions to the trend are quite telling. Nicholas of Cusa, Desiderus Erasmus, Nicole Oresme, Giordano Bruno, Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, Blaise Pascal, William of Ockham, John Wycliff, John Adams, and Soren Kierkegaard were quasi-Christian. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was **formally** a Christian. This circumstance did not preclude these men from making the valuable contributions they made. They made such contributions not by becoming MORE dogmatic, but by thinking in creative, new ways that thwarted the "conventional wisdom" that they'd inherited. Whatever insights they offered were not predicated on received doctrine. [No Tycho Brahe mustn't be counted, as he promoted geocentrism, failed to advance Copernicus, and was overshadowed by the achievements of Galileo and Kepler.]

These men were able to accomplish what they accomplish insofar as they engaged in secular thinking. Likewise, someone like Paul Dirac, who sporadically subscribed to science-couched "mysticism", can't be counted as "religious" so much as "ad hoc superstitious" (in a way that had nothing to do with his contributions to human knowledge). Dirac explicitly denounced religiosity as being out of touch with

Reality. Someone like Thomas Newcomen was a British Baptist, yet, like Erasmus or Pascal or John Adams, can't attribute his achievements to any religiosity he may have harbored. (The same goes for well-known scientists like Thomas Bayes and Freeman Dyson—each quasi-Christian.)

Indeed, it's not enough to merely note that the greatest minds in history weren't the greatest minds because they were religious. We must go further, and assert that the greatest minds in history were the greatest minds insofar as they were secular.

Martin Luther—a very devout man who made crucial headway in civil rights activism—illustrates this point well. Though he remained tied to his Faith, the progress he made is attributable to his challenging—even if incompletely—entrenched dogmatism, and emancipating himself—even if only partially—from groupthink. We could say that he went from perhaps a 7 to 5 on the Ph Scale of religiosity-secularity.

Time after time, it is clear that the insights of such men were not attributable to any religiosity they may have harbored. (They certainly did not accomplish what they did because they started reading the Bible more closely...or by becoming more dogmatic.) Dr. King essentially became a cosmopolitan Deist as far as his public civil rights advocacy went. He appealed to secular (i.e. humanist) values even as he often articulated himself via the Abrahamic idiom. Mahatma Gandhi was a Jain / Hindu, yet accomplished what he accomplished by transcending any religious affiliation, just as Akbar The Great (Islam) and Mevlana (Sufism) did before him.

When a devout medical doctor attributes his achievements in the operating room to God's will, he's being stupendously disingenuous. In doing so, he is short-changing not only his own abilities, but disparaging the education he received and the advances made in medical science that equipped him (advances which owe nothing to ancient scriptures, sacred doctrine, or anyone's professed devoutness).

We can thank a deity-of-choice all we want for the headway made in, say, cancer research, but the supernatural had nothing to do with it. If we were to, say, cure cancer, attributing the development to Allah / Yahweh / Christ / Kim Il Sung would only demonstrate a desperate urge to cling to a coveted omni-rationalization. (Should we attribute Frege's inauguration of modern logic to his fascism? Surely, a fascist wouldn't hesitate to do so. We'd be right to deem the claim preposterous... like attributing the invention of Algebra to Islam.)

Knowing what is salient and what is beside the point is the key to such explanations. If a Unificationist engineer designs the next great mode of transportation (using clean energy), shall he attribute his accomplishment to the “True Parents” (the reverends Moon) that founded his religion? Should the Scientologist that’s helped the needy attribute his good works to L. Ron Hubbard? If a Lutheran cures cancer, does this in any way lend more credence to the dogmas of his church? When a Mormon gives to the poor, is this a knock-down argument for Joseph Smith’s claims? We mustn’t confuse “because of” with “in spite of” when offering explanations for noble deeds.

Even Martin Luther himself challenged the religious establishment on secular grounds, thereby initiating the Reformation. That he didn’t become completely secular (he retained much of his religiosity) doesn’t mean that his dogmatism wasn’t diminished by his iconoclastic move—a shift “downward” on the Ph scale. The same could be said for John Wycliffe, Duns Scotus, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas. (In his enlightenment, Spinoza went from what may have been a “4” to a “0”.)

Institutionalized dogmatism has consistently been the primary impediment to—not a facilitator of—the advance of scientific knowledge and of human rights. If religion had played a more marginal role in society for the last two millennia, the Enlightenment would surely have happened many, many centuries earlier than it did. Had that been the case, civil society may well have been inaugurated pursuant to the demise of the Roman Empire. (For more on this point, see my essay on Secularism In History.)

