Secularizing Religion: A Proposal

A point of departure is to define religiosity vis a vis secularity.This can be seen as a spectrum analogous to the Ph scale, where acidity is the analogue of religiosity and basicity is the analogue of secularity. A mode of secularization, then, would be the analogue of alkalinity.Here, being completely secular is “0”, a “base”…while a state of fundamentalist religionism is a “9”.Progressively secularized (i.e. liberalized) religion, then, would be a matter of increasingly diluting the “pure” religionism. In this way, secularized religion is essentially watered-down religion. It is the result of diluting the religiosity of the system while maintaining the other elements (e.g. communal participation, group solidarity, teamwork and cooperation, a shared spiritual experience, and a common purpose.)

This process involves retaining shared folklore, a shared project, a shared legacy / heritage, shared norms / conventions, and shared values…while purging the system of a formal hierarchy of authority, institutionalized dogmatism, and groupthink.In other words, de-religionizing religion is a matter of expunging the cult activity aspect of religion from the religion, leaving a secular process as the remaining aspect.

What is a de-religionized religion? A community of participants, drawn together by a shared narrative, shared rituals, and shared values, collaborating with one another in a shared project.The three elements involved, then:

1Making sense out of life and the world (past, current, and future) by way of designated folklore (a CNV).This includes the idiom by which people conceive of and “get in touch with” (come to understand and “connect with”) the divine (the transcendent). It is thus the means by which people experience the sublime.

2Communal participation in custom. Here, prescribed ritual acts serve as vehicles for solidarity. Shared traditions reflect a shared heritage / legacy, and are thereby ways of forging—and preserving—inter-human bonds. This is a mechanism for establishing–and maintaining–a support network.

3Agreed-upon principles by which to live one’s life. This entails established conventions on which to base a community of shared expectations / standards, and shared values that inform acceptable endeavors.

Examples of such de-religionized religions include the cultural Christianity found in Scandinavia, the secularized version of Jewish participation found amongst New York City's most liberal (i.e. "reform") Jews, or the non-doctrinal mode of Christianity (of which Universalist-Unitarianism is the extreme case).We find this even with liberal forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, the Baha'i Faith, and the new generation's treatment of Shinto in Japan.

In each case, all members of the community count on the support of "fellow travelers": those with whom one can relate because they share a heritage / legacy, and have common concerns and aspirations.Here, all members think of things in the same terms.By partaking in such arrangements, one can count on having a shared experience with one's brethren.

These systematized, dogma-free associations enable cooperation and foster a sense of community / fraternity.The common idiom allows mutual affinities. This engenders the mutual empathy, mutual respect, and mutual understanding necessary for any community to operate. (Being able to RELATE TO others is a crucial element of communal existence.)

All this is possible without involving an iota of dogmatism…or tribalism. Such communal modes need not be doctrinal…or insular (parochial). Communal activity can be perfectly compatible with autonomy and cosmopolitanism.Thus, free inquiry, measured skepticism, and open critical analysis can be encouraged.Delusion and indoctrination play no role in secular communal activity, as nobody is taking advantage of, dominating, manipulating, subordinating, misleading or exploiting anyone else.

Forging long-term bonds need not involve any manner of cult activity.Human solidarity can be based on our shared humanity, even as we employ different narratives to make sense of our personal lives and the world in which we find ourselves.Here, then, folklore is recognized as folklore, superstition as superstition, and tradition as mere tradition.Ceremonies are taken seriously—yet never become a pathological obsession.

The mystical can be introduced without resorting to idolatry, irrationality, or dogmatism.The positing of the supernatural need play no role in profound spiritual experiences.In fact, non-dogmatic spirituality is the only authentic spirituality.One

need not abandon naturalism or abdicate intellectual integrity by engaging in spiritual activity.Experiencing the sublime, getting in touch with the divine, without recourse to dogmatic excursions is eminently possible.

We can have hope / optimism without delusion, spirituality without superstition, dedication without obsession, commitment without pathology, solidarity without submersion, shared values without groupthink, shared experiences without enforced conformity, tradition / heritage without rote obedience, tribute without idolatry, appreciation without worship, and reverence without supplication.Principled living entails transcending doctrinal mindsets.Genuine spirituality is perfectly in keeping with naturalism and independent thinking.

One can have a sense of purpose—nay, an ACTUAL purpose—without having it ASSIGNED TO one by external authorities.(Two notable examples of secular spirituality are Taoism and New England Transcendentalism.)One can be moral without a sacred doctrine to follow.One can find a point to life (a reason to live) without recourse to religion.

Community is important because it provides a virtual place to call “home”.It’s about having others that one considers “family” (even if extended): confidants, those on whom one can depend for support in times of woe, those with whom one can share joy and appreciation.Can I depend on you to be compassionate?Yes, if you’re part of my “family” of fellow travelers.For we are a team, working together, with a common endeavor.We are a team because—in spite of our individual differences—we have a shared teleos.We are diverse, yet unified.

De-religionized religion is possible.The key is as follows: **1 and 2 must be entirely subordinate to (designed exclusively to serve) 3.Moreover, 3 must be grounded in a foundation that exists independently of the community (i.e. independently of 1 and 2).**

The problem with most religion is that it fails on one or both counts: 3 is often a byproduct of (and thereby subordinate to) 1 and/or 2.This is a recipe for grave dysfunction.It is no surprise, then, that with religiosity, systematically enforced heteronomy transplants autonomy.Meanwhile, the possibility of cosmopolitanism is precluded by entrenched provincialism.By contrast, secular communities don’t Balkanize mankind; they celebrate our diversity.

Being connected with the divine, feeling connected with our fellow humans qua fellow humans, doesn't require dogmatism or groupthink or idolatry.That is to say, it doesn't need to involve religion.In fact, such things are much better achieved in a meta-religious way.

"Secular organization" or "organized secularism"; "secular communalism" or "communal secularism"; "secular spirituality" or "spiritual secularism": Are these oxymorons?No, they are the very things that will replace religion in an enlightened society.They may take the form of secularized religious traditions, but they will not themselves be religions.They will serve crucial roles: helping people to be genuinely good people, helping people live fulfilling lives (on their own terms), and helping people help other people.Fostering well-being and human solidarity are important things for any healthy society.It's time we recognized that we don't need religions to do it.