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A Deep Dive into the Atheistic Religion - Part 1

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Introduction

Secular religion? Really? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? I mean, the very idea of secular means "not" religious, right? It seems to be an oxymoron like "jumbo shrimp," "small crowd," or "good coffee" (coffee lovers please don't hate me). But is the idea of secular religion really an oxymoron? Is something that is secular actually non-religious? Answering that question requires that we take a look beyond the shallow surface level impression that most people have about the concept of "secular," and make a deep dive into the very definition of religion.

Many people define a religion as "belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods" or "a particular system of faith and worship." (Oxford University Press) The problem we run into, though, is that those definitions don't take into account probably the most important element of religion.

At its most basic level, a religion is a belief system – a belief that is based on faith. At this most foundational level, secular beliefs are eminently religious. That is, there is no objective or empirical basis for believing that "secularist" beliefs are true – they must be believed by faith.

Secularism is atheistic. And it is currently the most dominant belief system in all of western civilization. In America, it dominates virtually every societal institution. Because it is so pervasive, and because it is, for the most part, so hostile to the Christian faith, it is worth our time to understand as much about it as we possibly can.

In order to take this deep dive, we are going to tackle this topic in a four part series. We will begin this first part by explaining exactly what we are talking about.

What are Secular Religions?

We have already mentioned that Atheism is a religious belief, but before proceeding any further, we need to take a more precise look at what secular religions are, and why, exactly, they are religious. To get at this, it is essential to look at Secularism's worldview foundation.

For those not familiar with the concept of worldview, a worldview is the assumptions people make about the nature of reality. That is, it is the set of beliefs people hold that define for them what they consider to be real vs. what they consider to be fantasy. In practical terms, what this means is, if a person holds beliefs that you consider to be fantasy, *you* have made your judgment about the nature of *their* beliefs based on an entirely different set of beliefs – beliefs that represents a worldview that is different from theirs.

For those who have not made a special effort to study the concept of worldview, it is necessary to understand that worldview beliefs are generally unconscious. In fact, most people could not tell you their worldview beliefs even if you asked them directly. They just assume them to be true, and never even consider the possibility that they might be false. There are, of course, beliefs that people are consciously aware of. It is these conscious beliefs that they generally consider to be their most basic religious beliefs. But worldview beliefs are even more basic than those. In fact, the beliefs most people consider to be their religious beliefs (or philosophy of life) would not even make sense if it were not for the underlying worldview

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beliefs they hold. For example, the secularist belief that God does not exist requires an underlying belief that the natural universe is all that exists. It is those underlying worldview beliefs that people use to evaluate even their own religious beliefs.

Looking at the big picture, there are four foundational worldviews (Naturalism, Animism, Far Eastern Thought, and Theism), and each one has an entirely different way of understanding how reality is structured. Beyond that, every religion, cult, and philosophy that exists in the world is based on one (or in specialized cases more than one) of the four worldview categories. And since each worldview has its own unique understanding of what is real and what is fantasy, every one fundamentally contradicts every other one.

There is one last principle that is also critical to grasp. Every worldview is based on faith. There is no empirical science that is able to establish objective proof that any given set of worldview beliefs is true. With that background, it is time to look at where Secularism fits within the worldview spectrum.

Secularist beliefs fall into the worldview category called Naturalism. Naturalism is the belief that the natural universe, based on natural laws, is all that exists. It acknowledges no transcendent element to reality at all. As such, Naturalism is firmly atheistic.

There are numerous naturalistic belief systems, and it is these various belief systems that can be identified as "secular religions." Some of the more well known secular religions include Atheism, Agnosticism, Skepticism, Secular Humanism, Existentialism, Marxism, and Postmodernism (there are others, of course).

While each of these belief systems do have their own unique belief elements, all of them, without exception, are built upon a naturalistic worldview foundation. We will look at exactly how that works later.

History of Naturalistic Beliefs - Pre-naturalistic Atheism

While naturalistic beliefs are inherently atheistic, not all atheistic beliefs are based on a naturalistic worldview. There are a couple of different kinds of Atheism that have a different foundation. It is important to understand this distinction, as other atheistic beliefs actually fall into entirely different worldview categories.