Alas, religion ushered in—and prolonged—the Dark Ages. The evidence is as conclusive as evidence can possibly get: The Catholic Church and Islam retarded the evolution of human society—each in its own time and place. Often neglected is the fact that the Dark Ages **were dark for a reason**: Human progress was all but arrested for over a millennium, philosophy and science stagnated, democracy delayed, century after century after century—with a few flickers of light here and there by those who were able to stray from the ambient religiosity.

The Dark Ages didn’t happen because people weren’t religious enough. It took the Reformation / Renaissance to “shake things up”, challenge the established order, buck the conventional thinking, and catalyze the process of secularization we now call the Enlightenment. Though flawed and jittery, this process had a palpable upward trend: less hidebound dogmatism, more forward-thinking critical inquiry.



Setbacks have almost always occurred as a result of cult activity: the KKK, Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism, Revisionist Zionism, the G.O.P... Such movements stunt free-thought, suppress intellectual activity, abet dogmatism, foster groupthink, and thereby **sustain or exacerbate societal dysfunction**. These social “cancers” are often quite malignant: they demand “loyalty” and submission in order to operate. This degenerate *modus operandi* involves compliance with prescribed rules, obedience of authority, and conformity to imposed norms. No criticism of the established order is allowed. Critical reflection is stunted. Independent thinking is impeded. Free inquiry is deemed heretical. Heterodoxy is treated as subversive activity—and quashed. In such a scheme, one must cow-tow to the anointed creed... lest one be deemed a criminal. (If there is “heresy” posited as a crime, then we can be quite sure cult activity is afoot.)

As Timothy Ferris noted, “Science demands free, open discussion and publication, not only in order to circulate fresh information and ideas but to expose them to lively criticism. A totalitarian regime can afford little of either.” (The Science of Liberty, p 199) So when I look at heterodox Muslims like the five luminaries listed above, I see Enlightenment thinkers who were able to transcend their own religiosity...just as when I see a Martin Luther King Jr., a Montesquieu, a Maimonides (to a small degree), or a Gandhi. Thank goodness for their secular impulses.

Thomas Jefferson once said: “All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their back, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of god.” Spoken like a true Deist. Denis Diderot once stated: “All things must be examined, debated, and investigated without exception and without regard for anyone’s feelings. We must ride roughshod over all these ancient puerilities, overturn the barriers that reason never erected, give back to the arts and sciences the liberty that is so precious to them... We have for quite some time needed a reasoning age when men would no longer seek the rules in classical authors, but rather in nature.”

If only we’d listened to Thomas Paine in the late 18th century, the civil rights movement would have happened in the early 1800’s, not in the late 1900’s. Alas, human ignorance has momentum: the inertia of defective institutions has sustained defective thinking. Widespread fealty to primitive ways of thinking impeded the ability of great minds to effect positive change. Only when people stopped

fetishizing passages in sacred books and cow-towing to demagogues did mankind awaken from its dogmatic slumber. We're still waking up...always edging a step closer to a secular world.

POSTSCRIPT:

Inevitably, I have received much feedback about key figures that I failed to mention in my catalogue of luminaries. I omitted statesmen from the listing, if only because statesmen are a different kind of luminary (i.e. not accurately categorized as "great thinkers"). Thus, Teddy Roosevelt, arguably one of the greatest statesmen of the 20th century, was not mentioned. Neither were Che Guevara or Nelson Mandela, also two iconic figures. Needless to say, all were secular—thereby further corroborating the essay's thesis. Meanwhile, I already included Kierkegaard, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. in the discussion.

I also already addressed Nicholas of Cusa, Erasmus, Giordano Bruno, Nicole Oresme, William of Ockham, Blaise Pascal, Thomas Aquinas, John Wycliff, and Duns Scotus in the discussion of "religious" philosophers. (And no, Saul of Tarsus, Jerome, Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, Benedict of Nursia, Marcion of Sinope, and Anselm of Canterbury were not great thinkers.) As explained in the essay, these seven men were theologians who were able to transcend their Faith in order to glean insights based on non-religious thought. If anything, they illustrate the point being made; they certainly don't refute it. (We should be reminded that Giordano Bruno was an anti-Catholic pantheist, burned at the stake for his heresy.) Kierkegaard—one of the greatest thinkers in history—is a very interesting case, as he embraced Faith. The key is that he did so outside of any specific Church. Neither formal doctrine nor official dogmas informed his philosophy. He was spiritual, but not "religious" in the conventional sense.

