Secularism 101

Misconceptions Of Secularism:

In his book, A Secular Age, Charles Taylor defines “secularism” as a kind of “loss”.He holds that the secular—by definition—involves absence of the divine.This is, of course, nonsense.Nevertheless, many have taken his book seriously.How could this be, when his thesis is wrong on such an elementary level? (For a brief book review on Taylor’s specious diatribe, see my essay, A Misplaced Emptiness.)

The present essay was written to address various mis-perceptions about secularism–mis-impressions demonstrated by Taylor’s book. Contrary to Taylor’s depictions, not only are perfectly secular treatments of the divine common, but—some would argue—they are the only sensical treatment of “divine”.(Meanwhile, one need to posit a divinity to be secular.With secularism, the spiritual is optional—a personal choice.)

One must wonder how a person can write an entire book on “secularism” without even knowing what the term actually means vis a vis those who are secular.(Of course, anyone can write a book on chrysanthemums if he’s at liberty to define “chrysanthemum” however he sees fit.By proceeding in this way, one can make oneself the world’s greatest expert on anything.)

Taylor isn’t alone.There are many distorted depictions of secularism.So it may be in order to set the record straight as to what it means.(After all, it is not at all a complicated concept.)

·In terms of an individual, secularity isn’t hostility toward being religious (or toward those who are religious); it is **sheer lack of religiosity**.

·In social terms, secularism is not anti-religion; it is **absence of religion**.

One of the most idiotic depictions of secularism comes from the professional charlatan, G.K. Chesterton.Chesterton once said that the problem with the man who doesn’t believe in god isn’t that he believes in nothing; it’s that he believes in anything.Such an absurd statement could only come from a man thoroughly deluded by his own credulity.

This was a textbook case of projection: It is, after all, the religious dogmatist who is ready to believe in anything, and the freethinker who is constitutionally judicious with his claims.Chesterton, a man who had prostituted his mind to become a Christian apologist, had the gall to accuse the freethinker of being epistemically promiscuous when—of course—it was he who had abdicated all intellectual integrity so as to embrace whatever he saw fit.The beauty of freethough is that one will NOT believe in just anything, unlike the Chestertons of the world.

To be secular is to espouse only propositions that have verifiable grounding, and to be meticulous in vetting one's convictions.To be secular is to not be personally involved in religious thinking or activity.To be secular is to resist dogmatism and subject all things to critical analysis.To be secular is to strive to what Kant called "maturity": to have the courage to be autonomous.

Contrary to Taylor's contorted caricatures, if a community is secular, it is NOT RELIGIOUS.It is, essentially, "outside of" religion.Thus, secularism is the state of being meta-religious—to not be subordinated to a dogmatic system.Cult activity is, by definition, the opposite of secularism, as it involves groupthink instead of individual autonomy, discourages rather than encourages free / critical inquiry, and is based on dogmatism rather than being antithetical to it.

Put another way: Secularity is the condition of a-religious-ness.If religiosity were sexuality, secularity would equal asexuality.In other words, secularity is to religiosity what asexuality is to sexuality.(The key difference, of course, is that secularity is a choice while sexuality is not.)

Someone may want to explain the following to Charles Taylor before he writes another book.

Secularism As A Force For Diversity:

Religionism is, by its very nature, a force for homogenization.Cult activity thrives off of homogeneity of thought and of behavior—demands for compliance, conformity, submission, obedience.By stark contrast, secularism is the optimal environment for diversity, for independent thinking.In other words, secularism is the primary ground for pluralism.A secular State is the only state that can facilitate a pluralistic society.This is because only a meta-religious state can be a categorically impartial State (with no vested interest in any particular culture).Only a State that transcends tribalism and sacred doctrine is conducive to FULL tolerance of diversity—even celebration of diversity.Indeed, secularism is multiculturalism's best friend.

What those like Taylor fail to understand is the following: Secularism isn't ITSELF a culture; it's a CONTEXT FOR culture.Secularism is symbiotic with cosmopolitanism, while religionism is symbiotic with parochialism / provincialism.Even if every person in a society were secular, there would still be plenty of space for diverse lifestyles to abound.Meta-religion is not itself a religion.

Cosmopolitanism is the "playing field" on which different cultures may emerge—within certain boundary conditions.Secularism is the context within which pluralism can flourish in a healthy way (i.e. in a manner consonant with a civil society).

