

## Does secularity put religion at risk?

The Cranky Professor

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Does secularity put religion at risk? Yes, it does. Does it put religion at risk unfairly? No, not at all, and least not in liberal democratic communities like ours.

A secular society is one in which no public position is open only to people of a certain faith, or only to people of faith. Moreover, it is one in which religious authorities—in their capacity as religious authorities, that is—have no political power. Priests, ministers, rabbis, and the rest do not vet candidates for public office or review legislation. In a secular society, that a proposal is in keeping with a religious tradition, or with religion generally, gives it no special status. That a proposal is offensive to religion does not count against it in the play of interest-based politics.

Secularity does not forbid religion to enter the public square, of course, for we may, as citizens, laud or criticise whatever we want for whatever reasons we want, including reasons of religion. And our elected representatives may support or oppose on religious grounds whatever they support or oppose.

Secularity puts religion at risk because it makes religion a private matter, and that fact has repercussions all the way down. Public support and validation enable religion to flourish; without them, religion might wither. The risk is particularly acute in multi-cultural states, where no one religious tradition predominates.

Consider children in a secular, multi-cultural society. A secular state does not make it its business to see that children acquire a religion or even acquire respect for religion. That's left up to parents, if the parents choose. Parents may try to inculcate in their children religious attitudes and loyalty to a particular religion, but the state doesn't help them, beyond maintaining a large space within which parents may raise their children as they wish.

Children in such a society will be exposed to a variety of religious traditions as well as to people who live happily and well without any religion at all. As they grow into their teens, attentive children who have acquired religious attitudes will note that that they believe and practice what they do merely because of their upbringing, not because of evidence or argument. Doubts will cross their minds that the stories that illustrate and nourish the doctrines of their religion are more than just stories, more than just mythology. Their interactions with others who do not believe as they do will urge on them non-religious justifications for the rules and values they accept—and they will puzzle over those rules and values for which they can find no non-religious justification. If they continue to be religious into adulthood, likely the quality of their religious life will be very different than it would have been had the stories, doctrines, and morals of their tradition gone unchallenged as part of the fabric of their society.

That's the risk in which secularity in multi-cultural, democratic, liberal society places religion. But this risk is not one that has been imposed on religion unfairly. Each religious way of life is another experiment in living among all the rest. It must compete or co-operate

with the others on whatever terms it can find. Religious people are free to live within their traditions and to honour them and to attempt to keep them alive as best they can. If a tradition becomes attenuated and thin under such conditions, or is abandoned, well, that is how things went. There's nothing unfair about it.

Multi-culturalism, democracy, and liberalism: these are essential to how we live, whichever specific way of life, religious or non-religious, we settle on. That a religion, or that religion generally, fails to flourish within our secular culture because of our commitments to multi-culturalism, democracy, and liberalism would give us no reason to go soft on these commitments, even if we happen to be religious.