Regarding Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, Ayn Rand, and Milton Friedman, we could simply say that they were certainly not profound thinkers—and just leave it at that. It is helpful to point out that their contributions in no way helped mankind...and in many ways fostered an economic ideology that has done tremendous damage. Nevertheless, even if we did oblige their followers and count these four figures as noble thinkers, it's a moot point anyway. They were all secular; and they're defecting thinking had nothing to do with their lack of religiosity. (And no, the traditionalist / monarchist, Edmund Burke, was not a great thinker; he was the quintessence of the counter-Enlightenment. He doesn't belong in this essay.)

I have chosen not to include martyrs like Boethius and Joan D’Arc simply because their primary claim to fame was, well, being martyrs. Though both may have had good intentions, their contributions to human knowledge / the advance of society was insignificant. Boethius’ “Consolations of Philosophy” is a moving and poignant work OF ART. But this survey does not include artists. (Boethius’ work falls in the same genre as, say, Proust’s “Remembrance Of Things Past”, Orwell’s “Homage To Catalonia”, or Goethe’s “From My Life: Poetry & Truth”.) As Salafis and other religious fanatics remind us even today, martyrdom in itself is not a noble achievement. Both Boethius and Joan were ardent religious believers who were—for the most part—well-meaning and dedicated to their cause. (One might even call them zealots.) Be that as it may, they don’t qualify under the criteria with which the present essay is concerned.

Inevitably, there were comments about Mother Theresa. Indeed, we should salute her for her noble efforts to help the poor. However, it seems she may have done as much harm as good—by discouraging birth control in impoverished areas that desperately needed it. The fact is that religion was not a prerequisite for her probity; dogmatism was not required for her compassion. But only religion could have persuaded an otherwise well-meaning person that birth control was a bad idea—a nutty belief for any sober-minded person to harbor.

(Regarding Catholicism in general: The evidence that any Pope or Cardinal has ever been a bona fide intellectual is dubious at best. We should stop pretending that high-ranking clerics—of **any** religion—are high-ranking clerics because they have great minds. Only hyper-dogmatism could bring a person to such a station.)

Another possible exception to the prevailing trend was the French political thinker, Alex de Tocqueville, a liberal Catholic who adamantly supported the separation of church and state. Tocqueville recognized the need for religion to be separated from politics in any genuinely democratic society. Needless to say, his religion did not inform his insights in any significant way. To wit: His contributions can not be attributed to any religiosity he may have harbored.

Comments regarding Louis Pasteur are duly noted. However, I think this is grasping at straws. The degree to which his thinking was in keeping with Catholicism is, to put it mildly, minimal. There is no doubt that he was personally influenced by the French Catholic milieu in which he lived. There are highly conflicting accounts by relatives as to how much he considered himself “Catholic”. He did not actively practice, yet seemed to embrace the heritage. Needless to say, he is not a counterfactual, as his

life and thinking was certainly not defined by Catholicism. That's the bottom line. In his environment, utter absence of affiliations with the prevailing Church would have been close to impossible. (Let's say that he'd be a "2", at most, on the Ph scale.) That he wasn't MORE religious speaks volumes.

Another figure mentioned in the feedback is groundbreaking geneticist, Francis Collins, who is now an ardent Christian. But he is no counterfactual. Indeed, all the important work he did for mankind he did while he was secular. In no way can his achievements be even remotely attributed to religiosity. Ever since his "conversion", he's done little other than churn out apologetics while pursuing celebrity.

That said, there are three other bona fide anomalies: Lord Kelvin (Presbyterian), Joseph Priestley (Unitarian), and Robert Boyle (Anglican). Not coincidentally, these three denominations represent the most liberal versions of Christianity. Like Kepler (unorthodox Lutheran), de Montaigne (liberal Catholic), Cauchy (liberal Catholic), Euler (non-denominational Christian), Faraday (Sandemanian Presbyterian), Maxwell (Presbyterian), and Heisenberg (unorthodox Lutheran), these three are—indeed—rare exceptions to the overwhelming trend of secularism amongst the best minds in history. That makes 10.