The Place Of The Divine in a Secular World:

Rebutting Taylor's main thesis is quite easy.First, it is important to understand that secularism is a form of liberation, not of "loss".It is a crucial element of enlightenment, and is the context in which any/all edification transpires.It is the medium for critical analysis, for impartiality / objectivity, and for all manner of bona fide erudition.It is the only valid basis for an objective ethical framework, and it is the only mode for authentic spirituality.

As Taylor would have it, a secular life is bereft of wonder and enchantment.In his queer depiction of the secular, a world of secularism would be a world somehow deprived of the sublime.Taylor couldn't be farther from the truth.Quite the contrary is—in fact and in theory—the case.Secularism enables us to appreciate the beauty of the world with lucidity, to grasp the sublime with sobriety.It enables us to do so without pretense, without illusion, without having to pretend.Moreover, it is in the secular context that one can forge a genuine connection with the divine—a naturalistic conception of the divine void of all superstition.

Secularity offers a spiritual dimension to one's life without having to delude oneself.The divine in a secular world, then, is far more authentic than in a religious world.In a secular milieu, being "in touch with" the divine is genuine; it is not contrived as it is in religious activity.With secular spirituality, we don't have to delude ourselves, subjugate / subordinate ourselves to some authority structure, conform to some prescribed choreography, comply with commands, or submit to rules imposed by some master.

The divine in a secular world, then, is less contrived.It allows for the positing of the divine without resorting to dogmatism or belief in the supernatural.Secularism excises delusion and superstition from spirituality.A freethinker is someone who doesn't need to engage in groupthink or subscribe to dogma in order to have a spiritual dimension to his life.

One can be secular without being an atheist just as one can be an atheist without being secular—although the overlap is significant.Many secularists posit the divine—though are certainly not "theists" in the conventional sense.Deists are the prime example of this.Being secular, they don't personify the divine, or render it a deity to be worshipped.Other secularists are agnostic.Some are atheists, some are anti-theists, and some don't even give the matter a second thought—thereby eschewing all labels.

Meanwhile, some atheists are not secular.Such people render atheism itself a kind of cult activity—demanding fealty, allegiance, loyalty, and compliance.The most obvious example of this is Ayn Rand's cult of "Objectivism".More recently (if not as severely), Victor Stenger has started to go down this road—with his eminently unimpressive book, The New Atheism.So we should take care not to conflate tribalistic atheism with genuine secularism.

The Oxymoron Of "Authoritarian" / "Fundamentalist" Secularism:

Of all the misconceptions of secularism that should be dispelled, the bizarre are notions of "authoritarian" or "fundamentalist" secularism."Authoritarian secularism" and "fundamentalist" secularism are both oxymoronic. Secularity is categorical absence of religiosity.Only religiosity can become fundamentalist.Only an institution can consolidate power.Only a hierarchal social structure can enact top-down control, and thus become authoritarian.Secularism is neither an institution nor a hierarchal social structure.

Imagine saying that lack of pathology is itself a kind of pathology.The term "authoritarian secularism" involves a blatant contradiction.It's as if to insinuate that one can "force" someone to be "free".One may as well coin the terms "totalitarian emancipation" or "enslaved autonomy".

If a formal system is “fundamentalist” or “authoritarian” in nature, it is—by definition—employing some kind of cult activity.In other words: It is, by it’s very nature, the antithesis of secular.Just because various cult movements have been conducted in the name of “secularism” (as pretense) doesn’t mean that (genuine) secularism is “just another strain of cult activity”.Labels don’t make Reality.

How can one be a fundamentalist freethinker?It would be like positing an “acidic base” on the Ph scale.There is a spectrum with pure base at 14 and pure acid at 0, with degrees between.Insofar as something is more one, it is less the other.If secularism is basicity and religionism is acidity, then we essentially have a Ph scale for cult activity.At one end of the spectrum is undiluted religionism while at the other end is pure secularism.Freethought (free inquiry, individual autonomy, and critical analysis) acts as a kind of alkalinity. (For more, see my essay, The Ph Scale of Religiosity.)

Go to one end of the Ph scale, and things like the Gestapo, the Inquisition, and the Taliban happen.Go to the other end, and things like Amnesty International, the U.S. Constitution, and Engineers Without Boarders happen.That there is a colossal difference between such things is obvious; the key is WHY there is a difference.What is the difference based on?

The poles of the religionism-secularism spectrum offer a cogent explanation.At one end, things like the Peoples’ Temple, Juche, and Hassidism happen.At the other end, things like Human Rights Watch, Planned Parenthood, and modern medicine happen.

