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Hallowed Secularism

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### August 15, 2007: The Sources of Depth in Hallowed Secularism: Theology

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Title: The Sources of Depth in Hallowed Secularism: Theology

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8/15/2007--The great post-war preoccupation of Christian thinking has been to ponder the rise of secularism and the meaning of that rise in light of the God of the Bible and the revelation in Jesus Christ. It is safe to say that never before in human history has man been in this situation. Of course there have always been individual atheists. But there has never been a culture in which humanity is regarded as being alone in the universe. How could this state of affairs have come about and what does it mean?

This theological project was the positive counterpart to Ludwig Feuerbach's statement in 1841 that "God is nothing else than man: he is, so to speak, the outward projection of man's inward nature" and the shocking announcement by Friedrich Nietzsche in 1882 that "God is dead". Feuerbach denied he was an atheist and Nietzsche has always been considered the more radical of the two in his understanding of man's relation to God. Nietzsche saw in the death of God the potential negation of all value.

One obvious answer to the rise of secularism would be that secularism is the latest manifestation of human sinfulness. Man has turned away from God, as usual. Humans have always used religion to turn away from God and now are using secularism to do so. The role of the Church is then simply to confront and resist modernity. Certain aspects of Karl Barth's theological opposition to liberal Protestantism can be looked at that way and there are some who identify Pope John Paul II as "the last anti-modern Pope". Pope Pius X's encyclical, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, "On the Doctrine of the Modernists" is often cited in this context.

But theology, perhaps best exemplified by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, did not rest on that rejection alone. In what Bonhoeffer called his "secular interpretation," he seems to equate secularism with Jesus' cry on the cross that God has abandoned him. God will not save in the world: "God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross." He is to be found only in "weakness and suffering." Thus we find ourselves in a world come of age without God, but before God, that is, in accordance with God's will.

From Bonhoeffer we may conclude that if we want to destroy ourselves, God will not prevent us from doing so. God has told us how to live and now that we have the power and knowledge to live without him, in a superstitious sense, we must live in accordance with his teachings or suffer the consequences. And in that suffering, God suffers with us. This is not a cheery conclusion.

Bonhoeffer was trying to understand the theology—that is, meaning--of the rise of secularism, as a situation without God. The theologian Jurgen Moltmann calls this task grasping "the implicit theology of this modern world of ours ..." Moltmann practices the most radical of critiques of modernity and its will to domination, on behalf of human liberation. He affirms that all theology in the secular world is public theology, that is, theology with its eye on the Kingdom of God, seeing what in the modern world moves toward the Kingdom and what moves away. To accomplish this goal, theology needs secularism, so that it is free of the institutional restrictions of the Church, but also needs an openness on the part of secularism to hear theology's critique.

Moltmann's basic approach is consistent with Hallowed Secularism. Our world is one in which organized religion no longer controls thinking about God. But in current secularism, theology has a hard time reaching popular thinking. Not many people in a secular world are reading theology. But in Hallowed Secularism, theology would become the blueprint for human life to confront reality. In other words, freed of Church control, secular man can return in his autonomy to religious sources for guidance. This is something of what Bonhoeffer and Moltmann are getting at. This is a secular world come of age.

What Hallowed Secularism is attempting to get secular man to see is that the religious question is the most important matter for us to grapple with. When all supernaturalism is abandoned, after miracles are rejected and death is embraced as real, that religious question amounts to this: what is reality really like and what is the human response to reality to be?

No doubt there are other ways into this question besides religion. But since philosophy has become technical and unhelpful to people, theology is the best source for thinking about this question, which is after all, the only question.