A thought experiment may illustrate the point:

Imagine for a moment what the effect on human development would have been if **all** of the aforementioned luminaries (**every one of them**), from the day he was born, had been persuaded to become a strict, doctrinal cleric—in whatever religion. (This hypothetical requires assuming that none of these people were constitutionally incapable of being dogmatic. We'll indulge in this dubious assumption for the sake of argument.) Such speculation—and, indeed, all it could possibly be is speculation—would seem to reveal what the role of secularism has actually been on human society. The result of such an alteration would be—to put it mildly—devastating to human civilization. None of the progress effected via this esteemed canon of people would have happened. NONE.

Furthermore, imagine if every one of the luminaries, instead of engaging in free inquiry, opted instead to devote his entire life to spreading religion, to more diligently "studying" only his sacred book, and persuading everyone else to do the same (i.e. to be more religious). How would things have turned out differently? The answer is surely too obvious to mention.



In sum: Anyone who claims that religiosity has played a crucial role in the betterment of human society is in need of a history lesson.

Here are 60 MORE notable “great thinkers of history” (not included in the lists in the main essay):

1. William Godwin
2. Pierre de Fermat
3. Charles Augustine de Coulomb
4. Herman von Helmholtz
5. Gregor Mendel (affiliated with an Augustinian Abbey)
6. Louis de Broglie
7. Daniel Bernoulli
8. Jean-Jacques Rousseau
9. Jean-Baptiste le Rond d’Alembert
10. Jeremy Bentham
11. Ludwig Boltzman
12. Friedrich Schiller
13. Henry Sedgwick
14. Robert Hooke
15. Wilhelm von Humboldt
16. Ernst Mach
17. Joseph Schumpeter
18. Harriet Tubman
19. Jane Addams (humanist with Presbyterian / Unitarian affiliations)
20. Dorothy Parker
21. Ella Baker
22. Ida B. Wells
23. Alice Paul
24. T.H. Huxley
25. Charles Dickens
26. John Dalton (Quaker)
27. Frantz Fanon
28. George Santayana
29. Isaiah Berlin
30. Emma Goldman
31. H.L. Mencken
32. Emile Durkheim



33. Antonio Gramsci
34. Franz Boaz
35. Roland Barthes
36. Clifford Geertz
37. Walter Lippman
38. Karl Jaspers
39. Linus Pauling
40. Jonas Salk
41. Jean Piaget
42. Joseph Campbell
43. Michel Foucault
44. Edwin Hubble
45. Herbert Marcuse
46. Bernard Williams
47. Reinhold Niebuhr (Protestant)
48. G.E.M. Anscombe (liberal Catholic)
49. Edward Said
50. Paul Samuelson
51. James Tobin
52. Robert Solow
53. Michael Walzer
54. Peter Strawson
55. Donald Davidson
56. David Lewis
57. Derek Parfit
58. Stephen Toulman
59. Steven Weinberg
60. James Watson / Francis Crick (partnership)

As it so happens, except for THREE, **all these figures were primarily secular too**. Niebuhr was a very liberal Protestant. G.E.M. Anscombe was Catholic. And Gregor Mendel was affiliated with an Austrian Abbey (though we can be quite certain that his association with clerics had nothing to do with his discoveries). A few others in this last list may have had brushes with religion (e.g. Rousseau), but none of the others could be said to be “religious”.



The issue invariably comes up as to whether or not I was being strategically “selective” in compiling the above lists. This is a fair concern. The danger of confirmation bias is ever-present. As a responsible scholar, I must ask myself: In listing over 200 prominent figures, was I cherry-picking the great minds of history for primarily **secular** examples?

In other words: Is the sample-set “rigged”?

As I mentioned in the introduction, I’ll leave that for the reader to judge. If I have offered a skewed listing, then—please—bring to my attention what major luminaries I missed whose crucial insights were predicated on religiosity. That is: **A key figure whose contributions to mankind can be attributed to his being religious.** I request that any bias I may have brought to my attention. If religion can be thanked for any societal progress, I’d love to hear about it.

It’s safe to say that if most scholars compiled their own list of, say, the 200 most important minds in modern history, the lists would not be identical. Nevertheless, almost all of them would include the vast majority of the names mentioned in this essay. (For more possibilities, see part 2.)