At one end exist people like John Hagee, Heinrich Himmler, Pol Pot, Kim Jong Il, and Ayman al-Zawahiri.At the other end exist people like David Hume, Thomas Paine, Carl Sagan, Albert Einstein, and Isaac Asimov.When the Ph is 14, fanatical clerics and cult leaders thrive.When the Ph is closer to 0, the world’s best scholars and civil rights activists thrive.This is no coincidence.

The illustrations of the spectrum are endless: The CBN and Wahhabi TV at one end; NPR and PBS at the other end.Smith’s Book of Mormon and Qutb’s In the Shadow of the Koran at one end; Paine’s Rights of Man and Rawls’ Theory of Justice at the other end.The logic of the spectrum isn’t difficult to follow.The different consequences of each pole are quite clear to see.

Anything bad that has happened in a secular context has happened in spite of secularism, not because of it.Nobody has ever engaged in iniquitous activity because they were insufficiently dogmatic or had engaged in too much sound reasoning.By contrast, when bad things happen in the context of cult activity, it is generally a direct result of the cult activity.

The typical organization that forms when religionism is undiluted is the Muslim Brotherhood.Meanwhile, the typical organization that forms in a secular climate is Doctors Without Boarders.What's going on here?Why is there such a difference?

Alas, the way some religious apologists talk, you'd think Soviet Russia and Maoist China were dysfunctional because they were too SECULAR.Such polemicists are forced to insist that such States were paragons of secularism.The way they speak, one would think that these horrible places were bastions of cosmopolitanism and free inquiry."Behold the consequences of secularism!" they declare.But what was the problem with these regimes?Was it that they hadn't adequately institutionalized a dogmatic system?

"Soviet Russia and Maoist China: exemplars of secularism."This is a peculiar claim to make.What on Earth are religious apologists implying?"See what happens when not enough people are Christian?!"What they fail to understand is that a DIFFERENT religion doesn't mean an ABSENCE OF religion.Such places were about as secular as Vatican City.If North Korea or Nazi Germany aren't called totalitarian theocracies, then what does theocracy even mean?Cult activity of a different brand is still cult activity.But by employing religionist Newspeak, un-approved cult activity can be conveniently labeled "secularism".The lesson learned: We need MORE religion.

Labeling such States prototypes of "secularism" would lead one to think that they may well have been shining examples of humanism.After all, the only moral system to be based explicitly on secular grounds is Humanism.But were these States exemplars of the humanist ideal?Were they places where individual autonomy, civil rights, diversity, and critical analysis were actively encouraged?Hardly.Au contraire, like North Korea and Nazi Germany, they were the antithesis of secular.They no more represented humanist values than did the Taliban in Afghanistan.They were prototypical examples of cult activity, and thus examples of the same kind of phenomenon underlying fundamentalist Christianity / Islam / Judaism…or Scientology's Sea Org…or Branch Davidianism.

How can one tell?

Such States boasted a deified demagogue, replete with cult of personality and mythical hagiography.The regimes depended on groupthink, compulsory idolatry, and institutionalized dogmatism.They established a sacred doctrine…and a sacred agenda.In other words, these places were the opposite of secular societies.

Tolerance?Pluralism?Free-thought?Civil liberties?Anti-establishment activity?Such things were forbidden.Instead, there was top-down control of thought and behavior according to the sacred doctrine.That's called "fundamentalist religion", not "secularism".Alas, a weed by any other name smells just as suspect.

"Nazism wasn't a religion; it was a godless political movement."A host of charlatans are only too eager to partake in such rhetorical shenanigans.They would like nothing better than to portray secularism as something that it isn't.…then give credit to religion for all the things that have happened in spite of religion.They can then blame secularism for all the bad things caused by cult activity.So they proclaim with a straight face that human rights, the promotion of civil liberties, and even democracy itself are based on religionism.Could a claim be any more preposterous?

It works fantastically well when words have been utterly stripped of their real meaning.

Secularism & (f)aith: The Varieties of "faith" worth having:

There is always faith (as opposed to Faith) involved in secularity.It is the faith of judiciously allotted trust, measured confidence, and prudent optimism.Such a faith operates within the bounds of Reason, and is thus non-dogmatic.It is, after all, secular faith.