Pantheistic Atheism

One type of non-naturalistic Atheism has Far Eastern Thought (Pantheistic Monism) as its worldview foundation. Far Eastern Thought is the belief that a transcendent reality (something outside of the natural universe) actually exists, but that it is completely immaterial and impersonal – for example, "the force" in the Star Wars stories. Religions like Hinduism and Buddhism fall into this category.

These belief systems are atheistic in the sense that they do not acknowledge the existence of a personal God. That is, there is no one "out there" to create anything or to reveal moral beliefs. This worldview belief system does recognize the existence of a transcendent reality outside of the natural universe, but it is an impersonal life force, not a personal God. In comparing that to Naturalism, naturalistic Atheism not only denies the existence of a personal creator God, it denies the existence of any kind of transcendent reality. Belief systems based on Far Eastern Thought existed long before a true naturalistic worldview ever came to be.

Animistic Atheism

A second kind of non-naturalistic Atheism came into existence in ancient

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Greece. The dominant worldview environment in those times was Animism. Animism is the worldview system that acknowledges the existence of a single reality that is divided into two parts – the spirit part and the material part. Animists believe that there are many gods and spirits that exist in the spirit world, and that the spirits in the spirit world interact symbiotically with human beings in the material world. That is, what beings do in their part of reality materially affects the beings in the other part.

In the ancient Greek period, most people believed in the animistic concept of many gods and spirits. The most prominent of these were the gods of Mt. Olympus. However, there were also understood to be thousands of other lesser gods and spirits who were worshiped in local shrines all over the world.

Thus the Greek poets and philosophers who came to be Atheists in those times were not denying the existence of God or gods based on naturalistic worldview beliefs, but had simply come to not believe in the animistic understanding of gods. Different individuals or philosophical schools had various reasons for questioning the existence of the gods.

The first record we have of an Atheist in this western strand was Diagoras of Melos. He was considered an Atheist because he made fun of the Eleusinian Mysteries in the 600s B.C. From that beginning, other philosophers came up with other theories as to why they believed the gods of the ancient Greeks were not real.

One group of fifth century BC atheistic philosophers were referred to as atomists. Men such as Leucippus (born ca. 460 BC) and Democritus (460-370 BC) put forth a materialistic philosophy that attempted to explain the formation and development of the world in terms of the chance move-

ments of atoms moving in infinite space (though their understanding of atoms was somewhat different from the modern scientific understanding).

The Sophists, also in the fifth century BC, were another group that questioned many of the traditional assumptions of Greek culture. This group put forth a belief that was more agnostic in nature. One of them, Protagoras (490-420 BC) wrote in his work, *On the Gods*, "With regard to the gods, I am unable to say either that they exist or do not exist."

Another view was expressed by some, like Euripides (480–406 BC), who put forth the idea that the very notion of gods were made up by political authorities as a means of frightening people into behaving morally.

Still another view was advanced by Aristophanes (448–380 BC), who questioned belief in the gods because he didn't believe there was any proof of their existence.

Euhemerus (330–260 BC) asserted a view that the gods were only the rulers, conquerors, and founders of the past who later came to be deified. He believed that cults and religions became associated with various rulers, and that the beliefs continued on after they died.

Philosophers like Plato (424-347 BC), Xenophanes (570-478 BC), and Anaxagoras (500-428 BC) held beliefs that were not atheistic in the sense of absolutely not believing in the gods, but simply attempted to explain the world in terms of natural processes rather than through mythological stories. They were considered Atheists by regular folks because they downplayed belief in the gods.

A similar group, represented by people like Socrates (470–399 B.C.),

were not atheistic in the sense of not believing in gods at all, but simply did not believe in the official gods of the state. While those in this group were not strictly Atheists based on the more common definition of the word, they were considered to be Atheists by the politicians who derived their power from their association with those gods.

One more group of Atheists came to be more widely known because their philosophy is mentioned in the Bible. Epicurus, around 300 BC, espoused a materialistic philosophy asserting that the universe was governed by the laws of chance without the need for divine intervention. He did believe that the gods existed, but that they were uninterested in human affairs. He began a school of philosophy that was still somewhat prevalent during the days of the first century Christian church. The apostle Paul, in fact, interacted with them when he went to Athens as recorded in the seventeenth chapter of the book of Acts.

Moving On

Thus far we have introduced the idea of Secularism and Atheism in order to begin gaining some context for this now prevalent faith system. In part two of this series, we will move forward to more recent times and see how modern Naturalism came to be.

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