Other names that could be mentioned may include:

- Niccolò Machiavelli
- Charles Berkeley
- Thomas Hobbes
- Étienne Bonnot de Condillac
- Nicolas Malebranche
- Johann Heinrich Lambert
- John Adams
- Christian Wolff
- G.W.F. Hegel
- Leon Foucault
- Thomas Edison
- Edmund Husserl
- Walter Benjamin
- Martin Heidegger
- Sigmund Freud
- Karl Jung
- Otto Rank



- Jack London
- George Bernard Shaw
- Jean-Paul Sartre
- David Armstrong
- Karl Polanyi
- Gilbert Ryle
- Alfred Adler
- Erich Fromm
- B.F. Skinner
- Lionel Trilling
- Michel Foucault
- Eric Hoffer
- Huston Smith
- Alasdair MacIntyre
- Stephen Jay Gould
- David Bohm
- Thomas Nagel
- Saul Kripke

Though some of the work of such figures is marginally important, it is questionable as to whether these popular names contributed as significantly to the advance of knowledge as the figures already listed. (For example, Tesla trumps Edison. We should give credit where credit is due.)

Even so, **33 out of 35** of THESE figures were secular. The two exceptions in this last list are MacIntyre (who was a liberal Roman Catholic) and Adams (who was a liberal New England Congregationalist—which is now dubbed “Unitarian”). Both could be said to have been toward the lower end of the Ph scale.) So we may go ahead and include them in our survey...and thereby only further corroborate the thesis.

[NOTE: Jonathan Edwards, Thomas More, Martin Buber, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Hilaire Belloc, and Alvin Plantinga were theologians, not philosophers. None were great thinkers. William Payne Alston and Robert Adams are borderline cases. Edmund Burke was an anti-Enlightenment thinker, and thus the antithesis of a genuine intellectual. Admittedly said a couple quasi-intelligent things. For example: “It’s not what a lawyer tells me I MAY do; but what humanity, reason, and justice tell me I OUGHT to do.” Unfortunately, Burke did not follow his own advice.]

With this postscript, an interesting parallel is revealed. We now have three sample-sets of many of history's greatest thinkers, one with 28, one with 100 (plus 15 others mentioned), and this last sampling of 60 + 4 (plus 35 others mentioned). In the first list, 1 was religious; in the second, 6 were religious; and in the post-script, 3 were religious. (Boarderline cases like Kierkegaard, M. L. King Jr., Mendel, Neibhur, Anscombe, MacIntyre, and Adams were addressed.) This leaves us with 10 of 242 of history's biggest contributors to mankind's knowledge (i.e. society's progress) being religious: **just over 4%**. (If we count the 7 boarderline cases, that brings it to 7%. If we split the difference, then, we might consider it to be 5.5%.)

Almost 95% secular. This indicates a clear trend...**especially when we take into account that almost all of these figures lived in a world where religiosity was overwhelmingly prevalent.**

As already discussed, I'm omitting the likes of S. Kierkegaard, G. Bruno, N. Oresme, T. Aquinas, D. Scotus, Maimonides, J. Wycliff, B. Pascal, William of Ockham, and Erasmus—as they are difficult to categorize (in terms of the secular basis of their contributions vis a vis the role of their Faith). They were each quasi-religious, yet bucked the establishment and achieved what they achieved on secular grounds.

Accusations of “cherry picking” and “confirmation bias” hold no water. Again, the invitation is open: For those who would like to mention great minds in human history that I omitted who were very religious (or examples of how religion contributed to the advance in human knowledge), I'm all ears. The likes of John Adams, Louis Pasteur, Max Weber, and Alex de Tocqueville would no more attribute their insights / achievements to religion than would John Rawls or Gandhi.

So there we have it: Only **5.5%** of the greatest minds in history were religious in some way—and, even then, accomplished what they accomplished in spite of, not because of, their measured religiosity.

To reiterate: This is especially striking because the majority of these figures lived in a time and place in which the overwhelming majority of their countrymen were highly religious. The verdict couldn't be more clear: For all of the magnificent insights, discoveries and advances in society since the Dark Ages (an era defined by religion), we have religion to thank for almost none of it. Thank heavens for secularism.



Incidentally, 5.5% is roughly in keeping with the current percentage of NAS and NSF members (arguably, the preeminent scientists in the nation at present) who claim to be religious in some way. The verdict seems to be that secular thought is overwhelmingly pre-eminent in the highest achievements of mankind—both throughout modern history and in the present day. This verdict is difficult to ignore, as 95% clearly constitutes a trend. The issue becomes: What conclusions can we draw from such proportions? While that may be up for debate, one thing that we can confidently assert is the following: Religion does not play a crucial role in human progress, while free-thought has been indispensable.