Life is not possible without such faith; it is required for both pragmatic and psychological reasons.Daily activity consists of circumstances in which it is not possible to have complete certainty.A "leap of faith", then, is sometimes required.The "catch" is that such a leap is done based on a well-reasoned assessment of relevant information.This is a discerning faith, born of some degree of independent thought and a modicum of critical reflection.

We mustn't conflate such rational faith with dogmatic Faith.There is, after all, a difference between hope and delusion.Engaging in positive thinking need not involve deluding oneself.Secular faith, then, is the only kind of faith worth having—the kind of faith necessary for a meaningful, fulfilling, prosperous life.

Examples of judiciously allotted trust: To be convinced of the probity of a person's intentions or capabilities.To estimate the degree of a person's responsibility to be sufficiently high to warrant putting one's trust in them (i.e. to "count on" someone).To have faith that one's spouse won't perpetrate infidelities or that a friend will return borrowed money need not involve credulity; it can be based on a well-honed "intuition".Here, one can't be completely certain about such things, but one is nevertheless willing to give a person the benefit of the doubt.Life without this faith would be utterly stagnant.

Examples of measured confidence: To have faith in the aptitude of a mentor—or in the abilities of a teammate.("I'm convinced that you are capable of accomplishing that task…based on what I currently know.")To wager that one's enterprise will yield fruit or that a plan will work—based upon tacit estimations.Often, this is based on instinct or a "gut feeling".It is more than idle speculation; it is based on an educated guess or a weighing of probabilities.Without such faith, one would be overly skeptical / cynical, and thus never make any headway with anything…or never believe anything.

Examples of prudent optimism: To have faith that certain efforts will prove successful.("I believe in you.")To act on the assumption that circumstances / fortunes will improve.Here, faith is the vehicle for hope.Such faith is more than merely wishing that things will get better (or passionately desiring that everything will work out in the end); it's placing a calculated bet that it will, in fact, be so.

Prudent optimism, then, is a vital kind of secular faith.It's about maintaining a positive attitude.This is a matter of being resilient: "keeping your chin up", "rolling with the punches", "weathering the storm", and "rising to the occasion".Such faith involves refusing to be discouraged by setbacks.

This means undertaking endeavors with determination…without being unrealistic or foolhardy.It means forging on in the face of adversity…without slipping into delusion.Such faith keeps us motivated—within reason.The key is to keep your spirits up without deluding oneself.Prudence, after all, is caution coupled with a good attitude.Keeping one's ambition in check without snuffing it out is the mean between two extremes.

Life is riddled with uncertainties.Short of being able to KNOW things will be so, we must often proceed AS IF things will be so.When we base such suppositions on reasonable / informed estimates, we can often proceed un-problematically.When the faith is ill-placed, we say that one is being foolish.

Secular (rational) faith plays a crucial role in a secular life:

·Without being able to believe that our aspirations will prove worthwhile, endeavor loses impetus. Without secular faith, all ambition is defused.

·Without being able to trust others, cooperation loses its glue.Without secular faith, collaborative efforts fall apart.

The next time a religious apologist indicts secularism for being a life without “faith”, check to see what, exactly, he’s referring to.Once he defines “faith” in a reasonable way, he may realize that a secular life is the only life with worthwhile faith.For secular faith is a discerning faith, not a faith of unquestioning acceptance.It is a faith that is consummate with Reality, germane to sobriety, and consonant with a healthy dose of skepticism.

There is no greater thing to hear from a freethinker than the words: “I have faith in X” when X has proven worthy of that faith.This has nothing to do with the Faith found in religion; it has to do with Reason.Such faith doesn’t involve superstition or belief in the supernatural.Of course, one can be secular and foolish, but here, when one’s faith doesn’t work, it’s not because one wasn’t faithful enough.When it does work, there’s always a naturalistic explanation.

Secularism & Dogmatism:

This is not to say that secular dogmatism can’t exist.Indeed, non-religious dogmatism is quite common.The point is that religion is institutionalized dogmatism; not all dogmas are institutionalized.Thus, dogmatism may exist at any place along the religionism-secularism spectrum.The difference is that insofar as a dogma is secular in nature, it is not institutional in nature.Meanwhile, there is non-dogmatic spirituality, which is—invariably—secular spirituality.

The relation between dogmatism in the context of cult activity vis a vis dogmatism in the context of secularism is a complex matter.The former kind of dogmatism is more potent, more viral, more entrenched, more systematic, more efficient, due to

its institutional nature.It involves groupthink…as well as a formalized / systematized, top-down control mechanism.Such dogmatic systems remain ingrained due to well-established, structural forces.

