Secular Religion and Non-Supernatural Spirituality - David Miller

Although I am an Atheist, I nevertheless have dozens of “gods” -
Truth, Justice, Freedom, Love, Humanity, Nature, etc.
Each of my “gods” has one or more “religions”.
For example, my “god” Truth has science and philosophy as its “religions”.
(Please note that the inverted commas indicate that I am using these terms in a naturalistic, non-supernatural sense.)
These “religions” can be labelled as Secular Religion, or Naturalist Religion.

I have been making an attempt to think through the ways in which humanity has used the concepts of religion, spirituality, God and the gods. The terminology with which I will be describing this attempt is labelled as Non-Theistic. Personally, I prefer to label it as non-supernaturalist or, more simply, naturalistic.

There has often been discussion on whether we non-believers are secular people rather than religious people. The problem, it seems to me, is that we tend to conflate **religion** with the **supernatural**. Such confusion is normal within our everyday language. The two words have almost become synonymous. I suggest that we begin to try to be more precise. Even if our efforts lead us in different directions, it will at least be illuminating.

Admittedly, historically, the gods have been portrayed as possessing supernatural powers. Yet God and the gods are merely symbols for the higher aspects of our human nature. These symbols are represented in the form of metaphorical personifications, with supernatural powers added on. However, if those powers are removed, there need be nothing supernatural in this usage. Does that surprise you? Let us take an example. Both theists and atheists occasionally refer to ‘Mother Nature’ as a symbol for nature. Mother Nature is a metaphorical personification of nature. There is no supernaturalism implied in this. She is not treated as a god. Personification is not necessarily deification.

How would we go about turning Mother Nature into a god? We would have to give her supernatural powers. For example, we could say that she created nature. That would be sufficient to deify her. However, that would immediately be seen as somewhat erroneous. Mother Nature is merely a symbol for nature. Nature is the reality, Mother Nature the symbol. How can the symbol create the very reality that the symbol represents? It is a category mistake. Yet when we use the monotheistic symbol ‘God’, our cultural conditioning blinds us to such errors of category confusion as are contained in the commonly heard claim that, “God created everything”.

Religions have been contaminated by this association with the supernatural for thousands of years. Hence the ‘common usage’ we usually find in our dictionaries. That is, unless you find one which includes within its list of definitions of religion – “the quest for the values of the ideal life”.

Religion and Human Nature

Let me start by reminding you that, in supernaturalist terms, we do not worship a religion. We worship the gods. Religion is our means of worshipping our gods. Religion is our tool, our method of worship. However, I wish to contend that religions need not necessarily be supernatural, and that supernaturalism does not have to be the basis of religion.

I am claiming that religion is, at base, the worship of the higher aspects of our human nature. In an attempt to remove the supernaturalist baggage we could, instead, say that religion is the ‘revering’ or

‘veneration’ of these higher aspects. Or, to use words with even less supernaturalist baggage, religion is the means we utilize to ‘honour’ or ‘uphold’ these aspects. Put the other way round: if we wish to uphold the higher aspects of our human nature, we find (or invent) an appropriate religion with which to do so. Science, for example, is utilized by many people as their means of upholding truth.

What ought to constitute a naturalistic religion? Let us begin to look at some of the requirements:
First, as already mentioned, is the reverence, veneration, honouring, upholding and the celebrating of the higher aspects of our human nature.
Second is the apprehension and realization of these aspects; in simpler words, getting to know and understand them.
Third is the manifestation, actualization and questing for these aspects; in simpler words, bringing them into being in our world, both in ourselves as well as in others.

So, if the higher aspects of our human nature involve no supernatural elements, then our means of upholding them, our religions, need no supernatural methods either. “But what are these aspects?” I hear you asking. I will respond by attempting to list the wide-ranging variety of answers humankind has given to that question:

1. Our highest values – Goodness (the moral and ethical realms), Truth (the objective and scientific realms), Beauty (the subjective and aesthetic realms).
2. Our loftiest ideals – e.g. Love, compassion, mercy, perfection, justice, freedom, creativity, certainty, power, etc.
3. Our peak experiences – e.g. Wonder, awe, mystery, gratitude, uniqueness, oneness, interconnectedness, security, risk-taking, etc.
4. Our areas of ultimate concern – e.g. Self, family, community, nation, humanity, nature, planet, universe, etc.

Note that all of the four categories are completely natural. There is nothing supernatural about any of them.

Some people prefer to symbolize their particular set of higher aspects in the form of a metaphorical personification. Or, in other words, a fictional representation. Unfortunately, most people throughout history have given supernatural powers to these symbols. Nevertheless, it is possible to uphold our higher aspects without personifying them, as well as holding personifications without deifying them.

So I hope I have begun to show that there is a sense in which I can refute the claim that we non-believers are secular rather than religious. In my terms, we are both secular and religious. We all find the means with which to revere, venerate, honour and uphold the higher aspects of our human nature.

Abrahamic Religions

The Gods of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are merely symbols for the higher aspects of our human nature. Each religion’s God symbolizes a slightly different constellation of values, ideals, experiences and concerns. The same applies to the denominations within each of the religions.
If, however, we were to deal with the issue from a polytheistic perspective rather than monotheistic, then each particular aspect could be symbolized by its own god. It might then be necessary to construct models (pantheons) within which to explain the relationships between these gods.

In non-supernaturalist terms, ‘spirituality’ is merely another name for human nature. And the ‘human

spirit' is yet another name for human nature. The positive side of this spirituality is, for many people, represented by fictional characters known as gods.
However, we must take into account all our values, all our ideals, all our experiences and all our concerns. Even low values, mundane ideals, devastating experiences and base concerns, as well as vile impulses and crass desires, etc. Within the Abrahamic religions, most of the latter are labelled as 'Demonic'. These religions use the Demonic as a metaphorical personification of humanity's lower aspects. Eastern religions, on the other hand, often stress the interconnectedness, rather than the opposition, between humanity's positive and negative sides.

Naturalistic Religion

Let me introduce you to an extreme version of this explanatory model, one in which I have labelled the higher aspects of human nature themselves as the 'gods'. In this model the 'gods' do not need to be symbolized. Nor do they have supernatural powers. They are natural. They are simply there.

So let me explain, within this latter model, how I define a 'god'. For example, how can a value be a 'god'? How can an abstract entity be a 'god'?

My answer: It is when you place the value above and beyond yourself. It is 'out there'. You give it allegiance. You serve it. You are subservient to it. It is your lord and master. You are its slave. If necessary, you are prepared to die for it. You will even kill for it.

In return it gives you meaning and purpose. It gives you something with which to identify. It takes you 'out of yourself', 'beyond yourself', to a 'greater purpose'. And, in this naturalistic, non-supernaturalist sense, it is your 'god'.

I like this extreme version. It allows me to say such things as: "You are in the grip of the 'gods'. They've got you in their grasp. You've got 'gods', whether you like it or not." - And also, by the way, you've got 'spirituality', whether you like it or not.

Secular Religion

The most notorious examples of secular religion are Nationalism, Fascism and Communism. These three give an imagined assurance of superiority to the in-group, be it based on nationality, race or class. And they often express intense hatred towards the out-groups.

I have come to the conclusion that if humans are not adherents of a supernatural religion, then they are quite likely to be adherents of a secular religion.

I find that many of my fellow Atheists do not like this concept of 'secular religion'. They claim that secular religion is a contradiction in terms. They want to reserve the use of the word 'religion' for supernatural belief-systems only.