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Hallowed Secularism

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### July 17, 2007: What Makes Hallowed Secularism Hallowed?

Bruce Ledewitz

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Title: What Makes Hallowed Secularism Hallowed?

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7/17/2007--How can secularism be "hallowed"? This would seem the crucial question. It would also seem to be a contradiction in terms. Surely secularism cannot be holy unless you think humanism can be holy, which would be a pretty tough sell after Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

We seem to have only two choices: God—a transcendent being outside space and time—or man as the measure of all things. We cannot believe that such a God exists and man on his own is a horror. So we seem stuck.

Some people find the answer to this dilemma in nature. They worship, or purport to anyway, the sun or the earth and its spirits. Perhaps I have just not seen this done properly, but for me it is not an option. Nature can be just as cold as the human heart, after all.

What is needed is a source of power and order and beauty outside humans themselves. This is what Our Religions give us. How can we have this without God?

To put the matter bluntly, human beings can encounter the mysterious Other, the transcendent, personally and historically.

Personal accounts of spiritual experiences are common. Here is a beautiful example from Dr. Rachel Remen's book, *My Grandfather's Blessings*:

A neighbor, a down-to-earth and practical person, shared...an experience with me. . . She had been cleaning her house...when suddenly it was as if her life were passing rapidly in front of her and she became aware of something she had not recognized before, that there was a coherence and direction that ran through it like a thread. ...Though she had never experienced this direction before, it was familiar to her. It was as if she had been following something unseen for many years and she had not known.

\* \* \*

As she stood in her kitchen...she became deeply certain that what was true of her personally was also true of life in general. Everything was unfolding according to a direction. It underlay all existence, binding it all together. For a heartbeat, it seemed to her that she could experience this directly. "A steady unseen force, like a wind," she told me.

This reported experience might be called an encounter with God by the religious believer. But that is not how this woman experienced it. Nor am I suggesting that Hallowed Secularism should be charismatic, seeking personal and emotional encounters with the unseen. Rather, I mean that Hallowed Secularism acknowledges the depth of human life and its meaningfulness. That mystery of human life must be authoritative, not subject to my feelings and choices.

This sense of oneness with all reality is a common theme in non-"religious"—I just mean non-dogmatic--thinkers as diverse as Eric Voegelin and John Dewey. In fact such a sense of cosmic unity may underlay all our religions. Thus, the religious leaders in human history have a great

deal to teach us about the nature of reality. Hallowed Secularism must be open to such teaching.

This is not the same as a God who is a personality with a will, plans and actions. Yet, it is not atheism either.

This sense of depth is not just a matter of personal experiences. There is also public consciousness of transcendence. In order to recover from consumerism and the flatness of American life, this sense of depth must be present in public life as well. This means, on the one hand, the end of the scorn secularists now exhibit toward anything “religious”. We are not dealing here with superstition or the supernatural, but with a broader sense of human life. Secularists must be open to that.

The public sense of depth also means a new appreciation of the power of justice in history. Abraham Lincoln understood the Civil War as God’s judgment for the sin of slavery. Thomas Jefferson feared for such a civil catastrophe out of the same concern for God’s judgment. I feel that way about global warming.

Reality is structured in such a way that there are consequences for national injustice. Mistreat the poor and your society will end up in ruin. This is what the Hebrew prophets taught us. Hallowed Secularism must be open to this message, too.

Once we clear out the brush of dogmas that conflict with the natural laws of the universe: resurrection, heaven, hell, messiah, apocalypse, reincarnation and a being called God, Hallowed Secularism may just fall out as what’s left. What’s left is neither materialism nor rationalism. It’s beyond both. For there is reality to the unseen. Remember, the number 2 cannot be seen. And neither can love.