On the other hand, secular dogmatism is more haphazard.It transpires on an individual-by-individual basis, and metastasizes for myriad reasons.It tends not to involve groupthink to a significant degree, as its dissemination tends not to be systematic.Personal superstitions are a common example.Believing the random urban legend is another example.Not all dogma come in the context of an ideology or are part of a belief system.

That said, blaming secularism for malignant dogmatism is like blaming a sexual freedom for pedophilia.Each time someone has a fatal heart attack while exercising, we don't conclude that exercise is bad for one's health.Correlation doesn't mean causation.Meanwhile, there is a direct causal link between cult activity and the dogmatism it fosters.Secularism isn't BASED ON dogmatism, while religionism is.

We are all dogmatic to some degree—in some ways due to cult activity, in some ways not.One can be completely secular yet still quite dogmatic, though it is far more likely to be dogmatic due to partaking in cult activity.

Playing With Words:

The trick: Change the meanings of words as you see fit in order to make things seem to be the way you want them to seem.And so cults often define "cults" as any cult activity that is not OUR cult activity.(MY cult activity is a "religion".)Superstitious people define "superstitions" as superstitions that aren't OUR superstitions.(MY superstition is a "belief".)Cult activity is always what the other guy is doing; superstitions are always the unfounded claims the other guy believes."When YOU do it, you're just being dogmatic; when I do it, I'm engaging in the noble enterprise of Faith."The cognitive dissonance is flagrant.

And so religious apologists simply define "secular" as religions they don't deem to be religions…thereby denying that anything that is genuinely secular even exists.Presumably, they do this in the hope that if the phenomenon is deprived of a label, people won't notice it when it happens.In this scheme, "bad" religion isn't considered religion, and is thus demonized as something else.Thus, demonized religions can't be called "religions".So things like Nazism and Maoism and Stalinism are deemed examples of "secularism".Meanwhile, what actually is secularism is associated with whatever we see occur with the demonized religions.

This is a linguistic bait and switch.In this scheme, if you're "secular", you're simply engaging in some alternate form of groupthink, dogmatism, and idolatry: a religion that we won't call "religion".(Here, we'll label any lack of ideology as if it is itself an ideology.)Then, we can point to such cult activity, and declare: "SEE what happens when people are 'secular'?"

This sham is based on a false equivalence: that bad religion isn't really "religion"…as if religion was analogous to science in this respect.The reality is this: Bad science isn't legitimate science; yet bad religion is still religion.Those like Taylor seem not to recognize this elementary distinction.Bad logic is illogic, not just another form of logic.Bad medicine is invalid medicine, not just another form of medicine.Meanwhile, dysfunctional cult activity is merely cult activity of a certain sort.

Lack of cult activity is not itself a form of cult activity; it is secularism.The moment we fail to employ the terms in this straight-forward way, we end up with a cluster-fuck of convoluted conceptual distortions…which seems to be exactly what religious apologists specialize in anyway.Go figure.

So the trick is simple: Take flagrant examples of cult activity (that are not of the form endorsed by the religious apologist) and label them "secular"…while taking examples of GENUINE secularism and caricaturing them as just another form of cult activity.In other words, darkness is just another form of light…and cold is just another manifestation of heat.Meanwhile, silence is a kind of noise (or is noise is a kind of silence?)In this way, Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism—each the epitome of cult activity—can then be portrayed as examples of "secularism"…while bona fide free-thought is just an illusion.Civil society is, it turns out, a mirage…and all we can ever hope to have is a religion-based civilization.Why?Because all we can EVER have is some kind of dogmatism.

Says the religious apologist: "MY dogmatism's better than yours; so pick mine."

Such semantic slights of hand are absurd—yet religious apologists expect us to be duped by them.If one holds that secularism involves just another form of dogmatism, then one may as well say that acidity is just a kind of alkalinity.Our Ph scale analogy consequently implodes.How convenient if one wants to make the case that everything is acidic.

Secularism is just a special kind of Faith?Okay.Well, then, is silence a special kind of noise?According to our new logic: yes.Sanity is ultimately its own kind of psychosis, sobriety is just another kind of intoxication, and health another form of sickness.Get

it?If free-thought is a form of dogmatism, then all bets are off.After all, nudity could just be considered a special kind of clothing, right?We could go on.In a world where secularism is just another kind of Faith, vernacular becomes an amorphous blob.Indeed, sophists often depend on a rigged lexicon so as to make their case seem credible.Even the brain-meltingly inane can seem plausible if the audience is credulous enough.

We can play the taxonomy game all day long…and have boatloads of fun obfuscating Reality.Are animals ultimately just a special kind of plant?If so, then what do these categories even mean?So it is: There aren't really any so-called "animals" in the world; it's all just PLANTS.Fine.Now what?

Fun-With-Words makes for some nifty mental gymnastics."I'm fanatical about not being fanatical" involves a paradox (just as does "I follow the rule to never follow rules" or "It's impervious to imperviousness" or "I'm allergic to allergies").Such linguistic contortions are fodder for amusing games, but they betray a misunderstanding of the meaning of the words being used.We'd be well advised to know the difference between secularism and religionism, just as it's useful to know the difference between silence and noise.

Secularism & Democracy:

Regarding the symbiosis of liberal democracy with secularism, Taylor also seems to be oblivious.What people like Taylor don't get is that genuine democracy is inherently secular.Free inquiry and critical analysis and individual autonomy are secular values, antithetical to the modus operandi of cult activity (i.e. religion).Taylor doesn't seem to recognize that all human progress has only ever happened due to SECULAR factors—and when in the context of religion, in spite of, not because of, the religion at hand.

Muhammad al-Khwarizmi didn't invent algebra because he suddenly started reading the Koran more closely.Avicenna of Bukhara didn't advance the science of medicine in the Middle East because he started adhering to Sharia law more strictly that his fellow Muslims.Any progress that transpired in the context of Islam does not have Islam to thank. (For more on this point, see my essays on the role of secularism in history.)

Duns Scotus didn't refine modal logic because he more thoroughly familiarized himself with the Pauline letters.John Locke didn't offer insights about democracy because he scrutinized church doctrine more diligently.Thomas Aquinas didn't

provide new philosophical ideas because he became MORE dogmatic.Martin Luther King Jr. didn't abet the civil rights movement because he became MORE religious than his bigoted Christian brethren. (After all, the Bible clearly endorses slavery.)Any progress that transpired in the context of Christianity does not have Christianity to thank.

Einstein didn't contribute to physics because he was studying the Talmud.Spinoza didn't inaugurate the Enlightenment because he became a more devout follower of Judaism than his Jewish neighbors.The tidbits of noble insight offered by Maimonides didn't derive from a more careful reading of the Torah.Any progress that transpired in the context of Judaism does not have Judaism to thank.

In each case, the thinker achieved what he achieved in spite of any religious influence in his life.Each man TRANSCENDED the ambient dogmatic system—while often articulating himself in the idiom with which he was familiar.We wouldn't attribute the great contributions of Aristotle to his belief in the Greek gods, would we?Why, then, would we attribute the noble insights of, say, Victor Frankl to the Pentateuch?

Meanwhile… Those "thinkers" who stuck with their religion, like Augustine of Hippo or Sayyid Qutb, offered humanity nothing but balderdash—concocting fodder for more extreme cult activity down the road.(Indeed, if no "prophet" or Pontiff or Ayatollah had ever existed, perhaps we may have skipped the Dark Ages altogether.)Alas, people posing as sages, like Saul of Tarsus, Rabbi Baal Shem Tov, and Muhammad al-Wahhab, sabotaged human progress by spurring MORE cult activity.&npp;bsp; Take any religious apologist in history and it is easy to see that it was precisely his religiosity—the coveted dogmatism—that prevented him from engaging in sound reasoning.

Insofar as great minds were able to transcend the ambient dogmatic system, they were able to offer insight; insofar as they remained mired in dogmatism, their thinking was invariably flawed.(Locke, for instance, was under the impression that belief in the Abrahamic god was necessary to foster democracy.Even Newton believed in some pretty nutty things.Few have managed to completely rise above dogmatic thinking.)

Everyone is somewhere on the aforesaid Ph scale.The question is: Which end of the spectrum is one closer to…and in what direction is one moving?Is one further entrenching oneself in a dogmatic system, or is one making a noble effort to transcend it?Kantian courage is tragically rare.For every David Hume, there have been a thousand religious cattle.

Those who rise above institutionalized dogmatism to a fair degree usually don't rise completely above all dogmatism.(For all his secular thinking, Newton still endorsed alchemy.)Stalwarts of the Enlightenment weren't great because they weren't AT ALL dogmatic; it's that they managed to rise above MUCH of the prevailing dogma of their time.Insofar as they clung to residual dogma, their thinking remained marginally flawed.

We need only juxtapose Saul of Tarsus with Martin Luther King Jr., Rabbi Baal Shem Tov with Spinoza, or Muhammad al-Wahhab with Avicenna, to see how secularism plays a role in human wisdom vis a vis religionism.Such contrasts are striking.Each of the three juxtapositions illustrates what happens when a man transcends his religion vs. what happens when a man immerses himself more into his religion.The outcomes couldn't be more divergent.

Innovators and pioneers don't operate by further immersing themselves in pre-existing dogmas.They emancipate their minds from ambient dogmatic systems in order to achieve what they achieve.To the degree they are able to do this, they can discover things about Reality, cultivate new understanding, and thus further human knowledge.Leonardo da Vinci was able to innovate not by more rigorously delving into the prevailing dogma of his time, but by bucking it.He was the quintessential freethinker.Insofar as he managed to transcend the dogmas of the day, he was able to make headway.This has been the case with every great thinker since Socrates.All human progress has happened to the extent that people operated on a secular basis.

We can ask revealing questions: Was Mahatma Gandhi a great man because he followed sacred Hindu / Jain scriptures better than his Indian fellows?Or was he great because he transcended the prevailing dogmatic systems and embraced secular insights?Does democracy work because it is based on a particular dogmatic system…or is its virtue that it TRANSCENDS all dogmatic systems?Shall we behold the wisdom of Ben Franklin and conclude, "SEE what happens when you attend

enough church”?Meanwhile, those who opted not to listen to Thomas Paine so opted because they were stubbornly religious.Thank goodness that we’ve become more secular in our ideals!Civil society can thank secularism for its emergence.

Grounding in universal principles is different than grounding in doctrinal edifices.The power of democracy is that it is based on secular principles, not on specious social constructs.We will be afflicted with dysfunction until we come to terms with that fact.

Secularism In A Nutshell:

It is important to recognize the difference between genuine intellectual activity (e.g. genuine philosophical inquiry) and mental masturbation (theology).Religion involves idle reflection, not critical reflection—vacuous deliberations, not analytical deliberations.It is predicated on inane speculations (involving haphazard emotive ejaculations), not scientific hypotheses (involving rigorous, meticulous, analytical thinking).

Genuine secularism is not a “reaction” to ambient religion, as Charles Taylor claims.Would he say that science is a “reaction” to superstition?(Is modern medicine a “reaction” to witch doctors?Is chemistry a “reaction” to alchemy?Is astronomy a “reaction” to astrology?)Cult activity is cult activity; secularism is secularism.Let us not convolute taxonomies.There are no “brands” of secularism any more than there are “brands” of science.There are not brands of health; there is just legitimate health—and degrees thereof.

Zarathustra (a.k.a. Zoroaster), Lao Tzu, Siddhartha (i.e. the Buddha), and Mark’s Jesus of Nazareth were all primarily secular.(Though Jesus considered himself a Jew, his most noble insights were secular in nature.)Later, cult activity formed around the legacy of each inspirational figure.Urban legends emerged, folklore metastasized, superstitions developed, followers accumulated, and people constructed religions based on the ensuing narrative.

Mohammed of Mecca, Joseph Smith and L. Ron Hubbard, on the other hand, were NOT secular.Each man calculatedly created his own cult (i.e. religion).Understanding the history of each tradition helps shed light on secularity vis a vis religiosity.The differences are instructive.

Secular is easy to define; it simply means non-religious.That’s it.What it entails, though, is a different question.It is an important matter, requiring honest inquiry.The preceding essay has attempted to offer such an inquiry.Secular morality—the only genuine morality—involves a non-dogmatic conception of ethics.Secular spirituality—the only authentic spirituality—involves non-dogmatic conceptions of the divine. Human / civil rights are ultimately based on secular values.Science is a secular enterprise.Democracy is grounded in secular principles.The Enlightenment was a process of secularization.

Free-thought is a matter of resisting institutionalized dogmatism, rising above groupthink, and thereby achieving individual autonomy.It is a function of what Kant called “maturity” and “courage”.To depict secularity as anything like “just another religion” or “just a different kind of Faith” is to pervert the concept.To do this is to simply play with words without regard for worthwhile definitions.Such semantic distortions should be called out wherever they are found.